The New Visibility

John B. Thompson

A T THE end of April 2004, newspapers and television screens across the world were filled with the images of Iraqi prisoners being subjected to various forms of torture and degradation in Abu Ghraib, a US-run prison in the outskirts of Baghdad. One image, that of a hooded prisoner standing on a box with electric wires dangling from his outstretched hands, became an iconic symbol of abuse by an occupying power in the wake of a deeply divisive war, fuelling expressions of outrage in the media and even eliciting a degree of contrition from a hitherto belligerent US president and from other senior members of the Bush administration. Personal photographs taken with digital cameras by military staff inside the prison – like snapshots from an exotic holiday overseas – had leaked into the public domain and given rise to the most serious scandal faced by the Bush administration since it took its precipitous decision to invade Iraq. The hidden practices of US military and paramilitary personnel in the closed-off worlds of Iraqi jails had suddenly been opened up to public scrutiny, unleashing a sequence of further revelations that would be difficult for those in power to explain away and control. Thanks to the media, these previously hidden practices and events had been given an entirely new status as public and, indeed, politically explosive events; the invisible had been made visible for all to see, even though the viewers were far removed from the closed corridors and prison cells in which these disturbing events had transpired.

In this new world of mediated visibility, the making visible of actions and events is not just the outcome of leakage in systems of communication and information flow that are increasingly difficult to control: it is also an explicit strategy of individuals who know very well that mediated visibility can be a weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day lives. Once again, the war in Iraq provided us with countless reminders of this fundamental truth: the macabre beheadings carried out by (among others) Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Tawhid and Jihad group, videoed and shown live on the Internet and then recycled with varying degrees of explicitness through the

mass media of television and the press, are only the most dramatic illustration of a new political theatre that is played out in the world of the media, where spatial distance is irrelevant, communication instantaneous (or virtually so) and – especially with the rise of the Internet and other networked media – the capacity to outmanoeuvre one's opponents is always present.

What are the characteristics of this new form of visibility that has become a pervasive feature of the world in which we live today? How does it differ from other forms of visibility and what are its consequences? These are questions that have preoccupied me over the last decade and about which I have written at some length (Thompson, 1995, 2000). In this article I shall briefly outline my way of thinking about the new visibility and its consequences. I shall begin by situating the issue of visibility within the context of a social theory of communication media, since – as I shall try to show – the rise of the new visibility is inseparably linked to the new forms of action and interaction brought about by the media.

Communication Media and Social Interaction

To understand the new visibility, we must first understand the ways in which the development of communication media has transformed the nature of social interaction. This is what I have tried to do in developing a social theory of the media in *The Media and Modernity* (1995) and elsewhere. My approach could be described as an 'interactional theory' of the media because I analyse communication media in relation to the forms of interaction which they make possible and of which they are part. Communication media are not merely technical devices which transmit information from one individual to another while leaving their relationship unchanged; rather, by using communication media, individuals create *new* forms of action and interaction which have their own distinctive properties.

So what are these new forms of action and interaction? We can begin to analyse them by distinguishing several basic types of interaction. One type is what we can call face-to-face interaction. In this type of interaction, the participants are immediately present to one another and share a common spatial-temporal framework; in other words, the interaction takes place in a context of co-presence. Face-to-face interaction is 'dialogical' in character, in the sense that it generally involves a two-way flow of information and communication; one individual speaks to another (or others) and the addressee can respond (at least in principle), and so the dialogue unfolds. A further characteristic of face-to-face interaction is that it generally involves a multiplicity of symbolic cues; words can be supplemented by gestures, facial expressions, changes in intonation, etc. in order to convey messages and to interpret the messages of others.

The use of communication media creates various forms of mediated interaction which differ in important respects from face-to-face interaction. These various forms of mediated interaction have different spatial and temporal characteristics from face-to-face interaction. Whereas face-to-face interaction always takes place in a context of co-presence, mediated

interaction is 'stretched' across space and may also be stretched out or compressed in time. Whereas in face-to-face interaction the producers and receivers of messages share the same spatial-temporal framework, in mediated interaction the contexts of producers and receivers of messages are generally separated in space (and may be either separated in time or simultaneous). By using communication media, we can interact with others with whom we do not share a common spatial-temporal framework, and the nature of our interaction will be shaped by these distinctive spatial and temporal properties and by the distinctive characteristics of the medium employed.

One type of mediated interaction is that exemplified by activities such as letter-writing and telephone conversations. These activities involve the use of a technical medium to transmit information or symbolic content to individuals who are remote in space, in time, or in both. Since the participants do not share the same spatial-temporal framework, they must always consider how much contextual information should be included in the exchange – for example, by putting the place and date at the top of a letter, or by identifying oneself at the beginning of a telephone conversation. This type of mediated interaction also involves a certain narrowing of the range of symbolic cues, in the sense that the participants do not generally have the range and diversity of symbolic cues that are available to individuals in contexts of face-to-face interaction.

A different type of mediated interaction is that created by the production and reception of materials such as books, newspapers, radio and television programmes, films, videos, etc. I describe this as 'mediated quasi-interaction'. As with other types of mediated interaction, it involves the stretching of interaction across space and time and a certain narrowing of the range of symbolic cues. But there are two features that differentiate it from other forms of mediated interaction. First, in the case of mediated quasi-interaction, symbolic forms are produced for an indefinite range of potential recipients – it is, in other words, relatively open-ended. In a telephone conversation, utterances are produced for specific others, but a newspaper or a television programme is produced for anyone who has the means (cultural and material) to receive it. Second, whereas the kind of interaction involved in writing a letter or using a telephone is generally dialogical in character, mediated quasi-interaction is predominantly monological, in the sense that the flow of communication is largely one-way. The reader of a book or a newspaper, or the viewer of a TV programme or a film, is primarily the recipient of a symbolic form whose producer does not require (and generally does not receive) a direct and immediate response.

Since mediated quasi-interaction is largely monological in character and involves the production of symbolic forms for an indefinite range of potential recipients, it is best regarded as a kind of quasi-interaction. It does not have the degree of reciprocity and interpersonal specificity of other forms of interaction, whether mediated or face-to-face. But mediated quasi-interaction is, nonetheless, a form of interaction. It creates a certain kind

of social situation in which individuals are linked together in a process of communication and symbolic exchange. It also creates distinctive kinds of interpersonal relationships, social bonds and intimacy (what I call 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance').

The development of a range of new communication technologies associated with personal computers and the Internet can be analysed in a very similar way. These technologies create a variety of new interactional situations which have their own distinctive properties. We can loosely label these situations as various kinds of 'computer-mediated interaction', but in practice we need to distinguish between various types. The use of email, for example, is similar in some ways to the kind of mediated interaction involved in letter-writing, but it differs in important respects. Like letter-writing, email is dialogical in character, oriented to specific others and involves the written rather than the spoken word; but the temporal compression is much greater and the mediating institutions and conditions of use (including the cultural and material resources) are altogether different. Other forms of communication via the Internet, such as news groups, chat rooms, bulletin boards, etc., display different characteristics. Many of these forms of communication are more open-ended than email and can be accessed by anyone with the necessary skills and equipment (although some may have specific conditions of entry, such as passwords and/or the payment of entrance fees); but unlike mediated quasi-interaction, some also have specific dialogical features, such as real-time chat, ordering and/or downloading material from websites and contact via email.[1]

By adopting an interactional approach to communication media, we can gain a distinctive sociological perspective on the development of communication media and their broad historical significance. Prior to the development of print in late medieval and early modern Europe (and until quite recently in some other parts of the world), the exchange of information and symbolic content was, for most people, a process that took place exclusively within the context of face-to-face interaction. Various forms of mediated interaction and quasi-interaction did exist, but they were restricted to a relatively small sector of the population. But with the rise of the printing industry in 15th- and 16th-century Europe, and with the development of various types of electronic media in the 19th and 20th centuries, the 'interaction mix' of social life has changed. Face-to-face interaction has not been displaced but it has been supplemented by other forms of interaction, which have assumed an ever-increasing role. Increasingly individuals are able to acquire information and symbolic content from sources other than the persons with whom they interact directly in the course of their day-to-day lives; increasingly they have access to 'non-local knowledge' which they can incorporate reflexively into their self-formative process. The creation and renewal of traditions are processes that become increasingly bound up with mediated symbolic exchange; traditions are not necessarily destroyed with the development of modern societies, but gradually they lose their moorings in the locales of everyday life. The

development of the media creates new fields of action and interaction which involve distinctive forms of visibility and in which relations of power can shift quickly, dramatically and in unpredictable ways. Let us examine this latter point in more detail.

The Rise of Mediated Visibility

The visible is that which can be seen, that which is perceptible by the sense of sight; the invisible is that which cannot be seen, is imperceptible or hidden from view. In the normal flow of our daily lives, visibility is linked to the physical capacities of our sense of sight and to the spatial and temporal properties of the circumstances in which we find ourselves: we cannot see beyond a certain distance (unless aided by a technical device of some kind), we cannot see in the absence of a certain amount of light (unless aided, again, by a technical device) and we cannot see into the future or the past. What we see is that which lies within our field of vision, where the boundaries of this field are shaped by the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now. Visibility is situated: the others who are visible to us are those who share the same spatial-temporal locale. Visibility is also reciprocal (at least in principle): we can see others who are within our field of vision, but they can also see us (provided that we are not concealed in some way). It is the situated visibility of co-presence.

But with the development of communication media, visibility is freed from the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now. The visibility of individuals, actions and events is severed from the sharing of a common locale. One no longer has to be present in the same spatial-temporal setting in order to see the other individual or to witness the action or event: an action or event can be made visible to others by being recorded and transmitted to others who are not physically present at the time and place of its occurrence. The field of vision is stretched out in space and may also be stretched out in time: one can witness events occurring in distant places 'live', that is, as they occur in real time; one can also witness distant events which occurred in the past and which, thanks to the preservative qualities of the medium, can be re-presented in the present. Moreover, this new form of mediated visibility is no longer reciprocal in character. The field of vision is uni-directional: the viewer can see the distant others who are being filmed or photographed but the distant others cannot, in most circumstances, see them. Individuals can be seen by many viewers without themselves being able to see these viewers, while the viewers are able to see distant others without being seen by them.

The development of communication media thus brought into being a new form of visibility – or, to be more precise, new forms of visibility whose specific properties varied from one medium to another – which differed in fundamental ways from the situated visibility of co-presence. In this new form of mediated visibility, the field of vision is no longer constrained by the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now but is shaped, instead, by the distinctive properties of communication media, by a range

of social and technical considerations (such as camera angles, editing processes and organizational interests and priorities) and by the new types of interaction that these media make possible. It is also shaped by the fact that, in most communication media, the visual is not an isolated sensory dimension but is usually accompanied by the spoken or written word – it is the audio-visual or the textual-visual. Seeing is never 'pure vision', it is never a matter of simply opening one's eyes and grasping an object or event. On the contrary, seeing is always shaped by a broader set of cultural assumptions and frameworks, and by the spoken or written cues that commonly accompany the visual image and shape the way in which the images are seen and understood.

We can bring out the significance of this new form of visibility by focusing briefly on one area where its implications were particularly profound – the complex and changing relations between visibility and political power. Prior to the development of print and other media, the visibility of political rulers depended to a large extent on their physical appearance before others in contexts of co-presence. For the most part, these appearances could be restricted to the relatively closed circles of the assembly or the court: visibility required co-presence, and political rulers were generally visible only to those with whom they interacted routinely in the face-to-face settings of daily life. Their audiences consisted primarily of members of ruling elites or individuals who participated in the social life of the court.

There were occasions when rulers appeared before wider audiences comprising, among others, some of the subjects over whom they ruled. These occasions included major public events such as coronations, royal funerals and victory marches. The pomp and ceremony of such occasions enabled the ruler to maintain some distance from his subjects while enabling them temporarily to see and celebrate his existence in a context of co-presence. But for most individuals in ancient or medieval societies, the most powerful rulers were rarely if ever seen. Individuals who lived in rural areas or in the peripheral regions of an empire or kingdom would rarely have the opportunity to see the emperor or king in flesh and blood. Apart from royal progresses, which were transient and relatively infrequent, most public appearances of the monarch took place in the political centre – in the halls or courts of the palace or in the streets and squares of the capital city (see Geertz, 1983).

With the development of print and other media, however, political rulers increasingly acquired a kind of visibility that was detached from their physical appearance before assembled audiences. Rulers used the new means of communication not only as a vehicle for promulgating official decrees, but also as a medium for fabricating a self-image that could be conveyed to others in distant locales. Monarchs in early modern Europe, such as Louis XIV of France or Philip IV of Spain, were well versed in the arts of image-making (see Burke, 1992; Elliott, 1985). Their images were constructed and celebrated not only in traditional media, such as paint, bronze, stone and tapestry, but also in the newer media of print, including

woodcuts, etchings, engravings, pamphlets and periodicals. During the reign of Louis XIV, for example, periodicals like the *Gazette de France*, published twice a week, and the *Mercure Gallant*, published monthly, devoted regular space to the actions of the king. While the monarchies of early modern Europe were primarily court-based societies in which rulers oriented their activities towards elites who met in palaces and other specially designed milieux, nevertheless the images of monarchs and accounts of their activities were circulated well beyond these restricted circles through the medium of print. The circulation of these images and accounts rendered the activities of political rulers increasingly visible to a plurality of individuals who were not in a position to encounter these rulers (or other members of the political elite) in the course of their day-to-day lives. Gradually, the visibility of political rulers and others, the visibility of their actions, of their utterances and indeed of their selves, was prised apart from their appearance before others who were gathered together in the same spatial-temporal locale.

The development of electronic media – radio and above all television – represented in some ways the continuation of a process that had been set in motion by the advent of print, but in other respects it represented a new departure. As with print, electronic media created a kind of visibility that was severed from the sharing of a common locale, a visibility which, with the increasing availability of media products on a national and even international scale, impinged on the lives of a growing proportion of the population. But the kind of visibility created by electronic media was different in some respects from the visibility created by print. Electronic media enabled information and symbolic content to be transmitted over large distances with little or no delay. Hence electronic media created a kind of visibility which was characterized, at least in principle, by what we could call 'de-spatialized simultaneity': distant others could be rendered visible in virtually the same time-frame, could be heard at the very moment they spoke and seen at the very moment they acted, even though they did not share the same spatial locale as the individuals to whom they were visible. Moreover, the electronic media were characterized by a richness of symbolic cues that enabled some of the features of face-to-face interaction to be reproduced in these new media, even though the spatial properties of face-to-face interaction and mediated quasi-interaction were radically different. Radio created mediated audibility, enabling the oral quality of the human voice to be encoded and transmitted to a plurality of distant others, while television enabled both oral and visual cues to be recorded and disseminated. With the advent of television, therefore, individuals were able to see persons, actions and events, as well as to hear the spoken word and other sounds, in a way that was both simultaneous and de-spatialized.

The rise of the Internet and other digital technologies has amplified the significance of the new forms of visibility created by the media and at the same time rendered them more complex. They have greatly increased the flow of audio-visual content into the networks of communication and

enabled a much wider range of individuals to create and disseminate this content. Moreover, given the nature of the Internet, it is much more diffi-cult to control the flow of symbolic content within it, and hence much more difficult for those in power to ensure that the images made available to indi-viduals are those they would wish to see circulated. Ever since the advent of print, political rulers have found it impossible to control completely the new kind of visibility made possible by the media and to shape it entirely to their liking; now, with the rise of the Internet and other digital technolo-gies, it is more difficult than ever.

The ways in which political leaders appeared before others was shaped by the changing forms of visibility and audibility created by the media. With the advent of radio, it was possible for political leaders to speak directly to thousands and even millions of others, in a way that allowed for a distinc-tive kind of intimacy – namely, non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance – which was quite different from the speaker–audience relations character-istic of mass gatherings. In the days before amplified sound, a speaker who wished to address a mass gathering had to project his or her voice with great force; speakers generally stood above the audience so they could be seen, and often used fiery language that could elicit a collective response. But with the coming of radio, rhetorical aloofness gave way in part to mediated intimacy; the fiery oratory of the impassioned speech could be exchanged for the conversational intimacy of the fireside chat (see Jamieson, 1988, esp. ch. 3). Add the visual richness of television and the stage is set for the flour-ishing of a new kind of intimacy in the public sphere. Now political leaders could address their subjects as if they were family or friends. And, given the capacity of television to convey close-up images, individuals could scrutinize their leaders' actions and utterances – their facial expressions, personal appearance, mannerisms and body language among other things – with the kind of close attention once reserved for those with whom one shared an intimate personal relationship.

The development of communication media thus gave rise to a new kind of de-spatialized visibility which allowed for an intimate form of self-presentation freed from the constraints of co-presence. These were the conditions that facilitated the rise of what we could call 'the society of self-disclosure': a society in which it was possible and, indeed, increasingly common for political leaders and other individuals to appear before distant audiences and lay bare some aspect of their self or their personal life. The impersonal aloofness of most political leaders in the past was increasingly replaced by this new kind of mediated intimacy through which politicians could present themselves not just as leaders but as human beings, as ordinary individuals who could address their subjects as fellow citizens, selectively disclosing aspects of their lives and their character in a con-versational or even confessional mode. What was lost in this process was some of the aura, the 'greatness', that surrounded political leaders and insti-tutions in the past, an aura that was sustained in part by the aloofness of leaders and the distance they maintained from the individuals over whom

they ruled.[2] What was gained was the capacity to speak directly to one's subjects, to appear before them as flesh-and-blood human beings with whom they could empathize and even sympathize, to address them not as one's subject but as one's friend. In short, political leaders acquired the capacity to present themselves as 'one of us'.

While communication media have created new opportunities for political leaders to appear before others in a way and on a scale that never existed before, they also created new risks. Mediated visibility was a gift to those who were adept at using the media to fashion their image or further their ends. But the use of the media was not the sole preserve of political leaders. Mediated forms of communication could be used not only to promote and celebrate political leaders, but also to attack and denounce them. Pamphleteers and others in early modern Europe commonly used the printed word to mock and caricature those in power – Louis XIV, for example, was commonly portrayed in the royal press as a war hero, but he was lampooned by pamphleteers as a battle-shy womanizer. Moreover, since the media had the capacity to make visible arenas of action that were previously hidden from view, and since they created a complex field of images and information flows that were very difficult to control, they could also give rise to new kinds of mediated events which had the potential to disrupt and undermine the carefully calculated self-presentations of political leaders and others. I'll consider the nature and significance of these disruptive events a little later. But before I do so, I want to dwell for a moment on some of the theoretical implications of the account outlined here.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and other works, Foucault developed a distinctive and influential argument about the changing relations between visibility and power in Western societies, but if my analysis of the new visibility is sound, then we can see that Foucault's argument is very partial at best. His argument, succinctly put, is this. The societies of the ancient world and of the *ancien régime* were societies of spectacle: the exercise of power was linked to the public manifestation of the strength and superiority of the sovereign. It was a regime of power in which a few were made visible to many, and in which the visibility of the few was used as a means of exercising power over the many – in the way, for instance, that a public execution in the market square became a spectacle in which a sovereign power took its revenge, reaffirming the glory of the king through the destruction of a rebellious subject. But from the 16th century on, the spectacular manifestation of power gave way to new forms of discipline and surveillance, which increasingly infiltrated different spheres of life. The army, the school, the prison, the hospital: these and other institutions increasingly employed the more subtle mechanisms of power based on training, disciplining, observing, recording. The spread of these mechanisms gradually gave rise to a kind of 'disciplinary society' in which the visibility of the few by the many has been replaced by the visibility of the many by the few, and in which the spectacular display of sovereign power has been replaced by the normalizing power of the gaze (see Foucault, 1977, esp. 170 ff.).

Foucault uses the image of the Panopticon to characterize this new relation between power and visibility. The image is drawn from the work of the English prison reformer, Jeremy Bentham, who, in 1791, published a blueprint for the ideal penitentiary. Bentham envisaged a circular building with an observation tower at the centre. The walls of the building were lined with cells, each separated from one another by walls. The cells would have two windows: one on the inside, facing the observation tower, and one on the outside, allowing light to pass through the cell. By virtue of this unique architectural structure, a single supervisor in the central tower could subject a multiplicity of inmates to continuous surveillance. Each inmate, securely confined in a cell, is permanently visible; each action can be seen and monitored by a supervisor who remains unseen. Moreover, since the inmates know that their actions are always visible even if they are not being observed at every moment, they will adapt their behaviour accordingly and always act as if they were being observed. They are subjected to a state of permanent visibility, which ensures the automatic functioning of power.

Foucault regards the Panopticon not merely as an ingenious piece of late 18th-century architecture but as a generalizable model for the organization of power relations in modern societies. This model – what he calls 'panopticism' – provided an effective alternative to earlier forms of exercising power. Gradually it supplemented and replaced earlier forms so that, in more and more spheres of social life, individuals were increasingly subjected to the kinds of discipline and surveillance that were so effectively employed in the prison. Increasingly they are caught up in a new system of power in which visibility is a means of control. They are no longer witnesses to a spectacle that unfolds before them but rather objects of the multiple, intersecting gazes which, through the daily exercise of surveillance, dispense with the need for spectacle.

In developing this argument Foucault has highlighted, with characteristic brilliance, the importance of visibility as a means of exercising power, but his use of the Panopticon as a way of understanding the relation between power and visibility in modern societies is far from convincing. Of course, there are some organizations in our societies which rely on methods of surveillance – the police, the military and the security services, above all, but also other agencies of the state and some private organizations – and one could plausibly argue that surveillance is becoming more and more important today as states seek to develop new ways to combat crime and to counter actual or perceived threats (see Lyon, 1994, 2003). But we cannot understand the changing relation between power and visibility in our societies by focusing our attention on the phenomenon of surveillance and neglecting, as Foucault did, the role of communication media. If Foucault had considered more carefully the role of the media, he might have seen that they establish a relation between power and visibility which is quite different from that implicit in the model of the Panopticon. Whereas the Panopticon renders many people visible to a few, the media enable a few people to be visible to many: thanks to the media, it is primarily those who

exercise power, rather than those over whom power is exercised, who are subjected to a new kind of visibility. And this new visibility is very different from the kind of spectacle that Foucault discerned in the ancient world and the *ancien régime*, for the mediated visibility of individuals, actions and events is now severed from the sharing of a common locale and dissociated from the conditions and constraints of face-to-face interaction.

Mediated Visibility as a Double-edged Sword

With the development of communication media, the political field itself is partly reconstituted by the new forms of interaction and visibility brought into being by the media. The media can be conceptualized as a field of interaction with its own distinctive set of interests, positions and career trajectories, a field that has arisen separately from, but is interwoven in many ways with, the political field. In differing ways, media organizations are all concerned with exercising symbolic power through the use of communication media of various kinds.[3] While some of these organizations bear directly on the political field, they do not coincide with it, since they are generally governed by different principles and oriented towards different ends. The relation between politicians and journalists may on occasion be close and harmonious, as they may be bound together in forms of reciprocal dependency (politicians need the media to present favourable images of themselves, while journalists rely on politicians and other official sources to provide a regular flow of news). But the relation is also fraught with potential conflict and it can easily become a source of tension, as journalists may pursue agendas or take positions opposed to those that politicians or their spokespersons would like them to take.

As the political field becomes increasingly infused with mediated forms of communication, political leaders are able to appear before their subjects in ways and on a scale that never existed previously. The relation between political leaders and their subjects increasingly becomes a form of mediated quasi-interaction – shaped by the diverse and potentially conflicting activities of journalists, press officers and others – through which bonds of loyalty and affection (as well as feelings of repugnance) can be formed. Skilful politicians exploit this to their advantage. With the help of their PR consultants and communications personnel, they seek to create and sustain a basis of support for their power and policies by carefully managing their visibility and self-presentation within the mediated arena of modern politics.

But mediated visibility is a double-edged sword. The development of the media has created new opportunities for political leaders, but it has also created new risks and political leaders find themselves exposed to new kinds of dangers that stem from the uncontrollable nature of mediated visibility. The mediated arena of modern politics is open and accessible in a way that traditional assemblies and courts were not: in the age of mediated visibility, it is much more difficult to close the doors of the political arena and throw a veil of secrecy around it. The proliferation of new communication

media has only exacerbated the problem, creating a vast array of channels, decentralized and impossible to monitor and control completely, through which images and information can flow. Whether they like it or not, political leaders today are more visible to more people and more closely scrutinized than they ever were in the past; and at the same time, they are more exposed to the risk that their actions and utterances, and the actions and utterances of others, may be disclosed in ways that conflict with the images they wish to project. Hence the visibility created by the media can become the source of a new and distinctive kind of *fragility*. However much political leaders may seek to manage their visibility, they cannot completely control it. Mediated visibility can slip out of their grasp and can, on occasion, work against them.

It is in this context that we can appreciate the significance of various forms of trouble that can afflict politicians in the age of mediated visibility – phenomena such as the gaffe, the leak, the outburst and the scandal. Politicians must constantly be on their guard and employ a high degree of reflexivity to monitor their actions and utterances, since an indiscreet act, an ill-judged remark or an unwarranted disclosure can have disastrous consequences. Each of these forms of trouble merits detailed investigation. We need a new history of each – not a history that simply accumulates a series of intriguing, sometimes bizarre and beguiling stories, but one that recounts the development of these phenomena as part and parcel of the rise of mediated visibility.

This is the task I set myself in *Political Scandal* (2000): I set out to show that we can understand why scandals of various kinds – sexual, financial and what I called 'power scandals' – have become such a pervasive feature of our public life today only by situating this phenomenon in relation to the rise of mediated visibility, of which it has become an inseparable part (Thompson, 2000, esp. chs 2, 4). The word 'scandal' pre-dates the rise of the media by many centuries – indeed, the word can be traced back to Ancient Greek and early Judaeo-Christian thought. But from the 17th century on, this word was increasingly interwoven with claims and counterclaims that were articulated in print – initially in the pamphlet culture of the 17th and 18th centuries, and then, from the late 18th century on, in the emerging culture of political periodicals and newspapers. The word was gradually prised apart from its close association with libel and sedition and increasingly applied to a range of phenomena that had certain distinctive properties. By the early 19th century, a new phenomenon had come into being – the phenomenon of scandal as a mediated event. This modern phenomenon of mediated scandal had a distinctive structure and dynamic: it involved the disclosure through the media of some action or activity that was previously hidden from view, that involved the transgression of certain values and norms and that, on being disclosed, elicited public expressions of disapproval and outrage. Activities that were carried out clandestinely or in privacy were suddenly made visible in the public domain, and the disclosure and condemnation of these activities in the press served in

part to constitute the event as a scandal. Mediated visibility was not a retrospective commentary on a scandalous event: rather, it was partly constitutive of the event as a scandal.

While the 19th century was the birthplace of mediated scandal, the 20th century was to become its true home. Once this distinctive type of event had been invented, it would become a recognizable genre that some would seek actively to produce while others – especially those who were prominent in public life – would strive, with varying degrees of discretion and success, to avoid. The character and frequency of political scandals varied considerably from one national context to another, and depended on a range of specific social and political circumstances. In countries such as Britain and the United States, there were significant political scandals throughout the early decades of the 20th century, such as the Marconi scandal in Britain, which nearly brought down the Liberal Government in 1913, and the Teapot Dome scandal in the United States, which rocked Harding's Administration in the 1920s. But it is undoubtedly the case that the phenomenon of political scandal has become a particularly prevalent feature of public life in Britain and the United States, and in a number of other modern liberal democracies, in the period since the early 1960s. Why? How can we explain the growing prevalence of political scandal in recent decades?

One way of answering this question would be to argue that the growing prevalence of political scandal is symptomatic of a decline in the moral standards of political leaders, both with regard to their personal behaviour and with regard to their general probity in the conduct of office. So it might be argued, for instance, that the sex scandals that were a prevalent feature of British political life in the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the sex scandals that plagued the Presidency of Bill Clinton, were a reflection of a general decline in moral standards. Similarly, it might be argued that the corruption scandals which flourished in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the cash-for-questions scandals which destroyed the political careers of several British politicians in the 1990s, are symptomatic of declining levels of probity among politicians. However, while this may seem like a plausible explanation, there is little evidence to support it. Indeed, it is not at all clear that, in general terms, the moral standards of political leaders today are significantly lower than the standards adhered to by political leaders in the past. Kennedy's extra-marital affairs are only the most obvious example: quite a few earlier American presidents appear to have had liaisons which remained well-kept secrets at the time (see Hagood, 1998). It seems likely that the growing prevalence of political scandal has less to do with a general decline in the moral standards of political leaders than with the changing ways in which, and the extent to which, the activities of political leaders are made visible in the public domain.

So if we reject the thesis of the declining moral standards of politicians, what alternative explanation can we provide for the growing prevalence of political scandal? There are, in my view, a number of important changes which underlie this development – here I shall focus on three. One

factor is the changing technologies of communication and surveillance. The 20th century has witnessed a veritable revolution in the technologies available for recording, processing and transmitting information and communication. These new technologies, and especially those associated with television, have helped to make political leaders much more visible in the public domain, and have helped to ensure that their ways of appearing before others involved a degree of intimacy and personal self-disclosure that rarely existed in the past. And the more that political leaders sought to present themselves through the media as ordinary individuals with ordinary lives, the more likely it was that the audiences whom they addressed would be inclined to assess them in terms of their character as individuals – their sincerity, their honesty, their integrity. By presenting themselves as ordinary individuals with their own personal lives and commitments, and with their own reasons and motives for what they do, political leaders were giving character and integrity ever greater salience in public life. But character was an attribute by which they could just as easily be hung.

Changing technologies were important for another reason: they made it more and more difficult to throw a veil of secrecy around the private behaviour of political leaders and other public figures. Increasingly sophisticated technologies – such as those associated with the secret tape-recording of conversations, with long-distance photography, with the covert interception of telecommunications, and with the tracking and recovery of digitally codified electronic communication – provide a powerful array of devices that can be used to increase the leakage of back-region behaviour into front regions where, coupled with the activities of media and para-media organizations, they can be turned into highly visible events. It would be too strong to say that these new technologies herald the 'end of privacy', as some commentators have suggested (e.g. Whitaker, 1999). But it is undoubtedly the case that, due in part to the growing availability of these technologies, the social conditions of privacy are changing in fundamental ways. New technologies have created powerful new means of 'eaves-dropping'. Conversations or interactions that individuals believe to be private (whether carried out face-to-face or with the aid of one-to-one technologies like the telephone) can be picked up and recorded by covert means, and subsequently made available to many thousands or millions of others through the media. Words or actions that were originally produced as private communication or behaviour can unexpectedly acquire a public character, becoming visible in ways that were certainly unanticipated, possibly very embarrassing and perhaps even seriously incriminating (as Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton, among many others, discovered to their cost).

A second factor is the changing culture of journalism. The rise of journalism as a profession stems from the late 19th century, and there were a number of journalists and editors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries who saw themselves as investigators seeking to uncover hidden realities and bring them to the attention of the public – not only crusading editors like W.T. Stead in Britain and Joseph Pulitzer in the United States, but also the

so-called 'muckraking' journalists like Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell.[4] After this early flourishing, the tradition of investigative journalism went into a period of relative decline until the 1960s, when it was given fresh impetus by the tumultuous political events of this decade. In the United States, the civil rights movement and the struggle against the Vietnam War were perhaps the most important of these movements, but others, such as the women's movement and a questioning of traditional attitudes towards sexuality, were also of major significance. This questioning, critical culture did not by itself transform journalistic practices, but it did help to create a climate that encouraged investigative journalism.

While the encouragement of investigative reporting goes back to the period before Watergate, it is undoubtedly the case that the events that unfolded between the discovery of the break-in and the resignation of Nixon were a major boost to this trend. The Watergate scandal was significant in this context not only because it helped to legitimate the activities of investigative journalists (albeit by virtue of the somewhat romanticized account of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward), but also because, for the first time ever, it brought the most hidden regions of the highest office of political power into the public domain where, suddenly and unexpectedly, they were thrown open to view. And the content that emerged, both in terms of the evidence of criminal wrongdoing and the shockingly crude manoeuvrings of Nixon and his associates, served only to fuel the public's scepticism about the credibility and trustworthiness of their leaders. Watergate helped to foster a climate of scepticism in which no one, not even the president, is above suspicion.

The renewed emphasis on investigative reporting in the 1960s and 1970s helped to alter the culture of journalism and to create a context in which the search for hidden secrets, and the disclosure of these secrets if and when they were found, was increasingly regarded within media circles as an accepted part of journalistic activity. In the context of this broad shift in the culture of journalism, the distinction between different kinds of secrets became blurred and increasingly difficult to draw. Once it was accepted that the curtains that shrouded the upper regions of power could be drawn back, it would be very difficult to maintain a sharp distinction between secrets bearing on the exercise of power and secrets concerning the conduct of private life. Investigative reporting would easily shade into a kind of prurient reporting in which hidden aspects of the exercise of power would be mixed together with hidden aspects of the lives of the powerful. The journalistic codes and conventions that had previously discouraged journalists from reporting on the private lives and affairs of political leaders would be gradually relaxed and, in some quarters, abandoned altogether, so that journalists would be less constrained by the ethos of their own profession.

A third factor that has contributed to the growing prevalence of political scandal is the changing character of the broader political culture. This change is rooted in a series of structural transformations that have shaped

the environment in which political activity takes place. Of particular import-
ance in this regard is the gradual decline of class-based party politics, in
which parties with sharply opposed belief systems, broadly representing the
interests of different social classes that provided the core of their electoral
support, clashed in the political arena. During the second half of the 20th
century, the changing character of work in Western industrial societies –
including the decline of traditional industries, like coal and steel, and the
rise of the service sector and a range of knowledge-intensive industries –
has transformed the social context of politics. Parties could no longer rely
on the old social classes that once provided the core of their support.
Traditional doctrinal divisions were attenuated, and increasingly parties and
their leaders had to struggle to win the support of a growing pool of uncom-
mitted voters.

These broad social transformations help us to understand what we
could loosely describe as the gradual decline of 'ideological politics' and
the growing importance of the 'politics of trust'. The traditional class-based
party politics, with its sharply opposed belief systems and its strong contrast
between left and right, has not disappeared, but it has been significantly
weakened by the social transformations of the post-war period. And in its
place has emerged a kind of politics that is based increasingly on the
specific policy packages offered by political parties. These policy packages
can no longer be backed up by appealing primarily to the class interests of
voters, and voters themselves can no longer count on politicians to follow
through with their promises by virtue of the long-standing social affiliations
of their parties. Moreover, with the decline of the old ideological politics,
many people feel increasingly uncertain about how best to tackle the enor-
mously complex problems of the modern world; the world appears increas-
ingly as a bewildering place where there are no simple solutions, and where
we have to place more and more faith in our political leaders to make sound
judgements and to protect our interests. It is in this context that the question
of the credibility and trustworthiness of political leaders becomes an
increasingly important issue. People become more concerned with the *char-
acter* of the individuals who are (or might become) their leaders and more
concerned about their *trustworthiness*, because increasingly these become
the principal means of guaranteeing that political promises will be kept and
that difficult decisions in the face of complexity and uncertainty will be
made on the basis of sound judgement. The politics of trust becomes
increasingly important, not because politicians are inherently less trust-
worthy today than they were in the past, but because the social conditions
that had previously underwritten their credibility have been eroded.

This changing political culture has helped to give scandal a greater
significance in political life today. Part of the reason why political scandal
has become so important today is that it has become a kind of *credibility
test* for the politics of trust. The more our political life becomes orientated
towards questions of character and trust, the more significance we give to
those occasions when the trustworthiness of political leaders is called into

question. The more we have to rely on the integrity of politicians to follow through with their promises and on their ability to exercise sound judgement, the more significance we give to those occasions when weaknesses of character and lapses of judgement are brought to the fore. Viewed in this light, we can understand why a scandal concerning the private life of a politician is seen by many people to have broader political significance: it is not so much because they believe that politicians should adhere to strict moral codes in their private life, but because they are worried about what this behaviour tells them about the integrity, credibility and judgement of the individual concerned.

The gradual decline of ideological politics also means that, within the sub-field of professional politicians, fundamental disagreements over matters of principle become less pronounced and political parties search for other means by which they can differentiate themselves from one another. As parties move increasingly towards a common centre ground and compete for a growing pool of uncommitted voters, the character failings of their opponents (actual or alleged) and the infringement of codes of conduct become increasingly potent weapons in the struggle for political advantage. Questions of character become increasingly politicized as parties struggle to differentiate themselves in a context where it is more and more difficult to appeal to fundamental differences of principle, and where, partly in order to compensate for this, parties and their leaders seek more and more to make political capital out of the character failings of others.

Since scandal becomes a credibility test for the politics of trust and since questions of character become increasingly embroiled in partisan struggle, the occurrence of scandal tends to have a cumulative effect: scandal breeds scandal, precisely because each scandal further sharpens the focus on the credibility and trustworthiness of political leaders. The cumulative effect of scandal is incorporated into the electoral cycle, as political parties and prospective leaders use previous failures of the credibility test as a basis on which to build their own election campaigns. Hence, in the aftermath of Watergate, Jimmy Carter built his 1976 presidential campaign on the question of trust and on the promise to ensure that his administration would restore high ethical standards to government – 'I'll never lie to you', he famously declared during the campaign. Yet no sooner had he taken office than a wave of new scandals began to break. First there was the Lance affair, in which Carter's friend and close adviser was forced to resign as Director of the Office of Management and Budget amid much speculation about financial irregularities in his personal accounts. Then there was 'Billygate', a curiously inflated sequence of events in which Jimmy Carter's brother – an alcoholic with a poor sense of judgement – found himself at the centre of a scandal-storm concerning his business connections with Libya. And as if that was not enough, there was the strange story of Hamilton Jordan, a White House aide who was accused of snorting cocaine and formally investigated by a special prosecutor, although in the end the charges were dropped. In the wake of Watergate, Carter came to

power with the pledge to make government honest, decent and clean, but in a political culture focused on questions of character and trust, this was like waving a red flag before the assembled ranks of critics and journalists.

Bill Clinton found himself caught up in a similar cycle, though in a much more accentuated form. Like many presidential hopefuls in the past, Clinton campaigned on the promise to clean up politics after the sleaze of the Reagan administration, vowing to deliver 'the most ethical administration ever'. But he soon found that members of his own administration were being investigated on grounds of possible financial wrongdoing, and indeed Clinton and his wife became the subjects of a long-running investigation into their involvement in a speculative land deal in Arkansas and its relation to a failed Savings and Loan – the so-called Whitewater affair. Clinton also found that allegations and revelations concerning his private life would become highly public issues, nearly derailing his campaign in 1992 (with the Jennifer Flowers affair) and culminating in his impeachment and trial by the Senate following the disclosure of his affair with Monica Lewinsky. Of course, what led to Clinton's impeachment was not the disclosure of the affair as such, but rather a series of second-order transgressions committed in relation to a sexual harassment case instituted by Paula Jones, in the context of which Clinton gave testimony under oath denying that he had had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, thus laying himself open to the charge of perjury among other things. But what emerged in the course of this long-running saga was the unparalleled unveiling of the private interactions between the president and a young intern in the inner recesses of the White House, an unveiling which appalled many ordinary people – even if, at the same time, many people also felt that the scandal had been blown out of all proportion by an aggressive media that was preoccupied with Clinton's sexual misconduct, by a dogged investigative team that was led by a deeply conservative man with an axe to grind and by a partisan Congress.

Struggles for Visibility in the Media Age

I have used the example of political scandal to illustrate some aspects of the new visibility that has been brought about by the development of communication media. Today we live in an age of high media visibility, and those who hold or aspire to positions of prominence in public life find themselves acting in an information environment that is very different from that which existed several centuries (and even several decades) ago. Thanks to the development of multiple forms of mediated communication and the rise of numerous media organizations which are relatively independent of state power, the information environment is more intensive, more extensive and less controllable than it was in the past. It is *more intensive* in the sense that the sheer quantity of information flow is much greater than before, as more and more organizations and communication networks make available an ever-increasing volume of symbolic material. It is *more extensive* in the sense that the range of individuals who are drawn into these networks of communication and are capable of receiving the output of media organizations is

much greater than it was a century (or even several decades) ago, and in the sense that the geographical spread of these recipients is much wider: today, information flows very quickly through networks which are not only national but increasingly global in scope. And the information environment is *less controllable* in the sense that, given the proliferation of mediated forms and networks of communication, it is much more difficult for political actors to throw a veil of secrecy around their activities, much harder to control the images and information that appear in the public domain, and much harder to predict the consequences of such appearances and disclosures.

The public domain itself has become a complex space of information flows in which words, images and symbolic content compete for attention as individuals and organizations seek to make themselves seen and heard (or to make others be seen and heard). This is a space that is shaped not only by the constantly changing technologies that enable words and images to be recorded and transmitted to distant others, but also by the institutions and organizations that have an interest in transmitting this content (or not, as the case may be) and that have differing quantities of power and resources to pursue their aims. To achieve visibility through the media is to gain a kind of presence or recognition in the public space, which can help to call attention to one's situation or to advance one's cause. But equally, the inability to achieve visibility through the media can confine one to obscurity – and, in the worst cases, can lead to a kind of death by neglect. Hence it is not surprising that *struggles for visibility* have come to assume such significance in our societies today. Mediated visibility is not just a vehicle through which aspects of social and political life are brought to the attention of others: it has become a principal means by which social and political struggles are articulated and carried out.

The brutal war of words and images emerging from the war in Iraq illustrates only too well that, in this modern age of mediated visibility, the struggle to be seen and heard, and the struggle to make others see and hear, has become an inseparable part of the social and political conflicts of our time. And it also illustrates very well that, in a world where the networks of communication and information flow have become so complex and interconnected, it is impossible for any party to control completely the words and images that circulate in the public domain. The visibility of actions and events, and the impact of these words and images on the ways in which ordinary individuals understand what is happening in distant locales and form opinions and moral judgements about it, have, in this age of mediated visibility, become an inseparable part of the unfolding of the events themselves.

Notes

1. For a discussion of internet communication from the viewpoint of interactional theory, see James Slevin, *The Internet and Society* (2000).
2. This point is made very effectively by Joshua Meyrowitz in his *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (1985: 270 ff.).

3. I define symbolic power as the capacity to intervene in the course of events and influence the actions of others by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms. Symbolic power is one of four basic forms of power; for further discussion, see Thompson (1995: 13–18). I have examined the relation between the political field and the media field in more detail elsewhere (2000: ch. 4). The concepts of field and symbolic power are drawn from the work of Bourdieu, although they are used here in distinctive ways (see esp. Bourdieu, 1991, 1993: 72–7).

4. On the rise of journalism as a profession, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978).

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John B. Thompson is Professor of Sociology at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge. His publications include *Ideology and Modern Culture* (1990), *The Media and Modernity* (1995), *Political Scandal* (2000) and *Books in the Digital Age* (2005). He is currently working on the transformation of trade publishing and the making of bestsellers.