



## *Preaching to the 'Feral Beast': Tony Blair's Farewell Speech to the Press*

by Lidia De Michelis

It was St. Francis who in early-thirteenth-century Italy famously arraigned the ravenous wolf which was preying on the good people of Gubbio. Addressing it by the name of "brother", the saint went on to strike a heavenly bargain with the animal:

'As thou art willing to make this peace, I promise thee that thou shalt be fed every day by the inhabitants of this land [...]; thou shalt no longer suffer hunger, as it is hunger which has made thee do so much evil; but if I obtain all this for thee, thou must promise, on thy side, never again to attack any animal or any human being; dost thou make this promise?'. Then the wolf, bowing his head, made a sign that he consented. (*The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi* 2003: 57).

No such miracle, alas, attended Tony Blair's attempt to tame the British press, which in his Reuters' speech of June 12<sup>th</sup> 2007 (delivered merely a fortnight before he left office) he called "a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits" and "hunt[ing] in a pack" (Blair 2007: 478-479).<sup>1</sup> In fact, not only at the time did the media "beast" go straight for the speaker with its "jaws wide open" (*The Little Flowers* 2003: 56), but, as it may be inferred from Tony Blair's recent complaint in an interview with *The Sunday Times* that he has "got a problem with the UK media" bent on "settling a score" with him (Arlidge 2009), Blair's "intemperate" speech (Bright 2007) contributed

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<sup>1</sup> An Italian translation of the speech, by Vittorio Zambardino, was published in *La Repubblica*, June 14<sup>th</sup> 2007 (<[http://vittoriozambardino.repubblica.it/zetavu/2007/06/la\\_stampa\\_una\\_b.html](http://vittoriozambardino.repubblica.it/zetavu/2007/06/la_stampa_una_b.html)>). All the websites cited in this article were accessed between January 20<sup>th</sup> and February 5<sup>th</sup> 2010.



to leave a trail of enduring animosity in the relationship between politics and the press in Britain.

While this grudge is being currently revived in the wake of the former Prime Minister's impassive, self-righteous, even defiant appearance, on January 29<sup>th</sup> 2010, at the Chilcot Inquiry investigating the decision to go to war in Iraq, it is worth noting how this relationship has not always been so strained. New Labour's (and Tony Blair's) 'honeymoon' with the media during the 1997 election campaign and well into the party's first spell in power (1997-2001) has long been a favourite topic in the discussion of the communicative and discursive revolution brought about by the Blairites via their strategic alliance with the Murdoch media and effective deployment of information management and 'spin'.

In this perspective, the episode of St. Francis and the wolf seems to hold a Janus-faced moral, patently encompassing also the press, which has since self-critically admitted to some level of passive complicity and perhaps too meek acceptance of the pre-digested, sugar-coated bits of news it was fed by the government's communication unit first-hand, abundantly and on a regular basis. (It is perhaps no chance that, beyond its obvious link to the semantic and performative import of 'feedback', *feed* has become such an ubiquitous term in the language of online journalism). The trouble came when, as it was conspicuously proved by the Gilligan/Kelly affair (2003) and the Hutton Inquiry (2003-2004), it became increasingly apparent that good, juicy morsels were too often being interspersed with poisoned baits.

A plethora of heated attacks and self-flailing accusations from within the political discursive arena has given way, in time, to serious investigations and reviews by journalists, academics and institutions alike focusing on the shared responsibility of politics and the media for what is largely perceived as the pervasive, global crisis of trust and credibility which is affecting popular participation in the political public sphere perhaps beyond repair. But, although the rhetorical mantra of New Labour as being *the party of 'spin'* has dominated media representations of the Blair decade, the fact that news management and agenda building have been a long established practice in British politics at least since the 1960s, with government and the media competing over what John Lloyd (2004; in Schlesinger 2006: 305) has called "the market for people's trust", has been widely acknowledged and thoroughly documented.<sup>2</sup>

Leighton Andrews (2006:32) has recently highlighted "the deep cultural resonance of the phrase 'spin' itself, which has become tabloid shorthand for the process of political debate". Tracing the first reference to this term back to Saul Bellow's Jefferson lecture in 1977 and surveying the story of its semantic accretion through political usage in the USA, Andrews goes on to map out the penetration of expressions such as spin and spin doctor(ing) into current British political jargon,

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<sup>2</sup> It was, in fact, under Thatcher and her formidable communication team that Cabinet information management marked a quantum leap.



concluding that even though, in Kevin Moloney's words, "spin is a 'culturally rich metaphor' also in the British context"- being amenable not only to baseball, but also to cricket (Moloney 2001, in Leighton 2006: 33) - only after the 1992 elections in Britain and the USA had they become commonplace in the UK.

Against an increasingly popular perception of public culture and media discourse as contaminated, unreliable and utterly estranging discursive domains - even delegitimized, in fact, by their mutual entanglement with celebrity politics and overriding financial interests - "spin" has come to signify any form of "offensive promotion of policy" (Moloney 2001:124) and is now disparagingly and uncritically received as a mere synonym for partisan communication across the political spectrum. According to most politicians and several opinionists, responsibility (or co-responsibility) for the current culture of spin - which consists in a cluster of interrelated communicative strategies such as leaking partial and slanted information in order to 'prepare' public opinion for impending policy announcements, defaming political antagonists, anticipating stories to friendly journalists and fiercely attacking adversarial ones (often on a personal basis and unidentified sources) in order to check the news agenda (Pilcher 2002: 9-10) - cannot be laid only at the door of politicians and their spin doctors, but has to be shared with large segments of those involved in the media industry.

This was the thesis, to cite but an example, of George Pitcher's *The Death of Spin? Communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, published as a pamphlet in 2002 for the then actively pro-Labour think-tank Demos and later developed in book form. Building on the rich crop of articles and books which - after the end of New Labour's honeymoon with the media, and even more in the run up to, and immediate aftermath of, the 2001 general election - started on both sides to wage a fierce, divisive battle over the proper boundaries of their respective zones of discursive influence and agency,<sup>3</sup> Pitcher drew a more balanced and nuanced sketch of the press/politics nexus at the time, perhaps also with a view to advance the Government's attempt to sign a truce with the media. This was apparent, for example, in the comments, speeches and interviews delivered after the low voters' turn-out of the 2001 election by Tony Blair's official spokesman and chief of communications Alastair Campbell, himself transformed into a celebrity emblem of political obfuscation till he resigned in August 2003 in the wake of the Kelly affair.

In a much quoted speech at the inaugural meeting of the Media Correspondents Association in 2002 - whilst meekly admitting, on the one hand, that New Labour had "appeared", and perhaps had been, "over-controlling, manipulative" (Campbell 2002, in Andrews 2006: 42), and blaming the media, on the other, for being vastly responsible for much that was generally understood as spin - Campbell called for a

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<sup>3</sup> Discussing the staggering amount of literature on this issue is, of course, beyond the scope of this article, but mention must be made, at least, of Gould (1998), Gaber (2000b), Barnett and Gaber (2001), Jones (1999; 2001), Lloyd (2004, 2005), Mazzoleni (2004), Negrine (2008), Curran and Seaton (2009). For a more exhaustive bibliography on the almost unfathomable domain of spin and counter-spin, see the reference section in Andrews (2006).



joint effort to re-moralize the political discursive domain. This argument, which has since been resumed by Peter Mandelson, Tony Blair, Jack Straw and a number of New Labour politicians, was still firmly at the heart of Campbell's Hugh Cudlipp Lecture (delivered on January 28, 2008). Ruling out any participation in the drafting or inspiration of Blair's "feral beast" speech "other than through the shared experience of trying to deal with th[e] changed landscape" (Campbell 2008: 339) of the new media environment, in that occasion Campbell strongly reasserted the former Prime Minister's line in his farewell address to the press. A similar insistence on the theme of 'shared responsibility' is to be found also in the words of Campbell's successor Lance Price. But his position, suggesting, as Ivor Gaber (2004: 371) has argued, "that the problem was more one of structures than mendacity", is clearly designed also to advance that conciliatory bias for shifting the blame from individual politicians and journalists toward the 'structural' transformations affecting both political communication and reporting which has now become commonplace in investigations and complaints about the alleged degeneration of the contemporary public sphere.

Going back to Pitcher's analysis, one of its most striking characteristics is its apparent concern with establishing a detached tone (sustained throughout the pamphlet) and projecting a sedate, non-partisan discursive milieu in which playing the blame game is by no means *the* issue. In fact, 'spin' is presented almost as an inevitable consequence of the post-ideological collapse of neatly-drawn conventional oppositions bringing along the need for the 'constructed' antagonistic positions which, against the "adversarial system on which our media and political cultures thrive", are deemed necessary for the realization of "advocacy". (Pitcher 2002: 11).

Marking out Campbell and Philip Gould (the author of the 'official' insider story of the communicative marketing 'revolution' which took New Labour into office [Gould 1998]) as communication giants who felt not embarrassed to show the inner workings of 24-hour political media management – on the contrary, they even contributed to the pervasive fascination with self-reflexivity characterizing current political communication – Pitcher's approach opens up to consider the roles of other possible culprits. Such was the internecine strife between "attributable" sources (such as the all too visible Campbell) and the various "shadowy spinners" existing within his own party (Pitcher 2002: 36). More importantly, Pitcher pointed to the offensive waged by the Conservative counter-spinners,<sup>4</sup> who took advantage of the rising spin war and New Labour's underdetermined ideological character "as a progressive project born out of a post-ideological mélange." (*Ibid.*: 37).

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<sup>4</sup> "The Tories saw an opportunity to liken spin to sleaze, as a corrupting force at the heart of government. On this they found themselves at one with the media, which found the gap between spin and substance to be a useful proxy measure of government performance. This created a climate in which it was relatively easy to undermine the Government's credibility by being cynical about truth and veracity in politics—in other words, 'it's all spin'". (Pitcher 2002: 37).



Pitcher's perhaps over-indulgent, though otherwise well-informed and thoughtful account of the way "New Labour became a victim of its own success" (*ibid.*: 36) when the media management strategies which had served it well in opposition finally backfired in government, is somewhat countermanded – at least as to perspective and tone – by a flurry of other differently-focused commentaries. Such is, to cite but one example, Philip Schlesinger's "Is there a crisis in British journalism?", which, taking issue through the lens of media ethics with political communication management - and New Labour's need to "win over (or neutralize) the hostile tory press" (Schlesinger 2006: 302) - underlines how

'Spin' worked for a while but in the end it produced an increasingly hostile reaction from journalists who thought (quite rightly) that they were being manipulated. In addition to that, much of the press was hostile anyhow. A journalism of revelation – focused on the *process* of media management, showing how it was done – has become an established part of the British scene. (*ibid.*).

Approaching his subject from a sociological perspective, Schlesinger draws attention to the antagonistic mutual complaints of politicians and journalists and, quite engagingly, tackles also the issue of the sweeping impact on the mediated public sphere of celebrity culture, which he describes as "a way of exploring the drama of changing relations between the public and private spheres, where old rules of the game are dissolving and new ones are yet to be invented". (*ibid.*). Such current re-negotiation of "the moral economy" and "the boundaries of sentiment and taste" (*ibid.*: 301) accounts also for the increasing importance of image management for politicians, and the blurring of fact and opinion by the media that, according to Moloney (2001: 124), "were an incubatory environment" for the culture of spin, which he interprets as being, fundamentally, "an exchange or contest between information and publicity". (*ibid.*).

After this brief, and necessarily sketchy account of the journalism/politics debate in the UK over the years which immediately followed the end of the honeymoon between New Labour and the media – one that, according to Campbell (2002), has been described as the longest in British history – I shall set out to define, again selectively, some of the ethical and analytical standpoints that concurred to make up the immediate discursive backcloth to Tony Blair's Reuters speech of June 2007. In this regard, John Lloyd's position, which is particularly critical of the press and concerned primarily with promoting self-reformation within the trade so as to restore and re-establish the proper role of the media "in the formation of social, civic and moral space" (Silverstone 2007: 5), seems to be especially relevant to the former Prime Minister's argument.

Taking his cue from the devastating media debate following the Gilligan/Kelly affair, unlike most other British opinionists the *Financial Times* magazine founder and now contributing editor took sides against the media, defining the event "a gargantuan demonstration of the power of the media in the political arena" (Lloyd





2003: 84) and pointing to the Hutton Inquiry as an educative drama which exposed “a culture of media spin revealed through a culture of media spin” (*ibid.*: 88). In the same essay, he also described the workings of so-called “laser journalism” – concentrating its light “on one spot” at the expense of the jarring complexity “that makes up real events” (*ibid.*: 87) – and called Gilligan an “attack dog” (*ibid.*), hired precisely in order to put an aggressive edge to BBC reporting. The ‘dog/beast’ metaphor resurfaces in Lloyd (2005: 210), where mention is made of the fact that journalists “can be diverse – or move in pack”.

Even more suggestive, though of course thoughtful and praiseworthy, is Lloyd’s long-lasting advocacy of, and active campaigning for, the establishment of a “Media Institute” - having the characteristics of a think tank and meant to gap the bridge between academic media theory and self-reflexive debate exclusively from within the press milieu. Its scheme was launched in the course of an event hosted by Demos (Lloyd is himself a Demos Associate) on January 18, 2005 and called, after the title of Lloyd’s book (2004), “What the media are doing to our politics” (Miller 2005). The Institute’s remit would comprise promoting serious reflection and future-oriented proposals on the state and role of the media, analysis and comment on media stories and, more importantly, would “act as an ombudsman for their accuracy and integrity” (*ibid.*). Lloyd’s theses about the alleged across-the-board current corruption of the British media and in favour of setting up a media think tank were largely rebutted by his discussant, Ian Hargreaves, who pointed instead to the complicity of politics itself in lowering journalistic standards. At the same time, he warned against the confusion, or ‘noise’, introduced in political communication by the “commercialisation of speech” (*ibid.*) and the danger that a Media Institute could represent to the freedom of expression and self-regulatory prerogative of the press. Lloyd’s project, however, to be developed in co-operation with Oxford University (Gibson 2005), was soon to come to fruition in the shape of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (<<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk>>), established in the autumn 2006 and based at the University of Oxford Department of Politics and International Relations, where John Lloyd is currently Director of Journalism and a member of the Steering Committee.

As it may be inferred from this brief survey, Tony Blair’s Reuters speech, which he himself reckoned to be the fruit of long reflection and “much hesitation” (Blair 2007: 480), is neither revolutionary, nor does it exist in a vacuum, but is fundamentally a re-writing of well known and much debated positions within the journalistic discursive arena. And, even though it is beautifully reworded to great effect, also the “feral beast” attribution (“the fear of missing out means today’s media, more than ever before, hunts in a pack. In these modes it is like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits. But no one dares miss out” [*ibid.*: 478-79]) is by no means new. As it has often been noted, it was Evelyn Waugh who in his novel *Scoop* (1938) put to ridicule sensationalist journalism through the vicissitudes of its protagonist, William Boot, sent to Africa as a foreign correspondent for the newspaper *The Daily Beast*. Neither has it been unusual for British journalists to lament, and warn against, the evils



of 'pack journalism' (a term coined by Timothy Crouse in 1973 [Breen and Matusitz 2008]).

Hence comes my research question, and therein resides its link with the focus of this special issue on "Communicating passions and building the political space": why did Blair's speech provoke such outrage, even among those who agreed with many of its implications? And why did journalists across the political spectrum feel obliged to stage some forms of self convened mediated tribunal as a response to the Prime Minister's charges?

A first answer could be found, of course, in the obvious pressure – in case the speech had implied an attempt at "kite-flying" (Gaber 2000a), or testing reactions about the possible extension of regulations to online news content – for journalists to close ranks and show an unwavering opposition to Blair's concluding remark that the "regulatory framework at some point will need revision" (Blair 2007: 479). It is my opinion, however, that, much of the media heated reaction in the immediate aftermath of the speech had to do with a largely 'emotional' contest between the press and the departing Prime Minister over the respective spaces of politics and the media in the 'hearts and minds' of the British public<sup>5</sup> and, ultimately, over divergent judgements about Blair's future 'place in history'.

A close reading of Blair's words, based mainly on a content and critical discourse analysis approach<sup>6</sup> but carried out also through the prism of cultural studies, will help to bear out my point.

*The purpose of the series of speeches I have given over the past year has been deliberately reflective: to get beyond the immediate headlines on issues of the day and contemplate, in a broader perspective, the effect of a changing world on the issues of the future. This speech on the challenge of the changing nature of communication on politics and the media is from the same perspective. (Blair 2007: 476; emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>*

The inception of the speech – which in actual fact is detachedly and somewhat vaguely titled "Speech on Public Life", being the last of a series delivered by Tony Blair since the beginning of 2006 called "Our Nation's Future" and published on the 10 Downing Street website – already posits the Prime Minister as someone "deliberately reflective", prone to "contemplation", bent on reconciliation ("politics and the media") and ready to enter a dialogue with the impulsive and unreflective press ("immediate headlines") as a mature, sedate advisor concerned uniquely with taking on the

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<sup>5</sup> Manuel Castells (2007: 242), for one, points to the way that, although the media are not "the holders of power", they "constitute by and large the space where power is decided".

<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, Wodak (2010: 26), with its focus on "doing politics" as a "highly context dependent" activity, affected by multiple variables, and relying on a symbiotic relationship with the media. On "political linguistics", see, also Wodak and De Cillia (2006), while Fairclough (2000) is to date an unparalleled tool for unravelling Tony Blair's rhetorical and discursive constructions.

<sup>7</sup> Italics are used to highlight expressions referring to the Prime Minister, while terms related to the media are underlined.



challenge of the future. (The “challenge of a *changing media*” is indeed an alliterative trademark for Blair, one that playwright Alistair Beaton [2000: 1-2] was ready to satirize in a comedy centred on New Labour’s government by spin in the run up to the elections of 2001).

This ‘mature’ stance, consistent with the Prime Minister’s discursive self-projection after his fall from grace in public opinion following his highly unpopular Iraq decisions and the ensuing contamination of his ‘brand’ (Scammell 2007; De Michelis [2008: 145-149]), is carefully sustained throughout the speech, as it may be proved by the following examples: “This is not my response to the latest whacking from bits of the media”, the speech is “not a complaint”, but “an *argument*”, ten years of “interaction with the world of communication has given me *pretty deep experience*”, “my principal *reflection*”, “being *held to account*, not avoiding it” (Blair 2007: 476), “we can then *debate a sensible way forward*” (*ibid.*: 478), right through to the closing remarks “I’ve made this speech *after much hesitation*. I know it will be rubbished in certain quarters. But I also know *this has needed to be said*”. (*Ibid.*: 480).<sup>8</sup>

Such rhetorical positioning is, in actual fact, suggestive of the so-called “exit strategy” which – according to a memo leaked to the *Daily Mirror* on September 5<sup>th</sup> 2006, at the height of the deadly combat between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown over the date of the former’s resignation from office – Blair’s communication and image experts had drawn out for him as early as the beginning of that year. “As TB enters his final phase”, they suggested, “he needs to be focusing way beyond the finishing line, not looking at it”. In particular, their advice envisaged the need for Blair to be “carefully positioned as someone who, while not above politics, is certainly distancing himself from the political village” (Maguire and Blackman 2006).

At the same time, as some commentators did not fail to notice (“Blair’s last enemy: freedom of speech” 2007), Tony Blair is careful to sustain the construction of his mediated persona as ‘one of us’ through an incisive and well balanced wielding of his famous ‘confessional’ rhetorical weapon. This includes, on the one hand, resorting to colloquial, populist expressions, such as, to mention but a few, “whacking”, “whinge”, “being at the top of the greasy pole” (Blair 2007: 476), “without the heavens falling in before lunch” (*ibid.*: 477), “asking a batsman to face bodyline bowling without pads or headgear” (*ibid.*: 478), and many more. On the other hand, it implies the dual strategy of pre-empting hostility by admitting one’s own faults (“I first acknowledge *my own complicity*. We paid *inordinate* attention in the early days of New Labour to courting, assuaging, persuading the media” [*ibid.*: 476; emphasis added]), and, more effectively, of bringing front stage the very process of political choice and the unrelenting fatigue of wrestling with the media on a daily, if not even hourly basis. Describing the news schedule as being, “now, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week”, the

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Blair’s ‘generous’ and self-sacrificial stance about the decision to deliver his speech on “Public Life” notwithstanding his doubts about the opportunity of “coming along and poking them in the eye just before you are about to go?” (Blair 2007: 484) is to be found at the end of the edited version of his answers to questions from the floor published in the *Political Quarterly*.





Prime Minister laments the way in which media pressure interferes with sound political decision-making, as “things harden within minutes” and “you can’t let speculation stay out there for longer than an instant”, but have to face the “overwhelming” task of “coping with the media, its sheer scale, weight and constant hyperactivity” (*ibid.*: 477).

Much of the criticism in Blair’s speech is, of course, quite relevant and objective, in so far as it spotlights crucial strictures in the mutually cannibalistic relationship between politics and the media and points to widely discussed structural changes in the modes of production and consumption of the news/politics discourse against the backcloth of an increasingly mediatized global space of information flows (see Castells 2007) and the mounting pressure of spontaneous, unchecked internet communication.

Largely ignoring the staggering implications of gigantic and multi-platformed media corporations extending their power world-wide, Blair underlines the role of intra-companies and intra-modal competition among different media – along with their giving in to the culture of negativity and cynicism (Lloyd 2004; Schlesinger 2007) brought about by the personalization, customization and trivialization of mediatized, “pop” politics (Mazzoleni 2009) – in transforming political news coverage into a conspiratorial blame game “driven by impact” (which always prevails over accuracy [Blair 2007: 478]), and thriving on “crisis” (*ibid.*: 477, 479). Whilst overtly claiming dual responsibility for allowing things to get to this point and advocating a common engagement in tackling the current deadlock, Blair’s speech nonetheless indulges in biting criticism of the faults of the press. Besides their “devotion to impact that is unravelling standards” (*ibid.*: 478) – promoting a sensationalist hunger for transforming politicians’ inevitable misjudgements and blunders into conspiracies, venality, moral flaws and personal “misconduct” (*ibid.*) – journalists are also blamed for depicting a Manichean, simplistic world in black and white. Its outline, for good value, is marred by (often malicious) “interpretation” and sensationalizing, and by the sell off of any “objective yardstick” (*ibid.*: 480) for the public to measure policies and events brought about by the “confusion” of “news and commentary” (*ibid.*: 479), which is seen of course as *moral* confusion.

In this regard, by singling out *The Independent* as an example – nay the “metaphor”, to take up Blair’s own words – of what is “avowedly a newspaper not



merely a newspaper" (*ibid.*),<sup>9</sup> the speech marks an own-goal, as this charge will be unanimously rebutted by commentators from all the ranks and reaches of the British press, ready to denounce the Prime Minister's jarring silence about his actual, powerful enemy, the Murdoch-owned, high-circulation *Daily Mail*.

Notwithstanding the rational, sedate and ethically-minded self-projection of the Prime Minister on the verge of stepping down from office as someone who, "while not above politics", is indeed "certainly distancing himself from the political village" ("The Blair Switch Project" 2006), it is worth noting how the whole event, as Jean Seaton (2007: 471) refers in her introduction to the *Political Quarterly* version of the speech, was characterized on both sides by pervasive emotional undercurrents.

The energy of Tony Blair's speech on the media [...] was charged; there was tension in the air. It was partly that the Prime Minister was angry and partly the recognition of the odd poignancy of the moment. [...] He felt as if he was restraining a fury and contempt that never quite spilled over, but which nevertheless drove what he said. What he could have said, and did not, was present in the room as a temptation and threat.

The topic of this speech being so sensitive and bound to draw dividing lines between the Prime Minister and the media, the emotional aspects of Tony Blair's difficult, tense performance – which in a different occasion would have certainly commanded the full attention of the press – went largely unreported. Most of the comments in the edited version of the speech, written a few weeks after the event, largely chose to take issue with the substance of Blair's speech and discuss the sin, not the sinner, as is the case with Will Hutton who, even though he defined the speech a "long contemplated Exocet at the media" (2007: 491), did not abstain from criticizing the information industry hunger for "total emotionality to win audience attention": a bias that, trading emotion for "less understanding", "is changing our culture". (*ibid.*: 492).

Much less considerate and reflexive were the immediate reactions of the press to Blair's speech. Even though most commentators agreed about the main points of Tony Blair's diagnosis and argued for the need to seriously cope with the declining

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<sup>9</sup> An impassioned defence of the role of "viewpapers" in advancing rather than hindering democracy, and their ability to co-operate fecundly with internet outlets, was taken by Carlo De Benedetti (2009: 7) in his Reuters Memorial Lecture delivered in Oxford on November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009 and reflecting the Italian situation. Newspapers, he said, "are not just flows of news. Newspapers are immersed in the flow and as they let it go by they keep those pieces of news which they can use to build a cathedral each day, [...]. In so doing, the newspaper does the opposite of what the great internet river does, it selects, prioritizes, discards and chooses [...]. In this search for the sense of things, newspapers re-read the day, broaden the scope of meaning of the news items that readers have seen cross their computer or television screen, penetrate the interests that they contain, trace a context in which they can exist in relation to other facts, and lastly express an opinion".



standards and corrosive nature of 24-hour journalism (many of them calling for a thorough internal review of the current state of British media ethics), they did not accept, of course, to take lessons from *that* pulpit (see, for instance, *The Guardian* Leader "Right sermon, wrong preacher" [2007]), and returned to the sender the charge of being the enabler and main agent of such damaging discursive practices and their attending culture of cynicism.

Predictably, much of their outrage was hurled at the high-impact "feral beast" phrase which was quoted in most of the titles, sometimes, even, allowing for playful variations as it was the case with *New York Times* Mary Jo Murphy's (2007) "Let Me Compare Thee to a Feral Beast", which from its detached American vantage point compared Blair's words with a few lines from George Crabbe's *The Newspaper* (1785), demonstrating how complaints about the press are almost as old as the medium itself. Others, such as Reuters' Peter Mosley (2007), wrote "Exit Blair pursued by beasts", whereas the editor of *The Independent* Simon Kelner (2007) reacted to the special distinction granted to his paper by asking "Would you be saying this, Mr Blair, if we supported your war in Iraq?". Just as critical was Martin Bright's (2007) innuendo, in his *New Statesman* blog, titled "It takes one to know one", hinting of course to the Prime Minister as being himself a "feral beast" perfectly at ease among the communication bloodhounds. "Is the media a feral beast?", asked also *Wall Street Journal* deputy editor Daniel Henninger (2007), putting to ridicule Blair's advocacy of the division between news and opinion by conjuring up a future in which "in an updated version of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*" some monastic order would take care "to preserve fact-only reporting smuggled around by hand on mimeographed sheets of papers".

A biting attack – targeted not only at Tony Blair, but also at a national press which had been too compliant about the Prime Minister's decision to go to war in Iraq and had renounced, as a whole, its civic function as "a mirror on the wall" for politicians –, again informed Simon Jenkins' (2007) article "Blair was hounded too little from the feral beast, not too much" in *The Sunday Times*. The need for the press to be "more ferocious", rather than less, underlies also Stephen Glover's (2007) likening of the "feral beast" to "a great sloppy Labrador" always renewing its affection for the Prime Minister regardless of his rough ways, and is again advocated in Gal Beckerman's (2007) "Feral Beast? Try Lemming. Tony Blair's Temper Tantrum", in which the author compares journalists to those "furry and well-intentioned" animals, obliged by nature "to follow each other mindedlessly off a tall cliff" at the cost of their own extinction. Lastly, mention must be made at least of Jeremy Paxman's MacTaggart Lecture, delivered in August 2007: on that occasion, the figurehead of British television journalism judiciously allotted blame on both sides, not only criticizing the way "the response to Blair's attack just pressed the F12 key. Yah boo. You're a politician. We're media yahoos" (Paxman 2007: 16), but also denouncing the implications of the Prime



Minister's choice of the "feral beast" simile: "feral either means untamed, or it means to run wild, as if they were once tamed. But surely we ought to be untamed?" (*Ibid.*: 24).<sup>10</sup>

Another theme underlying the emotional rhetorical structures of both Blair's speech and the responses by the media is their consensual, if not unidirectional and indeed quite ambiguous resort to the 'marriage metaphor' and its mundane re-writing in the more fashionable terms of 'the relationship'. This is, of course, a long established metaphor in describing the press/politics nexus, for, as remarked by Levering and Liebovich (2002), both parties hold prerogatives that make them equal "in the same ways that married couples are: neither partner has inherent power over the other, and both have ways to get back at the other if they feel mistreated or disrespected". Together with its related concepts of "love" and "family", it helps to build up – as Andreas Musolff (2006: 35) says in his study of metaphorical sources in the discursive construction of relationships within the EU – a narrative of LOVE-RELATIONSHIPS, ranging from FLIRT and ENGAGEMENT to MARRIED LIFE, CHILDBIRTH-PARENTAGE, MARRIAGE CRISIS, ADULTERY/MÉNAGE-À-TROIS, and in the worst case, SEPARATION or DIVORCE".

Upholding the argumentative attitude already discussed above, Tony Blair's position appears, from the start, to be primarily concerned with *healing* such relationship which often oscillates between that of a couple and a family triangle extended to embrace public life and/or the public ("the relationship between politics, public life and the media is changing as a result of the changing context of communication [...]; *no one is at fault*" [476]). In order to do so, he does not shun from pleading guilty ("We paid *inordinate* attention in the early days of New Labour to *courting* [...] the media" [*ibid.*]), even though his former, hyper-emotional behaviour is nonchalantly projected onto a younger self, governed by a kind of juvenile 'disorder' of the sense(s). Later on, however, the press is feminized, as it were, in the role of the less reasonable partner, whose "tenor" is "increasingly shrill" ("New forms of communication would provide new outlets to bypass the increasingly shrill tenor of the traditional media" [*ibid.*: 479]), and whose somewhat 'hysterical' nature is particularly prone to "quickly transfer" the other party "from drama into crisis". (*Ibid.*: 477).

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<sup>10</sup> The whole debate was revived at the beginning of 2008 – again triggering the dual response of public outrage and self-flailing calls for a serious review of journalistic standards – in the wake of Alastair Campbell's resumption of Tony Blair's main remarks in his Cudlipp Lecture (January 28<sup>th</sup>). In particular, the former arch-communicator on the verge of becoming novelist (his first novel, *All in the Mind*, was published in 2008, while the second, *Maya*, has just come out) stressed the issues of 24-hour news, with its impact on the current culture of negativity going "well beyond coverage of politics" (Campbell 2008: 334), and the practices of 'pack journalism' encouraged by economic concerns and competitive pressure. When the "dissonance" between the citizens' actual experience and its scandal-oriented representation in the news is perceived as "a cultural shift", Campbell argues, the overall credibility of the media suffers a serious drawback. This is partly in line with the definition of the adversarial press by the Italian Prime Minister in 2009 as "gloom and doom merchants" (in De Benedetti 2009: 4).



The 'triangle' structure, moreover, is itself unstable, shifting from defining the parents-cum-child relationship to suggesting a couple of rival lovers fighting for the attention and approval of the general public, in its dual capacity as voter and reader/viewer/consumer (such instability of the 'in-group/out-group relationship' is to be seen, of course, also in the pervasive referential ambiguity of the we/you/they subject pronouns). At the end of the speech, however, it is the 'family metaphor' which prevails, the Prime Minister appealing to the media joint 'parental' responsibility in order to advance the good of the nation (and public opinion) in accord with the politicians:

But a way needs to be found. I do believe this relationship between public life and media is now damaged in a manner that requires repair. The damage saps the country's confidence and self-belief; it undermines its assessment of itself, its institutions; and above all, it reduces our capacity to take the right decisions, in the right spirit for our future. (*Ibid.*: 480).

This was in line, to mention but one relevant example, with the metaphorical premise underlying the 2005 John Lloyd/Demos event quoted above, in the course of which, according to Miller's report (2005), the "troubled" relationship between politics and the media had been presented as "a marriage in need of counselling" (in that case, however, it was the media which had been deemed "to wear the trousers").

Reactions to Blair's embedded metaphorical framework implied, of course, making explicit his use of the matrimonial metaphor, one he had already resorted to, famously, in his 'masochistic' communication campaign in the run up to the 2005 election (Scammell 2007). The editor of *The Spectator* Matthew D'Ancona, for example, reminded his readers of the way the Prime Minister had not despised, in the old days, "to tango with the media" (in "Blair's media criticism: the reaction", 2007). This was consonant with the comparison of Tony Blair's self-victimizing attitude to the condition of a "jilted" or "spurned" lover which was a staple feature of many other responses (Beckerman 2007; Glover 2007).

The 'marriage/affective relationship' metaphor was still a popular cultural script for "The Media and Public Life" (2007) debate organized jointly by the Media Standards Trust and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the Foreign Press Association on November 28<sup>th</sup> 2007, when Lord Jay described the relationship as one "with a certain wariness, [...] and a certain mutual respect, borne [...] of the sort of symbiotic relationship where each actually needs the other".

At the end of this brief survey one might wonder where this relationship -- fraught, cannibalistic, based on the impossibility to wholly embrace transparency, and yet exacting from an emotional point of view, inextricable and mutually dependent as true love always is - leaves us - the people, the 'children'. Perhaps the current crisis of trust which obliges us to surf on our own across the staggering noise and confusion of the innumerable, unchecked news flows of the networked society will spur, some of us at least, to 'grow up' and claim responsibility, not by embracing anarchic, riotous and





community-destructive forms of communication, but by reconnecting with our own elected representatives and their watchdogs in the media, requiring them to recover new levels of seriousness and accountability. Most importantly – against the prevailing culture of celebrity and mediated existence and the new cultural script of global vulnerability and surveillance – we should never forget that the old media myth of ‘transparency’ is itself no longer a clear-cut value which can be easily and unreservedly apprehended. Rather, as it has been proved by the devastating attrition between politics, the people and the media, it implies that dual potential for self-reflexivity and external control (Allen 2008) which is finally at the very heart of ‘spin’, itself understood not only as a practice, but also as a damaging way of being which is actually endangering what little space is left for civic participation and freedom of expression.

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