

Who's more in touch?

12th February 2006

Tripping and trapping

Listening to news programmes and media interviews with politicians, I feel constantly exasperated at the biased and distorted views that are aired. These views come from *both* politicians *and* the media. Much has been said about the cynicism of the average politician, but what of the media? Because, whether with good will or ill, they manage to misquote, and misrepresent

Take the BBC, specifically the Today programme. Make sure you tune in for at least an hour and a half; time enough to both hear a full-length interview and then the way it is repeatedly quoted and mentioned in later summaries.

A politician comes on, tries to make whatever points they can, and faces a barrage of often irrelevant questions that seem deliberately designed to try to trip them up. These questions are asked in the name of "balanced reporting", which seems to be code for making interviewees contradict themselves.

Effective politicians try to rise above and present their arguments consistently. Ineffective ones simply crumble away under the attack, or defensively bluster back.

Compounding the crime

So far I have no major objections apart from the pointlessly combative style of most of the journalist's enquiries, and the mistaken belief that the interviewer is in any way more in touch with "ordinary people" than the politician. If anything it is the other way around - at least a politician has surgeries where they are directly accountable to their electorate.

Later sound bites of the same interview will only quote a very small and select part of the interview, often miles away from the main points discussed, giving a distorted impression of the politician's perspective. Worse still, the summaries and references made then paraphrase these out-of-context titbits and the result can feel quite different from the original.

The politician has no come back on these later summaries, and since more people will hear the repeats of these than the original full-length interview, the result is a distortion of what was said. In fact, the only time no distortion seems to happen is when a politician refuses to come on the programme. This is probably the best way to get an accurate opinion across.

Faults on both sides

I don't want to imply that I think it is all the media's fault. Politicians repeatedly refuse to tackle journalists about this game, and their use of evasiveness and tautology speak volumes for the intelligence they grant their audience. Both sides are caught up in a Westminster farce of great interest to each other, but irrelevant to others.

At least the politicians can't get away with it for too long. It is a shame the same can't be said of journalists who repeat the same distorting misbehaviours year after year.

Their reward is awards and respect from their peers. One day they may realise that their peers do not include the "ordinary people" whom they pretend they represent.