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Television news and the economy: inflation in Britain

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Introduction

The economy is a hotly disputed realm in almost all political systems, and economic turbulence is linked in successive studies to political support for parties (for example, see Nannestad and Paldam, 1994). We might assume, therefore, that media coverage of the economy warrants exploration, with its contribution to public understanding and, through this, effective citizenship at issue. Does the news satisfy the needs of an informed citizenry; can it educate the electorate on the economic issues that decide elections? In this context, it is surprising that the literature on the media and the economy is so underdeveloped.

In Britain in the 1970s, the Glasgow University Media Group's (1980) ground-breaking and controversial work addressed the perceived lack of impartiality in economic news on television. Yet, while there has been considerable development in other areas of public communication, there has since been relatively limited interest in media coverage of the economy — although a few studies touch upon the topic. Political science, in contrast, takes a keener interest in economic news, modelling its relationship with different measures of public opinion. Research in the USA suggests that the press has an important mediating role between the public's experience of economic turbulence and the resultant political fallout (e.g. Mutz, 1992). Blood and Phillips (1995) suggest a more direct role, with press coverage of the economy driving public opinion — a finding

consistent with earlier research by Benton and Frazier (1976). Following the work of Mosley (1984), Sanders et al. (1993) have explored the relationship between press coverage and public opinion in the United Kingdom. They suggest that newspaper coverage has an indirect influence on government popularity. The only comparable work on the role of television (Gavin and Sanders, 1995, 1996, forthcoming) suggests a modest, but stable and direct, impact on perceptions of the government's competence (and, again, an indirect influence on its political support).

The last 15 years have seen only a few substantive studies in the area of media analysis bearing directly on the theme of 'the economy'. Herman (1982) analyses the ideological role of professional economists, but only touches on the issue of media representation of the economy. Dreier (1982) examines the complex relationship between the business community and the media — including attempts by the former to have business affairs reported in a more favourable light. Elsewhere, discourse analysis has been deployed to evaluate media portrayals of the economy. One study with a broad historical sweep (Eminson, 1983) analysed the ideological implications of what is seen as the reification of 'the economy'. This theme is amplified in Rac and Drury's (1993) research on press coverage of the 1990 recession. Finally, an in-depth study by Jensen (1987) has dealt with economic coverage on ABC and NBC news in America and suggests there are aspects of the economic coverage where causal explanation is underdeveloped. Coverage is abstract, where 'agents are typically missing in accounts of economic processes' and 'economic variables tend to lead lives of their own' (Jensen, 1987: 16–17).

Overall, the literature tends to suggest that economic news has an important influence on public opinion. On the other hand, media studies problematize the ability of economic news to be impartial or politically neutral, suggesting that it is structured so as to present a reified portrayal of the economy, and that a narrowly focused agenda can exclude some (and, in particular, critical) explanations and evaluations of economic events and forces. In this respect, what little work there is, is consistent with a critical or Marxist position. If correct, these conclusions have important implications for the assessment of the role of media in contemporary society and for the place of economic news in broader power structures. The object of this article is to focus on one salient economic issue — inflation — and assess this existing research in the light of an analysis of recent British television news coverage. We will challenge the notion that the reification of the economy is a common aspect of economic news, reassess the degree of closure of the economic agenda and examine the political implications that follow from this. Finally, we will locate our findings in relation to the literature on the sociology of news production (although inevitably, given our emphasis on content alone, our conclusions will be tentative and speculative). It is hoped that our findings will inform a debate which has

revolved more around issues of the 'voices of primary definers' (Hall et al., 1978) and *sources* (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994), or around *production practices* (Schudson, 1996) and *socioeconomic structures* (Murdock, 1982; Hallin, 1996), rather than dealing in a sustained fashion with the substance and intellectual sources of the ideas that inform coverage (irrespective of the mechanisms which bring them to public attention).

The data: economic news 1993–4

The Jensen (1987) case study referred to earlier is rigorous and thought-provoking but concentrates only on one week's coverage. Indeed, many of the media studies referred to have similar characteristics, offering a close focus either on one *particular* medium or one *narrow* time-period. The use of tightly focused case studies reflects some important practical difficulties in analysing the enormous quantity of economic news that fills our television screens, newspapers and magazines. A wholesale exploration of complicated news forms, deploying tight narrative analysis of multiple themes, is only possible for small amounts of material. However, this approach is less appropriate if the object of the analysis is a *developing* news agenda, or a complex narrative which evolves over a longer period of time. Mindful of these issues, the aim of this article is to explore the television coverage of one high-salience economic issue over a calendar year. The subject chosen was inflation and its reporting on the two principal British weekday news programmes (BBC's *Nine O'Clock News* and ITN's *News at Ten*) between November 1993 and November 1994.¹ Inflation is an issue of considerable interest to the public (Gallup, 1994), it is a theme around which a great deal of political controversy revolves (Grant, 1993), and price turbulence is thought to be an important influence on government support (Nannestad and Paldam, 1994). We limit our thematic focus further by an emphasis on *causal* attribution (i.e. television coverage of the causes of inflation and prices). The emphasis on attribution follows, in some respects, Warner and Molotch's (1993) study of press reporting of the causes of the '1987 Crash'. It is also consistent with Gansson and Modigliani's (1989) notion of the important role causal attribution plays in constructing the news frame. This narrowing of focus embodies a trade-off between temporal sweep on one hand, and, on the other, the depth that can be achieved by an intensive analysis of a snapshot of economic news.

Our large corpus prohibited an in-depth discourse or framing analysis of the material (as in Pan and Kosicki, 1993). Nor, given the complex nature of the coverage, was a formal, numerical content analysis appropriate. Rather, a broad, interpretive approach was taken,² with the corpus scanned for stories featuring or including items about inflation or prices. On

average, there were five or six stories of this sort per month on BBC and two or three on ITN. This material was scrutinized for references to the cause or causes of inflation. We focused on manifest, 'first-order' causal attributions ('first order' meaning the description in the text of a direct causal agent or factor):

A successful GATT deal will touch the lives of millions. As subsidies and import tariffs come down, prices will fall. Increased buying power translates into greater demand, extra production and higher employment. (BBC 14 Dec. 1993 correspondent)

This might be contrasted with descriptions of 'second-order' explanations which deal, for example, with why the GATT agreement had been signed (in this case, the perceived need to free world trade and avoid a slide into protectionism).

Television news is not, nor could it be, a set of mini-seminars on the dynamics of the economy and the causes of inflation. Rather, causal attributions for inflation (and for other economic factors) seem to pepper the bulletins in a scattered and isolated fashion (surrounded by a much greater amount of material dealing with *description* of trends, comments on *political* fall-out, interviews with *politicians*, or discussion of *other economic factors*). This made the exercise easier than anticipated and helped in the process of isolating instances of causal inference.

Nevertheless, determining what constitutes a 'causal inference' occasionally posed problems and at times it was necessary to use a native English speaker's own sense of what constituted a textual form implying causation. Verb forms of causal agency were used in many cases as vehicles for isolating and categorizing items:

The price of goods leaving Britain's factories hardly changed last month. But *pressure* on industry to raise its prices is building up, with the cost of raw materials increasing at 7 percent a year. (BBC 14 Nov. 1994 anchor)

Further problems occurred where an *association* was offered, rather than a straightforward causal inference:

[A report by the Consumer's Association] says that prices are rising while water companies are making record profits. The companies say the increases are necessary to pay for environmental improvements. (BBC 7 July 1994 anchor)

In this example, the need for environmental improvements is a clear first-order cause. But 'profits' are also in the frame, and sufficiently close in proximity to the causal issue to warrant inclusion. Fortunately, there were relatively few instances where this sort of ambiguity crept in and, in the analysis that follows, these are acknowledged in the commentary.³ The following section outlines our findings — focusing our textual examples

primarily on those issues whose theoretical implications we explore subsequently.

The agenda

In an exercise whose object was to obtain a firmer appreciation of the causal attributions informing the news agenda on economic affairs, it was important to specify the range of causal factors that were covered. Our analysis of the news coverage revealed 13 causal categories which were given generic titles indicating the nature of the underlying theme. Together, these constitute what we termed the 'constellation' of factors represented as having a bearing on inflation and prices. The results are represented in Figures 1 and 2.

The values in parentheses, indicating the number of times each element occurred over the year, demonstrate some slight differences between channels in the frequency of occurrences and their distribution, not all of which are explained by the greater total of references to inflation on BBC (179) than on ITN (120). Also of interest, however, was the range on different factors which were found to be reported as having a bearing on inflation. Both channels occasionally reported the onset or end of seasonal sales as a prelude to, or explanation for, price changes. Wage-led inflation, which the Glasgow University Media Group identified as prominent in the

FIGURE 1
BBC News causes of inflation

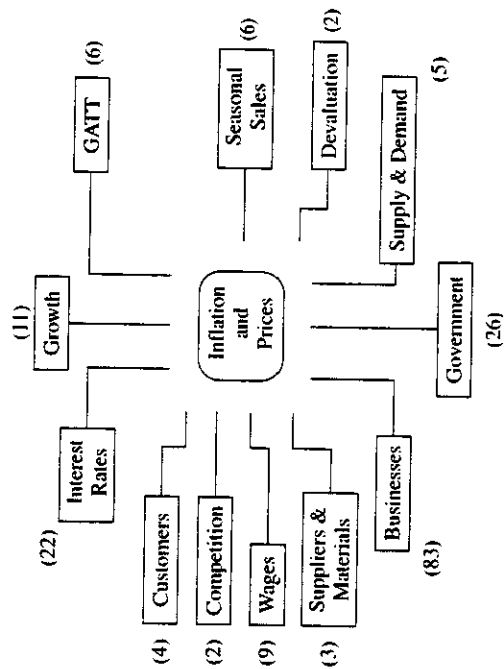
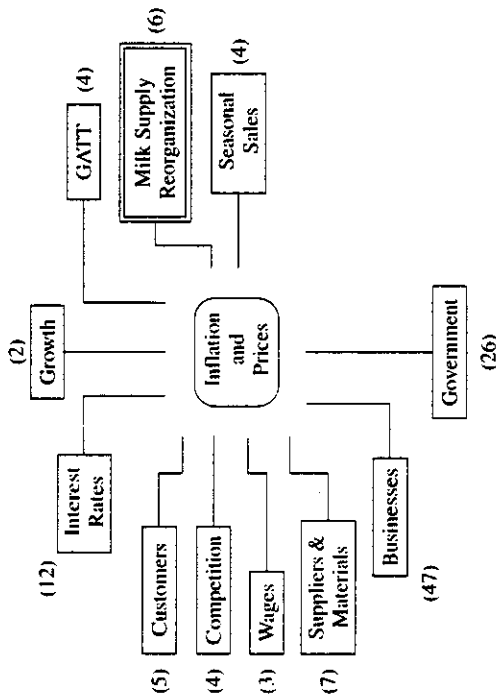


FIGURE 2
ITN News causes of inflation



coverage of the economic crisis in the 1970s (1980: 27–49), was also mentioned infrequently, although more often on BBC than ITN. On the other hand, customer resistance and competition were reported as having a role in bringing prices down. The impact of the GATT agreement, alluded to earlier, was presented on both channels as a route to lower inflation, ostensibly through reduced tariffs, cheap imports and the consequence, again, of increased competition. Finally, on both channels, the cost of materials was reported as producing inflationary pressure.

Growth, however, was reported significantly more frequently on BBC than ITN as a factor bringing inflation in its wake. BBC and ITN also differed in areas relating to devaluation, supply and demand (both mentioned on the BBC, though neither on ITN), and the reorganization of milk supplies. On the BBC alone, the pound's depreciation was among the less prominent causes of inflationary pressure. That the forces of supply and demand can raise as well as lower prices was alluded to on BBC, though not on ITN. On the other hand, the issue of milk reorganization (involving the replacement of the Milk Marketing Board, a state body, by Milk Marque, an independent, commercial organization of milk producers) revealed a greater tendency for ITN to attribute related price changes to the impact of decisions taken by the new body. On the BBC, the reorganization was generally reported as stemming from the government's own initiative:

Here, Britain's biggest dairies are warning that the government's deregulation of the milk industry will put the price of a pint of milk up by two pence or more, and mean the loss of thousands of jobs. (BBC 22 Aug. 1994 anchor)

The government has created an unregulated monopoly. And arising from their selling scheme for raw milk to my members, we have seen an 8 to 10 percent increase on average. (BBC 1 Nov. 1994, Jim McMichael Philips, Dairy Trade Federation)

There were a small number of examples of this type, and these were included under the Government factor in Figures 1 and 2.

Together with Business, Government formed one of the two largest categories on both channels. In the Government category were references made in Budget specials — often relating to rises in duty:

Duty on beer and spirits is unchanged, though wines and cider will go up 2 pence a bottle after Christmas. Cigarettes are up by 11 pence. Petrol and diesel are going up by 13½ pence a gallon. (ITN 30 Nov. 1993 anchor)

However, there were references throughout the year to the government and government actions:

Since then [December], there has been no net increase in prices, despite the budget adding 0.3 percent to the December price level. (BBC 19 Jan. 1994 correspondent)

The government announced its proposals to bring competition into the supply of domestic gas today. It will mean that independent suppliers will now be able to compete for customers with British Gas which currently holds the monopoly. But one consumer group has warned that it will lead to higher prices for those who don't use much. (ITN 9 May 1994 anchor)

The largest category, however, was Business, denoting where a particular company or business was the organizing factor around which price rises were explained. This could occur when an interviewee talked about his or her company. Categorization under Business also occurred when a correspondent referred to an economic agent directly, or talked indirectly about an industry.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the rising cost of raw materials like steel has forced some *manufacturers* to raise their prices. (BBC 10 Aug. 1994 correspondent)

Further analysis of references to inflation coded under the Business category for each channel enabled us to produce a second pair of constellations elaborating on this category alone. The text above, for example, was coded Suppliers & Materials. The results of this exercise are recorded in Figures 3 and 4.

FIGURE 3
BBC News causes of inflation involving business

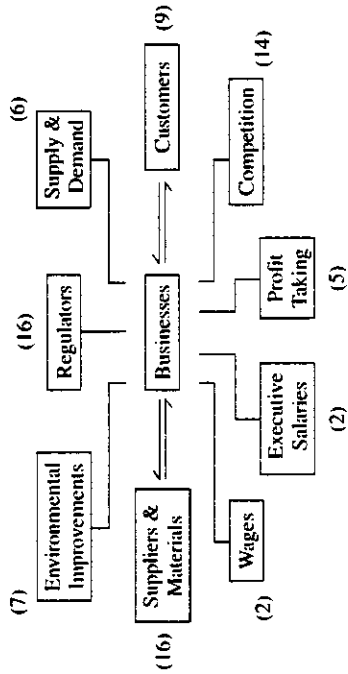
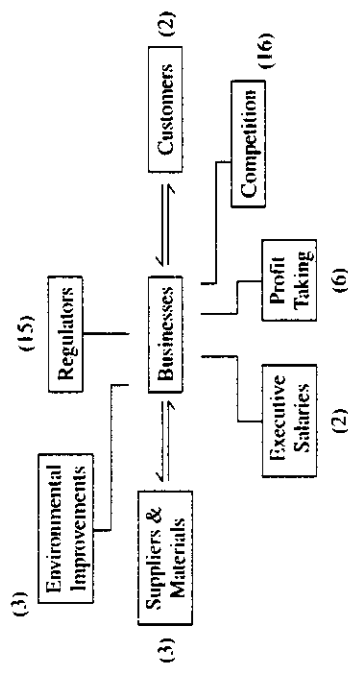


FIGURE 4
ITN News causes of inflation involving business



Here the locus of price turbulence was the business or corporation. As the figures suggest, these organizations are hedged about by constraints and imperatives of their own. While the news rarely detailed the processes linking 'interest rates' or 'growth' to inflation, the world of business-related prices was explored more fully. The stories concerning business often revolved around two main groups of themes. The first related to the Suppliers & Materials, Business, Customers, Competition axis. Here supplier costs had implications for prices. At the same time, the need to retain customers caused resistance to price rises. This was represented as especially important in the context of competition:

ITN correspondent To compete [with Far Eastern motor manufacturers], analysts say British car makers must cut their prices.

Neil Marshall (Retail Motor Industry Federation) We need to strip prices down. We need to give the public a product they can afford much more readily. That is the way to rebuild confidence in our marketplace. (18 Oct. 1994)

In many instances, Suppliers-Business and Business-Customers pressures ran both ways: suppliers were increasing costs, but companies were pushing their suppliers to reduce them; companies wanted to increase their prices, yet the customers were resistant:

BBC correspondent Grasshoppers in Wolverhampton make the baby clothes that sell in the Ethel Austin clothes shops, and customers' pressure on the shopkeepers is passed on loud and clear to the factory floor.

John Matto (Managing Director, Grasshopper Ltd) I would like to see the government cut interest rates by at least 1 whole percent to stimulate the economy. There's a tremendous competition between the retailers on the high street and they are continuing to ask us to cut costs where possible, either to maintain prices or to reduce prices where possible. We're doing everything we possibly can. (15 April 1994)

A second axis revolved around the Environmental Improvements, Regulators, Executive Salaries and Profit Taking themes. This largely concerned the privatized utilities: water, gas and electricity. Since privatization, these have statutory regulators who are reported as forcing changes in pricing policy. In the next example, this issue is broached in the context of competition, or its absence:

It's the job of this man, OFFER's boss Stephen Littlechild, to regulate the electricity prices in the absence of effective competition. He's just carried out his first major review and will announce his proposals tomorrow. (ITN 10 Aug. 1994 correspondent)

Other utilities, the water industry in particular, were reported as complaining that they had to fulfil externally imposed environmental improvements. Finally, Executive Salaries and Profit Taking, whose significance we shall explore in greater detail later, were both occasionally mentioned in relation to the privatized utilities, though mostly in an oblique or associational manner. However, it was rarely the case that profits and executive salaries were outlined as a direct and unambiguous cause of price rises in quite the way that other factors were:

Today's announcement follows bitter criticism of the privatized water companies which have made large profits while bills have gone up dramatically. (BBC 28 July 1994 anchor)

It's been obvious to the majority of their customers that while the profits of the privatized electricity distribution companies have been going up, electricity bills haven't been coming down. But that could begin to change tomorrow when the

industry watchdog. Stephen Littlechild, sets his first limits to what the distributors can charge. (ITN 10 Aug. 1994 anchor)

Theoretical and political considerations

What can be said about the significance of the news agenda revealed by the preceding exercise? When framing an answer to this, we have to bear in mind that millions viewed our news corpus each evening and that stories in late bulletins often repeat earlier reports. Television, moreover, is cited, in Britain at least, as the public's most important source of political information (Dunleavy and Husbands, 1985; Independent Television Commission, 1996) and is viewed as a trustworthy source of news (Barnett, 1989). In this context, one important feature of the causal 'constellation' is the broad similarity across BBC and ITN. With one or two exceptions, the same range of factors are represented. And in terms of prominence (if, by prominence, we mean the number of times a causal factor was referred to — the numbers in brackets in Figures 1–4), the weight given to each is roughly comparable across BBC and ITN. In one sense, the agenda exposed in our analysis is approaching the degree of 'consonance' which Noelle-Neumann (1981, 1987) views as maximizing the influence of the media (as selectivity options are reduced). If the news is to exercise its full potential in setting the agenda, it will be in precisely this sort of context (Gavin, 1997). Traditionally, agenda-setting has focused on the media salience of different issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1993). However, it is also suggested that the media set the public agenda on the attributes associated with social phenomena and political personalities (Benton and Frazier, 1976). The preceding analysis of the causes of inflation should be viewed in this light.

The agenda that emerges from the survey is rich in detail, suggesting that a number of factors and, more importantly, a wide variety of actors and agencies are involved in price turbulence. This contrasts markedly with Jensen's findings from the USA:

If we look at the economy *per se*, we see that it is consistently described as a set of variables. Economic actors, such as big corporations, small firms, wage earners, or consumers, are absent. In the story about inflation, various indexes and their components are listed, but things seem to move by themselves. The absence of causes or agents behind inflation gives the impression of a closed system. (Jensen, 1987: 19)

What is the explanation for these contrasting conclusions? The institutional context may explain these differences. As Hallin (1996) notes, the commercialization of news reporting has moved much further in the USA than it has in Britain. A stronger imperative to retain and entertain the audience may, in this context, account for the relative lack of causal

elaboration that Jensen seems to find in economic coverage in the United States. But this explanation does not sit comfortably with Iyengar's (1991) findings from a six-year study of network news on American television. He suggests that the television coverage of the issue of *unemployment*, at least, is much more likely to be reported in a way that embodies explanation, context and in-depth considerations, rather than focusing exclusively on isolated events, incidents and statistics (1991: 18–19, 47–50).⁴ Despite considerable differences of approach to the analysis of news, the content identified by Iyengar has more in common with the explanatory constellations we uncovered than with Jensen's notion of coverage largely devoid of detailed commentary on the role of economic actors and agents. If it is the case that contextualized coverage of the economy is a common feature of American television news, it is less likely that the contrast between our findings and Jensen's are simply the product of the different socioeconomic contexts or journalistic practices on either side of the Atlantic.

A more plausible answer lies in the temporal breadth of the respective studies. Jensen's one-week study was less likely to turn up coverage which dealt in any depth with causes of inflation or economic turbulence. Indeed, it would have been possible to select a week from our corpus with similar omissions. However, our year-long time frame gave ample scope to identify explanatory content when it occurred and more closely resembled Iyengar's analysis of news which extended over an even longer period. This exemplifies a common difficulty in framing stable and supportable generalizations about the composition and structure of economic (or other) news from small-scale, cross-sectional analysis (irrespective of the intensity of attention to narrative detail).

The focus on actors and agents revealed in our constellation also has a bearing on the work of Clayton (1983), Emmison (1983) and Rae and Drury (1993). They draw attention to news depictions that 'reify' the economy by presenting it as an abstract and concretized 'thing', capable of bearing down on, or constraining, individuals, communities and their political representatives. However, our analysis of British television news suggests that this is certainly not the common mode of economic exposition. In the corpus we studied, there were areas where 'actors' rather than 'actors' seemed to take precedence, notably on coverage of the impact on prices of interest rates, growth and devaluation:

And an economy on the turn can also give signals simultaneously of both recovery and relapse. That's the good news. Much more worrying is the *Wise Men's* [panel of economists regularly consulted by the Chancellor] consensus that starting from here, the economy can't safely grow faster than a cautious 2.5 percent a year in the short or even in the medium term without risking rising inflation and higher interest rates, though unemployment should fall. (BBC 22 Feb. 1994 correspondent)

But the vast bulk of television news explored the actions of specific, socially located individuals and institutions and these images and explanations were widely available. The coverage was not in any sense obscure, or apt to present the viewer with a sense of being the plaything of forces beyond personal or political control. It is probable that the form of coverage that we identified 'sociatizes' for the public those aspects of the economy that are actually portrayed in an abstracted fashion elsewhere (i.e. helps locate reified objects in the social and political world of real people).

We have found that reification was *not* a predominant feature of television's coverage of inflation. Nevertheless, it was the case that news coverage of the causes of inflation had a strong political dimension. In one of the more convincing sections of their analysis of economic news in the 1970s, Glasgow University Media Group (1980: 13–26) highlighted the relationship between the most pervasive form of explanation for events in the media and one particular political perspective — the news agenda, in their view, had a distinctive political complexion. Today, the political and economic context has changed a great deal. Given these changes, it is not surprising that the agenda on inflation is markedly different, and that a wider and, we would argue, more *balanced* range of explanations is represented. Conservative politicians would have winced at television's reminder that their policies made a direct contribution to inflation — an issue likely to have a direct bearing on public support for the party (Peffley, 1984; Abramowitz et al., 1988; Gavin 1997). However, they would have been sympathetic to the notion of customer or consumer empowerment through market competition, or delighted at references to the impact of competition on prices. These are, after all, central themes in free market philosophy (Gilpin, 1987). The Labour Party, in turn, might have been pleased at references to a regulatory regime that governs prices in the privatized utilities, since firmer regulation was one of a range of alternatives to expensive renationalization that the party was entertaining in the run up to the 1997 election. This might have been especially pleasing to them if regulation was discussed in the context of seemingly rapacious, profit-hungry privatized utilities, run by greedy, uncaring and incompetent executives. They would have been a good deal less happy with references to wage-led inflation, especially in the context of their prospective plans for minimum wage legislation.

The full political significance of the coverage is, however, difficult to assess. Notions of consumer sovereignty and market forces might be considered a modest part of the ideological backdrop to British politics. On the other hand, the coverage of executive pay in the privatized utilities was of more direct and immediate electoral significance, given the public's deep dissatisfaction with the privatization programme and how this reflected on Conservative strategic policy making (Gallup, 1995). But here again, we found an element of party-political balance. Given the high probability that

the minimum wage would be on the agenda in the 1997 election, continuing references to the inflationary consequence of wages might have proved damaging to Labour's election prospects.

It is undoubtedly true, though, that *absences* from the screen are potentially as significant as who (or what) is shown (Entman, 1993). There were some notable omissions in the 'constellation' of explanatory factors in Figures 1–4 and it is important to explore the political implications that follow from this. There was only one reference that we could find to the money supply on either channel (and here the connection with inflation was oblique and associational, rather than strictly causal):

Winter has turned almost to summer since the Governor of the Bank of England started telling the Chancellor not to cut interest rates in case inflation takes off again. But today's report notes only three small clouds in the sky — higher inflation forecasts in the City, slightly faster earnings growth in recent months and a bit more money in circulation. (BBC 10 May 1994 correspondent)

One of the other main strands of monetarist theory — control of the budget deficit as a route to low inflation — seemed to be missing from the coverage altogether. This is significant because an emphasis on the monetary component of price turbulence is normally associated with right-wing politics. Indeed, the right-of-centre journal *The Economist*, in a recent special edition on inflation (16 Sept. 1995), expressed concern at the dangers of resurgent inflation and declared that the growth of the money supply is still its principal driving force, although wage pressures play a part. At the other end of the political spectrum, the critical, left-of-centre approach of Will Hutton (1996) is only barely discernible in television economic news. Hutton's view of the British economic system emphasizes the 'short-termism' of the banking community and the premium this places on profit maximization in a context of under-capitalization. The references to Profit Taking in Figures 3 and 4 are the closest the coverage gets to the profit component of inflation. Yet, where they do occur, it is within the 'social justice' frame: the utility executives are generating huge profits and pay themselves high salaries while we pay higher bills. Profit maximization, low investment and productivity, which, in the context of under-capitalization, make a *general* contribution — as Hutton suggests — to Britain's inflationary problems, do not fall within the news frame.

However, it would be wrong to overestimate the significance of such omissions or suggest a conscious or subconscious attempt to exclude obvious and plausible explanatory factors from the agenda. Monetarist theory, for example, is firmly associated with right-of-centre politics, yet it is characterized by a high degree of mathematical sophistication and formalism, making it extremely difficult to present in the limited space normally available to broadcasters. Moreover, some of the central tenets of monetarist theory are now viewed with a great deal more scepticism than

they once were (Grant, 1993; Thompson, 1996). It is also clear that monetarist theory ceased to inform government policy as long ago as 1985 (Smith, 1987; Griffiths and Wall, 1991). Finally, opinion within the economic profession is evenly divided on whether monetary policy is at the root of inflation (Ricketts and Shoemith, 1990: 41–54). In this context, it is not at all surprising that the monetarist dimension of neo-classical theory is underrepresented in the coverage of inflation — a feature noted in at least one other study of economic news (Warner and Molotch, 1993).

The absence of Hutton's 'stakeholder' thesis is also unsurprising. His book, *The State We're In*, is the most recent, and the most rounded, developed and widely read, treatment of Britain's present economic problems. But it was published *after* our survey.⁵ That aspects of Hutton's thesis should appear at all is perhaps testimony to the fact that the balance of opinion within economics favours Hutton's critique of the damaging effect of short-termism (Ricketts and Shoemith, 1990: 41–54).

Other omissions are equally understandable. The impact of high unemployment and job insecurity on wage restraint and prices (the 'reserve army of labour' thesis) was not covered — notions normally associated with Marxist evaluations of economic practice. But then, neither was the role of the supply-side issues like labour-market flexibility — typically an important concern of right-wing or free-market theorists. However, an explanation for their omission can be sought in the complexity and controversial status of these theories, and the way this impinges on journalistic practice. Both theories encompass a range of extremely complex and difficult sub-issues, making them especially difficult to present in the context of the usual 2- or 3-minute story. Moreover, both are highly contested — evidentially and analytically. This would ascribe their omission to journalistic practicality rather than to conscious or subconscious bias or ideological reproduction. A closer and more direct investigation into journalistic practices would be required to support this ascription more fully, but these problems of interpretation and explanation certainly highlight some of the glaring problems and pitfalls in assessing the political significance of *omissions* in coverage — difficulties which are greatly underestimated by those who encourage close attention to what is left out of the news (Entman, 1993).

Finally, it should be noted that the types of factor isolated in our survey would not look out of place in the contemporary economics literature and, no doubt, informed journalistic opinion draws on the input of the broad professional community of economists (including scholars, as well as economists and analysts who apply their knowledge in and around the business and financial centres). The issue of the interests which this community serve hinges on an evaluation of professional economists. Herman's (1982) instrumentalist position surely overdraws the case for economics and economists as the ideological props of contemporary

capitalism. This is a contentious view of economics as 'sophisticated propaganda' and falls within the same frame as Herman and Chomsky's (1988) treatise on the mass media in the United States — one which has attracted considerable critical attention (Schlesinger, 1989, and Schudson, 1996, among others). Economic research may not always correspond to best scientific practice (Blaug, 1992); the success of some economists may indeed have more to do with their effectiveness as intellectual entrepreneurs than the profundity of their thought (Parsons, 1989); and econometric techniques may be intrinsically incapable of accounting for the chaotic complexity of social and economic behaviour (Ormerod, 1994). But it is surely simplistic to view economics and the news output that it informs as a form of 'propaganda'.

Economics may embody an element of service on behalf of particular social or political interests. The evidence suggests that the *political* views of the city analysts occasionally sourced in news stories tend to be to the right of the political spectrum (Gavin, 1992). But it is far less convincing to suggest that the body of thought to which these people make a contribution (and news which draws upon this discourse) is *primarily* about ideology. Genuine efforts by economists of conflicting perspectives to understand and grasp the meaning and significance of national and international events can and do enter the equation. This helps to explain the post-war rise of Keynesian theory in a context in which its development and practical implementation were associated with exciting levels of growth and development. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the same efforts lent credibility to the monetarist economic critique and helped make it the vogue. Monetarist, neo-classical and free market economics, as Herman (1982) quite rightly points out, have much to commend them to right-wing politicians and ideologues. But to consider this a symptom of complete ideological closure or the dominance of one particular set of interests over all others would be mistaken. Moreover, in much of contemporary economics, attempts to wrestle with some of the practical and theoretical problems thrown up by the implementation of free market economics likewise explain the disenchantment with the neo-classical paradigm (Blaug, 1992; Hutton, 1996). At face value, this disenchantment seems to be registered through the absence of monetarist cues in the news we surveyed.

Schudson's (1996) work on news production practices offers a more plausible set of theoretical interpretations within which we can frame an appreciation of the coverage we looked at. He offers three competing models to explain the pressures moulding the production of news — those emphasizing the economic context of news production and the economic structures within which the business of news is located; those in which practical and organizational considerations are foregrounded; and those which emphasize the dynamics of social and newsroom cultures. The

constellation which we uncovered might be located broadly within Graham Murdock's theoretical frame which Schudson characterizes as the most theoretically sophisticated of the political economy models. He quotes Murdock's contention that news 'coincides with' and 'reinforces' the 'definition of the political situation evolved by the political elite' (Schudson, 1996: 144). Indeed, our constellation shares some of the structures of conventional thought within contemporary economic science and, insofar as economists constitute a relatively distinctive and closed professional order, what appears on our screen might be said to be the product of an elite. However, it is not quite the sort of elite which Murdock had in mind. On the other hand, Schudson talks of the culture of the newsroom (and of broader society) as important determinants of news output. Again, this could, in a broad sense, explain the shape of the constellation we uncovered, although here we are looking at the product of a relatively narrow intellectual, academic or professional 'subculture': Schudson rightly draws attention to the importance of the 'cultural air' that news producers breathe but we would contend that we need a clearer and more precise sense of its constituent elements and where, indeed, it has drifted in from.

Conclusions

The preceding analysis suggests a number of conclusions. At face value, we have identified what might be considered a 'consonant' agenda on the causes of inflation across BBC and ITN. Has the agenda on inflation evolved since the pioneering research of Glasgow University Media Group, and does it include a broader range of issues and actors than formerly? The answer here must be a tentative 'yes'. It is evident that there is a degree of balance in the coverage, at least in terms of party politics. On the other hand, how do we assess the broader ideological significance of the news agenda we uncovered? The answer here is less obvious and turns on how one views economics and economists. We have also suggested that *sustained* empirical attention to the contours of coverage and to its intellectual origins and antecedents, ought to be an important and complementary component of studies that focus on production *processes*.

If our research is to be carried forward, it is clear that locating our findings in broader theoretical terms requires a sustained and detailed study of newsroom practice (Gavin, forthcoming) and agenda building (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994) in the field of economic news, and, perhaps, a deeper, more detailed analysis of the discourse of economics and economic news than was feasible in this article. It also requires an analysis of the impact on the public of the agenda on the causes of inflation — it is still an open issue how and to what extent the agenda we have described affects the television news audience. However, the type of survey outlined in this

article does offer a potential platform for such an analysis of audience awareness of the causes of economic phenomena. This could be based on the method deployed by Gurevich and Levy (1986), where the range and structure of the public's views of the causes of unemployment were probed through telephone interviews. A study of this sort, married to an effective inventory of media presentations of causal factors, would highlight emergent conjunctions or disjunctions in agendas. This would outline some of the contingencies of influence and set our results in a sharper theoretical perspective.

Notes

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1. Statements and reported comments of politicians were not coded. This is consistent with studies which emphasize the persuasive powers of presenters, experts and commentators over politicians (Page et al., 1987; Gavin and Sanders, 1995, 1996).
2. This follows Warner and Molotch: 'Our coding of market explanation [in the press] was necessarily interpretive, running parallel to ethnographic procedures, rather than relying on word counts or other quantitative techniques' (1993: 172).
3. Those interested in viewing the isolated textual material should contact Dr Gavin at Liverpool University.
4. Iyengar distinguishes between episodic and thematic approaches to framing issues, and suggests that unemployment more often has a thematic than an episodic treatment.
5. Hutton has since appeared on Channel 4 News and BBC current affairs programmes giving background on the 'stakeholder society' — a central theme of his book. He has also fronted a three-part documentary on Channel 4 on the themes outlined in his book.

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'Is anyone else out there sick of the news?!': TV viewers' responses to non-routine news coverage

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Who decides what 'counts' as 'news'? Rather than being simply the validation of objective events, labeling something newsworthy is the outcome of a complex effort by various claimsmakers (Spector and Kitzuse, 1977). Most scholars debate whether it is editors and journalists or corporate owners and sponsors who have the power to decide questions of newsworthiness (Bagdikian, 1990; Schiller, 1989). Rarely taken into consideration are consumers' own opinions. This article explores United States' television viewers' beliefs about what ought to count as news by examining their responses to unscheduled news bulletins (pre-emptions). Focusing on viewers of daytime soap operas, analysis reveals the content of viewer complaints and shows how recent changes in the viewer/fan subculture have altered the way complaints are handled by the networks. Viewers' responses to pre-emptions might be considered a form of political action rather than the uninformed whining they are usually perceived to be.

Introduction

Television, viewers and political action

Most of the literature on the links between television, viewers and political action focuses on several key issues. The area of political life where the impact of television has been most successfully established is public opinion, where TV news has been shown to set the political agenda and shape viewers' opinions (Iyengar, 1991: 2; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987;

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