Media Representations of Political Discourse:
A critical discourse study of four reports of
Prime Minister's Questions

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The House of Commons is an apparent (but bogus) focus of political life and government. For this reason politicians of all parties, representatives of powerful interest groups, the media, and civil servants, all pay unctuous tribute to the House: the paternalistic politeness of the peer to the flower-girl. (Kingdom 1991: 306)

Introduction

In representative democracies such as Britain, for government to be truly democratic it is essential that citizens be provided with adequate and independent information about the issues which are being debated and the policies which are being formulated on their behalf by politicians. Therefore the way in which the activities of legislatures such as the British Parliament are reported is a matter of the greatest importance. However, in modern Britain there are a number of problems with the relationship between Parliament and the media that strongly challenge the liberal notion of the media as a positive democratic force.

Firstly there is the problem of the sheer volume of words written and uttered in Parliament every day and the corresponding need for the media to be selective in deciding what and how to report. Unfortunately, apart from the great State occasions such as the Queen's Speech and the Budget, the weekly ritual of Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons is the only aspect of Parliamentary activity that is widely reported on in the British media, particularly television. This need to be selective in turn leads to a simplification and trivialization of proceedings and a tendency to focus on personalities, pomp and circumstance rather than on substantive political problems, a tendency encouraged by the commercial pressure on all media organizations, not excluding those founded on the public service model, towards regarding readers and viewers as consumers to be entertained rather than as citizens to be enlightened. The well-documented right-wing bias that exists in many areas of the British media is another factor which undermines its democratic role, as is the tendency of many mainstream political journalists to adopt an overly deferential attitude to those senior politicians and civil servants on whom they

depend for their professional sustenance. Finally, with respect to the reporting of Parliamentary proceedings in particular there is the problem of the increasing professionalization of political communication – exemplified by the current Labour government's infamous 'spin doctors' – one aspect of which is the tendency for the executive branch to bypass the legislature and attempt to effect government by sound bite, photo opportunity and press release rather than through the more democratic constitutional channels.

These problems are all well-known and have been much researched by political scientists, sociologists, media studies scholars and others (Garnham 1990; Franklin 1994; Thompson 1995; Street 2001). However, one aspect of the problem which has until recently received comparatively little attention is the *discoursal* nature of media power and the ways in which the language of the media *per se,* both in terms of its genres and discourses and in its practices of textual production and distribution, influences how the activities of politicians are perceived by the general public. Yet as researchers working in the interdisciplinary area known as critical discourse analysis (CDA) have begun to point out, as with other social institutions it is precisely at the level of discourse that all other aspects of media power are exercised and legitimated (Fairclough 1995, 2003; van Dijk 1998; Wodak 1996). Drawing on the CDA framework, in this paper I shall consider the discourse of four elements of the British media which have an intimate relationship to the activities of Parliament. It should be borne in mind, therefore, that this is not a study of political discourse in the conventional sense of investigating the social events that politicians take part in, the social practices that they engage in within those events, and the language (or rhetoric) which they use as part of those practices. Rather, it is a study directed towards the *meta*discoursal level in which the media *represent* these events, practices and usages. To assist those readers who may be unacquainted with contemporary British Parliamentary politics I have prefaced the actual study with some contextualizing notes. Those readers who are already familiar with this topic may prefer to omit these.

Parliament and the Government

Parliament is the supreme legislative authority in the United Kingdom. Its four principal functions are to pass and repeal laws, to authorize the Government to raise and spend money, to scrutinize the activities of the Government, and to debate the issues of the day. In this paper it is the third of these functions that I shall be focusing on, specifically the practice of scrutinizing the Government by means of asking oral questions to the Prime Minister. Parliament consists of the Queen (as hereditary monarch); the House of

Commons (with 659 elected Members of Parliament or MPs); and the House of Lords (with approximately 700 unelected members known as Peers). All three combine to carry out the work of Parliament but again in this paper I shall be concentrating on just one of these: the House of Commons. The Government is made up of approximately 100 members of the political party which has the majority of seats in the House of Commons following a general election. The leader of the governing party who is referred to as the Prime Minister heads the Government. The leader of the second largest party, known as the Official Opposition, is called the Leader of the Opposition. Currently, the Labour Party is the governing party and the Prime Minister is Tony Blair. The Official Opposition is the Conservative Party and its leader is Michael Howard.

Questions in the House

Parliamentary questions have long been an important feature of British Parliamentary business. Questions are tools that Members of Parliament can use to seek information or press for action from government Ministers (HCIO 2005: 2). As such they are widely regarded as an important means by which the legislative branch of government can hold the executive branch to account, though in the view of Kingdom this power is far less effective than it was in the past since 'party domination renders the liberal-democratic notion that Parliament controls the executive illusory' (Kingdom 1991: 295). As this paper is only concerned with questions for oral answer ('oral questions') I shall not discuss the various other forms of questioning, such as questions for written answer, currently used in Parliament.

The procedure for asking an oral question is as follows. First, an MP must 'table' the question, which means submitting it to the House of Commons officials. This must be done three days in advance of the day on which it is to be asked, this being regarded as the minimum period that Ministers and their staff are assumed to need to prepare an answer. All questions submitted to a particular Minister are then shuffled by computer and a quota selected for inclusion on the relevant day's Order Paper. On that day, the MP will be called by the Speaker of the House to ask his question and the Minister will answer it. Ministers deliver their answers at the Government Dispatch Box, a wooden box positioned on the Table of the House near the Government Front Bench which functions as a lectern on which Ministers may place their notes. MPs usually ask their questions from wherever they happen to be sitting in the Chamber. The exception to this is the Leader of the Opposition who also uses a Dispatch Box on the Opposition side of the Table (see Figure 1).

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After asking his or her original, 'tabled' question, an MP may then ask one supplementary question which the Minister will also answer. This arrangement has advantages and disadvantages for MPs. The ability to ask a supplementary allows for an element of surprise and can be used to ask Ministers more topical questions, but the limit of two questions means that it is not possible to ask a Minister a series of searching questions on the same topic. Again, one important exception to this rule is the Leader of the Opposition who need not table a question and is permitted three or four supplementaries in succession to follow up his first supplementary. This is in fact precisely what happens in the excerpt of Prime Minister's Questions that I will be examining below.

Prime Minister's Questions

MPs may ask questions to the Ministers of every department of government. On average, each department answers questions on one day per month, the precise dates being determined through negotiation between the government and opposition parties. The exception to this rule is the Prime Minister. The arrangements for Prime Minister's Questions (hereafter PMQ) have recently been changed but at present this session takes place from 12:00pm to approximately 12:30pm every Wednesday when Parliament is sitting. It is regarded by many as the dramatic highlight of the parliamentary week and is often the only aspect of Parliamentary proceedings to which the mass media pays any attention. It is, consequently, the aspect of Parliament most well-known among the general public. PMQ is a very significant event for the leaders of the main political parties since the way in which they ask and answer questions is regarded as a key measure of their overall performance. The particular PMQ that will be examined below was rated by political commentators as being an unusually successful one for the Leader of the Opposition and a rather damaging one for the Prime Minister and the government.

Parliament and the media

In general terms, the history of the relationship between parliament and the media is conventionally viewed as consisting of a slow but steady opening up of access to Parliament by the media for the benefit of the voting public. However, as I hope to demonstrate below, the three-cornered relationship between Parliament, media and public is in fact considerably more complex than this. The history of this relationship reflects the more general history of the news media in Britain which itself is closely connected to underlying developments in communication technology. Thus initially, before the rise of the mass media, only those citizens actually present in the public gallery of the Commons' Chamber

could see and hear what their elected representatives were doing on their behalf. The size of the gallery imposed an absolute limit on the numbers, but more importantly this arrangement effectively meant that only those with the time, leisure and what Bourdieu calls the right kind of 'habitus' could attend regularly: in other words, people rather like the MPs themselves – London-based gentlemen of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy.

It was not until the rise of newspaper reporting of Parliament in the 18th century that information concerning proceedings became widely available to the general public, and even here the coverage was subject to intense political pressure and control (Curran and Seaton 2003). To circumvent this control an alternative, radical press soon developed, but whereas the officially-sanctioned press tended to be excessively deferential, the radical press tended to go to the other extreme of rancorous criticism. The first step towards a more impartial account of proceedings in Parliament occurred during the Napoleonic wars, when the great political reformer William Cobbett began printing parliamentary debates as a supplement to his influential periodical the *Political Regster* in 1802. In 1811 Cobbett sold this business to Thomas Curson Hansard, the son of the official printer to the House of Commons, under whose proprietorship it flourished. This is why the Official Report of the House of Commons is still generally referred to simply as 'Hansard'. At first Hansard was based on reports of speeches taken from the press. Subsequently, it became the original work of Hansard's own reporters. During the 19th century, Hansard faced various financial problems and had to be subsidized by the government. Following a Select Committee enquiry in 1909, the operation was taken over permanently by the House of Commons itself which controls all aspects of its running including the appointing of the journal's staff (HCIO 2003b).

The possibility of broadcasting the proceedings of Parliament was first suggested during the early days of radio in the 1920s. Although the first radio broadcast from Parliament took place on April 25th 1928, when Winston Churchill, as the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, made his budget speech to the House, regular radio broadcasting of proceedings by the BBC did not begin until 1978. During the 1980s attention shifted to the question of whether to allow television cameras into parliament. Several Commons debates were held to consider this matter because the House was sharply divided on the issue. Those MPs who were opposed to the idea argued that it would change the traditional character of parliament, that audiences would not understand the arcane procedures of the House, and that speakers would be tempted to 'perform' for the public. There were also those who expressed the fear that broadcasters would emphasize dramatic incidents such as clashes between Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition at the expense of

less newsworthy but nevertheless important debates. On the other hand, those MPs in favour argued that ordinary people had a democratic right of access to the proceedings and that for the vast majority who could not attend the Chamber's public gallery, television broadcasts provided the most effective substitute. It was also argued that ignorance of parliament's activities was already widespread and that televising proceedings could only help promote greater understanding of, and interest in, the political process.

Television cameras were first admitted to Parliament on an experimental basis in 1985, initially in the House of Lords only. This experiment was deemed successful and the arrangements were made permanent in 1986. In the House of Commons, a similar pattern of experimental broadcasting (from 1989) followed by permanent broadcasts in 1990 occurred (HCIO 2003a). Most recently, webcasting of Parliament began on an experimental basis in January 2002. Although this was not the first time that parliamentary proceedings had been relayed over the Internet – the BBC and others had previously been allowed to use parliamentary material on their websites – it was the first time that Parliament itself had made its proceedings continuously available in this form (Parry 2004).

The outline of the evolution of the Parliament-media-public relationship sketched out here is a highly abridged one (for a fuller account see McKie 1999) but the main point which needs to be borne in mind as we move on to examine the four media texts in detail is that, as Fairclough observes, despite appearances to the contrary, at every stage in this evolutionary process:

'the settlement that has been arrived at between politicians and the media is not a stable one. It is a relationship of complicity and mutual dependence which is constantly unsettled by its contradictions, for the agendas of politics and media are not in the end the same. Oscillation between harmony and tension, trust and suspicion are inherent. The order of mediatized political discourse is itself, therefore, an essentially unstable one.' (Fairclough 1995: 200)

Which is to say that although the present 'settlement' (or 'order of discourse' to use Foucault's term) may be rather flawed, it does not exhaust the possibilities for what future settlements might be reached. I hope that the present study, by critically examining a number of the textual artifacts created by the current settlement, will be able to suggest some possible directions for future development.

Case study: PMQ for 8th December, 2004

The particular session of PMQ that was selected for analysis in this paper took place on Wednesday, 8th December 2004. This session was chosen simply because it was the most recent one at the time when this study was begun. However, subsequent comparison with several other sessions has indicated that it was a not untypical example. During this 30 minute session, the Prime Minister was asked a total of 19 questions: eleven 'tabled' questions and eight supplementaries. A variety of topics were covered, ranging from serious issues such as terrorism in Indonesia, the peace process in Northern Ireland and Britain's Kyoto Agreement targets to more minor matters such as the 'social evil' – as the Prime Minister somewhat humorously described it in his answer – of chewing gum on the nation's streets. However, due to limitations of space I shall in this paper just be discussing one short sequence from this session: namely, a sequence of two questions asked by the Leader of the Opposition and the corresponding answers given by the Prime Minister. This sequence occurred roughly in the middle of the session and can be regarded as a more or less free-standing section in that it dealt with an issue not touched on by other questions in the session. This sequence was selected for two reasons. Firstly, since it represented the main 'clash' between the two party leaders during this session, it was likely to be the most widely covered by the media in their reports. Secondly, the fact that the topic was not one that involved sharp ideological differences between the two parties makes it easier to identify the ideology of the media discourses which were drawn on in the textual representations made of it.

Before proceeding to an examination of this sequence, it might be helpful to briefly review two aspects of the political background that surrounded it, one general and one specific. The most salient general factor is that there is due to be a general election in 2005, most probably in May. In advance of this, all parties have been trying to gain electoral advantage by highlighting their own merits and downplaying those of their rivals. Two regular themes of such election campaigns in Britain are crime (usually referred to as 'law and order') and immigration (these days centred around the number of so-called 'asylum seekers' entering Britain). Responsibility for this aspect of government lies with the Home Office. The Minister in charge of this department is known as the Secretary of State at the Home Office or more colloquially just the Home Secretary. The Conservative Party has traditionally presented itself as the party of law and order and low immigration and, moreover, since Michael Howard served as Home Secretary under John Major's Conservative government from 1993 to 1997 these are themes about which he is clearly well qualified to ask questions.

The specific aspect of the background to this session of PMQ, and the issue which prompted Mr Howard's questions on this day, was the crisis in the government surrounding the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett. In Labour's first term of government (from 1997 to 2001) Mr Blunkett had been Secretary of State for Education and Employment. At that time the Home Secretary had been a man called Jack Straw. Following Labour's second general election victory in 2001, Mr Blunkett took over from Mr Straw as Home Secretary and Mr Straw became Foreign Secretary (Minister in charge of the Foreign Office). However, since August 2004 Mr Blunkett had been caught up in a scandal concerning his affair with a married woman and his subsequent legal battle for access to her son of which he claims to be the father. This case had been causing considerable embarrassment for the government ever since it had arisen but in late November Mr Blunkett's position grew much more difficult following accusations that he had abused his authority as Home Secretary by expediting the visa application of a foreign nanny employed by his lover. As a result of these more serious charges there had been repeated calls for his resignation but, at least until shortly before the time of this session of PMQ, the Prime Minister and other senior Labour Party colleagues had continued to support him publicly and Mr Blunkett had continued doggedly refusing to resign. Then, on 6th December, things turned even worse for Mr Blunkett when highly personal and critical remarks about his Cabinet colleagues which he had made to his biographer were published in a national newspaper. It is against this background that the Prime Minister attended this session of PMQ on 8th December, accompanied by Mr Blunkett who was seated on the government front bench next to Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was in turn sitting next to the Prime Minister (see Figure 1). As a footnote, it may be noted that Mr Blunkett did eventually resign, just one week after this PMQ session.

Finally, having now introduced most of the main participants, it just remains to mention one other essential contributor to the proceedings, namely the Speaker of the House. Like all other proceedings in the House of Commons, PMQ is chaired by the Speaker. It is he or she who decides which MPs may speak, ensures that the rules of procedure are followed, and disciplines any Members who misbehave. Seated on the throne-like chair at one end of the Chamber and attired in traditional wig, black robe and knee-breeches, the Speaker's role is a very important one: officially he or she is the second most important commoner in the country after the Prime Minister. The current Speaker is Michael Martin, a Scottish Labour MP who, on taking office and in accordance with tradition, agreed to give up party politics for the duration of his tenure.
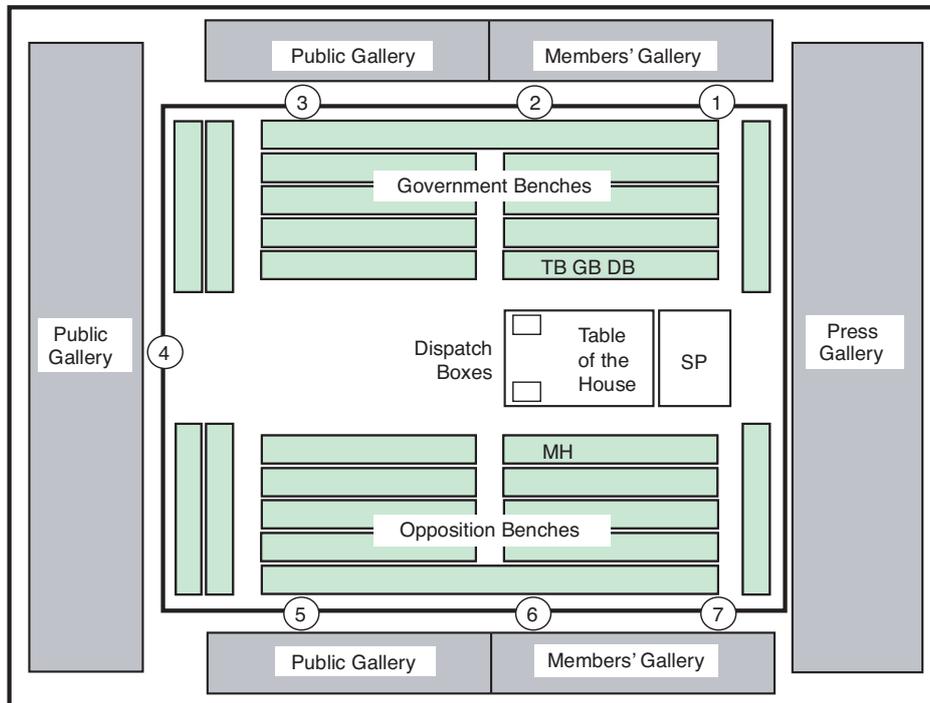
Figure 1. Simplified plan of the Chamber of the House of Commons
TB = Tony Blair; GB = Gordon Brown; DB = David Blunkett; MH = Michael Howard; SP = Speaker
Numbers indicate position of television cameras (see text).

The four texts

For this study, four texts were selected for analysis: the Official Report of the session of PMQ printed in Hansard; the webcast of the session on the BBC's Parliament Channel as archived on the website of the Prime Minister's Office; the Press Association report which was printed in *The Guardian* newspaper the following day; and *The Times* newspaper's Parliamentary Sketch based on the session which also appeared the following day. The first of these texts was chosen because of Hansard's unique position as the journal of record of Parliamentary proceedings. The second text was chosen because of the similarities and differences it illustrates between itself and the written record of Hansard. On the one hand, like Hansard it is an officially-sanctioned version of the event but, on the other, it is produced by a major media organization and cast in the visual and oral mode as opposed to the written. The two newspaper reports were chosen as examples of 'unauthorized' versions of the event, with the anonymous Press Association report exemplifying a 'straight' news report and *The Times'* Sketch being highly modulated through the humorous style that is characteristic of the genre. Clearly

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these four texts do not remotely begin to exhaust the full network of texts and discursive practices (both within the media and beyond) in which this event was rearticulated and recontexualized but I believe they do show sufficient variation to allow a number of meaningful comparisons and evaluations to be made.

The critical analysis of discourse

As noted in the introduction, this study locates itself within the field of CDA, which is both a theory of discourse and a method for analyzing it (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 16). Or rather, a constellation of theories and methods (Wodak and Meyer 2001) held together by the shared principle that a textually-oriented understanding of the dialectical articulation of discourse with the various other moments of social life is the sine qua non of effective social critique. As Norman Fairclough, one of the leading figures within CDA has argued, the analysis of media discourse should be recognized as an important element within the wider critique of contemporary social change because 'changes in society and culture manifest themselves in all their tentativeness, incompleteness and contradictory nature in the heterogeneous and shifting discursive practices of the media,' (Fairclough 1995: 52). In a CDA study, the analysis of any particular type of discourse involves keeping an alternating focus on two complementary dimensions: on the one hand, specific communicative events and texts and, on the other, the sociocultural order of discourse in which they occur. These two dimensions are mediated by a third dimension, namely that of discourse practices. Reinflecting the classical sociological concern with the structure-agency dichotomy, CDA explores how the tensions between the first two dimensions are resolved within shifting patterns of the third. In the present study the four media texts will be investigated folliwing the version of CDA that is outlined in Fairclough 1995.

Text 1. Hansard

Hansard reporters sit in the Press Gallery to write their reports, working in relays taking five or ten-minute turns. Reporters check their notes and then send them to editors who compile them into sections and send them the House printer. Authorship is therefore anonymized and collectivized. The complete report of one day's sitting in the House up to 1:00am is available in print form by 7:30am the following morning and by 8am it is also available on the Parliamentary website. Impressively fast though this schedule is, it is too slow for newspaper or TV journalists producing reports for the following day's morning papers or news programmes.

As noted above, Hansard is officially regarded as a 'clear and independent' record of proceedings, even though it provides very little explanatory support for the uninitiated reader and notwithstanding the fact that it is completely under the control of Parliament itself. While it is true that MPs are not permitted to make alterations of substance to their speeches, and any minor alterations must conform to certain rules, it is difficult to regard the report as being truly independent. Likewise, one may reasonably ask whether it really represents a 'full report' of proceedings. The definition of a full report was adopted in 1907 by the Select Committee on Parliamentary Debates as being one 'which, though not strictly verbatim, is substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but which on the other hand leaves out nothing that adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument,' (HCIO 2003b: 3). As we shall see, it is highly questionable whether this excerpt conforms to this definition.

The sequence of PMQ under consideration in this study was recorded in Hansard as follows:

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): In Labour's first term, crime rose, detection rates fell and the number of asylum seekers more than doubled. Presumably the Prime Minister agrees with his current Home Secretary, who thinks that after four years of Labour Government he inherited "a giant mess"?

The Prime Minister: At least he never said there was "something of the night" about him. Let me remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that in our first term

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crime fell under this Government, and under this Home Secretary crime continues to fall and we have record numbers of police officers—as opposed to the record of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, who cut the numbers of police officers. Not merely have we got record police numbers: we have community support officers as well.

Mr. Howard: I shall tell the Prime Minister what his Home Secretary says about me. He thinks that I was the first Home Secretary to focus on cutting crime. That is what he says. Now I shall tell the Prime Minister what his Home Secretary thinks about the current Foreign Secretary's time at the Home Office. *[Laughter.]* Wait for it. He says:

"It was worse than any of us had imagined possible. God alone knows what Jack did for four years. I am simply unable to comprehend how he could have left it as it was. It was a giant mess."

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He does not stop there. He thinks that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is weak; the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry does not think strategically; and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has not developed as expected. He also says that the Prime Minister does not like being told the truth and—as no doubt the Prime Minister will agree—that the Chancellor is a bully. Could the Prime Minister please arrange for the Home Secretary to make regular reports on his Cabinet colleagues and place them in the Library?

Hon. Members: More!

The Prime Minister: I think that we have had quite enough. Since we are talking about records as well as the comments that people make—[Hon. Members: "Oh!"] Well, the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not actually want to discuss the alternative records of his time in office and our time in office, but that is what I am going to do. When he was responsible for employment, it went down and unemployment went up by 1 million—[Hon. Members: "Ah!"] That is right, is it not? When the Home Secretary was in charge of employment, unemployment fell by 500,000. When we were in office, we increased the investment in health and education, we got mortgage rates down and we got inflation and unemployment down. People remember not the comments but the record, and it is the record of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's time in government that we will concentrate on between now and the election.

The general social event (a session of the House of Commons) and specific social practices (asking and answering Parliamentary – in this case Prime Ministerial – Questions) to which this text and the other three texts considered in this study are connected have been described in detail already. Clearly, the production of this particular text constitutes an intimately related social practice within that overall social event. Hansard reporters are staff of the Commons and if for some reason they were not able to record proceedings then it is very probable that the Speaker would suspend the session. Hansard serves to link each particular PMQ into the historical tradition of such events and to the wider past and future evolution of parliamentary affairs. By virtue of its very venerability and institutional power it would appear to enjoy an unassailable position as *the* authoritative report of Parliament's activities.

In terms of genre, this text represents a paradigmatic example of the official proceedings report genre. Indeed, an indication of its preeminence is that the style and very name 'Hansard' have been borrowed by numerous other legislatures around the world. Structural features of this genre evident here include the peremptory use of column

numbers for reference purposes and the clear but terse identification of speakers, including (for those other than the Prime Minister and *the* Speaker) the name of the constituency they represent and their party affiliation. Speakers' words are recorded in the first person which gives this text a strong sense of verisimilitude and immediacy although no attempt is made to represent prosodic features. In constrast, there is virtually no authorial voice and what little does occur is impersonal and generalized – rhetorical choices which similarly add to the impression of this text as being a simple, unmediated transcription of what was said. The authority of the text producers is evident, however, in framing devices such as the column numbering, the naming of speakers, and the selective, minimal description of some audible vocalizations. Some of these latter are attributed to 'Hon. Members', while others (e.g. 'Laughter') are not, although it is not clear why this should be since it is difficult to know who else would be recorded as laughing in the Chamber other than the Members.

In terms of discourse, this text instantiates in textual form the fundamental discourse of liberal-democratic politics that underlies the functioning of Parliament: that Parliament is the supreme legislative body and that MPs enjoy 'Parliamentary Privilege' to speak freely without the normal fear of libel laws. Speakers' words are treated with the utmost respect, being reported without comment in a sanitized form of verbatim prose which is claimed to convey the full import of what is said. Indeed, in a sense words are given a higher priority than actions. For example, when the Conservative backbench MPs cried 'More' as Mr Howard read out Mr Blunkett's criticisms of his colleagues, many of them also waved their Order Papers in the air, but such non-verbal instances of semiotic behaviour go unrecorded here. Likewise, a gesture by a certain non-speaking participant of this session which was the focus of great attention in almost all other media reports of this PMQ finds no menton here. In fact, it may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that words are considered more important than the actors themselves here: hence Tony Blair (and elsewhere Michael Martin) are labelled according to their role rather than to their individual identities.

Regarding the practices of consumption which this text enters into, the most noticable fact is that despite being the official record of proceedings in Parliament, these days, even with its publication on the Internet, it is likely that fewer people read this than watch or read any of the other three kinds of texts. Why this should be, and whether or not this is a good or a bad thing will be considered further below.

The overall impression given by the magisterial authority of Hansard both as an institution, a discourse practice and a regular series of textual instantiations of that

practice, is that the order of discourse in which it exists is an extremely stable and homogeneous one. Yet as we shall begin to see in the following text, there are tensions within it which one of Hansard's less commendable functions is to conceal.

Text 2. Parliament Channel webcast

The television broadcasting of proceedings in the the Commons Chamber is strictly governed by the House of Commons Select Committee on Broadcasting. All broadcasts must conform to the 'Rules of Coverage' drawn up by this committee and overseen by the Director of Broadcasting, an officer of the House. The Rules of Coverage are essentially a set of guidelines for the camera operators and the television director, setting out which shots may and may not be used, and what may and may not be depicted. They provide specific guidelines for picture direction and instructions on how specific events, such as disorder in the Chamber, are to be treated.

The Rules begin with a 'Statement of Objective' to the effect that 'The director should seek, in close collaboration with the Director of Broadcasting, to give a full, balanced, fair and accurate account of proceedings, with the aim of informing viewers about the work of the House.' (HCBC 2003: 14) To this is appended a note stating that 'In carrying out this task, the director should have regard to the dignity of the House and to its function as a working body rather than a place of entertainment.' Recently, although the coverage is generally regarded by both politicians and the media as being 'fair' and 'balanced', some broadcasters have questioned whether the rules really permit the coverage to be 'full' or 'accurate' (6-8). For example, in his evidence given to a meeting of the Broadcasting Committee in 2002, the Head of News and Current Affairs at Channel 4 said that broadcasters felt it was time that the Rules of Coverage were relaxed. He argued that under the existing rules coverage was 'distant and unexciting' and that relaxing the rules would 'allow for a more accurate and full portrayal of the House' (6). And Anne Sloman, the BBC's Chief Political Adviser, went further in arguing that 'the shot-by-shot rule book should be abandoned' and that 'the spirit of trust between broadcasters and Parliament should allow directors to reflect the mood of the House without artificial restrictions'. However, despite these and other similar pleas the Committee's conclusion was that there was no case for making any substantial changes to the rules.

Under the present arrangements therefore, the television equipment used is as follows. Firstly, there are seven cameras in the chamber, located approximately as indicated in Figure 1 above. They are comparatively small, light-weight units, mounted on the underside of the galleries. Because they are entirely remote-controlled, no camera

operators need be present in the chamber. For sound recording a number of microphones are suspended from the ceiling of the Chamber ensuring that wherever an MP may be sitting his or her question will be audible. These microphones are also used to record the general sounds of the Chamber such as laughter and cheering. There are also larger stand microphones mounted on each of the two Dispatch Boxes to pick up the voices of the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition.

Although at the time of writing archived versions of this televisual text are currently still available for viewing on various websites such as those of the BBC's Parliament Channel or the Prime Minister's Office, in order to convert such texts into a form suitable for presentation and analysis here it has been necessary to transcribe them. While such a procedure clearly results in the loss of an enormous amount of important visual and aural information and, conversely, introduce a number of inevitabe biases and inaccuracies to the text, considerable care has been taken to make this transcript as accurate as possible.

The camera shots used in filming this sequence are shown below. For each shot, the following five items of data are given:

  (i) Shot number
 (ii) Camera number (refer to Figure 1)
(iii) Shot type
     (WA: Wide angle; LS: Long shot; MLS: Medium Long Shot; MS: Medium Shot)
 (iv) Shot duration (to nearest second)
  (v) Brief verbal description

 1: C4 WA   5   Establishing shot of Chamber from Public Gallery.
 2: C2 MS   13   Direct shot of Mr Howard speaking at Dispatch Box.
 3: C5 LS   4   Oblique shot of Table from Opposition side, Mr Blair speaking at Dispatch Box.
 4: C6 MS   7   Direct shot of Mr Blair speaking at Dispatch Box.
 5: C2 MS   2   Cut-away direct reaction shot of Mr Howard smiling, seated beside colleague.
 6: C6 MS   15   Direct shot of Mr Blair speaking at Dispatch Box.
 7: C3 LS   4   Oblique shot of Table from Government side, Mr Howard rising to speak at Dispatch Box.
 8: C2 MS   7   Direct shot of Mr Howard speaking at Dispatch Box.
 9: C6 MS   2   Cut-away direct reaction shot of Mr Blunkett shaking his head, seated next to Mr Brown.
10: C2 MS   29   Direct shot of Mr Howard speaking at Dispatch Box.
11: C5 MLS 3   Oblique shot of Table and Labour front bench from Opposition side, Mr Howard speaking at Dispatch Box.
12: C2 MS   27   Direct shot of Mr Howard speaking at Dispatch Box.

13: C3 LS   3   Oblique shot of Chamber from Government side, Mr Howard speaking at Dispatch Box, Mr Blunkett putting arm round Mr Brown's shoulder, Conservative backbenchers cheering and waving Order Papers.

14: C2 MS   11   Direct shot of Mr Howard speaking at Dispatch Box.

15: C5 MLS 6   Oblique shot of Table from Opposition side, Mr Howard sitting, Mr Blair rising to speak at Dispatch Box.

16: C6 MS   7   Direct shot of Mr Blair speaking at Dispatch Box.

17: C7 MS   7   Oblique shot from Opposition of Blair speaking at Dispatch Box, Mr Brown and Mr Blunkett foregrounded.

18: C6 MS   16   Direct shot of Mr Blair speaking at Dispatch Box.

19: C5 MS   5   Oblique shot from Opposition side of Mr Blair speaking at Dispatch Box.

20: C6 MS   21   Direct shot of Mr Blair speaking at Dispatch Box with slight pan and zoom at end as he sits.

In producing the transcript the following conventions were used:

Participants: SP = Speaker; MH = Michael Howard; TB = Tony Blair

Numbers in brackets indicate camera shot number (see shot list above)

Underlining indicates markedly stressed words or syllables or a marked increase in pitch or volume.

SP　**(1)** Michael Howard *[cheers, cries of "Hear, hear"]*

MH　In Labour's first **(2)** term, crime rose, detection rates fell, and the number of asylum seekers more than doubled. Presumably the Prime Minister agrees with his current Home Secretary, who thinks that after four years of Labour Government he inherited "a giant mess"? *[laughter]*

TB　**(3)** Well, er, at **(4)** least, at least he never said there was "something of the night" about im. *[prolonged laughter, during which* **(5)***]* And actually, in the first term, let me just remind **(6)** the right honourable gentleman, in the first term, crime fell under this Government, and under this Home Secretary now, crime continues to fall, we've record numbers of police officers and, as opposed to him *[= MH]* who cut the numbers of police officers, not merely have we got record police officers we've got community support officers as well. *[cheers]*

SP　**(7)** Michael Howard

MH　I, I'll tell him what his Home Secretary says about me **(8)** he thinks I was the first Home Secretary to focus on cutting crime. *[prolonged cheers and laughter]* That's **(9)** what he says *[pointing at Blunkett]* that's what he says. *[cheers, during which* **(10)** *]* And now, and now I'll tell him now I'll tell him what his Home Secretary thinks, about the current Foreign Secretary's time at the Home Office. Wait for it, "It was worse than any one of us had imagined possible. *[laughter]* God alone knows what Jack did for

four years. *[laughter, during which* **(11)** *]* I am simply <u>unable to comprehend how he could have left it as it was</u>. **(12)** <u>It was a giant mess</u>." And he does not stop there. He thinks the <u>Culture</u> Secretary's <u>weak</u>; he think's the <u>Trade</u> Secretary doesn't think strategically; and he thinks the Education Secretary "<u>hasn't developed as expected</u>". *[laughter]* And he says the Prime Minister doesn't like being told the truth and the Chancellor, no doubt the Prime Minister will agree with this, the Chancellor's a bully. *[prolonged laughter, during which* **(13)** *]* **(14)** Now could the Prime Minister <u>please</u> arrange for the Home Secretary to make, <u>regular</u> reports on his Cabinet colleagues, and place them in the Library of the House? *[prolonged laughter, cheers, cries of "More", during which* **(15)** *]*

TB Er, I think what he, what he can do however, is the eh h h *[cries of "More"]* **(16)** no I think we've had quite enough actually, er h *[laughter]* **(17)** What I, what I can do however, is since we're talking about <u>records</u> as well as comments *[cries of "Oh"]* that people make **(18)** <u>Well it's</u> he doesn't actually want to discuss the alternative records between <u>his</u> time in office and our time in office, but <u>that's</u> what I'm going to do. Because **(19)** when he was employment secretary, employment went, employment went down unemployment went up, <u>a million</u>, that's right, isn't it? When he *[pointing at Blunkett]* was in charge of education employment, unemployment fell by <u>half a million</u>. *[cheers]* **(20)** When <u>we</u> were in office, we've increased the er investment in health, in education, we got <u>mortgage</u> rates down we got inflation and unemployment down. People remember not the comments but the record, and it's the <u>record</u> of his time in government that we will concentrate on between now and the election. *[prolonged cheers, laughter]*

Given that most people in Britain these days rely on television for most of their information about what is going on in the world of public affairs, it would seem that providing televisual access to Parliamentary proceedings would be an essential task for a genuinely democratic society. To this end the provision of a dedicated channel to cover Parliament (the Parliament Channel was taken over by the BBC in 1998) would appear to be a welcome step forwards. However, a study of television news bulletins by the Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government revealed that, between January and March 1999, barely four percent of news items involved politicians, and of this figure, less than one percent contained parliamentary coverage (Coleman 1999). There are of course several theories to explain this situation, but one factor which cannot be overlooked is the discourse of the broadcasts themselves. Describing the Commons Broadcasting Committee's 1988 report on the televising of Parliament, Kingdom comments that it 'brought dismay, with its determination to do everything possible to emasculate producers and exorcise all hint of the drama of real-world politics. … the desire of the committee

was to make the result as boring as possible to viewer' (Kingdom 1991: 303). Anyone who has watched a Parliamentary debate on television may be forgiven for agreeing with this evaluation. As the list of shots used in this sequence indicates, the visual grammar made available to the director through the Rules of Coverage is highly limited: four basic shots, no close-ups and almost no panning or zooming (to say nothing of sound effects, computer graphics, flashbacks, slow-motion or exotic locations!). Nevertheless, within these constraints, I consider that the director of this sequence made good use of the tools available, albeit perhaps in a rather conventional way, and it comes as quite a surprise to realized that during this brief (barely three minutes) sequence a total of twenty shots were used.

The sequence opens with an establishing shot from Camera 4 of the whole chamber, helping the viewer to understand where the 'action' is taking place. This shot is used to mark off almost every cycle of questions and answers during PMQ broadcasts, rather in the way that new chapters are used to indicate major divisions in a novel. Continuing the analogy, the direct shots of the two protagonists are like paragraphs, with the oblique shots acting as divisions between paragraphs, and the cut-away reaction shots like sentences in parentheses within a paragraph. In fact the sequence of shots closely corresponds to the turn-taking patterns of the speakers and appears to contemporary eyes at least to be presenting events in a highly naturalistic way. However, the suggestion of authorial voice is not entirely absent. For example, one interesting feature is the use of Camera 5, which at the beginning of this sequence encompasses the whole of the Table and the Government Front Benches in a long shot but which gradually draws closer to Blair at the Dispatch Box as the sequence progresses as if towards a dramatic climax. On the other hand, given the prominent attention given by many less closely regulated media reports of this event to Mr Blunkett's behaviour at the moment when Mr Howard quotes him as saying 'the Chancellor's a bully', the fact that this is filmed in long shot from Camera 3, from where it is barely visible, suggests that perhaps considerations for the 'dignity of the House' were here overriding the director's desire to create exciting television. A more innocent interpretation might be that the director was more interested in the (relatively rare in recent months and thus newsworthy) scenes of Conservative backbenchers enthusiastically cheering their leader's performance at the Dispatch Box.

The tension evident in this text, a tension which reflects that between the views of the broadcasters and the Committee noted above, is the familiar one between the informing function and entertaining function of the media. From the point of view of wishing to encourage a renewed and revitalized role for the House of Commons, one

which would put it firmly at the heart of British political life – and no longer dependent for its living on selling flowers (or fig leaves) to paternalistic peers, whether press barons or media moguls – it is a tension concerning whose ideal resolution it is extremely difficult to adjudicate. For, if the media is allowed more freedom to enliven or (to use a Labour Party spin doctor's own phrase) 'sex up' its coverage of PMQ and other Parliamentary proceedings, on the one hand it may well succeed in attracting a larger and qualitatively different audience to Westminster. But on the other hand, it runs the risks noted in the introduction of trivialization and (over)simplification. This tension exists within all media texts and in the next two examples we will see how non-official producers of parliamentary reportage resolve it within their own discourse.

Text 3. Press Association Report

For many years the amount of parliamentary reporting in the British press has been in steady decline. In a recent study David McKie found that there had been a drop of over 70 percent in terms of column inches in the main broadsheets during the last 50 years of the 20th century (McKie 1999). These days, a few newspapers have begun reintroducing daily reports but these tend to be rather minimal and often just based on the feeds they receive from the Press Association. This is a British news agency jointly owned by the main regional newspapers. It has a team of Commons Press Gallery reporters who supply the whole of the media with reports on proceedings. As noted above, since its journalists must serve a wide range of customers their reports are cast in what is generally considered to be the idiom of pure and unadorned news. The following item appeared as the fourth out of fourteen equally brief sections reporting on the whole of the previous day's events, including PMQ, under the headline 'Yesterday in Parliament'.

David Blunkett

The public judges politicians on their records not their words, Mr Blair insisted as he faced taunts over David Blunkett's criticisms of cabinet colleagues. Mr Howard made full use of the home secretary's stinging analysis. As he did so, Mr Blunkett, who launched the tirades in an interview for a book serialised this week, put a supportive arm around the chancellor Gordon Brown's shoulders.

Mr Howard told Mr Blair the home secretary said he "inherited a giant mess" when he took over the job from Jack Straw. But the prime minister recalled Ann Widdecombe's less-than-flattering description of the Tory leader: "At least he never said there was 'something of the night about him'."

Here for the first time in this study we find an explicit texturing of voices, a blending of the authorial voice with the voice of the participants in the social event that is PMQ. An immediate consequence of this shift from first person to third person narration is that the author's voice, annonymous though he or she is, begins to frame and classify the words, or more accurately the 'speech acts' of the politicians. For example, Mr Blair is described as having 'insisted' and 'recalled'. More radical reformulations are also indulged in by the author where he or she describes Mr Howard's remarks as 'taunts' and Mr Blunkett's remarks as 'stinging analysis' and 'tirades'. Perhaps most omniciently the author feels capable of interpreting the intention (or is it the effect?) of Mr Blunkett's arm movement as 'supportive'. This authorial framing is further emphasized by using Mr Blunkett's name as the heading for this section. Since he was the focus of so much media attention at that time it is highly likely that this choice was motivated by the author's (or editor's) knowledge of the prevailing market conditions for news stories. This of course can have serious implications in terms of the conflict between business considerations and democratic principles.

Two further important differences between this and the previous two texts concern selectivity and chronology. Firstly, rather than purporting to be a 'full' account of proceedings, the author has selected and summarized it, encapsuling its purport as Mr Blair 'facing taunts over David Blunkett's criticisms of cabinet colleagues'. In fact, it is only the criticism of Mr Straw that is mentioned here and so readers must be left wondering who the other targets were. We are told what Mr Blunkett did with his arm but not what Mr Brown's reaction was (cf. Text 4). Finally, the move to third person presentation facilitates the decoupling of story and narrative and allows for the foregrounding of a (slightly inaccurate reformulation) of the conclusion to Mr Blair's second answer at the very start of the text in the phrase 'The public judges politicians on their records not their words'.

On the other hand, this text helpfully provides readers with certain items of background information which the 'full' official and semi-official reports do not. For example, Mr Blair's use of the cryptic phrase 'something of the night' is attributed to its original author, the Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe who used it to describe Mr Howard in 1997, although its meaning is not explained beyond stating that it was 'less-than-flattering'. Also, we are given important information about the source of the criticisms that Mr Howard is quoting. Unless they can provide the public with these kinds of background details I do not believe that Hansard or the Parliament Channel can be considered as providing 'full' reports.

4. *The Times*' Parliamentary Sketch

At first glance this text might strike readers unfamiliar with the British press as not being in keeping with what they imagine to be the lofty tone of the famous *Times* of London. However, there has been a long tradition of political satire in Britain and these days such sketches are a well-established and popular feature of most of the quality newspapers. However, what perhaps is rather disturbing is that whereas in the past this genre may have provided a useful counterbalance to more weighty reporting, what makes this type of text more significant these days is the sheer dearth of other more serious coverage of Parliament. As Barnett and Gaber note:

'the breed of political journalist that gives politicians most cause for concern is the parliamentary sketchwriter – a trade that has boomed with the decline of parliamentary reporting. On an average slow news day in the House of Commons the benches of the press gallery will be virtually deserted but for the Hansard note-takers, the ever-present Press Association reporter and the parliamentary sketchwriters. ... Sketchwriters need to be witty and trenchant, and, most worryingly for MPs, they have a self-declared mission to mock. Given the decline in straightforward reporting of Parliament, MPs are particularly concerned that these sketches are now virtually the only perspective on the conduct of MPs to be found in the press on a daily basis.' (Barnett and Gaber 2001: 36)

In terms of the current debate about whether the media is 'dumbing down' its treatment of serious social issues I think the MPs' concerns should be viewed as well-founded. However, it must be said that if the Leader of the Opposition habitually uses his allotment of questions merely to engage the Prime Minister in what Tony Blair described in an earlier (and similarly frivolous) exchange with Mr Howard during this same PMQ as 'rather absurd point scoring across the Dispatch box' then perhaps they should reconsider their own behaviour before casting aspersions at the media.

The sketch appeared in *The Times* as follows:

Victims of hiss and tell take to the stage in the political panto

Ann Treneman

PRIME MINISTER'S Questions was a hoot yesterday, although I am not sure that David Blunkett would agree.

[remainder of first paragraph and two following paragraphs omitted]

The Leader of the Opposition was on good form but then he had the perfect ammunition. This had been provided by Mr Blunkett, who does a hiss-and-tell in a new biography by revealing what he thinks of Cabinet colleagues. His assessments may be sagacious but they were also wounding. Some of the most bruised were absent, including Jack Straw, who had gone to Luxembourg (as you do). Mr Blunkett was sitting between two of his victims. Margaret Beckett, who was portrayed as someone treading water, was wearing a flowing turquoise number right out of The Little Mermaid. Her facial muscles did not move for the entirety of PMQs. On the other side was Gordon Brown.

Michael Howard asked if Mr Blair agreed with his Home Secretary that Mr Straw had left the Home Office in a "giant mess"? "At least he never said there was something of the night about him," retorted Mr Blair, dredging up that insult.

He paid for it, though. "Well, I'll tell him what his Home Secretary thinks about me," shouted Mr Howard. "He thinks I was the first Home Secretary to focus on cutting crime!" The Tories were convulsed. "That is what he said!" crowed Mr Howard. It was pure political panto but, for Mr Blair, it was not so much "Behind you!" as "Beside you!" How Mr Blunkett must have wished that he could activate a trap door and disappear. Mr Howard then read out his uncomfortable opinions, ending with the two men at the top: "He says the Prime Minister doesn't like being told the truth and the Chancellor – no doubt the Prime Minister will agree with this – is a bully."

At this Mr Blunkett threw one of his arms across the Chancellor's shoulders. Mr Brown looked thunderstruck. I do not think that he is a hugs kind of guy. It is hard to imagine him, even on the most riotous stag night, throwing his arms around anyone really. Certainly yesterday his body language was screaming "No!"

But Mr Howard had no pity. Could Mr Blair arrange for Mr Blunkett to make regular reports on colleagues and place them in the Commons library?

Mr Blair was lost for words. Almost as rarely, Tory MPs were right behind their leader as they shouted "More!" at a flummoxed Mr Blair. "I think I've had quite enough actually," said the Prime Minister. To which the only reply can be: "Oh no you haven't!"

In this text (which incidentally was the only one in this group to be by a named individual author), the most distinctive discoursal feature is its high degree of intertextuality. The key to understanding the intertextual references made throughout this text, indeed the key to the overall thematic structure of the sketch, is to understand that this PMQ took place in December, shortly before the Christmas holiday season,

which is the time of year when pantomimes are a traditional part of the festivities in Britain. The goings on in Westminster are often described in terms of political theatre but here the author is making the analogy more topical and, at the same time, more satirical since pantomimes are a particularly fantastic, cliched and childish form of drama. This humorous trope is signalled by the headline and the phrase 'a hoot' in the first sentence. It then recurs several times throughout the text. For example, the cry of 'Behind you' is traditionally shouted by audiences in pantomimes to alert the protagonist to the presence of an adversary on the stage: of course, as indicated in Figure 1, Mr Blunkett was seated beside (or more precisely, one place away from) Mr Blair on the Government front bench at this time. Likewise, contradicting a character's utterance by shouting expressions such as 'Oh no you haven't' is another traditional practice among pantomime audiences. Within this overall structure there are further satirical features, such as the clearly preposterous comments about the immobility of Margaret Beckett's 'facial muscles' and her clothes resembling the costumes of 'The Little Mermaid', but they all serve to support this main theme.

The remarkably mocking, satirical tone of this text is typical of the Parliamentary Sketch genre. This would surely come as a fitting and welcome item of comic relief to readers of *The Times* were it merely an encore to the main coverage of Parliamentary affairs. But since this may well be the only account of PMQ in the whole paper we are reminded once more of the tension between the media's entertainment and informing roles. This text also raises important questions about the place of free speech and a free press in a democratic society. Before condemning the trend suggested by this sketch towards trivializing politics too hastily we ought to remember that there are still a number of countries in the world where publishing this sort of text is illegal. As Oscar Wilde might have put it, if there is one thing worse than living in a society where the press trivializes politics, it is living in a society where the press does not trivialize politics.

Conclusion

Having examined these four very different accounts of the Prime Minister's Questions and noted how their textual characteristics instantiate the discoursal practices and orders of discourse within which they are formed, I would like to conclude this paper with a discussion of how each of these texts might be changed to strengthen their contribution to making Parliament a more effective public sphere.

Firstly, I believe Hansard could be made far more reader-friendly by the addition of a system of contextualizing notes and cross-referencing. This would no doubt involve a

certain amount of extra expenditure in terms of paying for researchers and may even introduce a delay in publication, but the benefits in terms of readability and accessibility would be considerable. Furthermore, since it seems reasonable to assume that the online version of Hansard will gradually replace the printed version as the default reference work for politicians and the general public alike, there would appear to be great potential for re-designing it as a hypertext document, with clickable links directly to, for example, the websites of each speaker. Regarding the televising of PMQ, I would similarly like to see greater efforts by the broadcasters to make their coverage more comprehensible. Rather than chafing at the restrictions on using close-up shots and other currently forbidden camera techniques, a simple but helpful improvement would be to provide subtitling to give the names and constituencies of whoever is speaking. Other on-screen information could quite easily be provided, such as the titles of the debates and an outline of the agenda so that viewers who tune in half way through could know roughly what it was that was being discussed. As for the output of news agencies such as the Press Association, although this tends towards being rather bland in style, designed as it is for general consumption by a wide range of media outlets, the opportunity which the shift to third person narration affords of editorializing allows for a greater degree of contextualizing than is currently provided by either of the first two texts and as such I regard it as providing a reasonable balance between the entertainment and information giving functions. The Parliamentary Sketch genre, on the other hand, I consider to be a perfectly legitimate form of expression but one which needs to be balanced by the sort of more serious coverage which is currently lacking.

Finally, we are left with one question: does it matter whether (and if so how) the media covers events in the Palace of Westminster or not? As the quotation from John Kingdom with which I started this paper illustrates, there are some who regard the House of Commons as being little more than a form of ideological state apparatus, a device designed, much as the eminent Victorian journalist Walter Bagehot once described the House of Lords and the monarchy, as a way to beguile and deceive the masses in order that the real process of government could proceed unimpaired by popular participation. If Parliament is to become a genuine forum for representative democracy then clearly it must maintain strong and, in this increasingly digital age, interactive channels of communication with the electorate. As such the media has an important role to play in this but as CDA helps us to see, they have their own interests, agendas and discourses which may or may not coincide with those of the other two sides of this eternal triangle.

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