Since the introduction of political discourse on mass media platforms, political parties and politicians have tried to sway the media’s perception of them. The reason why one would rationally seek out the approval of the media is because they believe having the support of the media improves their chances at election, re-election, and the passage of their policy initiatives amongst other reasons. With the improvement and technological advancement that the media industry has seen through newspapers, television, the internet, and blog-type services such as Twitter, one would assume that politicians’ desires to achieve and maintain support from the media is only intensified. One might also assume that because of this intensification, the media has a profound impact on the outcome of elections and British politics in general. However, there is disagreement amongst scholars in regard to the impact the media actually has on British politics.

Those who find the media has a minimal impact point to an important distinction, that it is unknown whether or not the media’s opinion on a certain topic influences the general public’s opinion, or if the inverse is true. Despite the disagreement surrounding the influence, it is generally accepted that “the media’s role is crucial for a democracy.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Yet it is also difficult to claim that the media, an institution that many members of the public believe to be important to the fabric of society, fails to impact political discourse. Thus, this analysis will argue that the overall impact that the media has on British politics is often overstated, yet the media does still impact British politics through accountability and the sheer fact that they control the spread of information.

In order to understand the topic at hand, we must first appreciate the role that the media has in today’s society. The Hansard Society performs an *Annual Audit of Political Engagement* with the aim of tracking changes in public opinion and actions in relation to politics. In 2010 the *Audit* asked respondents to rank institutions in regard to the impact they have on their everyday lives. Of the institutions, the media was first by a substantial margin, as it had 63%, compared to the Westminster Parliament at 19%, the Prime Minister at 17%, and the Cabinet at 5%.[[2]](#footnote-3) The disparity seen in this statistic is due to the fact that the media is the institution that disseminates the information to the public. Thus, while Parliament is objectively more important to the future of the country and to the protection of its citizens, the media is seen as more important because it conveys information to the public and allows the public to hold the government accountable. To confirm this concept, one can turn to the fact that of the respondents, 73% with a degree rate the media as the most important actor, compared to 39% without a degree.[[3]](#footnote-4) This shows that those who take political interest, usually more educated than the rest of the population, find the media to be the most impactful institution. Thus, through the 2010 *Audit*, the importance of the media in relation to everyday life has been observed.

As is true with most institutions, the media has undergone significant technological advancement and has evolved considerably. Since the advent of newspapers, coverage of politics has been important to the news consumer. As in all societies, an elite group will exist; the British media is no exception. Just outside of the House of Commons is a lobby known as the ‘Member’s Lobby’. This lobby is open only to Members of Parliament and a select group of journalists known as ‘members of the Lobby’.[[4]](#footnote-5) Originated in the 1884, this select group of journalists was created by the government “to ensure that reporters based at Westminster were fed enough material to satisfy their editors and readers, but not enough to embarrass the Government or Opposition.”[[5]](#footnote-6) While the Lobby allowed certain reporters greater access to MPs, giving reporters inside information, it actually allowed the government to exert control over the media. In a similar vein, Lloyd George, when describing the Lobby, said, “What you can’t square you squash, what you can’t squash you square.”[[6]](#footnote-7) Additionally, all MPs, when speaking to members of the Lobby, were speaking ‘off-the-record’ so there was a culture of confidentiality between the press and the MPs.[[7]](#footnote-8) Thus, with newspapers being the primary medium of dissemination of news and information, the government controlled the narrative.

Despite the fact that this select group was severely constrained by MPs, they still had great influence and impacted British politics. To demonstrate the influence, we can look to their last period of sustained and significant power and influence, the 1970s. In 1979, when Jim Callaghan lost a confidence motion, there was genuine news that was being reported, with the Lobby in the position to report breaking news of national significance.[[8]](#footnote-9) Members of the Lobby reported on MPs defecting and resigning as well as potential motions that could get support from the minor parties. What made the Lobby so special in this time was that they had complete access to MPs, and the public was dependent upon the reporting of the Lobby.[[9]](#footnote-10) Eventually, some reporters began to grow tired of the coziness between the MPs and themselves, and dissatisfaction grew. As Anthony Bevins said, “the Lobby encouraged ‘the insidious laziness of the hacks’ and was a ‘crutch for crippled journalism’”.[[10]](#footnote-11) However, the most important change that led to the ultimate fall of the Lobby was the advancement of technology and the inclusion of that technology in political discourse. The introduction of constant news through the 24-hour news cycle forced Lobby reporters to spend a significant amount of time filing stories as opposed to gathering and verifying them.[[11]](#footnote-12) Television, radio, and services like Twitter have also allowed MPs to reach constituents and members of the public directly, and has cut out the necessity for the Lobby. In effect, the members of the Lobby are now no more than a mystic group of reporters that have as much access to MPs and government officials as does any other reporter.

As seen with the case of the Lobby, MPs have become more accessible to the media, and the media has become more accessible to the public, thus, MPs and government officials are now more available to the public. One would then assume that the media has become increasingly impactful to British politics. Yet before rushing to the conclusion that the media has a profound impact on British politics, there are factors that must be taken into account. The first of these factors is that people tend to consume news that they want to read, hear, or watch. For instance, when discussing the potential for a strong economy under a Labour government, Conservatives “would be inclined to dismiss news about a buoyant economy … On the other hand, the … Labour incliners would be more likely to have their expectations amplified.”[[12]](#footnote-13) This occurrence has only increased as news has become more accessible through the internet, social media and television. Known as an ‘echo chamber’, filtering one’s news with content that only confirms their own bias has the potential to lead to the spread of disinformation.[[13]](#footnote-14) In short, the echo chamber thesis argues that the media fails to impact British politics because the majority of the electorate’s vote remains unchanged, thus minimizing the impact of the media.

Another factor that suggests the media does not have a great impact on British politics is the fact that there are strict regulatory policies in Britain regarding media spending from politicians and political parties.[[14]](#footnote-15) Unlike other countries, like the United States, where during the campaign season, political adverts on the television are played at nauseum and spending is virtually unlimited, political parties in Britain “have always been prohibited from buying advertising space in broadcast media, having to rely instead on fixed time allocated on a strict quota system.”[[15]](#footnote-16) However, viewership of the allocated time allotted to political parties lags in comparison to other programs. Thus, television has a significantly weaker influence in Britain than in other countries when discussing the impact on politics. There is yet another argument that suggests the impact from the media is overstated. The argument begins by stating that there are two ways to read the relationship between voting behaviour and media coverage and consumption, those two ways being that “both press and public are responding to ‘real world’ changes … or newspapers may simply be responding to the oscillations in the public mood.”[[16]](#footnote-17) If one believes that the media corporations are seeking the highest ratings possible, or the highest consumption rates, then the media corporation would follow their consumer base in relation to the ‘public mood.’ This argument offers yet another strong case for why the impact of the media is often overstated, as all three factors are valid.

Although the case has been made that the media has less of an effect on British politics than is often believed, it would do a disservice to this analysis to argue they have no impact at all. As is true in every country, UK “politicians’ desire to secure and control the mainstream media agenda has built to something of an obsession.”[[17]](#footnote-18) In addition, campaign spending from the Conservative and Labour parties grew from an average of £5 million in 1983 to £27 million in 1997.[[18]](#footnote-19) No rational politician would squander the time and money trying to please the media if it offered no benefit to their chances of re-election or public approval. However, of the two parties, the Conservatives have historically had control of the media.[[19]](#footnote-20) One could look at this command over the press and attribute the long periods of Conservative reign in Parliament to the dominance of the Tory cause in the press. One election that has been attributed to the media’s influence was the 1992 election. John Major and the Conservatives surprisingly won a plurality of votes, and Neil Kinnock, the Labour party leader at the time, attributed the loss to the ‘Tory press.’[[20]](#footnote-21) The next Labour party leader, Tony Blair, not only took the party to a more moderate position, but he also “started a concerted charm offensive aimed at the proprietors of the Tory press, in particular the Murdoch empire, and proposals for restricting media ownership were conveniently and coincidentally jettisoned.”[[21]](#footnote-22) This strategy ended up working as New Labour garnered 72% of national press support by 2001.[[22]](#footnote-23) As evidenced through these case studies, the media’s opinion has had a correlation with election results. Yet another argument that demonstrates the media does impact British politics is outlined by Neil Gavin and David Sanders in a model they performed. By looking at the economics section of newspapers, they found that coverage clearly affected middle-class and working-class expectations on the economy by 0.3 and 0.38 percentage points respectively.[[23]](#footnote-24) Therefore, they found that “over the course of a year (or, indeed, a parliament), numerous stories have the potential to change expectations to a significant degree and, in turn, influence overall support for the government.”[[24]](#footnote-25) These cases and evidence do explain and demonstrate that British politics is in fact impacted by the media.

It is evident that the media does impact British politics; however, the general perception of the media’s impact is overstated as seen through the examples provided. The media is vital to a democracy, in large part due to the accountability of the government it can provide. More research should be done in the field of social media’s impact on British politics, as this new medium is being exploited by politicians and political parties to try to gain votes. This has been seen through the advent of ‘fake news’. Social media has also helped continue the trend of the ‘echo chamber’, as algorithms force biased news stories onto the consumer’s ‘feed’. Though regardless of the impact of the media, one thing is certain from this analysis, British politicians have, and will continue to try to sway the media to improve their chances of election, re-election and the passage of their initiatives.

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2. ‘Public Perceptions of the Media’s Reporting of Politics Today’ page 370 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. 371 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. ‘The Slow Death of the Westminster Lobby: Collateral damage from the MP’s expense scandal’ page 479 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. page 481 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid. page 482 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ibid. page 483 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid. page 484 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid. page 489 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. ‘The Press and Its Influence on British Political Attitudes under New Labour’ page 587 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. ‘Fake news: How our brains lead us into echo chambers that promote racism and sexism’ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. ‘Studying the Media and politics in Britain: a tale of two literatures?’ page 362 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. ‘Politcians, Privacy and Media Intrusion in Britain’ page 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. ‘The Press and Its Influence on British Political Attitudes under New Labour’ pages 583-586 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. ‘Politcians, Privacy and Media Intrusion in Britain’ page 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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