Financialisation, Media and Social Change

Dr Catherine Happer

Abstract

This article uses a circuit of communication framework to examine the role of the media in shaping public debate of the financial system and the way in which this impacts on audience response and related societal impacts. It is founded in debates about neoliberalism and financialisation which highlight the shift of power from, or through, the state to large corporations. One result of this structural shift is an increasingly integrated political, media and corporate culture which promotes the interests of the 'market' in public and private lives, and operates to limit the information available to audiences. Alternatives to economic policies and solutions to problems are marginalised in public debate, as illustrated by media coverage of the financial crisis. This limiting of alternatives is decisively implicated in the development of sympathetic attitudes to 'preferred' perspectives and related policy moves, which constrain the potential for effective resistance at the level of collective and individual responses.

Funding

The author received financial support from the UKERC, and Glasgow City Council. Research for this paper was supported by the project Financialization, Economy, Society and Sustainable Development (FESSUD), which is funded by the European Union under Framework Programme 7 contract number 266800.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the work of Greg Philo and David Miller on the circuits of communication model upon which this paper is theoretically founded. I would like also like to thank Mike Berry who helpfully shared his unpublished work. A debt of gratitude is also owed to Ben Fine, Kate Bayliss and Mary Robertson for their invaluable advice and comments on various drafts.

Introduction

When the global financial crisis broke in 2008, the media played a central role in communicating and interpreting its nature to the wider public. Despite very strong reflection of public anger and blame in the immediate aftermath of the crisis directed at finance, no sustained and effective public challenge to the prevailing economic system has emerged. That the media do not simply reflect social and political change is widely recognised amongst media scholars. However, the ways in which media representations may be decisively implicated in the construction and promotion of social structures, processes and change is the subject of much debate (Curran 2002; Castells 2010; Happer and Philo 2013; Philo *et al*. 2015). The material culture of financialisation, which provides the foundation to this symposium, rests on an understanding that material processes and structures are crucially interdependent with the systems of meanings and beliefs which support (or contest) them (Fine 2013). Further, these meanings develop through the workings of the financial system, and are responded to by audiences in different ways, such as collective support for or resistance to policy moves. As such, media and communications become crucial in discussions about whether the current economic and political system may or may not be sustained.

To understand this more fully, this article draws on a multi-dimensional model of the circuit of communication (Philo *et al*. 2015) which integrates an analysis of the social and political structures which shape media production, media content and audience response and any societal outcomes. As such, the first section provides an overview of recent structural shifts in the political economy, their relation to the reshaping of the circuit, and the way in which these underpin the material cultures of financialisation. It then assesses the role of the media in constructing this financialised culture, with attention to financial journalism and, in particular, the reporting of the crisis and how this marginalised more radical solutions. The final section looks at, first, the degree to which audience members are positioned to contest financialised media representations and, second, the way in which the circuit of communication operates to inhibit the potential for social change.

Financialisation and the transformation of the circuit of communication

Whilst there is broad recognition in the last three decades that societies in the West have moved towards a model of 'neoliberalism', there is much debate about what this means (Mudge 2008; Fine 2010; Vanugopal 2015). The term has been greatly expanded (Venugopal 2015) and commentators note that it variously refers to an ideology, a system or set of policies in practice and/or as a period or state, such as an era of capitalism (Fine 2013; Davidson 2015). Fine notes that these different elements are continually shifting and often inconsistent, and as such neoliberalism has, incorrectly, been seen as 'illusory' in nature. A key aspect of this inconsistency is that, whilst theoretically neoliberalism incorporates the ideological promotion of 'free markets', in practice it has led to the intervention of the state in markets in the direction of increased power of large global corporations (Miller 2010; Miller 2015; Philo *et al.* 2015). One practical element of this has been the transfer of key sections of the economy from the public to the private sector through privatisation – which the Thatcher government led in the UK and many other (European) countries followed, although in different forms and to varying degrees. Further waves of reform involved the introduction of market-based mechanisms into key aspects of the public sector, such as the health service, education and other government provision, new markets into which the public are increasingly drawn as consumers. This offered corporations increasing involvement in decision-making in relation to publicly-owned services, whilst these have become more weakly subject to democratic processes. This redistribution of power has crucially been accompanied by a structural shift – again supported by governments via deregulation – whereby private profit is increasingly generated ‘through financial channels rather than trade and commodity production’ (Krippner 2005: 351). Financialisation is a term much referred to in relation to debates about the character of contemporary global capitalism, but here I draw on Fine and Hall’s basic characterisation of a political economy which is shaped by the ‘excessive expansion and proliferation of financial markets and their penetration into, and influence over, almost every area of economic and social life’ (Fine and Hall 2012: 45). It incorporates an emphasis on the ‘naturalisation’ of finance and markets and their prioritisation over political decision-making or regulation (Froud *et al*. 2012), but also refers to the way in which aspects of everyday experience are quantified and interpreted in financial terms. This conceptualisation underpins the material culture of financialisation, and the 10Cs approach, in which the financial system is *Constructed* through its material structures, relations and processes, in response to which subjects must react. It is *Construed* or interpreted in ways which reflect individuals’ experience and knowledge and the range of alternatives on which they have to draw. The *Contradictory* nature of the financial system itself creates the *Context* within which it is *Collectively* interpreted and *Contested*. Despite the latter, the power and centrality of finance, and its integration with communications systems that provide public legitimacy and shape responses to financial outcomes and the crisis in particular, the material culture of finance is *Closed* in who has access to its representation and how, if not absolutely so.

Philo *et al*. (2015) provide a framework for examining the increasingly complex ‘circuit of communication’ which integrates the ‘diverse range of agencies facilitating the flow of information’ (Philo *et al*. 2015: 446) within a media production, content and reception model. The four key elements of the circuit are: the social and political institutions which influence the supply of information; the media and their content; differentiated audience groups; and the wide range of decision-makers including politicians, local government and European institutions. Central to the model is that all of these elements interact and are dynamic. They are also not mutually exclusive; politicians, for example, may both feed the supply of information and also respond to their understandings of what audiences believe and desire. Digital media support a parallel flow of information that interacts with mainstream media to underpin (and *Contest*) content but also reflect *Collective* response. The relationship between the different elements of the circuit 'varies with the subject, the relative balance of forces and specific historical contexts' (Philo *et al.* 2015: 448), and is a continually evolving site of ideological struggle. The circuit has been transformed materially and ideologically in recent years. The neoliberal shift in power towards global finance has been supported by the progressive dilution of democratic controls on capital as corporations have increasingly moved into the political process (Monbiot 2000; Beder 2006; Carroll 2010). In what Lagna (2016) describes as 'the financialisation of the state', politicians have progressively moved away from making public debt-related decisions to behaving as co-actors in a marketplace. This shift is rooted in a belief shared by politicians, academics, bankers and regulators in the primacy of financial innovation, which 'naturally' and efficiently resolves any economic uncertainties, a belief bolstered by the long, if uneven, period of stability prior to the crash (Johal *et al.* 2012; Froud *et al.* 2012). A necessary outcome of this blurring of the public and the private is reduced clarity on democratic accountability. In this context, Wedel (2011) describes the emergence of a 'shadow elite', those working as government advisers, financial lobbyists, think tankers, and business consultants, who draw on these discourses of 'naturalisation' which legitimise the interests of finance to directly influence policy (Miller 2009; Froud *et al.* 2012). The shifting nature of political party finance in the UK, in which accountability to mass membership has given way to wealthy private backers often drawn from the world of finance, further serves to cement the nexus between the core executive and city elites. Miller defines this process as the 'short-circuit' of communication which *Closes* out the public entirely (Dinan and Miller 2008; 2012; Miller and Harkins 2010). As a general rule, the activities of these *Collective* groups are beyond the reach of the media and public debate, but PR agencies for global finance feed directly into the production of media which publics *receive* in unprecedented numbers of ways.

However, the media is a site of *Contested* interests, and the movement of traffic is not simply one-way. Journalists operate within a system which is answerable to the pressures of ownership, editorial imposition and financial interests but, ultimately, the commercial imperatives of delivering audiences (Herman and Chomsky 1994; Philo *et al.* 2015). A further factor is the norms and ethics of journalism, such as adherence to balance and neutrality, and the need to challenge decision-making, although these are open to shifting content and interpretation (Doyle 2006; Guerrera 2009; Tambini 2010). There is a reliance upon a restricted range of official sources – of which politicians are the most significant – due to their authority status and direct access to decision-making (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013; Lupien 2013). However, even journalists operating in the most constrained organisational structures can possess a need (and desire) to feature a wider range of views – which routinely lead to the inclusion of *Contested* and, hence, *Chaotic* accounts, often within the same news outlet. Audiences expect the powerful to be held to account by the media, and sometimes newspapers and TV respond accordingly. The banking crisis and arguments over tax evasion have focused public attention on corporate activity and the accumulation of corporate and private wealth in recent years. This can have the effect of undermining elements of corporate self-interest, notably in the mainstream media attacks on the tax evasion of global companies such as Google and Amazon, which gain populist mileage from harnessing public outrage.

Digital media in these instances can facilitate *Collective* ways of *Contesting* the logic of finance through globalising and interconnecting local campaigns as with the Occupy movement. They can also allow for opposition to global corporate PR in other ways. Propaganda can be discredited at a much faster pace by activists and experts operating on digital media than journalists working in the mainstream (Robinson 2010). Wikileaks, the global online organisation which has 'leaked' classified documents, was set up not only to release information which powerful groups sought to keep confidential but to eliminate PR spin. When UK-bank Northern Rock collapsed in 2008 the mainstream media were prevented by a judge's order from revealing the details, but Wikileaks released a confidential briefing which legal groups attempted and failed to block (Leigh and Franklin 2008). In this way Wikileaks' releases showed real potential for the breakdown of governmental and corporate controls on the release and shape of information at national and global levels. However, business and political groups also resist such action through a *Collective* show of power; in the case of the US State Department leaks, companies such as Amazon and PayPal bowed to government pressure and blocked the organisation, making it more difficult for Wikileaks to sustain their online operations. Digital media can also aid PR in more direct ways by the simultaneous reinforcement of constructed messages across media in relation to, for example, damage limitation. The circuit model allows for the potential role public response, both online and offline, may play in shaping public debate – as politicians will, for example, consider in advance how what they release will be received and interpreted by media audiences and the likely range of responses. In this way *Contesting* interests continually shift the balance of power. However, the evidence suggests that the 'short circuit' of decision-making is not routinely disrupted by audience (inter)activity. I will now discuss the way in which these processes operate in relation specifically to financial reporting and coverage of the crisis.

Financial journalism

Theoretically, financial journalism has traditionally been defined as having a watchdog function in terms of holding to account state or corporate power (Tambini 2010). However, financial reporting has undergone a significant transformation in recent years (Davis 2002; Clark *et al.* 2004; Schifferes 2011) which Davis (2002) connects with the changing financial system and the re-allocation of power in the political and social spheres. He argues:

> corporate communication imperatives … have been more instrumental in shaping business news in the last two decades. City corporations, aided by the employment of proactive financial PR, have managed to "capture" financial news production (Davis 2002: 60)

Whilst corporations promoted the idea that financial PR grew in order to meet the information demands of investors and regulators as the sector expanded, in practice it became more and more proactive in generating a supply of information which *Conformed* with broader corporate aims (Miller and Dinan 2000; Davis 2002; Tambini 2010; Johal *et al*. 2012). This was made possible because, in contrast to other journalists, the suppliers of information, the main source of advertising (and the corporations paying for it), and consumers of financial reporting are drawn from the same global interest group (Featherstone 2009; Schecter 2009). Former reporters note that 'crossing the aisle' from journalism to join 'friends' in the financial sector is commonplace (Schetcher 2009; Fahy *et al.* 2010).

But, as Froud *et al*. (2012) note, the stories which circulate must also carry credibility to facilitate a shift in political decision-making. The long period of economic stability evidenced the wider benefits of financial innovation and cemented the expert status of the financial experts who were most vocal in promoting it (Davis 2002, 2012). There was a sense that the facts spoke for themselves. This limited any resistance amongst the political classes and instead led to an increasing reliance on those experts to direct policy makers and regulators. In this sense the finance pages inform the politicians too. Politicians may be the primary definers of public debate and their commitment to prioritise an issue leads the media. However, in this case, the influence of financial elites on politicians, and their inter-connectedness with them, offers them agenda-setting powers too.

The privately-owned press, whilst responsive to political shifts, are too led ultimately by their own economic interests both at the macro- and micro-levels. For example, Schechter (2009) notes that media companies take billions in advertising revenue from lenders and credit card companies. But the bulk of the British media, as private enterprises with corporate owners, also tends to support 'free markets' and deregulation at the ideological level (Philo *et al.* 2015). The adherence to journalistic norms of balance, truth and impartiality may operate to *Contest* dominant ideologies but where corporate priorities are in conflict with the public interest, the need to support the former is likely to shape reporting. There is then a confluence of stories and, in respect of the 'short-circuit', the material culture of financialisation can be seen to be effectively *Closed* to external influences.

The financialisation of news

Financial reporting, however, is no longer only a case of elites speaking to themselves. There has been a transformation from niche to mainstream, but also a broader shift in news values across journalism. The penetration of financial markets into increasing areas of public and private lives (Fine and Hall 2012), such as home ownership (Robertson, this collection), has been accompanied by a rising public interest in financial news (Davis 2002; Schifferes and Coulter 2012). The structural support for increased participation in the market coincided with a significant growth in advertising for financial products, including mortgages and other forms of credit – with total global spending worldwide tripling during the 1990s and fuelling consumer demand (Greenfield and Williams 2001; Clark *et al.* 2004). Personal finance generated high advertising rates which in turn fuelled interest in financial products, paying for more coverage of companies and financial products and, therefore, leading to an increased demand for coverage of the financial markets and broader financial journalism in a self-perpetuating way. Such growing public interest extended the demands upon financial reporting across depth (understanding the financial system as a whole) and breadth (to include broader social and political implications).

In relation to the former, the expansion of audience reach and more mainstream coverage posed particular issues for financial journalists in that the financial system is highly complex, and there is the difficulty of communicating risk and uncertainty to a lay audience who are looking for simplified explanations (Clark *et al*. 2004; Guerrera 2009). In a 24-hour news cycle dominated by entertainment values (Barnett 2011), Doyle (2006) argues that the transition from finance to headlines, exposed the sector's limitations, finding itself caught up 'between two stools', often in *Contradiction*; the need to provide both in-depth numerical coverage for professional groups and general coverage for lay audiences with low levels of knowledge and understanding. Doyle argues that, in meeting the demands of the latter, the drivers of financial stories tend to be large corporate names and dramas, in which blame may be placed on individuals or companies (Tambini 2010). These are also the kind of stories which operate to ensure journalists are ever more reliant on industry 'insiders', those least critical of the system.

But whilst Doyle argues 'breadth' is often marginalised in such financial reporting, conversely Mills (2015), in his account of the neoliberal transformation of BBC news journalism, documents the way in which the reporting of broader social and political issues instead became bound up with the values of finance. He identifies a cultural shift away from presenting news from the perspective of organised labour to a reflection of the 'naturalising' role of markets in the political system and a growing acceptance of financial logics. An aspect of this is the metaphorical construction of the public as financial subjects, as a 'nation of shareholders' (Mills 2015) with 'personal responsibility' for public debt (Clark *et al.* 2004). In other words, there is an increase in reporting of finance but also a move towards the financialisation of news itself which is seen in the shift towards interpreting and quantifying events, and defining the public in financialised terms.

The media and the financial crisis

As the financial crash hit in 2007-2008, with its roots in the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market, a central question was why the media *Collectively* and systematically failed to warn the public (Lashmar 2008; Schechter 2009; Tambini, 2010; Fahy *et al.* 2010; Berry 2012). Some of this relates to the ideological resilience of the infallible market which the public and the role of the public as consumers, which, in this period, promoted in particular the expansion of property markets. But in fact a small number of economists, journalists and commentators had raised the potential risks and threats (Starkman 2009; Marron *et al.* 2010; Philo 2012; Berry 2012; Mercille 2013). The mainstream media did not provide them with an effective platform to voice their concerns (Berry 2012). Schechter's (2009: 26) claim that the majority of the media 'missed the run-up to the crisis, just as much as the press was uncritical of the run-up to the war in Iraq' alludes to the processes by which sources of information were systematically drawn from groups least likely to provide any critique of it (Lashmar 2008; Schechter 2009; Tambini, 2010; Fahy et al 2010; Berry 2012; Mercille 2013). In this case there were direct vested interests in the form of the profits and the sizable bonuses being made from subprime mortgage lending supported by a genuine inability to consider market failure. Davis notes the ‘capture’ of financial news by those representing and contained within the system, and their inter-connection with successive governments and journalists and the sharing of commercial imperatives as well as ideological positions, meant that criticisms were effectively silenced (Davis 2002; Philo 2012; Berry 2012). US financial journalist Schechter (2009) notes that he attempted to raise the alert of the impending crisis but was dismissed as an ‘alarmist’. As Philo notes, the bankers and corporations as well as growing profits and house price rises were celebrated as long as the economy appeared to be booming (Philo 2012).

As the events unfolded the British popular press reflected the anger of their readers (Philo 2012), as did the global media, with expressions such as ‘greed’, ‘madness’, or ‘irrational exuberance’ commonplace (Philo 2012; Meissner 2013). The sensationalism in language and focus partly reflects the transformation of financial news to entertainment and the need to find personalities and drama on which to hang simplified stories (Manning 2013) but also a tendency to apportion blame (Philo 2012). As *The Sun* explains in this editorial:

> Many will ask if it is right that tax payers are forced to subsidise irresponsible borrowers and greedy banks. But what was the alternative? Neither America nor Britain could stand by and watch their economies disintegrate. (The Sun, 20th September 2008, quoted in Philo 2014: xiii)

In this way the financial sector is reinforced as beneficial to the economy and blame is imposed on groups of individuals guilty of wrong-doing or errors rather than systemic failures which, if addressed, might lead to more attention to radical transformations. As Berry (2012), who analysed coverage on the BBC’s flagship news programme *Today* across two months in 2008, found, the range of experts consulted on the crash included representatives from the financial community, politicians and lobbyists – all of whom were fundamentally supportive of the ideology of free markets and deregulation. Therefore, even as the crash took hold, commentators prioritised ‘getting the credit markets going again’ (quoted in Berry 2012: 260) and even continuing to invest in the property market (at ‘great value’) (Mercille 2013).

Media representations of solutions

Berry (2012) also examined coverage of potential solutions to the British banking crisis on the *Today* programme. In spite of the existence of a number of reputable economists raising a range of reforms including nationalisation of the banks, re-introduction of capital controls and restrictions on the banks’ ability to create credit, these arguments were rarely found in his content analysis. When they were, they were often dismissed; for example, nationalisation was strongly argued against with one BBC journalist describing it as ‘meddling’ in the banks. City voices continued to be promoted as (impartial) experts. As Berry notes:

> this means that City voices are given almost monopoly status to define the issues and how they might be resolved. The consequence of this is that far-reaching reforms are either completely absent or appear briefly only to be instantly downgraded. (Berry 2012: 15).

The longer-term consequences of the crisis have been the economic recession and increased unemployment as the government prioritised the need to tackle the fiscal deficit (Philo 2012; Stanley 2014). The British government, a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, elected in 2010 to replace the New Labour government, presented a financial ‘solution’ by increasing general taxes such as VAT and cutting government spending in local services, education and welfare. In the context of expanded household and individual credit-fuelled expenditure, a widely referred to ‘household metaphor’ which paralleled state finances with those of the household effectively (if inaccurately) presented austerity as 'common sense as a well-managed household avoiding the accumulation of unnecessary unsecured debt' (Stanley 2014: 905). This was offered in direct opposition to the previous government onto whom both the media and the first Cameron Coalition Government effectively shifted blame for the financial crisis; a failure of politics rather than the market. As Pirie argues:

> the failure of the Labour Party to advance a clear analysis of the crisis played an important role in enabling the dominance of Conservative narratives of the crisis focused upon public spending' (Pirie 2012: 341).

The media constructed a false opposition between New Labour and coalition policy, which in fact was largely one of continuity in respect of the broader free market principles (Cobham et al 2013). In this way radical solutions were again excluded from public debate.

The circuit of communication, however, does not operate only to promote powerful interests and there is the paradoxical argument that the media were implicated in exacerbating the financial crash by being negatively predictive of the effects of the crisis and causing panic (Parliament Publications 2009; Davies 2009). As discussed previously, the shaping of media content is *Contested* ideologically, often *Chaotically* and subject to a range of influences including journalistic norms and audience interest. In the case of coverage of the financial crisis, Schechter (2009) highlights the example of *The Daily Telegraph*, nominally a free market and Conservative-supporting newspaper, which was most outspoken of all of the British press in its predictions about the financial problems looming. Journalists on the paper were denounced as alarmist when, as Schechter argues, they were often most accurate in predicting what was to come:

> What started as a kind of anglophile bashing of Wall Street and Americans for the lack of regulation turned into scrutiny of British practices in the Northern Rock affair and its aftermath. (Schechter 2009: 25)

Overall the extent to which media are 'open' to alternatives and may feature many *Contesting* views is likely to vary in relation to a range of political, economic and institutional factors. However, the inter-dependency both materially and ideologically of financial experts, policy makers and journalists, means that the trend towards the 'preferred' stories and explanations as well as the *Closing* of alternatives, is well supported.

<u>Audience response to media coverage</u>

The material culture of financialisation also integrates an analysis of the way in which the structures, processes and relations shape responses by subjects – and how these 'preferred' interpretations of the finance system are *Construed* in as much as they are accepted or *Contested* at the level of individual or *Collective* responses. Within the circuit of communication framework, the way in which audiences negotiate content, including acceptance and rejection of the message, is dependent upon a range of different factors. Audience members carry with them diverse cultural values, preferences and levels of interest, and research has shown that acceptance or rejection of media accounts can also depend on the use of processes of logic and reasoning (Philo 1990; 1996) as well as the generation of fear and panic (Philo 1996; Briant *et al.* 2011). A consistent finding across research, however, is that audiences draw on their own direct experience or alternative sources of knowledge to evaluate media messages (Philo 1990; Philo and Berry 2006, 2011; Briant et al 2011; Happer *et al.* 2012; Philo and Happer 2013) – with the corollary that where these are absent then the power of the media message increases, and the audience becomes more reliant upon it to make sense of explanations and events. In this context, we return to debates about the democratisation of information dissemination via digital and social media this time more specifically to reporting of finance and coverage of the crash (Leadbetter 2008; Rosen 2012). As discussed, theoretically at least, such technologies may be a significant channel for the transmission of alternative sources of knowledge and competing perspectives. Drawing on these arguments, in this final section, I will first consider the extent to which audiences have the power to *Collectively Contest* or renegotiate the 'preferred explanations' of the root of economic problems and solutions.

As previously discussed, in the period preceding and during the crisis, increased interest in the economy and financial reporting was paralleled by increased audience exposure to information in the media on the subject (Davis 2002; Schifferes and Coulter 2012). In 2010, for example, two years after the crash, 75 per cent of British people said that they were following news about the state of the economy closely, with only one in ten saying that they hardly ever checked the news – a significantly higher level of interest than before the crash when nearly half only looked once a month (ICM quoted in Schifferes 2010). There is also evidence that audiences were accessing a wider range of media sources, including online sources in this period (Schifferes and Coulter 2012). There is a body of research that argues that the advent of online news, and the increasing use of social media, has led to a shift in the relationship between mainstream journalists and audiences which ultimately poses a threat to the 'authority' of the former (Robinson 2010; Rosen 2012; Siapera 2011). An element of this is the way in which audience response via blogs, social media or online comments sections can 'fact-check' or challenge the perspectives offered by reference to *Collective* knowledge and expertise (Jenkins 2006; Robinson 2010; Marchionni 2013). In theory, this potential may be enhanced by the widely reported low levels of public trust in representatives from the financial world after the crash (including the journalists who failed to predict it) in that audiences are likely to be seeking alternatives.

In spite of the fact that individuals and households increasingly entered financial markets in this period through, for example, home-owning and other forms of borrowing (Robertson, this issue), the evidence suggests that the actual workings of financial markets are considerably more distant than other areas of media coverage (FSA 2006; Langley 2008; Fine 2012). Research by Philo and Happer (2013) shows that, in those areas in which clarity or further information is sought (often following TV headlines), and trust in the information environment is low, there is a tendency to digitally scan the range of coverage in order to gain a sense of consistency across different sources. The range of sites accessed, however, tends not to be independent blogs and alternative news sites. This process is largely designed to expose the differing agendas of reputable news outlet to allow accuracy of basic factual details and arguments to emerge. Particular weight is given to traditional and authoritative news sources online (Horrigan 2006; Siapera 2011; Philo and Happer 2013). Patterns of online news consumption during the crash bear this out (Schifferes and Coulter 2012) – they show an increase in traffic across recognisable news brands including the BBC and Yahoo, and the importance of mainstream bloggers, most significantly the BBC's Robert Peston. In this way, in the context of low trust in the information environment, audiences sought out respected brands such as the BBC to interpret events – which evidence shows gave a privileged platform to the same elite sources who failed to critically assess the system when it was heading towards the crisis (Berry 2012). The moves between the range of established news brands, all of which are dominated by the exclusive group of elite sources, result in audiences being subject to the reinforcement of the limited range of perspectives on the causes of, and potential responses to, the crash. The circuit allows for *Contestations* – such as those of the range of commentators who were at least were invited onto the BBC in Berry's sample. However, access to, and knowledge of, the financial world is highly exclusive and ideologically coherent (Davis 2002). As such, the range of commentators who are in a position (both ideologically and structurally) to *Contest* dominant perspectives in an informed way are limited and their penetration into the mainstream media is also highly restricted.

Social media provides a further avenue for the promotion of alternatives. However, research has shown that that Twitter is closely aligned with the mainstream media, with the latter shaping the agenda, to which corporate and political agencies have disproportionate access, rather than the other way around (Newman 2011). In the case of financial reporting and financialised news, the '*Collective* intelligence' to sway the discussion towards alternative solutions and broader critiques of the system did not exist (Jenkins 2006). Most people do not know enough about finance to assess the arguments critically *Collectively* or individually. As such, general audiences were not routinely hearing alternative arguments promoted in any area of reporting and, in practice, social media can operate to reinforce and cement the message of mainstream media (which largely promote the free market).

A further aspect of the media's role in shaping audience understandings was the focusing of attention upon individuals and the sensationalist nature of their stories and away from the wider systematic failings. The importance of the Robert Peston blog, and his elevation to almost celebrity status, may offer insight into what at least some audiences sought from the coverage; the levels of entertainment and drama increasingly expected of finance reporting, indeed of all reporting (Clark 2004; Doyle 2006). In contrast, audience reach for websites hosting Q&A's on the wider impacts and personal finance stories in relation to mortgages and pensions were sourced relatively rarely in the period (Schifferes and Coulter 2012). There was no evidence that the wider interest in coverage enhanced the public's understanding of the financial system nor the ability to assess impacts and responses critically. A 2010 poll showed that people still felt ill-informed on the way in which, for example, the financial developments that they were reading about might impact on personal finances (ICM quoted in Schifferes 2010). The financialised metaphor of ‘government as household’ was effective in this respect – offering a powerful way of connecting arguments at the ‘common sense’ level with direct experiences of finance, but simultaneously shutting down any more complex explanations (Stanley 2014). In spite of intense media coverage, a YouGov poll found that the majority of the British public are incorrect about which is greater between the deficit and the public debt, with more than a third simply offering a ‘don’t know’ (Jordan 2013). If anything the coverage operated to maintain the general ignorance of finance, beyond the key players involved in the drama of the crash. All of the above illustrates how the financial media is both *Closed* and *Conforming* to an extraordinary degree despite both the significance for everyday life and the evidence of extreme dysfunction wrought by the (financial) crisis. This is itself contingent upon the *Context* of neoliberalism, by which the benefits and efficiencies of free markets has remained the default, illusory position, as well as *Commodification* which, in the context of financialisation rendered the financial system unknowable (Langley 2008). Further, the parasitical *Construction* of the financialisation on top of the productive system through speculation, such as with sub-prime mortgages, is deeply *Contradictory*, and conducive to a *Chaotic* culture of knowing the financial system to be to blame but, ultimately, being drawn not only to leave it barely challenged but even subject to massive bail-out and other forms of support.

Audience response and social change

The evidence therefore is that, with the material culture of financialisation, audiences have limited access to the means to strongly *Contest* the ‘preferred interpretations’, and so respond in ways which may facilitate a change in direction in terms of societal outcomes. Whilst social changes at the level of policy do not require public support, they are facilitated by it and, equally significantly, by the containment of active opposition. This is primarily because governments need to maintain electoral support. In the period following the crash, general audiences were very reliant upon media representations which reinforced dominant messages about the causes and possible responses. The limiting of solutions to economic problems (Berry 2012), are, therefore, likely to impose limitations on what people consider possible in the absence of alternative perspectives on which to draw. That markets were fallible and therefore might be altered in a radical way was not promoted. In line with this, the government spending cuts promoted by financial experts (which politicians are increasingly reliant upon both financially and ideologically) were met with widespread public support across Europe (YouGov 2011).

This has been bolstered by the campaigning and results of the 2015 UK election which put into power a Conservative Government which proposed more 'austerity' rather than any moves to limit the activities of the financial sector. In this sense we see the way the circuit of communication operates; alternatives to the current financial model are marginalised, broader explanations are absent, spending cuts are presented as an inevitable 'solution' to the economic crisis, and this limits the potential for public understanding let alone *Contestation*. While the interplay of public opinion, policy implementation, and social change is complex, the media plays a powerful legitimising role.

Conclusion

The way in which financialised reporting at the global and national levels impact upon social change across policy and individual action is highly complex and dynamic. The arguments presented here provide evidence for the material culture of financialisation as seen through the 10Cs, not least through their integration with the circuit of information supply which operates to promote and legitimise the system. A key element, therefore, in the way in which finance is *Construed* is the lack of available alternatives to the naturalised logic of the market which operate to limit any *Collective Contest* to it. Factors such as journalistic norms and ethics, the level of access that audiences have to alternative explanations, and a lack of coherence between media, political and corporate objectives can, partially and temporarily, coincide to *Contest* promotion of hegemonic interests – as in the example of the run on Northern Rock in 2008. In this case media representations were *Chaotic* in respect of the dominant and reinforced messages of mainstream media on the ongoing need to invest in housing (Berry 2012; Mercille 2013). Indeed, as growing sections of the population are structurally excluded from home-ownership, it is likely that *Contestations* to the dominant discourse of owner-occupier will be given further space in the media (Robertson, this volume). But currently there are stronger, chronic examples where political, corporate and journalistic objectives conform with one another in order to *Close* the avenues for resistance and its conversion into action.

The central point though, is that the media are instrumental in sustaining the material culture of financialisation and that structural transformations in the circuit of communication, through the redistribution of power in the era of neoliberalism, cements this further. That media and communications can and do make a difference is, therefore, a founding presumption. The financial crisis exposed the way in which this has been highly damaging at the level of society, in that the circuit of communication operated to marginalise the critical analysis required to take a different path in response to it. The inter-connectedness of the corporate world, politicians and reporters promoted *Conformity* of ideology and practice, and in this sense the media can be seen to play a decisive role in maintaining the system and limiting social change.

References

Aynsley, H. (2009), 'Briefing: financial inclusion and financial capability explained', (Resolution Foundation: London). Available from: http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Financial-inclusion-and-financial-capability.pdf [accessed: 15 Jul 2015]

Bak, H. J. (2001), 'Education and Public Attitudes toward Science: Implications for the "Deficit Model" of Education and Support for Science and Technology', *Social Science Quarterly, 8*2 (4), pp. 779-795.

Barnett, S. (2011), *The Rise and Fall of Television Journalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic: New York).

BBC (2012), 'Home Ownership in England Continues Gradual Decline'. Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17026462 [accessed 15 August 2015].

Berry, M. (2012), 'The Today Programme and the Banking Crisis', *Journalism*, 1 (18), pp. 253-270.

Bone, J., and O'Reilly, K. (2010), 'No Place Called Home: The Causes and Social Consequences of the UK housing "Bubble"', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61 (2), pp. 231–255.

Briant, E., Philo, G., and Watson, N. (2011), 'Bad News for Disabled People: How the Newspapers Are Reporting Disability', (London: Inclusion).

Castells, M. (2010), *Communication Power,* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press).

Clark, G., Thrift, N., and Tickell, A. (2004), 'Performing Finance: The Industry, the Media and Its Image'. *Review of International Political Economy*, 11 (2), pp. 289-310.

Curran, J. (2002), 'Media and the Making of British Society, c .1700-2000', *Media History,* 8 (2), pp. 135-154.

Curran, J., Fenton, N. and Freedman, D. (2012), *Misunderstanding the Internet* (London: Routledge).

Davidson, N. (2015), 'The New Middle Class and the Changing Social Base of Neoliberalism', *Oxford Left Review*, 14, pp. 4-10.

Davies, N. (2009), *Flat Earth News,* (London: Viking).

Davis, A. (2002), *Public Relations Democracy: Public Relations, Politics and the Mass Media in Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

Davis, A. (2006), 'Media Effects and the Question of the Rational Audience: Lessons from the Financial Markets', *Media Culture Society*, 18 (4), pp. 603-625.

Davis, A. (2012), 'Evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, Module 3'. Available from: http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Submission-by-Professor-Aeron-Davis.pdf [accessed 20 August 2015].

Dinan, W. and Miller, D. (2008), 'Transparency in EU Decision Making, Holding Corporations to Account: Why the ETI Needs Mandatory Lobbying Disclosure', in *Corruption and Democracy: Political finances - conflicts of interest - lobbying – justice,* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe).

Dinan, W., and Miller, D. (2012) 'Sledgehammers, Nuts and Rotten Apples: Reassessing the Case for Lobbying Self-Regulation in the United Kingdom', *Interest Groups and Advocacy,* 1 (1), pp. 105-114.

Doyle, G. (2006), 'Financial News Journalism: A Post-Enron Analysis of Approaches towards Economic and Financial News Production in the UK', *Journalism*, 7 (4), pp. 433–452.

Elliot, L., and Atkinson, D. (2008), 'The Gods that Failed; How Blind Faith in Markets Has Cost Us Our Future', *The Guardian,* June 2.

Fahy, D., O'Brien, M., and Poti, V. (2010), 'From Boom to Bust: A Post-Celtic Tiger Analysis of the Norms, Values and Roles of Irish Financial Journalists', *Irish Communications Review,* 12, pp. 5–20. Available from: http://dit.ie/icr/media/diticr/documents/Fahy%20OBrien.pdf [accessed 15 Jul 2015].

Featherstone, L. (2009 May-June), 'Identity Crisis: The Wall Street Journal Steers away from What Made It Great', *Columbia Journalism Review*, pp. 31–35. Available from: http://www.cjr.org/feature/identity_crisis.php [accessed 15 August 2015].

Financial Services Authority (FSA) (2006), 'Levels of Financial Capability in the UK: Results of a Baseline Survey', *Consumer Re*search: Report 47, (London: Financial Services Agency).

Fine, B. (2010), 'Neo-Liberalism as Financialisation', in Saad-Filho, A. and Yalman, G. (eds), *Transitions to Neoliberalism in Middle-Income Countries: Policy Dilemmas, Economic Crises, Mass Resistance* (London: Routledge), pp. 11-23.

Fine, B., and Hall, D. (2012), ‘Terrains of Neoliberalism: Constraints and Opportunities for Alternative Models of Service Delivery’, in McDonald, D., and Ruiters, G. (eds), *Alternatives to Privatization: Public Options for Essential Services in the Global South,* (London: Routledge), pp. 45-70.

Fine B. (2013), ‘Towards a Material Culture of Financialisation’, FESSUD: Working Paper Series No. 15. Available from: http://fessud.eu/working-papers/ [accessed 21 August 2015].

Froud, J. et al (2012) ‘Stories and Interests in Finance: Agendas of Governance before and after the Financial Crisis’, Governance 25 (1), pp. 35–59.

Greenfield, C., and Williams, P. (2001), ‘Finance Advertising and Media Rhetoric’, *Southern Review*, 34 (4), pp. 44–66.

Guerrera, F. (2009), ‘Why generalists were not equipped to cover the complexities of the crisis’, *Ethical space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics,* 6: 3/4. Available from: http://www.communicationethics.net/journal/v6n3-4/v6n3-4_feat3.pdf [accessed 15 August 2015].

Happer, C., Philo, G., and Froggatt, A. (2012), ‘Climate Change and Energy Security: Assessing the Impact of Information and its Delivery on Attitudes and Behaviour’, UKERC Project Final Report. Available from: http://www.ukerc.ac.uk/publications/climate-change-and-energy-security-assessing-the-impact-of-information-and-its-delivery-on-attitudes-and-behaviour.html [accessed 2 October 2016].

Herman, E., and Chomsky. N. (1994), *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (London: Vintage Books).

Horrigan, J. (2006), 'Online News: For Many Home Broadband Users, the Internet Is a Primary News Source', Pew Internet and American Life Project. Available from: http://www.pewinternet.org/2006/03/22/online-news-for-many-home-broadband-users-the-internet-is-a-primary-news-source/ [accessed 21 December 2015].

House of Commons Treasury Committee (2008), 'The Run on the Rock. Fifth Report of Session 2007–08 Volume I'. Available from: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmtreasy/56/56i.pdf [accessed 21 August 2015].

Johal, S., Moran, M., and Williams, K. (2012), 'The Future Has Been Postponed: The Great Financial Crisis and British Politics', *British Politics*, 7 (1), pp. 69–81.

Jordan, W. (2013), 'Few Think the Deficit Shrank in 2012', YouGov. Available from: http://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/08/24/few-believe-budget-deficit-shrank-2012/ [accessed August 21 2105].

Krippner, G. R. (2005), 'The Financialization of the American Economy', *Socio- Economic Review*, 3 (2), pp. 173–208.

Lagna, A. (2016) 'Derivatives and the Financialisation of the Italian State', *New Political Economy*, 21 (2), pp. 167-186.

Langley, P. (2008), *The Everyday Life of Global Finance,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Lashmar, P. (2008), 'Sub-prime – the Death of Financial Reporting or a Failure of Investigative Journalism?' *The End of Journalism? Technology, Education and Ethics Conference,* University of Bedfordshire, 17-18 October 2008.

Lupien, P. (2013), ‘The Media in Venezuela and Bolivia Attacking the 'Bad Left' from below’, *Latin American Perspectives,* 40 (3), pp. 226–246.

Marchionni, D. (2013), ‘Journalism-as-a-conversation: A Concept Explication’, *Communication Theory*, 23 (2), pp. 131–147.

Marron, M., et al. (2010), ‘The Scorecard on Reporting of the Global Financial Crisis’, *Journalism Studies*, 11 (2), pp. 270–283.

Mercille, J. (2013), ‘The Role of the Media in Sustaining Ireland's Housing Bubble’, *New Political Economy*, 19 (2), pp. 282-301.

Meissner, M. (2013), ‘Portraying the Global Financial Crisis: Myth, Aesthetics, and the City’. *European Journal of Media Studies*, 1 (1), pp. 98-125.

Miller, D., and Harkins, C. (2010), ‘Corporate Strategy and Corporate Capture: Food and Alcohol Industry and Lobbying and Public Health’, Themed Issue on Corporate Power: Agency, Communication, Influence and Social Policy, *Critical Social Policy*. 30 (4), pp. 564-589.

Miller, D. (2010), ‘How Neoliberalism Got Where It Is: Elite Planning, Corporate Lobbying and the Release of the Free Market’, in Birch, K., and Mykhnenko, V. (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism: The Collapse of an Economic Order,* (London: Zed Books), pp. 23-41.

Miller, D., and Dinan, W. (2000) ‘The Rise of the PR Industry in Britain, 1979–98’, *European Journal of Communication*, 15 (5), pp. 5–35.

Miller, D., and Dinan, W. (2003), 'Global Public Relations and Global Capitalism', in Demers, D. (ed), *Terrorism, Globalization and Mass Communication*, (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books), pp. 193-214.

Miller, D. (2015), ‘Neoliberalism, Politics and Institutional Corruption: Against the "Institutional Malaise" Hypothesis’, in Whyte, D., (ed) *How Corrupt is Britain?* (London, U. K.: Pluto Press), pp. 59-69.

Mills, T. (2015) ‘The End of Social Democracy and the Rise of Neoliberalism at the BBC’, Thesis submitted at the University of Bath.

Mudge, S. L. (2008), ‘What is Neo-liberalism?’, *Socio-Economic Review*, 6 (4), pp. 703-731.

Newman, N. (2011), ‘Mainstream Media and the Distribution of News in the Age of Social Discovery’, Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism. Available from: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Working_Papers/Mainstream_media_and_the_distribution_of_news_.pdf [accessed 21 December 2015].

Parliament Publications (2009), ‘Banking Crisis: Reforming Corporate Governance and Pay in the City - Treasury Contents’. Available from: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmtreasy/519/51911.htm [accessed 21 August 2015].

Peston, R. (2008), *Who Runs Britain?* (London: Hodder & Stoughton).

Philo, G. (1990), *Seeing and Believing,* (London: Routledge).

Philo, G. (1996), (ed.) *Media and Mental Distress*, (London: Longman).

Philo, G. (2012), ‘The Media and the Banking Crisis’, *Sociology Review*, 21 (3). Available from: http://magazines.philipallan.co.uk/Magazines/Sociology-Review.aspx [accessed 20 May 2013].

Philo, G. (2014), ‘Foreword’, in Devereux, E. (ed.) *Understanding the Media,* (London: Sage), pp. xii-xv.

Philo, G., and Berry, M. (2011), *More Bad News from Israel*, (London: Pluto Press).

Philo, G., and Happer, C. (2013), *Communicating Climate Change and Energy Security: New Methods in Understanding Audiences*, (New York: Routledge).

Philo, G., Miller, D., and Happer, C. (2015), 'Circuits of Communication and Structures of Power: The Sociology of the Mass Media', in Holborn, M. (ed.) *Contemporary Sociology* (Polity Press: London), pp. 444 – 470.

Roberston, M. (this issue), 'Constructing the Financialised Culture of Owner-Occupation in the UK', *New Political Economy*, forthcoming.

Robinson, S. (2010), 'Traditionalists vs. Convergers: Textual Privilege, Boundary Work, and the Journalist–Audience Relationship in the Commenting Policies of Online News Sites', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 16 (1), pp. 125–143.

Rosen, J. (2012), 'The People Formerly Known as the Audience', in Mandiberg, M. (ed), *The Social Media Reader*, (New York and London: New York University Press), pp. 13-16.

Schechter, D. (2009), 'Credit Crisis: How Did We Miss It?' *British Journalism Review,* 20 (1), pp. 19–26.

Schifferes, S. (2010), 'Trust-meltdown for Business Journalism', *British Journalism Review*, 2 (1), pp. 3-7.

Schifferes, S. (2011), INAUGURAL LECTURE: 'The Future of Financial Journalism in the Age of Austerity', Department of Journalism, City University London. Available from http://www.city.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/151063/The-Future-of-Financial-Journalism-in-the-Age-of-Austerity.pdf [accessed 21 August 2015].

Schifferes, S., and Coulter, S. (2012), ‘Downloading Disaster: BBC News Online Coverage of the Global Financial Crisis’, *Journalism*, 14 (2), pp. 228-252.

Schifferes, S. (2012), ‘Austerity News: The Financial Crisis and the Digital Revolution.’ *Digital News Report: Reuters Institute.* Available from: http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/essays/2012/austerity-news-the-financial-crisis-and-the-digital-revolution/ [accessed 21 August 2015].

Shin, H.S. (2009), ‘Reflections on Northern Rock: The Bank Run that Heralded the Global Financial Crisis’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 23 (1), pp. 101–119.

Siapera, E. (2011), *Understanding New Media*, (London: Sage).

Skellington, D. (2013), ‘Faith and Trust in British Political Institutions Plummet’, The Open University. Available from: http://www.open.ac.uk/platform/blogs/society-matters/faith-and-trust-in-british-political-institutions-plummet [accessed August 21 2015].

Stanley, L. (2014), ‘’We’re Reaping What We Sowed’: Everyday Crisis Narratives and Acquiescence to the Age of Austerity, *New Political Economy*, 19 (6), pp. 895-917.

Starkman, D. (2009) ‘Blindness: The Media and the Meltdown’ *Columbia Journalism Review,* 48 (1), pp. 24–31.

Tambini D. (2010), ‘What Are Financial Journalists for?’, *Journalism Studies*, 11 (2), pp. 158–174.

Taylor, E. (2011), ‘Public Attitudes to Housing in England: Report Based on the Results from the British Social Attitudes Survey’, London: Department for Communities and Local Government. Available from:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6362/1936769.pdf [accessed 21 August 2015].

Vanugopal, R. (2015), 'Neoliberalism as Concept', *Economy and Society*, 44 (2), pp. 165-187.

Vlaev, I., and Elliot, A. (2013), 'The Financial Capability of the UK', Ipsos MORI, & Money Advice Service. Available from: https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/files/the-financial-capability-of-the-uk.pdf [accessed August 15 2015].

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. et al (2013), 'Breadth of opinion in BBC output', BBC Trust. Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/breadth_opinion.html [accessed August 15 2015].

Whiteside, N. (2002), 'Constructing the Public-Private Divide: Historical perspectives and the politics of pension reform', Working Paper Number WP102, Oxford Institute of Ageing. Available from: http://www.ageing.ox.ac.uk/download/114 [accessed August 15 2015].

YouGov (2011), 'Strong public support for benefit cuts'. Available from: http://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/05/16/strong-public-support-benefit-cuts/ [accessed 21 August 2015].

Yougov-Cambridge (2013), 'Public Trust in Banking: Spring Symposium'. Available from: http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/ylf7gpof19/Public_Trust_in_Banking_Final.pdf [accessed 21 December 2015].