

The Image of the Contemporary British Monarchy: Between the Influence of Television and the Democratization and Commodification Discourse

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Abstract

Throughout queen Elizabeth II's reign, the British monarchy has experienced an unprecedented scale of change. Efforts have been made to modernize the institution and bring it closer to the common individual. But modernization comes with a price, which sometimes may mean giving away some of the mystery which traditionally surrounded the Crown.

Keywords

British Monarchy, Elizabeth II, modernization, discourse

The twentieth century-British monarchy was faced with at least two situations of major crisis: King Edward VIII's abdication in 1936 and the death of the Princess of Wales in 1997. Although the press, especially tabloids, called them scandals, they were in fact identity crises of the institution of monarchy generated by several factors: the person of the monarch, crises in the British establishment, like the political parties and the Parliament, the press and least but not last, the nation itself. Today, Belgium, for example, is in an identity crisis, on the brink of division, the situation itself being generated not by the person of the sovereign but by the complex structure of the society. The situation created by Edward VIII is in a large measure attributed to the king's person. The case of the Princess of Wales, although apparently less dangerous for the stability of the Crown than Edward VIII's abdication, has deeply penetrated the strata of the British society, reaching the ordinary individual.

The identity crisis of the British monarchy reflects the social and economic changes that have marked the country and the values cherished by the British. The 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a radical market economy; the Thatcher Age led to a rapid development of the materialistic ethos and the splitting of the society as far as living standards were concerned. At the same time, the intense consumerism created by the society's need to sustain and develop economically, as well as globalization as a world-wide phenomenon that tries to

level the social, cultural and political differences up to depersonalization have made the British society and the monarchic institution question themselves about their own identity and find answers and viable solutions for the twenty-first century and its challenges.

Television played and continues to play a crucial role in building a modern image of the British monarchy and the royal family. As part of the mass media, television has spread at lightning speed and, once it entered the royal world, it has never left it, thus bringing both advantages and disadvantages to the royal family. If, during the Victorian Age, it was relatively simple for the monarch to achieve a high score in opinion polls, also due to the veil of mystery that was still covering the British Crown, in the twenty-first century things have become more complex. The larger and larger access to education, to various and rapid forms of information have contributed to the crystallization of a well-informed public opinion that is critical and hard to convince without strong and tangible arguments.

In 1867, in *The English Constitution*, Walter Bagehot identified the elements with which the British monarchy maintained its popularity among the masses. One of these was the mystery that surrounded it, periodically unveiled on the occasion of certain events that marked the life of the royal family: weddings, christenings or the jubilee of Queen Victoria's coronation: "*It is commonly hidden like a mystery, and sometimes paraded like a pageant*" [1, 90]. As a consequence, the monarch had a privileged position in society, and was permanently present in collective mentalities without being obliged to face continuous scrutiny on the part of society. The solitary and detached position granted him the attraction exerted on the masses.

But the veil of mystery was lifted when Queen Elizabeth II was crowned on June, 2nd 1952. The ceremony of the coronation, minutely prepared months in advance, was looked forward to by many Britons and considered reason for a national holiday after a long period of economic restrictions caused by the effects of World War II. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II was an impressive, grand moment, following the age-old tradition of the coronation of British monarchs. But because of an unprecedented element, specific to modern times, this ceremony was totally different from all the previous coronations: the presence of television. It was the queen's own wish that the BBC broadcast live to the world her accession to the throne of the United Kingdom. It was Winston Churchill who strongly opposed this decision and who probably inferred the force that television would build in the contemporary world, with consequences hard to predict on the monarchy. In spite of Churchill's strong opposition, the queen had the last word. The coronation of

Queen Elizabeth II was the first event of the kind to be broadcast live by a television, with millions of spectators all over the world. Being the witness of the coronation – the most sacred event in the life of a monarch – television has irremediably unveiled the mystery, thus exposing the Crown and the royal family to permanent public scrutiny. As a consequence the monarchic institution and the royal family had to reconsider the role that they played in the nation's life and the way in which they must fulfill their duties and responsibilities.

If in the 1950s television was still a rare presence in the domain of journalism, today its role is dominant. In *On Television*, Pierre Bourdieu underlines the strong economic and symbolic role that television plays today: “*Television is becoming day by day the arbiter of the access to social and political existence*” [2, 22]. No leader of a political party or country can build a public image today without the help of television. Bourdieu also upholds the idea of using television when the situation requires.

Today the sovereign is still a strong symbol, a representative of both the country and each individual separately. She is the sum total of the national aspirations, a defender of values and national identity and, not least, the person towards whom people turn in moments of crisis, waiting for at least encouragement, if not solutions. Therefore, a sovereign must be or learn to become a good communicator. Today, among the media that can facilitate the communication between the head of State and the country, television seems to be the most effective because it offers access to a large enough number of people, since it is practically heard by everybody. As a consequence, television has an important role as a go-between, which offers it unpredictable powers.

One of the powerful weapons of television in the fight for influence in the field of journalism is its capacity to produce the effect of being real as Bourdieu underlines; he also explains how this effect is built: “*the image can make us see and believe in the existence of what it is showing us. It can make ideas and representations exist, and also groups...able to unlock strong feelings*” [2, 21]. The broadcast of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation disseminated to the masses the image of a robust monarchy whose traditions had played the role of pillars of the country in difficult moments. Moreover, the broadcast even seemed to offer Great Britain a good image in the world when its supremacy was on the wane. But beyond any other analysis, the coronation revived a deep feeling of national pride and trust in the British Crown.

Patrick Charaudeau in *Le discours d'information médiatique. La construction du miroir social* completes Bourdieu, considering the media

communication (including the televised one) to be a social phenomenon the aim of which is to build a social sense. The builder of the social sense can be any social actor placed in a discourse, who has his own representations of the surrounding world. Charaudeau considers that any media communication has several functions, out of which two seem to have an important role in building the representations which the television or any other means of any other media can circulate: *the emotional function* which aims at creating strong feelings among the audience and *the factitive function*, the one that intends to determine the public's attitude, a public able to develop their own opinions which, in their turn, can influence the social and political processes inside society.

The emotional function is the one that turns television into such an attractive means of communication. It is possible that the success of her coronation as a televised event convinced the queen to use the same media strategy at the coronation of Charles, the Prince of Wales. His investiture took place on July 1st 1969 at Caernarfon Castle, one of the most glorious mediaeval Welsh castles. Although the coronation was meant to highlight and celebrate the traditional ties between the heir to the British throne and the principality of Wales, the ceremony itself was considered to have "*a slightly Disneyfied pseudo-historical atmosphere*" [4, 197]. The discrepancy between the background of the ceremony and the age of the Beatles that Great Britain was experiencing at that time was indirectly reflected even by the princely crown worn by Prince Charles, the design of which, though traditional in the assembly of elements, had a futuristic air in fashion in the 1960s.

The Prince of Wales's coronet, the product of the team led by Antony Armstrong-Jones, the first Earl of Snowdon and a well-known photographer of the time, and its futuristic design already expressed a turn towards a new aesthetic, influenced by a more agitated rhythm of life and a society that was getting more and more consumerist. Those economic and social changes influenced the whole society with all its components profoundly, the monarchic institution and the mass-media. Television too was influenced by the new consumerist ethos, was compelled to gain financial profits, and accordingly launched into strategies of "*looking for the scoop at any price*" [2, 20]. In this way the need of the sensational was created and the principle on which news was selected was the spectacular. Television has managed to build its own discourse over the surrounding world, a discourse based on the dramatization of events. Bourdieu draws attention to the fact that this dramatization has a double aim: "*it stages an event using images and it also exaggerates its importance, gravity, its tragic, dramatic character*" [2, 19]. The royal family itself falls victim to the need of *scoop* and, having already

permitted television to penetrate the veil of mystery, it can no longer avoid its permanent scrutiny. As a consequence, without having a precise intention in this direction, the royal family have found themselves under the magnifying glass of an inquisitive institution that was monitoring and analyzing each and every of their moves. This was an unprecedented situation for which the monarchic institution was not ready enough.

If, in many cases, the analysis of the press concerning different events that involved the royal family was appropriate, thus contributing to forming a constructive critical spirit, there were situations when the monitoring of the royal institution fell into disuse. For this situation, the need of *scoop* is not the only one to blame. The responsibility for this state of affairs belongs to many members of the royal family too, who, because of their questionable actions and nonconformist lifestyle that contradicts the values that the royal family is supposed to represent, have become victims of the television need of the sensational. Thus, the misunderstandings between Princess Margaret, the queen's younger sister and her husband, Antony Armstrong-Jones, Prince Andrew's romantic affairs and his ex-wife, Fergie, the Duchess of Kent's extramarital liaisons, the notorious divorce of the prince and princess of Wales, became favorable topics for the media while the television was presenting them at prime time. This news connected with the life of the royal family did not belong to the category of ordinary things. Therefore, the need to broadcast them is understandable. But the fact that news bulletins were permanently presenting disputed royal news gave those domestic events a dramatic character. The social effect of this uncomfortable situation was followed by a decrease in popularity of many members of the royal family and, during the 1990s, even a decrease in popularity of the monarchic institution.

This over-mediatization of the royal family has led to the appearance of a new phenomenon: the *commodification* of the image of the royal family. Between two events related to the Prince of Wales (for example one of his speeches on the danger of the spreading of illiteracy and a new detail of the divorce between the prince and the princess of Wales) the media gave greater importance to the latter event, turned into hot news to the prince's frustration and the delight of the public whose demand for the spectacular the media pretended to satisfy, even though they offered no real alternative. In this way, the news connected to the royal family was turned by the visual and written media into products to sell, increasing the rating of the news channels and, consequently, their budget.

In *Discourse and Social Change*, Norman Fairclough defines commodification as "*the process whereby social domains and institutions, whose*

concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption” [6, 207]. Television and the written media have managed to build a discourse of commodification of the image of the royal family, seen as a constant source of sensational news and extraordinary profit. The paparazzi’s obsession with immortalizing the members of the royal family in as odd as possible postures upholds this point of view. In this case it is about a commodification with a negative result for the royal family, because the phenomenon does not bring them any gain, on the contrary, it brings damage. It is a commodification discourse which the royal family did not produce directly, on their own initiative, but indirectly, as a result of the strong influence of television on the social.

One can also talk about a deliberate commodification of the discourse of the image of the royal family. Everything circumscribed by the term *memorabilia* (postcards, mugs, plates, silver-plated spoons, T-shirts with the portraits of the members of the royal family and other monarchic symbols, badges, trinkets, books and documentary films about the royal family) contributes to the building of a discourse of commodification of the royal image. It is even a traditional commodification, as this custom is time-honored, a fashion in itself, launched under Queen Victoria, a sovereign who paid much attention to her family’s image in the public eye. Although this traditional commodification has as its first aim the presence of the royal family in collective mentalities, it reaches, as Fairclough suggests, a conceptualization of the image of the royal family in terms of *product*. All the memorabilia represent products for sale, therefore subjected to a process of distribution and consumption. From the moment the royal family’s financial situation was open to media scrutiny, culminating with the year 1992 – the *anus horribilis* – when the British taxpayer refused to sustain financially the rebuilding of Windsor Castle heavily affected by a fire, the commodification of the image of the royal family underwent a process of reorganization/restructuring. Buckingham Palace became open to the public for the first time in its existence in order to gather the sums of money necessary for the reconstruction of Windsor without overloading the taxpayer.

Moreover, this process of commodification of the image of the royal institution has an advertising component, too. By selling the memorabilia, the royal family advertises its own image. Therefore, the image of the royal family experiences a marketing process. Fairclough explains the way in which a certain interpretation of the world around us produces a certain discourse which, in

its turn, influences the surrounding reality. Fairclough defines marketing as “*the extension of market models to new spheres*” [6, 99]. An outstanding example of the marketing of the image of the royal family is the way in which the queen has chosen the word *The Firm* to refer to the royal family. This is a process of *rewording* [6, 76-77] which Fairclough defines as a re-conceptualization of a term. As a consequence, the royal family is re-conceptualized, redefined as a firm, which creates a new interpretative perspective. In this way the queen tries to attach to the royal family the characteristics that each firm should possess in order to cope with the market economy: professionalism, profitability, initiative, competition spirit. Thus, the merciless capitalism of the laissez-faire type of approach of the economy supported by Thatcherite governments came to influence the way in which the royal family wants or is forced by the circumstances to redefine itself. The traditional discourse that defines the royal family as a proof of the historical continuity of the State and as a symbol of the nation is doubled by a new type of discourse, of a managerial and marketing type which, in its turn, leads to a reshaping of the order of the discourse.

Like Fairclough who, at a linguistic level, conceptualizes the representations of the world in discourse, within which any social actor can produce representations of their own social practice or any other social practice, highlighting forces that influence each other, Bourdieu explains the influence exercised by the mass media on society by using the concept *champ (field)*, referring to the field of journalism. In Bourdieu’s opinion, the field is “*a socially structured space, a field of forces – there are the dominants and the dominated, there are permanent, constant rapports of inequality that are exercised inside this space – which is also a field of forces. Inside this universe, each individual uses, in competition with others, all his (relative) force which defines his position in the field and, consequently, the strategies he adopts*” [2, 46]. As the fourth power in the State, the mass media have often occupied force positions as compared to other institutions of the state State, including the institution of the Crown. As an example of power ratio in favor of television is the series of events triggered by the disappearance of Princess Diana, a series that culminated in the broadcast speech of the queen in honor of the Princess of Wales. At that time (September 1997), the British accused their sovereign of lack of empathy towards the emotional state of the public and lack of support. Although there were many voices then, but also later, to defend the queen, claiming that her decision to remain in Scotland, at Balmoral, to protect Diana’s sons from the intrusions of the press was right and

necessary, the public opinion could not forgive the queen for not hurrying to London, the capital, in such a painful moment.

The Londoners and the British from all over the country congregated days on end in front of Buckingham Palace shouting: “Where is the queen?”. In the end, as a consequence of public pressure, the queen accepted to give a broadcast speech to the country on September 5th 1997, a day before the Princess of Wales’s funerals. The only possibility to cope with the pressure of the public was to organize a broadcast speech which, by broadcasting the queen’s instant message to the nation, could rapidly fill the gap between the sovereign and her people. The queen had to conform to some strategies to stage the televised event so that her message could have a positive and soothing effect on the public.

Among these strategies, the *temporal and spatial frameworks* of the queen’s speech had a distinct importance. Any event that is broadcast live gives the impression of a direct participation at that event, that the effect of the real mentioned by Bourdieu, and intensifies the feeling of direct contact with the event. In addition, the queen’s speech was transmitted at 6 p.m. local time, a prime time that increased its importance. The *spatial framework* is another strategy to stage an event. The queen addressed the people gathered around Buckingham Palace from the Chinese Drawing Room, one of the official rooms of the palace, which was a perfect location for the queen’s speech because the windows of the drawing-room open onto the Mall, one of London’s main boulevards. Through the wide-open windows one could see and hear the thousands of people waiting for the sovereign’s speech. In this way, the image of the queen overlapped with the image of the people at the gates of the palace, an image with a strong symbolism with strong symbolical value: the queen and the nation together paying tribute to the Princess of Wales.

If in 1997 the polls showed an extremely poor support for the royal family, in the year 2002, the year that marks the Golden Jubilee of her reign, Queen Elizabeth II seemed to have recuperated a lot of the percentage lost after Diana’s death. The queen’s Golden Jubilee was meant to celebrate fifty years of Elizabeth’s reign, fifty years entirely dedicated to the country and the Crown. At the same time the Jubilee was intended as a national holiday to be celebrated by all the British. Besides, the Jubilee testified to the royal family’s long effort to restore some deeper ties with the nation and an authentic rapprochement towards with the commoner. The official program of the Jubilee and the events and ceremonies meant to celebrate fifty years of reign tried to underline the rapprochement with ordinary people that was desired by the queen and her family. From a linguistic

point of view, this has led to an apparent democratization of the discourse of the image of the royal family. Fairclough defines the term *democratization of the discourse* as “*the reduction of overt markers of power asymmetry between people of unequal institutional power – teachers and pupils, managers and workers, parents and children, doctors and patients*”[6, 98]. As a result, the democratization is based on at least an apparent erasure of differences and inclines towards eliminating the disparities of rank, prestige, power.

From an organizational point of view, this tendency towards democratization was present in the collaboration between Buckingham Palace as prime organizer of the festivities of the Jubilee and other charities. In this way they laid stress on the idea of partnership, all the other bodies involved in organizing and coordinating the events being considered partners of the royal palace, the headquarters of the Crown. Thus, the charity *The Queen’s Golden Jubilee Weekend Trust* and the organization *Golden Jubilee Summer Party* collaborated with the local authorities, televisions, public institutions, youth organizations, the business community and other public bodies in order to promote both the participation of the local communities in the Jubilee’s festivities and a sense of pride and unity.

Another example of the democratization of the discourse on the Crown institution and the royal family is offered by the concert organized in the gardens of Buckingham Palace on June 1st 2002, in which twelve thousand people took part – an event that opened the Weekend Jubilee. The public invited to attend the concert were drawn from among those born on the day the queen followed her father to the throne of Britain, February 6th 1951, and who sent the applications to the concert together with a copy of their identity card to Buckingham Palace. During this event, a sign of the apparent democratization of the discourse is the location of the concert itself. The concert could have been organized in any other place in London which answered the needs of a concert of such grandeur. The gardens of Buckingham Palace were chosen exactly because of their symbolical importance. Buckingham Palace is the official headquarters of the British monarchy. In addition, the gardens of the palace are usually open on the occasion of the Garden Parties which take place several times a year, hosted by the queen and the prince consort and whose guests are usually representatives of public institutions and local communities. This time the guests were ordinary people who did not have a certain public function thanks to which they could have got the invitation. Famous names of the pop culture, among who Joe Cocker, Ozzy Osborne, Phil Collins, Annie Lennox and the present members of the rock band Queen performed at the concert, too. The festivities continued with a fireworks show,

lights and sounds of the rock'n roll and rock hit medleys belonging to Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones or the Queen. But the intention to democratize the discourse culminated in the playing of the national anthem *God Save the Queen* by the guitarist of the Queen, Brian May, using an electronic guitar on the roof of Buckingham Palace, with the queen and her family present in the audience. The national anthem and its interpretation in a classical way usually belong to an official discourse focused on tradition, therefore a conservative discourse. But its interpretation on electronic guitar makes it possible for the anthem to be part of pop culture. In a symbolic way, the British royal family seems to suggest that they assimilate this type of culture specific to the masses. And the young generation of royals even belongs, to a certain extent, to pop culture.

Therefore, the British Crown and the royal family seem to subscribe to a formula specific to a discourse of the *Third Way Discourse* type, which claims by the phrase "*traditions in a modernized setting*" that tradition can survive in a modern framework. But within this modern discourse which the Crown and the royal family try to assimilate, the process of democratization becomes "*ambivalent*" as Fairclough underlines. Because of this, the democratization tends to belong to either "*a genuine relaxation or is used strategically as a technology*" [6, 221]. In addition, Fairclough draws attention to the fact that the process of democratization also hides a fight for supremacy in which those who have the power are not sure they can keep it intact: "*Power holders may appropriate democratization, but the process of appropriation may itself open up a further terrain of struggle, in which defeats can be suffered by power-holders. There is a sense in which synthetic or simulated democratization for strategic purposes is a high-risk strategy, which is itself a concession to the power of democratizing forces as well as a move to combat it*" [6, 221]. Therefore, a total democratization of the discourse on the Crown and the royal family is almost impossible, because the standardization that democratization involves would void the prestige the British Crown has had for centuries and which it tries to keep among the public. Thus, in the process of democratization there are two opposed forces: on the one hand, there is the need to relax the relations between the royal family and the public and on the other hand there is the approach to a strategy by means of which the royal family could preserve a certain influence over the masses, an influence that may justify their social status and historic role. This way, a certain tension between the royal family and the nation is formed. This tension can contradict or even void the need of less tense relations between the members of the royal family and the public.

Appearances can be saved by exhibiting a certain degree of informality expressed in the interaction between the royal family and the public, such informality being already put into practice by using a more flexible protocol. It is the symbolic role played by the royal family in the life of the nation that does not allow of total democratization.

But where democratization could no longer bring benefits to the image of the royal family, commodification could. Although at first sight they seem to be discourses that exclude each other, because democratization involves loosening the grip on the control and commodification underlines its tightening, the two complement each other. Fairclough insists on the fact that “*Commodified texts built upon advertising models also commonly manifest other democratizing features, including informality, and a move towards conversational discourse*” [6, 219]. An example of successful commodification hailed by the public is given by the launching of the official website of the British monarchy, www.royal.gov.uk. A website has both an informative and a promotional function. Thus, the official site of the British monarchy does not offer only correct and up-to-date information about the institution of the Crown, but also the events it takes part in. The website is also a modern modality to promote the image of the British monarchy and the royal family. Moreover, this website is not addressed to the inhabitants of the British Isles only, but to any person interested in the topic and who has access to a computer connected to the internet. The format of the first page of the website and surfing on the thousand of its web-pages are user-friendly, a specific characteristic of the promotional discourse. Beside this, the site also has a Twitter connection, Twitter being a rich database which is updated automatically, allowing the users easy and quick access to a variety of topics. The website offers the public the possibility of virtual visits to the royal residences, such as Windsor Castle. It is a strategy by means of which the Royal House opens to the public, giving them access to the familiarity of otherwise inaccessible spaces. The website of the British monarchy also contains a section called *The Royal Family in My Area*, which is strategically placed on the first page of the website. The section is in fact a calendar of the future royal assignments covering a two-week span of time. The calendar is accompanied by a map and the selection of these assignments can be done depending on region, period and the members of the royal family who participate in these events.

The Royal Channel has also been launched. It is the official online television channel of the British monarchy in collaboration with Youtube. This

way, the royal family has improved their access to the large public by means of the internet and has even gained a certain degree of independence from the public television or other private channels which used to intermediate access to information about the royal family and their activities on the visual media market. The Royal Channel puts at the disposal of the public not only images and video recordings from the archives of the history of the British Crown and the royal family but also video recordings of the most recent events that the queen and her family have taken part in, thus allowing any individual access to quick and accurate information. Therefore, the official website of the British monarchy and its channel are means of promoting the Crown and the image of the royal family circumscribed to a promotional discourse.

The launching in 2007 of the documentary *The Royal Family at Work* belongs to a managerial discourse with promotional goals. The self image of the royal family which they want to build both for themselves and the public is one of a firm, a corporation whose executive manager or CEO is the Queen. The documentary tries to present the royal family as a company that has to cover about four thousand official duties and engagements per year, many of them minutely prepared months or even years in advance, a firm in which the employees, which means the members of the queen's family, must prove their professionalism and efficiency in fulfilling their duties and playing their constitutional roles, among which the most important is the one of representing the nation and its interests.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the British Crown and the royal family try to redefine the role they must play in the life of the nation. The ways and approaches that the Royal House is experimenting to reach this goal are diverse, some more successful than the others. The attempts to democratize and commodify the image of the royal family are just some of them. Both can be helpful, but can also have harmful effects when the changes desired are but cosmetic changes. As a consequence, the royal family's effort must be permanent and authentic, inspired by the true wish to place the British monarchy in mutually beneficial and harmonious relationship with ordinary people.

The tension between the need to harmonize the relationship with the public and the necessity to keep a certain prestige of the Crown will probably never disappear, but this tension could stop being interpreted as the expression of frustration. It could become the expression of a continuous exercise of regularization of the relationship between the Royal House and the nation, an exercise based on the mutual understanding of the needs of both parties involved.

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