

5 The News: Gates, Agendas and Values

AIMS

- To present the case that by its nature and practice the news is the product of the cultural contexts in which it operates: and rather than mirroring reality, constructs ritual formulations of it.
- To explain with reference to landmark theories three core features of news production – gatekeeping, agenda setting and news values and to examine their interactivity.
- To reflect on the role of ideology in the process of news production.

Sooner or later in every study of media communication we must descend from the high ground which offers us an overview of the terrain to examine texts and practices – the specifics which provide evidence to substantiate theories. So far attention has been trained on generalities such as the nature of audience and audience response and the purpose, within context, of mass communication. More than any other message form, the news provides us with documentation that illustrates and illuminates key connections – between public communication and the exercise of power, between freedom and control, between reality and representation. It is, by its content and its shaping, a discourse which purports both to present reality and to explain it.

This chapter puts the case that the news is inevitably *slanted* because a culture's views of the world at large are coloured by a primary interest in 'its own kind'. This we call ethnocentrism, manifesting itself substantially, though not entirely, in nearness, or proximity. We note also that 'slant' is demonstrated by a preference for featuring Knowns as against Unknowns: the elite are visualised as not only being in the news but making it.

Strategies of news construction – gatekeeping and agenda setting – are examined in relation to the underpinning criteria of news selection, which we call news values or

newsworthiness. Acknowledgement is made of the powerfully competing agendas in contemporary society which strive to attract and manipulate public attention and in doing so affect the nature of news production.

The cultural orientation of news

An old adage has often been cited as a definer of what makes news. It asserts that a fly in the eye is worse than an earthquake in China. Though ethically indefensible, the adage nevertheless pinpoints two crucial factors in the selection of events to be reported – the *ethnocentric* nature of news coverage (its culture-centredness); and the significance of *proximity*, or nearness.

What happens to ‘us’ is considered the prime principle of newsworthiness; and if a number of us are killed in that earthquake in faraway China reports of it will guarantee that the tragedy will be more fully reported.

Geographical proximity does not automatically qualify as a value demanding news attention. Events in the United States are more readily and substantially reported in Britain than events in Europe, despite the ties that bind the British to Europe; and the difference is more than one of language. Australia and India share with the British and Americans the English language but command far less media attention in Britain. The difference is one of *power-value* arising from key economic, political and cultural interactions, in which America has been the dominant partner. The high profile granted to the USA in the British media is at best only modestly reciprocated in American media.

The news is as much about the perceived *importance* of self and other as it is about ‘reality’. As perceptions of importance – significant events, occasions, developments – change, so does reality definition. At a primitive level we might envisage news as the view a sentry has at the mouth of our communal cave: who or what out there is for us or against us, and what threat might they pose? The purpose here is one of *surveillance*.

From the beginning, then, news as a version of reality is skewed by a cultural bias and conditioned by the specifics of situation: the guard dog barks, the sentinel geese cackle and we take action to protect ourselves, whether the ‘invader’ is a foe from across the water or a scare about salmonella in pre-cooked meals.

Cultural ritual

The surveillance function affirms the *tribal* nature of news; that it is part of the rituals which dominate our lives. As our ancestors took guard when dusk fell and watched the night hours for signs of danger, so the Eye of News reports to us daily in the papers, on the hour on radio and several times daily on TV. It is as ritualistic as changing the guard; and in the nature and ordering of its content the news resembles a ceremony. Indeed, we are so familiar with content and style that it might be said that the news is actually *olds*: what has by precedent been counted as news continues to be classified and used as news.

The *conventions* of news production are often so formulaic that they hint at a rightness born of hallowed tradition which in turn, when queried, is righteously defended. In this sense, the news is not in the business of telling us about reality; rather it is privileged to inform us about what is *important* or salient about reality. And importance is key: people or institutions featuring regularly in the news do so because they are important to society. They are primary actors in the ritual of cultural reinforcement and renewal, lords and ladies of the dance. Thus a media bias towards reporting their doings and sayings is, convention decrees, only natural and proper.

Herbert Gans in *Deciding What's News*,¹ says that 'knowns' are four times more likely to be in the news than 'unknowns'. He gauged that fewer than 50 individuals, mostly high-placed federal officials, regularly appear on American TV news.

The ritual of news is characterised both by its ethnocentric nature (its 'us-centredness') and what might be called its 'power-centredness'. Both aspects of the ritual demand a considerable degree of selection, of inclusion and exclusion. The same criteria for selection seem to apply to news *sources*. According to Allan Bell in *The Language of News Media*,² 'News is what an authoritative source tells a journalist... The more elite the source, the more newsworthy the story'.

In contrast, says Bell, 'alternative sources tend to be ignored: individuals, opposition parties, unions, minorities, fringe groups, the disadvantaged'. As far as our opening adage is concerned – about the fly in the eye – selection depends on which fly and in which eye.

News as construct

We are seeing, then, that the news is culturally positioned, and we view reality through a cultural prism. That the rendition of reality is so convincing is explained partly because the news, framed for us by the media, is usually all that we have to go on as a portrait of realities beyond our known environment; and partly because the news is constructed with such professional skill.

Television news suggests that what we see is what there is, that we are being presented with mirror images of reality. One of the best books on 'life seen through a media prism' is edited by Stanley Cohen and Jock Young. It captures the point being made here in its title: *The Manufacture of News*.³ Contributors to this volume examine the reporting of events and issues in terms of a process of assembly, of construction according to dominant cultural-political criteria. Among subscribers to *The Manufacture of News* are Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, and Professor Stuart Hall whose work is referred to later in this chapter.

As audience our attention is not, however, drawn to the 'constructed' nature of news. Rather we have grown so accustomed to the modes of news presentation that we are, unless especially cautioned, likely to judge that it is at least a close encounter with reality. Yet journalists provide us with a clue to their trade as 'assembly-workers' when they refer to news reports as 'stories', thus implying a process of invention. As Allan Bell puts it, 'Journalists do not write articles. They write stories' (a theme taken up in the next chapter).

We begin to recognise the artifice of news only when we come face to face with

the real thing through lived experience: disasters, riots, protest marches, strikes, demonstrations – news media have filled our heads with visions of how these things ‘look’. Just occasionally we encounter such events personally and the shock of the real to our mediated experience can be devastating.

Selecting the news: gatekeeping

In studying the news we need to explore three linked features of production – *gatekeeping*, *agenda setting* and *news values*. The operation of the first two depends upon the demands of the third, which in turn regulates the *conventions* of news presentation. Gatekeeping is about opening or closing the channels of communication. It is about *accessing* or refusing access. In an article ‘The “Gatekeepers”: a case study in the selection of news’, published in *Journalism Quarterly*, 27, 1950, David M. White presents a simple model of the gatekeeping process (Figure 5.1).

White had spent a period of research observing the activities of a ‘Mr. Gate’, a telegraph wire editor on an American non-metropolitan newspaper. The notion of ‘gate areas’ had been posed three years earlier by Kurt Lewin in ‘Channels of group life’ in *Human Relations* 1, 1947. Lewin’s particular attention was focused upon decisions about household food purchases but he drew a comparison with the flow of mass media news.

While the term gatekeeping originates at this time, the practice of it is as old as history and it is an identifiable practice in many areas of communication. Students who have done any research will have already experienced gatekeeping: you want some information or you would like to talk to someone, perhaps to interview them for a project you are preparing. Some gates open, some are ajar and need pushing and some are firmly closed against you: why?

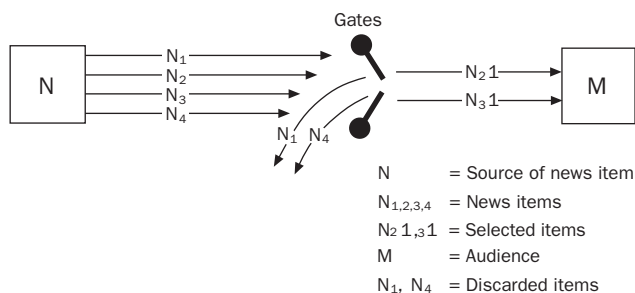


Figure 5.1 White's simple gatekeeping model (1950). From D.M. White, ‘The “Gatekeepers”: a case study in the selection of news’ published in *Journalism Quarterly*, 27 (1950) and latterly reproduced in *Communication Models for the Study of Mass Communications* (UK: Longman, 2nd edn, 1993) by Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl.

Students doing projects or dissertations know why. Those whose say-so rules the opening and closing of gates may be too busy. They are more likely to open the gate – like the news – to Knowns rather than Unknowns. As one of my own students put it in a project log, ‘The people I wanted information from didn’t think I was important enough to bother with, being a mere student. And I had nothing to exchange with them for their advice and their time’.

At a personal level, gates can sometimes be prised open through sheer determination and persistence, but ultimately the gate swings on hinges of reward; of purpose – of worthwhileness. White’s model features a number of competing news items (N). At the gate, the sub-editor – ‘Mr. Gate’ – selects those items considered of sufficient interest and importance to be passed through to the next stage of news production. Thus N_2 and N_3 have been selected and have undergone the first stage of transformation, hence White’s use of the ‘to-the-power 1’ at this point (indicating that the ‘assembly’ process – of shaping and selection – has already begun).

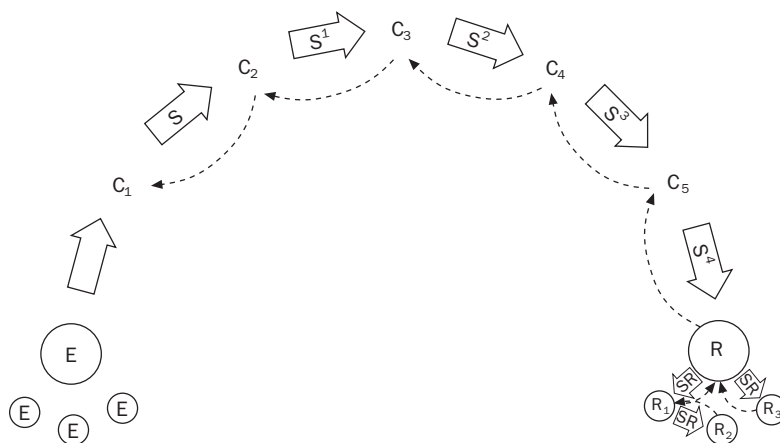
N_21 and N_31 are no longer raw information: they are *mediated* information. White’s model does not give the criteria for selection and rejection of news items, nor does it acknowledge the fact that in the general process of mediation there are many gates and that gatekeeping in one form or another is taking place at all levels and at each stage of the news manufacturing process.

In 1959 J.T. McNelly produced a model of news flow which reflects the many-gated reality of news processing. It also indicates that modifications take place to the story as it passes through each gate (Figure 5.2). At every stage in the mediation process, decisions are taken, not only about what events to cover, but how these might be covered and by whom; and gatekeeping is far from being the monopoly of media operators: audience too exercises the powers of selecting and rejecting.

We are all gatekeepers: we self-censor. We decide to say something to another person – the comment passes through the gate. But we may decide *not* to say anything; or we might need to summarise, modify, spruce up, distort that which passes through our communicative gate. Yet again, we see the importance in the process of communication of *intent*.

Reporters with leftish political leanings, working on a rightish newspaper will, if they wish to stay on the payroll, gatekeep pre-emptively; that is, they will be selective about the stories they submit for publication, knowing that certain stories (sympathetic to the left, for example) would simply not be published – so why waste time and effort in submitting them?

Self-regulation of this kind is essential if the gates of access to sources of information are to be kept open. In most countries the chief supplier of information is government, and most governments regularise (even ritualise) the provision of information to the media, in particular to what are termed ‘lobby correspondents’. Here, a degree of reciprocal gatekeeping is often a condition of access. Government will provide a certain amount of information in return for the journalist using that information ‘properly’. ‘Improper’ use of that information may lead to the exclusion of a newspaper’s lobby correspondent from the privileges of daily access to government news sources.



McNelly's model of intermediary communicators in news flow, showing news passing different 'gatekeepers' (after McNelly 1959)

Key to symbols in diagram:

E = Newsworthy event

C₁ = Foreign agency correspondent

C₂ = Regional bureau editor

C₃ = Agency central bureau or deskman

C₄ = National or regional home bureau editor

C₅ = Telegraph editor or radio or TV news editor

S, S¹, S², etc = The report in a succession of altered (shortened) forms

R = Receiver

R₁, R₂, etc. = Family members, friends, associates, etc.

SR = Story as modified by word of mouth transmission

Dotted line = feedback

Figure 5.2 McNelly's model of news flow (1959). Taken from McQuail and Windahl (see Figure 5.1). An important feature of the McNelly model is the SR feature which recognises the part audience itself plays in the mediation of news. The model originates in J.T. McNelly's article, 'Intermediary communicators in the international news', published in *Journalism Quarterly*, 36 (1959).

News gathering, news editing

As we have seen, selection operates at every stage of the news production process. It varies, however, in its nature and concentration. A.Z. Bass, writing in *Journalism Quarterly*, 46 (1969) poses a 'double action' model of internal news flow (Figure 5.3). This identifies two stages of production: Stage 1, *news gathering* and Stage 2, *news processing*. In Stage 1, reporters and photographers encounter raw news directly, or at least more directly than editors and sub-editors back at the newspaper, radio station or TV company. They are usually employed on one news story at a time. By the very fact that they are 'at the scene', they have a degree of choice on what features of an event they will select, and how they will report on them.

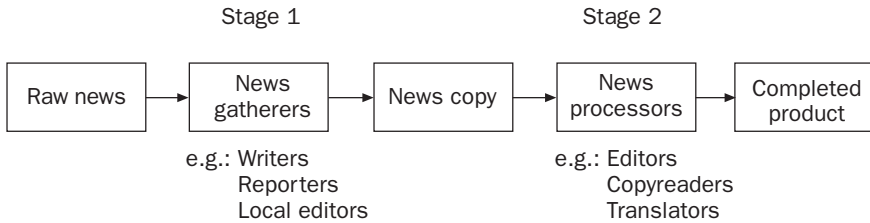


Figure 5.3 Bass's 'double action' model of internal news flow (1969). The model appears in 'Refining the gatekeeper concept' published in *Journalism Quarterly*, 46 (1969).

Once their report reaches the news organisation pressures of selection mount. The editorial team has many stories to deal with. They have to balance the demands of one story against another and, as Bass points out, they have to work in accordance with the organisation's norms and values. Far more than are reporters in the field, the editorial team is influenced in its decision-making by the cultural climate of the institution which in turn operates more centrally in the eye of government and the public.

Gates in times of crisis

The sound of gates slamming to, in times of crisis such as war, can be as loud as the enemy's artillery. During the Falklands War of 1982, between Britain and Argentina, it became difficult if not impossible to breach the walls of Fortress Information. Press and television were obliged to queue up at a drawbridge manned by the Ministry of Defence. During the Gulf War of 1991 the situation was different, though arguably no better for the free flow of news. The Allied forces kept the gates of information wide open, but they controlled the nature of that information, permitting the positive, closing off the negative. In *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War*,⁴ Philip M. Taylor writes:

Television is often regarded as a window on the world and in some respects it is. But in wartime, its potential to become a window onto the actual battle front is limited, not just by the nature of the medium itself but also by the curtain of darkness which military censorship attempts to draw over it.

Many commentators have pinpointed the inadequacies of Gulf War coverage as a result of its being gatekept by the military authorities. What TV could show of the war was what the military authorities granted them to show. For example, library footage (provided by the military) appeared to demonstrate the 'cleanness' of the war rendered possible by the technological wizardry of modern armaments. The resultant 'reality' had more in common with a video wargame than any resemblance to what was actually happening in Iraq as Operation Desert Storm settled the 'mother of all battles'.

Gates operate for and against media personnel. It is significant that Don McCullin, one of the world's best photographers of war, was gatekept throughout the Falklands War. While other reporters and photographers were permitted at least into the outer courtyard of Fortress Information, McCullin was not even allowed to cross the moat.

The Ministry of Defence was, according to its own lights, making the correct decision: McCullin's pictures would not have differentiated between Britons and Argentinians in portraying them as victims of war. His imaging of war as hell would not have sustained the war effort, nurtured consensus about its necessity; rather his pictures might have been instrumental in turning the public against the war.

Setting the agendas of news

An agenda is a list of items, usually in descending order of importance. Meetings have agendas which have to be worked to. If an item is not on the agenda prior to the meeting there is only one place that it can be raised during the meeting – under Any Other Business. The agenda for a meeting is normally drawn up by the secretary to the meeting in consultation with the meeting's chairperson. This gives them some power – to decide what will or will not be discussed at the meeting.

At the meeting itself, the chairperson has certain powers over the agenda. He or she may extend or curtail discussion on topics. The skilful chairperson will usually rule by consent, without the need to resort to voting. In Japan it is a tradition that decisions must already have been tacitly settled prior to the meeting. This is to avoid loss of face resulting from disagreement in public. Meetings conducted in Western countries may seem to be different, open rather than closed texts, as it were. Yet appearances can beguile. For every overt or public agenda there is a covert or hidden one.

As far as the media are concerned one might say that the overt agenda is synonymous with the public agenda; that is, what is of most importance to the public appears top of the media agenda. Yet it has to be acknowledged that wherever there are competing interests, rival ideologies or conflicting priorities, agendas are arenas of struggle. Those whose discourse dominates also choose the agenda and order its items. In the media industry reporters may wish to pursue certain agendas, but their activity will be reined in by agendas of ownership and control.

The link between media agendas and public perception of what constitutes news is a vital one to explore. If the public look to the media for news, what the media decides is news is what the public recognise as news. What is emphasised by the media is given emphasis in public perception; what is amplified by media is enlarged in public perception.

This is illustrated by Donald McCombs and Malcolm Shaw's agenda-setting model of media effects (Figure 5.4). The authors of the model state in 'Structuring the "unseen environment"' in the *Journal of Communication*, Spring 1976:

Audiences not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the

emphasis the mass media place upon it. For example, in reflecting what people say during a campaign, the mass media apparently determine the important issues. In other words, the mass media set the 'agenda' of the campaign.

Amplification of issues

McCombs and Shaw argue that the agenda-setting capacity of the media makes them highly influential in shaping public perceptions of the world: 'This ability to affect cognitive change among individuals is one of the most important aspects of the power of mass communication'. The model is an oversimplification, of course. It assumes one agenda – that purveyed by the media – which then becomes the agenda of the public. It can be argued that members of the public have their own agendas, shaped by their own personal circumstances.

There are plenty of *intervening variables* which influence our perceptions and our judgments other than media coverage, though it has to be said that none may be quite as powerful as the full force of media definitions – especially if the media are promoting the same definitions in similar ways. A single newspaper claiming that Party Z at an election will put up taxes may not sway public opinion, but ten newspapers saying the same thing, and TV channels reporting what ten newspapers are claiming, may well – through a process of amplification and reinforcement – drive the tax issue to the top of the public agenda.

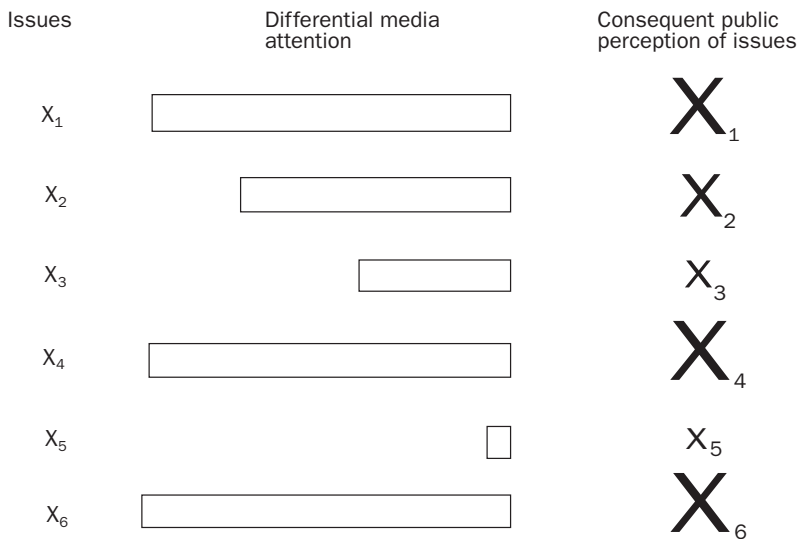


Figure 5.4 McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting model of media effects (1976). From McQuail and Windahl (see Figure 5.1). Once again X represents an issue whose importance is amplified by coverage in the media. Even issues of considerable importance may remain of modest or negligible importance in public perception if they suffer media neglect.

The McCombs and Shaw model does not tell us whether effects are direct, or, from the point of view of media, intentional. Also, as Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl point out in *Communication Models for the Study of Mass Communication*,⁵ the model leaves us uncertain 'whether agenda setting is initiated by the media or by members of the public and their needs, or, we might add, by institutional elites who act as sources for the media'.

A later model of agenda setting is posed by E.M. Rogers and J.W. Dearing (Figure 5.5). This identifies three interactive agendas. The *policy* agenda is that propagated by government and politicians. It is one often riven by counter-agendas – the right of the party, the left of the party. Appropriate emphasis is placed in this model on contextual factors: influences pressing in from national and world events.

The Rogers and Dearing model is a useful update of McCombs and Shaw, but one might ask why the three agendas are presented as being of equal size and presumably equal power. Because the model is still a linear one, it does not sufficiently indicate the dynamic relationship between the agendas or the potential for conflict. The policy and media agendas seem to be operating as *balancers* with the public agenda as being central (which of course is what it should be but rarely is). The model conveys balance, thus it is normative.

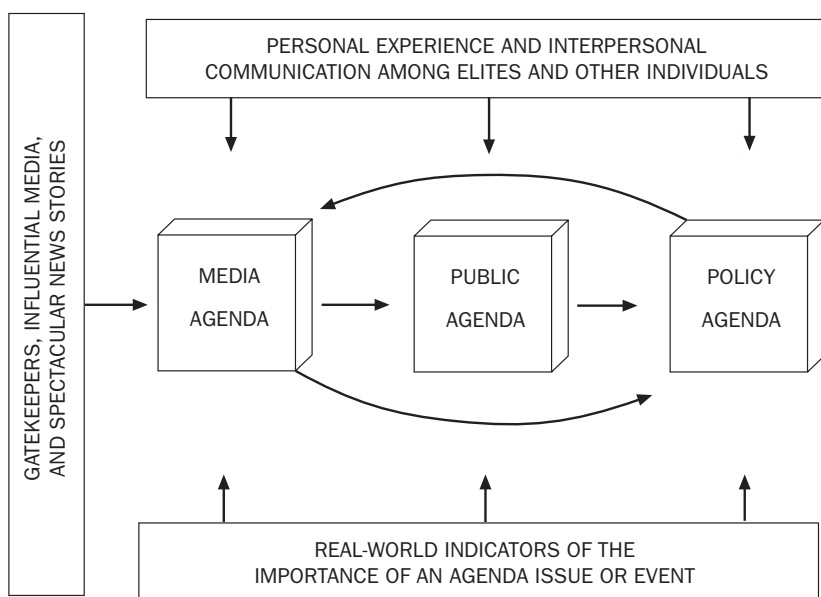


Figure 5.5 Rogers and Dearing's model of the agenda-setting process (1988).

From McQuail and Windahl (see Figure 5.1). This model, first published in an article 'Agenda-setting: where it has been, where is it going?' in *Communication Yearbook* 11 (US: Sage, 1987) serves very usefully as a basis for examining the whole contextual scene of news making.

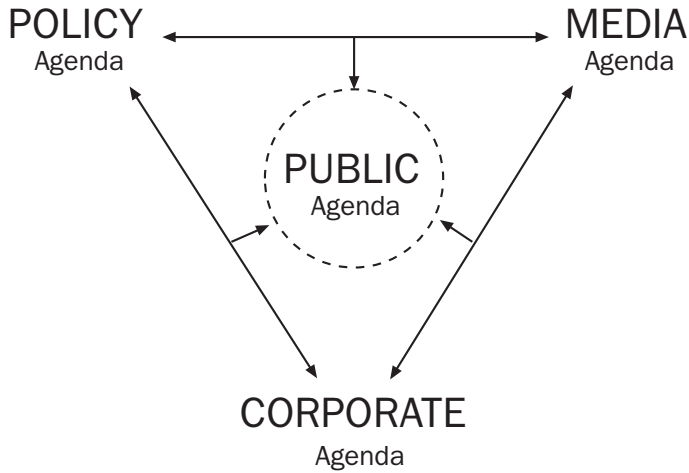


Figure 5.6 Tripolar model of agendas: policy, corporate and media. The public agenda is the only one which does not arise from consciously formed and articulated aims and objectives. Government, corporations and media largely know what they want from the public and how to go about getting it. The first two are also aware that in order to create and influence public opinion they have to do it through cultural apparatuses of which the media is arguably the most important. On the other hand, pressure groups in society are instrumental in influencing public opinion with a view to using the force of that opinion to influence government or the corporations.

To focus on the actual distribution of influence one would have to add an extra agenda – that of the corporations which dominate contemporary life (Figure 5.6). Corporate agendas often work in alliance with, and occasionally in competition with, the policy agendas of government, aiming to influence if not order public agendas. The reader may be justifiably tempted to add further arrows to this model to emphasise the interactive nature of the agendas.

Agenda, discourse and climate of opinion

We have seen that just as there are many gates there are several agendas; so any analysis of agenda setting must start with the question – *Whose* agenda, and articulated through which *discourse*? What is obvious is that there is much more to the agenda-setting process than merely listing what is important and what is less important.

Having been placed in a hierarchy of importance, stories are shaped into a discourse – a way of defining and presenting information and ideas; of creating preferred meanings out of which will hopefully arise preferred readings. Let us

remind ourselves of the nature and importance of discourse by recalling a definition offered by Gunther Kress in *Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice*:⁶

Discourses are systematically-organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that they define, describe and delimit what is possible to say (and by extension – what is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally.

Kress continues:

A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about. In that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual action.

News is a discourse, and news production is a discourse anchored by the ideology of the news producers or those who employ them, particularly if we are talking about the press. No news production, however, is independent of the values which shape and drive the players at all levels. The degree to which the media agenda is also that of the public, its discourse an influential part of public discourse, depends in large part upon the *standing* of the media in public perception – its credibility as a source of information.

In an article 'The future of political communication research: a Japanese perspective' in the *Journal of Communication*,⁷ Ito Youichi discusses the relationship between media, government and public in Japan. He speaks of *extracted* information – that which the public draws from sources other than the mass media, from personal experience and observation, for example, and talking to others. Youichi introduces the Western reader to a concept shared by the Chinese and Koreans as well as the Japanese – *kuuki*. This can be translated as a *climate of opinion requiring compliance*. It may be nurtured by the media or by those in government or be the product of extracted information on the part of the public. In other words, it becomes the force of public opinion.

The tripolar model of agendas illustrated in Figure 5.6 helps us keep in mind the potential for *alliances* of influence in the public arena. Media revelations about government corruption, for example, might create an alliance between media and public. Government, now the odd one out in the threesome, will have to move into line – respond to the climate of opinion requiring compliance – by taking action over that corruption. Similarly, gross intrusions into privacy on the part of the media might lead to an alliance between government and public and pressure upon media to put its house in order. Youichi writes:

Mass media have effects only when they stand on the majority side or the mainstream in a triadic relationship that creates and supports the *kuuki* that functions as a social pressure on the minority side.

He is of the opinion that 'Scholars should pay more attention to the conditions under which mass media credibility is or is not maintained'.

News values

The complexities of gatekeeping and agenda setting may at this point seem to be sending us every which way. We sense, however, that somewhere in the scrumgame there is at least a vague set of rules of combat as far as media performance is concerned. Such rules we refer to as *news values*.

The names of two Norwegian scholars, Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, have become as associated with news value analysis as Hoover with the vacuum cleaner. Their model of selective gatekeeping of 1965, while not carrying quite the romance of the apple that fell on Newton's head, is nevertheless a landmark in the scholarship of media (Figure 5.7).

They were not the first to assemble a list of criteria for news selection. As early as 1695 a German writer, Kaspar Steiler, wrote about news values in his book *Zeitungs Lust und Nutz*, roughly translatable as *Uses and Gratifications of Newspapers*. Steiler discusses *importance* as a news value and the *proximity* – nearness to home – of events. Also, he identifies events which are *dramatic* and *negative*. The American Walter Lippman produced his own analysis of news values in 1922, in *Public Opinion*.⁸

Galtung and Ruge first proposed their now-famous taxonomy or classification of news values or factors in an article in the *Journal of International Peace Research*.⁹ This was reprinted in *The Manufacture of News*³ and elsewhere. Of equal note when news values are being discussed is another contribution printed in *The Manufacture of News* – Stuart Hall's seminal article, 'The determinations of news photographs', a must-read for any student of media.

In the Galtung and Ruge model potential items of news resemble guests arriving at a hotel. Standing sentinel is the doorman, Media Perception, who lets some visitors pass through the revolving door of news values while others end up back

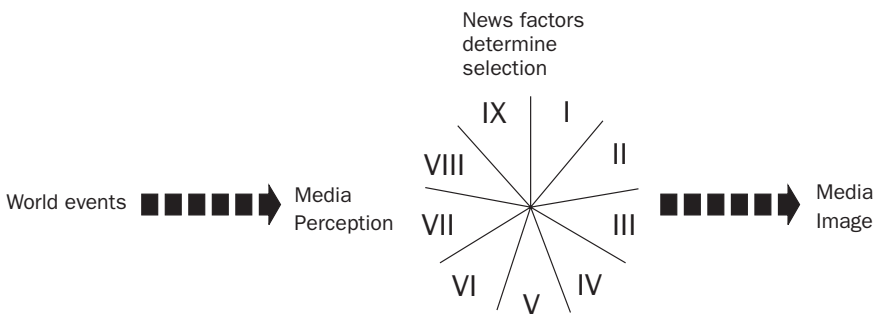


Figure 5.7 Galtung and Ruge's model of selective gatekeeping (1965). From McQuail and Windahl (see Figure 5.1). The model suggests that until a world event is *perceived* as being newsworthy by the media, it will not qualify for consideration for transformation into a media *image* of that event.

in the street. As the privileged guests emerge from the revolving doors they do so with the shape and gloss of media images. They have been processed as well as selected.

A number of values the authors define as being culture-free, others culture-linked, though it has to be said that attempting to describe any activity as being unaffected by the culture that surrounds it is a knotty problem and one which may not really warrant the effort. Indeed, the authors acknowledge that ‘what we choose to consider an “event” is culturally determined’.

Events, argue Galtung and Ruge, will be more likely to be reported if they fulfil any one or more of a number of conditions, particularly if they fulfil these conditions in combination. Below, I have listed and enlarged upon the 12 news factors which Galtung and Ruge identify.

- Frequency
- Amplitude
- Unambiguity
- Familiarity
- Predictability
- Surprise
- Correspondence
- Composition
- Eliteness – of people
- Eliteness – of nations
- Personification
- Negativity

■ Frequency

If the event takes a time to occur approximate to the frequency of the medium’s output of news – hourly, four times daily, daily or weekly – it at least initially qualifies for inclusion in news rather than if it has an ‘awkward’ timescale (usually, long). A murder, for example, is more newsworthy than the slow progress to prosperity of a Third World country. The completion over months or years of a dam that will aid irrigation and thus improve crops is less likely to be reported than if the same dam is blown up by terrorists.

■ Amplitude

The bigger, the better, the more dramatic, the more likely the event is to achieve what the authors call ‘threshold value’, meaning poised to pass through the gate; and ‘the more violent the murder the bigger the headlines it will make’. Amplitude alone may not necessarily constitute a news value. In order to qualify it will be

subject to regulation by geographical or cultural proximity. Three hundred people can die in a plane crash in Nepal and this *may* warrant an inside story in the Western press. However the presence of 'our own' people on board, however small in number, is likely to drive the story up the agenda.

■ Unambiguity

Galtung and Ruge speak of *clarity*. The more uncomplicated the events, the more they will be noticed and reported. A number of qualifications attach to this value. Some events are of sufficient amplitude to warrant coverage even though they may be complicated. Industrial disputes often fall into this category. What may happen is that the dispute is reported but freed from the complexities which surround it. We are seeing here the link between value and the process of news construction.

Finding an event complicated or ambiguous, the media will generally work towards simplification; and one approach is to single out those items within a complex story which actually are unambiguous, such as actions, which may be direct and clear-cut, whereas the causes of those actions are more complicated.

Recent commentators, Marc Raboy and Bernard Dagenais, speak of a 'tendency to flatten a complex and multi-textured phenomenon into simple formulations' and such a tendency they see as value-loaded. In their introduction to *Media, Crisis and Democracy*,¹⁰ the authors cite the case of the Gulf War (1991) in which Iraq, having occupied neighbouring Kuwait, was invaded by a military coalition of 28 countries, spearheaded by America, and including Britain and France. Raboy and Dagenais are of the opinion that the Western media:

blackened Saddam Hussein (the Iraqi president) and his regime, obscuring all possible consideration of the real meaning of the war, of US designs and motives, of the manipulation of public opinion and disinformation.

Oversimplification on the part of the media has less to do with the pressures of time (deadline meeting) than with value-judgments, manifested by the collusion which occurs between authority and media in times of crisis. Indeed Raboy and Dagenais see *crisis* as a news value in its own right because it provides dramatic stories.

■ Familiarity

Emphasis has already been placed upon ethnocentrism as a news value: that which is familiar to us, about which we know something, whether it involves neighbours, neighbouring communities or neighbouring nations, is considered important because events affecting them could also be events affecting us. We are more 'at home' with what is familiar to us, generally more interested in people and places we know than those strange to us.

Galtung and Ruge state that while 'the culturally distant will be passed by more easily and not be noticed' an exception to normal practice will come about through *relevance*: a 'remote country may may be brought in [to the news] via a pattern of conflict with one's own group'.

■ Predictability

Drawing upon a work by B. Berelson and G.A. Steiner, *Human Behaviour: An Inventory of Scientific Findings*,¹¹ Galtung and Ruge refer to a 'hypothesis of consonance' where news is what is expected to happen, a fulfilment of predictions. News operators 'know' what news is: when events conform to this expectation, they are reported, largely in set, or routine ways, reflecting routine thinking. Galtung and Ruge contend:

A person *predicts* that something will happen and this creates a mental matrix for easy reception and registration of the event if it does finally take place. Or he *wants* it to happen and the matrix is even more prepared, so much so that he may distort perceptions he receives and provide himself with images consonant with what he has wanted. In the sense mentioned here 'news' are actually 'olds', because they correspond to what one expects to happen... .

In short, this is a version of wish-fulfilment. It is a practice seen by a number of commentators to result in stereotyping of people and situations. Reporting of race often stands accused of allowing expectations to become predictions, and predictions in turn to become self-fulfilling prophecies. If black youths are associated in the minds of the media operators with violence, then, the hypothesis of consonance would suggest, those operators will actively look for violence to occur. This theme is analysed by Christopher P. Campbell in *Race, Myth and the News*.¹² The author writes of 'a kind of tunnel vision' which contributes to contemporary racist attitudes in the media.

■ Surprise

News values compete with one another and the value of surprise runs counter to that of predictability. That which is unexpected may well prove a vital news value. Thus dog biting man (especially if he is a postman) is scarcely news; but man biting dog, that is newsworthy. As Galtung and Ruge say, 'Events have to be unexpected or rare, or preferably both, to become good news'.

Skinhead youths crashing heads is news because the action might be deemed to be predictable. Equally, skinheads might qualify as news if their behaviour contradicts the stereotype: if they surprise media expectations by, for example, campaigning on behalf of multiracial neighbourhoods.

■ Correspondence

Once a story is up and running it will often continue to be covered even past its sell-by date in terms of its headline potential. Galtung and Ruge say:

The channel has been opened and stays partly open to justify it being opened in the first place, partly because of inertia in the system and partly because what was unexpected has now become familiar.

It is in the interest of the media to keep stories simmering because there is

always the potential to give an old tale a new twist. For example, it is common practice to link stories on similar themes, for such links strengthen news value. Old stories are regularly dusted down and given new life where they are perceived to clarify or reinforce – and amplify – the significance of new stories.

■ Composition

This value arises from what Galtung and Ruge term a ‘desire to present a “balanced” whole’. A diet of really bad news cries out for some balancing good news: the grim needs to be matched with the cheerful, the horrific with the heart-warming. Television news often rounds off with a human interest story – light, humorous, oddball.

The cynic might see even in this practice a degree of manipulation: let people go to bed thinking the world is an entirely horrible place and in future they may switch off the news altogether. The danger is of distraction or *deflection*, where what we remember of a news bulletin may not be the headline story about government corruption but the end-of-bulletin ‘filler’ about a yodelling parrot or a baseball team which has won its first game in 25 years.

■ Eliteness

The term ‘eliteness’ is actually used by Allan Bell in *The Language of News Media*² in offering his own variation on Galtung and Ruge; but the authors count as a primary value the importance of elite people, elite institutions and elite nations in the news. The elite are Knowns. They have titles, positions – they are easily referenced; enabling stories to be *personalised*, to be shifted from the theoretical and the general to the specific, the focused and the colourful. And of course having qualified for coverage the elite increase their public profile by being featured in the media.

Galtung and Ruge believe that ‘Elite people are available to serve as objects of general identification, not only because of their intrinsic importance’. Being the influentials in society, its leaders and leader-makers, the power elite have symbolic value. Hence their words as well as their actions are reported. Their opinions are more sought after and recorded. The most banal utterances of presidents and prime ministers will be reported even though they do not qualify under any criterion other than that they issue from ‘top’ people.

■ Personification

The *potential* for personalising a story, by emphasising its human interest, is a critically important factor of news, one invariably operated by the popular press. For every issue or event there has to be a person to associate with it, to encapsulate it, to symbolise it. Personality becomes a metonym for the story and its theme, and the characteristics of both become interchangeable.

There seems to be the need for somebody to blame, to shoulder responsibility,

to be answerable: after all, you can't take a picture of an issue. Matters of political, economic, industrial or environmental importance; issues concerning gender, race, crime and punishment may involve thousands or millions, but they are swiftly re-presented in person-form: a general becomes the epitome of the war effort; the complexities of an industrial dispute are boiled down to the features of the leading protagonists.

■ Negativity

The only good news, it has often been said as far as news gatherers are concerned, is bad news. If immigrant workers in Germany are being terrorised by fascist gangs; if their houses are being fired with petrol bombs; if they are beaten to death on the streets of Bremen or Stuttgart, then Germany will feature on the agenda of British or American news media more readily than that nation's generous hospitality to refugees from Bosnia.

What Anthony Smith has termed 'aberrant news values'¹³ are especially assertive in a Free Press system. This point hardly needs stressing, but the effects of bad news reporting are of critical and ongoing importance in our analysis of media performance. Bad news creates bad impressions. We carry images of people, groups, communities and nations in our heads which have been placed there by the media.

What is treated negatively risks being thought about negatively. Because the media are preoccupied with outcomes, we, as audience, rarely acquire information beyond the bad news. We are told WHAT but rarely HOW or WHY. Explanation and analysis, the tracing of effects back to causes do of course feature in media coverage; but the media operator might argue that sensation rather than analysis sells newspapers and boosts TV ratings.

Operational factors

Having produced their list of news factors which set the agenda that controls the media gates; having provided advice which might enable us to at least know how lived events become mediated events in the news, Galtung and Ruge suggest three hypotheses under the headings *selection*, *distortion* and *replication*.

The more an event satisfies news values, the more it is likely to be selected. Once an item has been selected what makes it newsworthy will be accentuated. This the authors call the distortion stage; and the process will recur at each phase of production as the item passes to audience. Replication is what happens when a 'version' reaches a new step in the process.

It is the *version*, not the reality, which is being worked upon: the 'longer the chain [of processing activities], the more selection and distortion will take place... every link in the chain reacts to what it receives... according to the same principles'. In other words, once the features of a story have been assembled, once the construction is under way, the subsequent phases of the operation build on the construction, not on 'reality'.

TELEVISION'S NEWS VALUES

Galtung and Ruge base their taxonomy of news factors on criteria operated by the press. In *Journalists at Work*,¹⁴ Jeremy Tunstall applies Galtung and Ruge to news values which govern TV news selection, suggesting four points of difference:

1. In TV the visual is given pre-eminence
2. News items which include film of 'our own reporters' interviewing or commentating on a story are preferred
3. TV makes use of a smaller fraction of the *number* of stories the newspapers carry, and even major items are short compared with newspaper coverage
4. There is preference for *actuality* stories which film of actual events makes possible for TV.

The status of source

In *The Language of News Media*² Allan Bell, making some useful additions to Galtung and Ruge, writes of *attribution* as a value. The reliability or status of the source of information is crucial, and this is closely linked with elite choice: organisations are more 'reliable' sources than individuals, unless of course those individuals are elite persons. 'The more elite the source,' says Bell, 'the more newsworthy the story.' He puts it bluntly: 'News is what an authoritative source tells a journalist.'

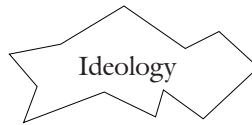
He refers to those who 'wear a general mantle of authority and are part of the institutional network where journalists expect to get information'. This value applies not only to what people do, but to who is saying what: 'Talk is news only if the right person is talking'. In this sense, the elite not only *are* the news, they *make* it. Bell is voicing similar sentiments to those of the American analyst David Barsamian who refers to journalists as 'stenographers to power'.¹⁵

The exception that proves the rule

If what Allan Bell says is true, that some sources of information – like trade unions – suffer from media neglect; and if proximity – cultural, geographical or commercial – is a prime value for news selection, why is it that in the 1980s Poland hit the headlines in the British press and was regularly reported on TV?

After all, Poland is classifiable as a faraway country of which we know little. And yet in the early 1980s the activities of the Polish trade union Solidarity sprang into British headlines. British trade unionists must have looked on in amazement as a Conservative government and a Conservative press turned the Polish workers into heroes and not demons.

What was going on? Had news values suffered a rush of blood to the head? Was the world of values being suddenly inverted? These questions had extra pertinence in the light of what was happening to trade unions in Britain. Worker rights were being drastically restricted by new legislation. There is a plausible answer:



This is not exactly the missing piece from the news values jigsaw because the assumption is obvious enough that the power elite come with their values, their ideology, attached. Nevertheless, any taxonomy that does not include reference to ideology is failing to offer a basis for explaining the ‘Poland conundrum’.

The explanation for Solidarity suddenly becoming the headline flavour-of-the-month in Britain lies not in the fact that here was a trade union fighting for the good of its workers; rather it was because its struggle was seen to be part of a grander conflict between Western nations and the Iron Curtain countries, between capitalism and communism.

Any force – even a trade union – standing out against the ideology of communism, for that is what Solidarity was perceived to be doing, would stimulate Western interest, Western support and media coverage. In this case, the news values of importance and proximity were secondary to ideology.

Ideology and the news

Stuart Hall in ‘The determinations of news photographs’ (in *The Manufacture of News*³) perceives two levels of news value. The first he describes as *formal*, the other *ideological*. Formal news values belong to ‘the world and discourse of the newspaper, to newsmen as a professional group, to the institutional apparatus of news-making’. Ideological news values ‘belong to the realm of moral-political discourse’ in society.

This ‘double articulation’ as Hall terms it ‘binds the inner discourse of the newspaper to the ideological universe of the society’. In practice ‘there is probably little or no distinction between these two aspects of news production,’ believes Hall. Ideology is essentially hidden, representing a “‘deep structure” whose function as a selective device is un-transparent even to those who professionally most know how to operate it’. Hall believes ‘Events enter the domain of ideology as soon as they become visible to the news-making process’.

It would seem appropriate, then, that the model of news values suggested by Jörgen Westerståhl and Folke Johansson in the *European Journal of Communication*, 1994¹⁶ places ideology in the centre of the news-making process (Figure 5.8).

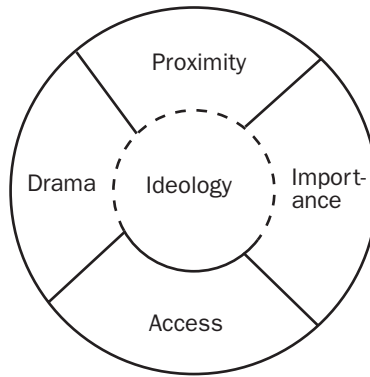


Figure 5.8 Westerståhl and Johansson's model of news factors in foreign news (1994). Ideology, put where it belongs, in the centre of the news-making process.

Though the model relates specifically to foreign news, it has a general application. *Drama* enters the picture and, as with news stories as well as fictional ones, the drama is bad news for someone. Stuart Hall is more specific. For him, in the domain of political news, the most salient news value is *violence*.

In the Westerståhl and Johansson model recognition is given to *access*, as much a circumstance as a value. If journalists have easy access to events – as they had during the Vietnam War (1959–75) – they are obviously more able to use the evidence of their own eyes, their own direct experience, than if they are herded together far from the war zone and fed information by officials – as they were during the Gulf War.

Sometimes all routes to information are blocked to reporters. They are denied physical access to events and they are refused even official information. This was the case with the Chechen civil war in the Soviet Union between 1995 and 1996, a largely unreported conflict resulting from hazards of access to the Chechen capital, Grozny, and other parts of the country. The McCombs and Shaw model (Figure 5.4) is apposite here, for minimal media coverage of the Chechen war meant that public interest in or knowledge of the fate of the Chechen people was modest where it existed at all.¹⁷

Very often, at home as well as abroad, the only information available is from official sources. Westerståhl and Johansson speak in their article of 'reporting coloured by national interest'. As far as Western nations are concerned, that interest is coloured by a 'common Western ideology'; in short, capitalism; in particular, in the decades of the 1980s and 90s, of the 'free market' variety, characterised by policies of privatisation, deregulation and commoditisation.

Where ideology appears to have no particular purchase, nations and the media that report them tend to take no sides. An example given by Westerståhl and Johansson is the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s which 'represented a case where the readiness in the Western world to identify with either side was at its lowest level'.

For this reason, few news values were activated: 'in terms of news coverage, the death of, let us say, one Israeli soldier counted as much as the death of hundreds of Iranian or Iraqi soldiers'.

The Gulf Crisis of 1990–91 featured hundreds of Iraqi soldiers; but also among the players of that exhaustively covered drama was a 'presence' few of the media seemed to mention much, but which made the ideological difference – oil; an 'untransparent' feature of Gulf War coverage.

Ideology and the pressures of time

A further criterion of newsworthiness which begs a mention here is one posed by Philip Schlesinger in the 1970s and which seems to be even more relevant now: *immediacy*. The emphasis on the importance of time in industrial societies, discussed in Chapter 1, has embedded itself in Western news values: the world is in a rush; time is ideological.

In an article entitled 'Newsmen and their time machine' in the *British Journal of Sociology*,¹⁸ Schlesinger defines immediacy as the time which has elapsed between the occurrence of an event and its public reporting as news. It refers to the speed with which coverage can be mounted; and the model example would be a 'live' broadcast: 'News is "hot" when it is most immediate. It is "cold", and old, when it can no longer be used in the newsworld in question.'

Immediacy is embodied in every newsperson's mental script. It shapes and structures his or her practices. It structures the news presentation, the running order and the time slots for each piece of news. Related to this is *pacing*: 'Each news bulletin is structured according to a concept of the right pace'; and this pace is dictated by the need to 'move things along' in order to keep the audience's attention.

The news value of immediacy can be linked to an addition Allan Bell makes to the Galtung and Ruge taxonomy – that of *competition*. What dictates choice and treatment is the competition from other newspapers, from other broadcasting channels. If, as Herbert Gans says in *Deciding What's News*,¹ the chief criteria for news presentation are clarity, brevity and colour then news producers will compete to be clear (unambiguous), brief (so as not to lose audience interest) and colourful (in order to capture and hold attention).

In short, the news has to be entertaining, and immediacy is perceived to be an essential ingredient of entertainment. Yet Schlesinger argues that immediacy creates situations in which news is all foreground and too little background; where the emphasis on *now* obscures the *historical* sequence of events. He speaks of 'bias in the news against the long-term, and it is plausible to argue that the more we take note of news, the less we can be aware of what lies behind it'.

THIS MODERN WORLD by TOM TOMORROW

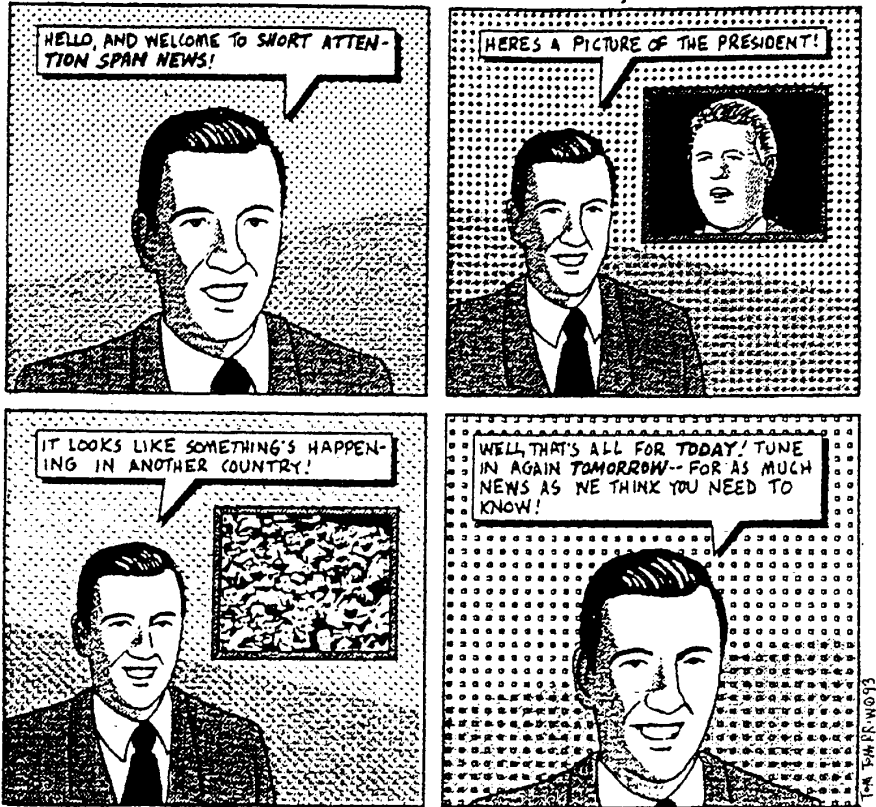


Figure 5.9 Cartoon published in *Index on Censorship*, 3, 1994.

SUMMARY

Stress has been placed here on the cultural orientation of news, its ethnocentric nature and its resemblance to ritual. However effectively, through professional skill, the news convinces us that it replicates reality we have to keep in mind that it is only a *version* of reality; and that it is highly constructed.

The process by which an event is transformed into news has been examined here. News values govern decisions about the selection of events and these manifest themselves in agenda setting – giving priority to some events or issues rather than others. Every potential news item passes through a number of media ‘gates’ and at each gate further selection – and *mediation* – takes place.

News values classified by Galtung and Ruge have been explained and linked to Stuart Hall's two *levels* of news value, formal and ideological. Selection, distortion and replication are seen to confirm the notion of news as a *construct* and a number of other values, such as crisis, immediacy and access are discussed.

Ideology is viewed as a key feature of news production. It operates within cultural and institutional contexts, influencing the ways in which news represents reality. News as a composite of 'stories' is touched upon, a theme taken up in the next chapter when the forms and features of *narrative* are explored.

KEY TERMS

ethnocentric ■ proximity ■ knowns, unknowns ■ discourse
mediation ■ gatekeeping ■ agenda setting ■ news values
extracted information ■ kuuki ■ hypothesis of consonance
formal and ideological news values ■ attribution ■ immediacy

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Discussion:
 - (a) What strategies might non-elite persons or groups devise to improve their chances of having their voice heard on local and national news agendas?
 - (b) Consider the view that the news is an agency of social control.
 - (c) Compare their effectiveness as news media of newspapers, television and radio.
2. Study a TV news bulletin (or bulletins) and gauge the number of stories involving elite and non-elite persons. Document the time devoted to such stories and indicate the particular news value/news values which have 'opened the gate' to such stories. How much attention has been paid to what the actors in the story say compared to what they *do*?
3. Examine tabloid newspapers in search of examples of Wedom/Theydom – references to minorities, foreign nationals, other countries. How are they described, categorised? What difference is there in coverage of stories of 'other' between the tabloids and the so-called quality press?
4. Video record a TV news broadcast and play it to a group of viewers, half of whom you blindfold (or have sitting with their backs to the screen). When the bulletin is over, conduct a test on how much non-visual information the

participants can remember. Who scores best, those who could see the on-screen images or those who couldn't?

5. Do a gender count of a day's news, in the papers and in broadcast news. Do women feature as prominently as men; and with what kind of stories are women/men most familiarly identifiable?

NOW READ ON

It is risky to fall into the trap of believing that the latest books render earlier ones out of date. Roger Fowler's *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (UK: Routledge, 1991) still provides an invaluable read concerning the way news is assembled into discourses through language.

Also warmly recommended are the following: *Understanding News* by John Hartley (UK: Methuen, 1982); *The Known World of Broadcasting News: International News and the Electronic Media* by Roger Wallis and Stanley Baron (UK: Routledge, 1990); *Journalism and Popular Culture* edited by Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (UK: Sage, 1992) and *Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues* edited by Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma (UK: Sage, 1994).

For readers fascinated with what it is like to work as a top journalist, see an entertaining States-side volume, *Breaking the News* by James Fallows (US: Pantheon, 1996). Lastly for an analysis of news as global practice see Mark D. Alleyne's *News Revolution: Political and Economic Decisions about Global Information* (UK: Macmillan, 1997).
