

MACHIAVELLILEZING door John Lloyd

The Power and the story

Machiavelli has come to be associated with cunning, opportunism and even deceit: though clearly less in the Netherlands than in the anglophone countries. You have named an award and a lecture after him, something unthinkable in Britain or in the United States.

You have the better grasp of the man and his work: for you honour the memory of one who shocked, and shocks still, for the clarity with which he faced real, as opposed to ideal, political events and consequences and leaders. In one of the most celebrated passages in his most celebrated work – *Il Principe*, *The Prince* – he writes that ‘since my intention is to say something that will be of practical use to the enquirer, I have thought it proper to represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined.’ And this determination – to ‘represent things as they are in real truth’ – bears on the subject I want to lay out in this lecture today.

We in the media tell stories. Journalism took off about four centuries ago, in the first great mercantile cities of Europe – as Venice, Frankfurt, Antwerp and Amsterdam: the Netherlands was among the pioneers of the newspaper trade in the early part of the 17th Century: the first regular newspaper to appear in London, in 1620, was a ‘coranto’ printed in Amsterdam, translated from the Dutch. From these beginnings to today, journalism has relied on stories: on generally short and generally factual narrations making a particular point – trying, or at least claiming to try, to ‘represent things as they are’. There have been many real and imagined crises in journalism, and most involve the telling of a story. These crises often coincide with crises in political life – or even, as in the famous revelations of Watergate, cause a crisis through revelation. Indeed, one of the fine passages of British journalism was during the Crimean War – fought between Russia on the one side and France and Britain on the other in order to halt Russian imperial expansion – was the reporting of William Russell for *The Times*, reporting which ultimately helped bring down the government of the day, because of its revelations of official incompetence and indifference to the sufferings of soldiers.

But the present conjuncture in journalism is not a dramatic crisis, like Russell’s reporting, or that of Woodward and Bernstein in Washington more than 30 years ago. What’s happening now in journalism in the rich democratic countries like mine and yours, is a more complex phenomenon, but one which I think people in public life should seek to understand and must certainly debate. It is, to put it in a word, about an issue which Niccolo Machiavelli would well have understood – indeed, a subject about which he was the first real practical theorist. It is about power. One could say the subject is – *The Power and the Story*.

Let me start with a story. A little before the US presidential election earlier this month, a Swedish journalist named Cecilia Udden, who has been a correspondent for Swedish public radio in the United States and now has her own show, called *Konflikt* – said in a news programme that Swedish journalists could not and should not be objective as to the election’s outcome. They spoke, and could do no other than speak, from a general European consensus, which was anti-Bush. They had of course to be balanced and objective when reporting on their own political scene, because they could materially affect it: but not on other elections – at least where there was a general European or Swedish view that one side was ruling badly, or proposing bad policies. She gave the example of the death penalty: how, she asked, could a Swedish journalist possibly be neutral and objective about the death penalty? Her view was challenged – First of all by Johann Norgard, a prominent policy thinker of the right, and then by others in the intellectual and political communities. It caused a lively debate within Sweden over the past month, with – broadly speaking – people of the left supporting her, people of the right opposing her. The management of Swedish public radio judged that she had been wrong, and took her off the air for two weeks as a punishment.

Though the debate was conducted with the usual Swedish civility and moderation, it is in one sense an extreme case. Few journalists in Britain working for the BBC, or indeed for other broadcasters, all of which are enjoined to be balanced and objective, would claim what Udden did. But in another sense, it is a very indicative example. For one of the great issues facing journalism today – and above all facing that journalism which tries to be, or is by law enjoined to be, balanced, objective, fair – is: how far can it be so? Can we reasonably expect journalists to be fair, balanced and objective? Discussions of this kind sooner or later mention Fox Television. Begun by Rupert Murdoch’s News

Corporation in 1996, its motto is 'Fair and balanced' – which is possibly ironic (since it is not), or more likely a statement that by its existence, it balances what Murdoch and the channel's chief executive, Roger Ailes, believe is the liberal bias of the established channels. During the Iraq war it has been and remains tremendously patriotic. In the election, it was openly pro-Bush.

Two things to say about Fox, and about Cecilia Udden's view. First, both remain outside of most boundaries set in most countries on public service journalism, which still has balance as its official ideal. Cecilia Udden was, officially, penalised – if not very heavily. Fox, though it has grown very fast and often outstrips CNN in audience figures, remains generally far behind the terrestrial channels in audience share. Second, there is a case to be made that in many countries, journalists are generally to the left of centre: this is often admitted, if usually after retirement, by BBC journalists and editors. There are few examples of manifestly right wing regular broadcasters in my country, though several of manifestly left wing ones. But they also work under a regime in which fairness and objectivity is enjoined: and usually match these standards well enough. There are enough editors and reporters aware of bias – including their own – and dedicated to compensating for it, to believe that objectivity and balance is not a wholly devalued concept.

But there are two evident and growing dangers to it. The first is that from left and right, the pressures on objectivity and balance are growing. From the left, there is a discourse – heard strongly in Sweden – that objectivity is not possible and that certain values, European values if you will, are so established as to no longer require balancing with other sets of values or views. The Fox example, in some ways more powerful because linked to a powerful commercial organisation, points to a large audience for strongly expressed views - in this case of a conservative patriotic kind. Popular demand and profits are a powerful combination, and one likely to be followed.

If these trends are confirmed, then the space for objective and balanced journalism shrinks. Yet arguably, there has never been more need for it. The world is closer us than ever before: we know, because we can see and experience it, that the processes known as globalisation are increasingly powerful and influential – especially on open economies, for which both the Netherlands and Britain have been, through the centuries, models. We need to understand more, and it is more complex to understand. If people are to be full citizens, they need to know on what basis they are casting votes and support for politicians; and need to know what these politicians are capable of. And while the expression of differing ideologies and policies are essential, so too is a place to which citizens can go with an expectation of finding something which is an attempt at the truth.

Can media tell the truth? It's a good question: which should be preceded by another question: why should they? After all, the media are not like the law, or the academy – with an overriding professional or scholarly impetus to produce the truth. They are not, as are the academy and the law, shielded from the market. They must produce for sale and profit: and if people want fiction rather than fact, well, they are paying their money and they can make the choice. In that great John Ford film, *The Man who shot Liberty Vallance* – which manages to be great about morality and about the media – the editor of the *Shinbone Star*, confronted with the truth about a heroic legend, says: 'When the truth and the legend conflict, print the legend!' And in Graham Greene's novel, *A Burnt Out Case*, the figure of the journalist Parkinson is made to say–

'Do you really believe Caesar said: 'Et tu Brute?' It's what he ought to have said and someone ...spotted what was needed. The truth is always forgotten'.

The truth is more easily forgotten when it is never told. And journalism can tell it – or attempt to tell it. It is possible to get at the truth, with the aid of certain tools, none of which have to be invented. These are the tools known well to both historians and journalists: tools of inquiry; of investigation in depth; of contextualisation. They are complex and hard to get over in short reports: but journalism, if it is any good, has to deal with complexity: and people, if they wish to be informed and lead a fuller life than they otherwise would, should be prepared and prepare themselves for understanding complexity. What other way do we have to an informed and active citizenship?

Let me tell another story, this time autobiographical. My first years at the *Financial Times* were spent as a labour reporter – reporting, in the 1980s, on the trade union struggles with the first governments of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – struggles which had as their climax the year-long miners' strike of 1984-85. There was a fairly large corps of specialist correspondents who did nothing else but cover the trade union movement and labour affairs. This group had its origins in the second war, when the

Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, was dynamising the British work force for war production: and it grew stronger as the labour movement did. To be a labour correspondent on a big newspaper or broadcasting channel was a large job. We were, after all, describing a large power – the organised working class – and its relations with the society and the state.

Now, the profession of labour correspondent hardly exists. It hardly exists because the power on which it depended for its coverage – organised labour – is much less powerful: dramatically so in Britain compared to the pre-Thatcher period, but true everywhere, for reasons both known and still debated. And the point is, it is not alone. Separate, independent powers – as organised labour; organised religion; political parties; associations of various kinds; the military; even the family and the authority of elders – have all declined, some dramatically, some slowly. The one power – apart from the state – which has certainly increased is that of the media. The great British journalist Anthony Sampson, who wrote his 'Anatomy of Britain forty years ago, the first sustained attempt to analyse the British power structure, writes in his latest version – 'Who Runs this Place', published early this year – that 'Editors, journalists and cameras penetrated nearly all institutions – including parliament, the monarchy, the political parties and Whitehall – demanding answers to irreverent questions, debunking their traditions and clamouring for openness. They were not separate limbs or membranes in the anatomy so much as part of the lifeblood, or nervous system'.

There are of course new organisations and associations which have achieved large prominence- as the NGOs and global, or anti-global movements. But the linking characteristic of these diverse organisations is this: they achieve large importance because of the media. If they do not tailor themselves to the media, they remain small. The story of small NGOs and initiatives and projects of a humanitarian kind is one of the great stories of the last fifty years, only occasionally told: but the organisations which tend to get the attention are those which work ceaselessly to get the media to convey their message.

That message is often one which many would agree should be told – narratives of oppression and destitution, at home and abroad. But these organisations are in form centres of dedicated professionals and volunteers, supported by memberships which usually do little more than agree with their aims and donate money, and able to continue their work and maintain their size only because they remain prominent in the media. They must thus ceaselessly demonstrate their usefulness; which means ceaselessly demonstrating the crises which they are in business to address. This is fine, many will believe: certainly I have benefitted greatly in my understanding of the world, and been moved and outraged by the work of such organisations as Medecins Sans Frontieres or Amnesty of Human Rights Watch or Oxfam and others. But they exist in a different relationship to society than the previous organisations and associations. They do not organise society – they appeal to conscience and intellect across societies.

The advanced societies increasingly show a direct confrontation between the state and the media, with much weaker institutions in between. Because these intermediate institutions have lost authority, and people place much less faith in them than before – this seems particularly true in the northern European countries: more, for example, than in North America – the media have taken the place of what before had been a diverse and powerful set of institutions. The media have accrued a great power: a power to interpret the narratives of society, and to do so with only one major competitor: the state.

This competition is not of course a fight to the death. The media depend on the state because, ultimately, they must work under the law and states make and enforce law. Broadcasters in particular depend on the state for licences– though with satellites and digital channels, they already depend less and will depend much less. Politicians and officials depend on the media, for the media are the channels through which they communicate and show themselves to their electorates. They are caught in a web of mutual favours and mutual antagonisms.

But the competition is increasingly naked. It is for the right to have the dominant narrative. And in this, the media have the upper hand – because we are the better story tellers. We know better how to please: and we don't have to upset. Governments have to take taxes; prohibit; judge; and command. We are there to please you. When, in the UK, last year, there was a direct confrontation between the government and the BBC over a report on a dossier the government had published on the reasons for a war on Iraq, an inquiry headed by an eminent judge concluded that the BBC was wrong in its report

and wrong in the way it handled it afterwards. When the report was published, there were polls to show that by a factor of two to one, the public trusted the BBC more than the government, whatever the report said. The public were being rational, of pleasure seeking. They were preferring an organisation whose existence depended on being nice to them to one which could be hard on them. We in the media are free to treat our readers and listeners and viewers as consumers: and increasingly, that's the way in which they are represented to us. In the last 20 years in Britain – the same is true in differing ways in all parts of the rich world – the media have come to be much more about consumption than anything else. We are, after all, rich societies. But politics cannot treat people as consumers only – even if the same pressures operate on them to do so, and they increasingly frame their policies and programmes in a consumer friendly way (and why not, since it is usually better than a consumer-repellent way, which the state has often adopted and still does in many functions). The democratic state, if it is to remain civil and controllable and ultimately democratic, needs citizens: it needs citizens to legitimate itself and it needs citizens engaged enough so that it can renew itself, especially between elections but also at elections.

I dealt with these issues in a recent book, 'What the media are doing to our politics'. My view there was, and is that, much of the media, perhaps especially in Britain but not confined to it, have a view of politics and the public sphere which amounts to an ideology of scorn. That is, that the media come close to assuming guilt unless innocence is proved; or so frame their stories and their coverage as to downgrade the politician or the official. This is particularly pronounced in Britain, where the media are very powerful: but it is evident elsewhere, too. Richard Reeves, a former political journalist in Washington, wrote in an essay in 1998 that, from the seventies on – that is, after Watergate – 'journalists took on priestly duties of the political establishment, stepping up to the bully pulpit of moral leadership....carelessly and systematically, the high riding Washington press corps and provincial imitators dominated politicians and governors, subjecting them to public scorn. Our message was simple: 'They're all bums! Don't believe them! Don't listen to them!'

Closely allied to the ideology of scorn is that of entertainment. We can't say that news and entertainment live in two separate spheres any more: the line has been and is still being blurred between the two. This began happening when TV began to come of age, in the early sixties. One of the reasons President Kennedy is still regarded with such favour by the sixties generation which now runs things is because he was the first TV president: in his marvellous book, *The Powers that Be*, David Halberstam writes of him that 'in no way could Kennedy have been elected without television. It was that simple. He meshed politics and television with such charm and style and despatch that the intellectual elite of the country. Which might normally have regarded the cross blend with trepidation, rich as it was in the potential for demagoguery, enthusiastically applauded him (in large part because the alternative to Kennedy was Richard M Nixon). Television loved him, he and the camera were born for each other, he was the first great political superstar; as he made television bigger, it made him bigger. Everyone using everyone. The media using the President, the President using the media'. Kennedy made the first Faustian bargain of the TV age in politics. He brought TV in to take the place of parties and smoke filled rooms and deals and compromises among the old powers that were. And he made it for all other politicians who aspired to high office after him: he made performance on TV the standard of future politicians, whether they liked it or not. His celebrated debate with Nixon helped establish him not just as the leading politician of his age, but establish TV as the leading political arbiter of the age.

As the TV age has gone on, we've remarked that, at least in the US, the actor as politician has become more prominent – Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger to mention only two governors of California. The politician as actor is also remarked: the mastery of TV which Tony Blair was once said to have; the inability to master it which Ian Duncan Smith displayed. Ian Duncan Smith was a kind of throwback to the pre-television age: a man elected by and popular with his party. One of the reasons why the Tories have attracted so much scorn – including from within their own party – is that they should be so foolish as to think that someone whom the Party liked but the media didn't should be elected its leader. He simply didn't produce the kind of level of TV performance that's acceptable.

To stray into Dutch politics: it is remarkable that both political assassinations - of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh - have been figures of the media, in the latter's case, or in the former, a hot subject of the media and constantly on it: indeed, he was killed while leaving a studio. To a remarkable degree, politics in all its forms has been captured by the media and especially by TV, and is almost inconceivable without it.

Media are a great power. In our rich and contented – even if unsettled – states, they have become a great political power. In other states, their power is repressed. They are repressed, or wholly suppressed, in states as diverse as Turkmenistan, Zimbabwe and Moldova, because the rulers forbid any form of free expression to challenge their own story of how things are. They are partly suppressed in Russia, where they were deemed to have become too powerful and thus had to be brought into line: though they remain freer, in some cases much freer, than they were in the Soviet period until Mikhail Gorbachev. They are partly repressed in China, where they are beginning to challenge, here and there, the authority of the party-state: sometimes radically, as in the remarkable and lengthy piece of reportage on the state of the Russian peasantry which appeared over a year ago and won the annual prize given to journalism by Lettres Internationales: its existence, embarrassing to the authorities because of the vast corruption it revealed, has nevertheless been tolerated.

Media power is always two-headed. It is the power of free opinion, of facts, of an independent source of ideas. It is utterly essential to democratic practise. And it is a power of its own: to persuade, to reward and punish, to distort, to lie, to deceive: to amass fortunes and debase taste. In unfree societies, the first is feared. In free societies, the second should be examined and probed and debated. Media say their greatest user to citizens is that they hold power to account. Media, a great power, must itself be held to account: or like all powers, it corrupts, first of all itself.