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18 The structured communication of events

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In modern advanced capitalist industrial democracies, such as Britain today, mass communications systems play a critical ideological role. The only comparable institution in earlier times would have been the Church, in the period when Catholicism was the only universal religious institution, integrating, within a common set of beliefs, practices and doctrines, and through its hierarchy, offices and organizations, the mightiest and the lowliest in the land into a single religious system. Considered 'sociologically', the modern mass media help to integrate the different regions, classes and cultures of a complex society like Britain – if only by providing one region or class with information about and images of how 'the others live' and how important events affect them. This is a critical function, since our society is complex and diverse and it is difficult for the mass of the population, who are not at the centre of power and decision-making, to get – from their own limited, differentiated experience – some knowledge of trends, movements and developments in British society as a whole. Compared with other similar societies in western Europe and North America, the British system of mass communications (taking the national press and the broadcasting authorities together) is very densely concentrated. Not only 'news' and 'information', but images and a sense of what is relevant or 'important' – what is preoccupying the nation today – knit British society together from Land's End to John O'Groats every day. Through their choice of what to report and what to show, the media help to 'set the agenda' of public issues each day – and, by and large, to set it nationally. Of course, when we say that the media help to 'integrate' society, we must mean simply that they maximize the knowledge of and contact between different and varying groups in society. It used to take weeks for 'news' to reach outlying regions from London, and perhaps months for a Papal Bull to reach the English

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province of the Catholic Church from Rome. It doesn't necessarily follow that, because people are now 'in contact' with each other, and with the centre, that they therefore 'agree' with each other more. The 'news' that unemployment is considerably higher in the North-West or in Scotland than it is in the South-East gives people a better picture of the employment patterns across the country as a whole. It may not necessarily make people in Glasgow feel more 'bound to' or 'in common with' those who are faring considerably better than they are, elsewhere.

When we speak of 'news' and 'better informed', we must bear in mind what kind of information this is. First, it is 'news' in the narrow sense: actual information about what is happening in Britain and in the world. But it is also 'images' and 'pictures' of the world which we receive — and these are a powerful stimulus to knowledge. Then it is 'knowledge' about how people behave, what they are thinking and talking about, how fashions — in clothes, or life-styles or speech or ideas — are changing. Finally, it is 'news' about how opinions about events are changing. It would be better to call all this, not 'information' in the strictest sense, but *practical social knowledge*. We may 'learn' as much about what we think northern working-class communities are like from watching *Coronation Street* — though we don't go to it for 'information' or to be 'educated' — as we do from *Nationwide* (which probably contains more 'entertainment' than 'hard news').¹ Rather than saying, simply, that the media 'inform and educate', it would be better to say that they add to and shape our general social knowledge — our 'pictures of the world' — about events in our society and other places.

Again, looked at 'sociologically', the mass media bridge a number of crucial gaps in our society. The kind of 'social knowledge' which the media transmit connects what may be broadly defined as two divided groups in society. First, it bridges the distance between the 'powerful' and the 'powerless'. The mass of the media audience is composed of ordinary citizens who have little day-to-day access to or information about high policy and strategy, or decisions and events which are likely, sooner or later, to affect their lives in a very immediate way. Second, it bridges the distance between those who are 'in the know' — the 'informed' — and those who are, in terms of how power operates, 'ignorant'. We have spoken of these as two, apparently different, groups. But you will see that they frequently overlap. Those who take national decisions every day also tend, for complex reasons, to be more 'in the know'. Those who don't may be well educated, but they don't have much access to the sort of privileged knowledge we are talking about here. Another way of putting this point is to say that the mass media operate within and are shaped by the way power and knowledge are distributed (unevenly) across society.

In this article we are particularly concerned with 'news' (broadly defined) about major national or international events — events with a political, industrial or social significance.² A substantial proportion of media time and massive technical, social and financial resources are given over, in our media systems, to this area of 'practical social knowledge'. But what is 'news' — who says that what we get is 'the news'? We can look at this question in two ways. First, by way of a general definition; then, in terms of the practice of those who package information and knowledge into news. Metaphorically, we can imagine a 'steady state' in the world, where, between one day and another, absolutely *nothing* changes. Life goes on exactly as it did before. In the strict sense, there would be nothing 'new' to report. And there is an apocryphal story that, in the days of Lord Reith when BBC news announcers still appeared in dinner jackets and black bow ties, an announcer *did* indeed appear one night and say, 'There is no news today.' The point is that 'news' is, literally, information about how things have changed since we last took stock of the state of the world. Usually, though not always, changed for the worse. That is why there is so little 'Good News' and why Bad News is almost always 'news'. Of course, this news about changes, new developments, may take different forms. It may tell us about something which is a bolt from the blue — totally unexpected: an earthquake in southern Italy and its consequences. It may tell us about a shift of direction in something we already know about: the resumption of hostilities in the Middle East or a new turn in the Government's economic strategy. It may tell us about something which is everyday in other places, but 'news' to us: Did you know that there are still millions starving in Kampuchea? Did you know that thousands of Palestinians are still living in transit camps? Whatever it is, the news will come to us as something rather unexpected, something out of the ordinary, unpredictable. It breaches the ordinary expectation in the back of our minds that 'things are simply going on as they were before'. In this sense, the news may prepare us for changes in the world — but it almost always 'surprises' us to some degree (and therefore perhaps un-nerves us, because the world always turns out to be less stable, predictable and safe than we expected or hoped).

This general definition helps to explain the practice of newsmen and journalists, and the 'news values' which they use to select what and what not to tell us about.³ If the news is about change — then the biggest, most dramatic, most unexpected, most far-reaching changes will be the most important 'news items'. Natural or human disasters which affect large numbers of people, conflicts which break out into open violence, dramatic shifts in policy or in who holds power, the dramatic rise and fall of important people and governments, major

breakthroughs, unexpected resolutions or compromises tend to float 'naturally' to the top of the news agenda. Against the stable background of a world in 'steady state', disaster, conflict, controversy and sudden reversals will always rank high in what is considered 'newsworthy'. There is no point in blaming the news-reader because what he or she tells us disturbs the even tenor of our lives. Dramatic shifts of direction is the main criterion of 'newsworthiness', but it isn't the only one. The news is also *ethnocentric*: a disaster in foreign places, which doesn't involve Britain, will rank lower than a lesser disaster which touches this country directly, because it is less relevant to us (or so news editors judge). You know the joke about the news report which ran, 'Thousands die in earthquake disaster. Three Englishmen injured.' It has more than a grain of truth to it. The news is also strongly oriented to power and to powerful or prominent people and personalities. Power, of course, matters, since a powerful decision taken by twenty people in the Cabinet room may have consequences for the whole population. So the news is fascinated by power — and by people who wield power, including the sort of power that attaches to prominent personalities like sports-people or entertainers. Some parts of the news will have a more 'celebratory' character — even if no dramatic turn of events is involved. National occasions, like the State opening of Parliament — rituals which involve the public with the symbolic life of the powerful and the nation — will rate a place in the news, though they involve nothing unusual, and happen regularly, to time, every year. But the single, most important cluster of news values is that which includes disaster, conflict, controversy, change and dramatic reversals, and violence.⁴

Now there are a number of operational fictions about this process of 'providing social knowledge' in our society. I want, briefly, to consider two. The first operational fiction is that this kind of information is, essentially, *factual* or largely based on fact. Because television, especially, can transmit not only information about, but actual 'live' pictures of, events in the world, it is widely considered to 'show us what actually happens', to open a 'window on the world', and to bring us knowledge relatively 'pure', uncontaminated by opinion. This is what we might call the naturalistic view of television information. It is therefore held to contribute to the 'free flow', or circulation of information in our society. This notion of 'free flow', in turn, is underpinned and reinforced by the substantial constraints which are placed on broadcasters in our system, in order to ensure that they don't contaminate 'the facts' illegitimately with their own opinions. These constraints are enshrined in the requirements that this sort of information on television must be 'objective', 'balanced' and 'impartial'.⁵ 'Objectivity' means that the broadcasters must report what they think or discover are the 'facts of

the case', and not mix them up with their personal views about it. 'Balanced' means that, if there are two sides to a question, or two major opinions about it, these must be given a fair hearing. 'Impartial' means, however, that even though each side to a controversy may express a very strongly held view, the broadcaster must not get involved in judging between them, or expressing a personal view about which side is right. These operational fictions and practices are intended to prevent broadcasting, which is a powerful instrument, from playing an illegitimate role in influencing decisions about things which governments, politicians or the people ought to decide. It constrains the broadcaster from exploiting his or her powerful 'right to communicate'.

And since the day-to-day responsibilities for broadcasting rest with officials of the broadcasting companies and authorities, who are not (except for the respective chairpersons) political appointees or in the pay of the government, the constraints are held to secure two things: first, that broadcasting is 'independent' of the political system; second, that broadcasting can function as an independent source of information for the people, and operate (like the press) as a sort of 'fourth estate'.⁶ Of course, in practice, these relations are subject to extensive and delicate negotiation. But on the whole, these factors, taken together, are held to ensure that broadcasting is a 'free, independent and accurate' source of practical social knowledge.

The alternative opinion is a minority one, but is strongly held in some quarters and has grown as a point of view in recent years. It demonstrates the massive opportunities which the broadcasters have to decide, select, present and communicate. It identifies the frequent recurrence of powerful views, favourably presented, on television, and the infrequent presentation of alternative or minority viewpoints. It points to the financial reliance of broadcasting on government, and the close relations between broadcasters and the powerful sources of their information. And it argues that, far from being independent, broadcasting is frequently and perhaps systematically 'biased' in its presentations.

In what follows, I want to consider the implications of these two views — 'free and independent' versus 'biased' — and to present an alternative. To sum up the argument briefly, at this stage: I would argue that there are several powerful reasons why the 'free and independent' picture is an inadequate way of understanding how broadcasting works and what it does — though it is not wholly wrong. I also want to argue that the simple notion of 'bias' — charging broadcasters with illegitimately expressing their own opinions or with 'tilting' the balance of the news — is also inadequate, though, again, not wholly incorrect. Instead, I want to replace both with a view of the communicative process as a necessarily structured process. By this I mean that communication

of the kind I have been describing takes place within, and is therefore strongly influenced, shaped and determined by, the structures within which it functions. Second, that **broadcasting is not a thing** ('free' or 'biased') **but a process** — which takes place over time, involves certain patterned relations between the groups involved, depends on the way in which a number of social practices are linked together, and has **certain predictable and identifiable kinds of outcome**. These outcomes are not simple but complex. Nevertheless, they are not *random*. If we understand the structures, the relations, the practices, the ideas or ideologies which inform them, the conditions in which they operate, the other parts of society to which they are related, we can begin to identify those patterns — and thus understand better this type of communication as a social process. That is why I call the provision of **social knowledge through broadcasting a structured process**.

I now want to present a number of different aspects to support this argument.

Let us start with the **'free flow' of information** — **broadcasting as an 'open circuit'**. It is true that broadcasting often **reports on what people are doing and saying** — and that this **'news is transmitted back, via the media, to them and masses of other people like them**. However, there is **no sense in which the broadcasting institutions and the people, the audience, can be equal partners in this circular exchange**. Broadcasters not only manage and monopolize the *means* (technical, social, financial) for finding out *and* for transmitting information. They must **always constantly select**.⁷ There are millions of important events in the world occurring every minute. There is only half an hour of news, and perhaps ten major items. It is not only which item, in which order, but also **what aspect of an event to report which is the broadcaster's responsibility**. Every journalist's report passed back from the field is a selection from 'all that happened'. From this pool of information, only very few items can be selected. The reporter or cameraman has chosen one or two aspects to report on. From this, the news editors must select a few seconds, at most, to show. Items must be edited, shaped for the bulletin. They must be fitted to the length, style and format of programmes. Commentary and supporting pictures or information must be selected. The selected items must be ranked into an order. Links must be established between items. It is true that, in one sense, the 'news' passes from people back to them. It is even truer that it is the **broadcasters who initiate and structure the circuit of communication** — what they don't put into the circuit will not pass round. This process of **'initiating' communication is determinate and involves extensive editorial interventions**, many practices of **shaping and selection** that are based not only on the technical means available but on **judgments** —

e.g. ideas of what is 'important' and 'relevant' and 'newsworthy' and 'dramatic', and what is not. What seems at first to be a naturalistic process (showing the world as it is) **is now revealed as a very complex social practice**: the practice of *making the news* — of *producing* information. What seems at first to be a perfect circle can now be seen as a circuit established between *unequally weighted* elements. Broadcasters communicate; audiences 'receive' their communications. 'Free flow' is really **structured flow**.

Let us look a little more closely at these practices of *producing* and *receiving* information. An event has taken place: a government has been overthrown. But how is that 'fact' to be shown? You cannot show it *all* — partly because it has probably been in preparation over many months, partly because there may have been no reporters on the spot during that time, partly because you can never film everything, partly because there isn't time to show everything, even if you had it. So perhaps a very few filmed sequences or shots, plus a very few minutes, at most, of reportage or commentary will have to 'stand' for the event in the bulletin: a few bursts of gunfire, plus a shot of tanks rolling into the courtyard of 'Government House', plus commentary. Of course, this is an accurate picture of 'how it happened' in the sense that the pictures are not fabricated and the reporter on the spot is telling us as accurately as possible 'what happened'. But in a larger sense — in terms of all that led up to the overthrow, the complex factors involved, the different issues and factions at work, its outcomes within the next few days, its long-term consequences for the balance of world power, its effects on our lives — almost everything of *significance* has had to be left out; and what is shown will have somehow to 'represent' what actually happened but can't be seen. **Television cannot therefore 'mirror' or 'reflect' what happens in the world. It has to translate events into stories** — words and pictures. Later on, in a Current Affairs documentary, things might be explored more fully, over a longer time-span (but even then, the representations remain necessarily selective and partial). What was reported in the first place will probably be re-shown and will constitute the **'factual basis'** for, say, a studio discussion between different experts.⁸ **Television, then, cannot be comprehensively accurate — not because journalists are 'biased' but because it isn't possible, objectively. They must represent the world. They translate complex historical events into 'scenarios of action'. They must connect one event with another by the use of some implied explanatory logic. By definition, broadcasting is in the very complex business of making events in the world seem something. They produce meaning about the world. This is a social, not a natural, practice: the practice of signification.**

But events in the world are notoriously ambiguous. They don't

mean any one thing, on their own. Certainly the Soviet tanks are in Kabul — and the camera shows them to us. But what does the 'invasion of Afghanistan' mean? Soviet penetration or the result of covert American interference? A progressive or regressive move? Expansionist or defensive? Popular or unpopular in Afghanistan — and among whom, and how many? It doesn't matter, for your purposes, what you think about the Soviet invasion. You can be sure that, even if the same actual pictures are transmitted, the event will be differently 'represented' and mean something different on television in Moscow, Washington, London and Karachi. Very few 'facts' — especially about conflict or controversial events — ever reach us in the form of absolutely 'pure information'. We would not know what to do with them if they did. They are constantly made to mean something by being mapped into or placed in some *meaningful explanatory context*.⁹ This is *not the same thing as 'expressing an opinion'*. The broadcaster may express no overt 'opinion' — certainly not his own view — but *he must be making use of interpretive frameworks*, otherwise the *words and pictures would not make sense and the news would mean nothing to us*. Producing the *news means interpreting reality*. Making things mean something is, by definition, an interpretive process. Whether they know it or not (or like it or not), broadcasters are constantly interpreting the world to us, defining the events they document, *defining reality*. This has little or nothing to do with overt or conscious bias. But it is also the case that the *more unconscious these interpretive procedures are, the more we deny they exist, the less we reflect on where these interpretive schemas are drawn from and question the assumptions built in to them, the more powerful they are*. They continue to shape and define reality — but they do so out of awareness and become 'taken-for-granted', and thus operate, as they say, 'behind men's backs'.

We can now consider the 'flow' of the communication circuit in a rather different way. Broadcasters *define what is news, select the news, order, edit and shape it, translate events into their representative images*, transpose happenings into a limited number of words and pictures to make up a 'story', and make use of interpretive schemas in order to define social reality to us. We call this the *encoding process*: news is not 'reality', but representations of reality encoded into messages and meanings.¹⁰ It is, however, *then often assumed that this encoded reality will pass in a transparent or unmediated way to the audience*. The only breaks in this communication circuit are conceived to be circumstantial (is the audience watching?) and technical (can people literally understand what they are seeing and hearing? Is the editing too abrupt or sophisticated? Is the language too complex?). In fact, just as encoding reality is a social practice (or set of practices), so is

'receiving the message'. *The audience or receiver must also deploy certain interpretive frameworks in order to 'get the message' and so 'take the meaning'*. This, too, is not a natural but a *social practice*. Broadcaster and receiver must share a common language: the news in Chinese would make little sense on ITN. They must share the *perceptual apparatus* which allows the receiver to 'decode' the lines and dots transmitted by electronic impulse on a flat screen as 'representing' a recognizable set of objects and people in the world: that 'dark mass' is a Soviet tank. But, clearly, the *audience must also share, to some degree, the interpretive frameworks or codes* which the broadcaster is using, and a *great deal of general social-knowledge-at-hand*. If you don't know what the word 'inflation' means, or that there is a government strategy about it, what sense would you make of a few dots and lines on your screen, with a voice-over saying, 'There has been another sharp rise in inflation this month?' 'Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan today' will mean little or nothing without some sense that this affects the balance of power between East and West. The broadcaster will have to *assume a great deal of background, contextual knowledge of this kind* — he can't go back to the beginning of modern international relations each time there is a new turn of events. The broadcaster must assume this knowledge in the audience, and the audience will have to have it, to make sense of what is shown and heard. Meaning depends on the shared frameworks, shared codes, shared knowledge-in-use, shared interpretive frameworks between communicator and receiver. Otherwise, information will not pass from A to B — and there will be no circuit. *If A 'encodes', then B (the audience) must 'decode'. Each is a social practice*. Both depend on a massive background of shared assumptions.

In much of the news, much of the time, there are such shared perspectives. This is where we may make use, as a descriptive term, of the concept of *consensus*. The broadcaster takes-for-granted consensual background knowledge and frames of reference in the audience. But we must be careful not to extend this meaning too quickly to the other meaning of 'consensus' — to imply *agreement*. I may perfectly well understand what the Prime Minister is saying on the Nine O'Clock News. I just happen to disagree profoundly. There is a *difference between understanding the literal meaning of words and images (denotative meaning)*, and either understanding or, more significantly, *agreeing with the interpretive meaning (connotative)*. The line between these two is hard to draw precisely, but it is a useful practical distinction.¹¹ And you can see that there can be 'consensus' on the literal meaning at the same time as there is divergence or conflict about its interpretation. This is especially the case where what is being reported is *conflict or controversy* (the very heart of news) — above all, when it is conflict or

controversy about important matters which touch, but also *divide*, the nation. For, in such cases, there is not likely to be much 'consensus', in the second sense, among different groups in the audience.

This affects very directly what we may call the 'objectivity' of the broadcaster. Where the broadcaster can assume a general consensus about an issue or event — both the broadcaster and the great majority of the nation have agreed to define the issue in *that* way — his 'objectivity' is secure. This may be, but isn't always, the case with foreign affairs. Would *anyone* have accused a BBC announcer of lacking 'objectivity' if he had described a German bomber brought down by anti-aircraft fire in 1940 as an 'enemy plane'? **But the closer you get to home, and the more conflict or controversy is involved, the less the broadcaster can assume a 'consensus'.** This is the broadcaster's dilemma — and, again, it doesn't have much to do with 'bias' as such. To call workers on strike 'militants' will be welcome to the Government (trying to keep wage demands low) and the employers (trying to keep production profitable and going) — and it may be accepted by a majority of the audience (who are adversely affected by strikes). For exactly the same reason, it will be seen as 'biased' by the union involved in the strike and deeply resented by the workers (who may have been reluctant to strike, and think they have a just cause).¹² The broadcaster cannot help but be caught in this crossfire.¹³ Conflict and controversy is the daily bread of broadcasting. It is also the broadcaster's deadliest enemy, because it exposes the practice of 'making meaning' for what it is. It undermines the fiction of 'pure fact' and 'perfect objectivity' by showing that this objectivity rests on certain conditions (e.g. the existence of a consensus on an issue). When those conditions are not met, the conditional, problematic nature of broadcasting's 'objectivity' becomes visible.

Objectivity is another (more polite or convenient) name for consensus. The broadcaster can be 'objective', provided the consensus holds. When it breaks, he is in trouble. It also follows that, in order to preserve 'objectivity', broadcasting is constantly driven to take up a consensual position, to find consensus (even-if it doesn't exist), and, when the chips are down, to produce consensus. If the broadcaster can presume that the majority believe all strikers are 'militants', he can use this interpretive category with impunity; but, on many issues, what the consensus actually *is* is extremely hard to determine. On controversial questions it is constantly shifting. It is influenced by many factors. In such cases, broadcasters are inevitably involved in the delicate work of assessing and judging where the 'balance of opinion' falls: or within what permissible *range*. In periods like the 1970s, when public opinion was shifting very markedly, this is a complicated affair. Broadcasters also decide who best expresses it, which viewpoints have to be represented

by right, which are so marginal that they can be excluded. This task of **exploring the consensus is made more difficult** because conflict-situations often involve a struggle as to which 'definitions of the situation' will prevail. Some will inevitably benefit more than others from where the consensus is presumed to lie. To define a strike in terms of 'militancy', or picketing exclusively in terms of its 'violence', must bring aid and comfort to the Government and employers, and not to pickets or strikers. Again, this has little or nothing to do with 'bias'.

What's more, such 'definitions of the situation' *matter*. If they prevail, and become consensual, they may — for example — make people more willing to support anti-union legislation, more hostile to strikers. How people define situations affects what they do, what policies they are willing to support. **Definitions therefore become factors in how conflicts are resolved.** They affect the balance of social forces. But this is a critical stake in any struggle, for it affects the ability of one side or another to claim popular support for its policies, and to represent the 'national interest'. By assuming a certain definition as 'consensual', broadcasters will help to *make it more so* (a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'). If *every* strike is ascribed to 'union militancy', this will tend to become the prevailing, taken-for-granted definition. It will have become consensualized — a process, not a thing; and one in which broadcasting plays a determinate role. By 'shaping the consensus', broadcasting will have helped to *manufacture consent*. It can then be summoned up as an already established fact: 'The great majority of the British people are opposed to strikes and trade union militancy . . .' The contested proposition has become received wisdom. Opponents of this view will now have to argue their case against the background of an **apparently universal agreement (consensus)** that 'to strike is to be militant' (where 'militant' = bad, 'moderate' = good). **I have chosen this example because the media language of industrial relations in the 1970s was saturated by the use of these two apparently descriptive, highly emotive and politically-charged words — the contrast between 'militants' and 'moderates'.** The media come to have a vested interest — objectively — in 'the middle ground',¹⁴ in *moderation*. It is in this sense that we can say that the media do not only reflect what the **consensus is on any issue** but help, in a number of ways, to **construct consensus**, to shape and influence it. It is a difficult fact of life for broadcasters to live with.

To return for a moment to the **relation between communicating and receiving, 'encoding' and 'decoding'**: it can now be established that the **'communication' of social knowledge** does not work like an open channel in which facts or events 'speak for themselves', and communications transmit the single, unproblematic meaning of them down the

line, to be received in exactly the same way at the other end. Instead, **broadcasters must interpret events, select the explanatory framework or context in which to set them, privilege or 'pre-fer' the meaning which seems to make sense to them, and thus encode a meaning.** Audiences, like broadcasters, also stand in their own (very different) positions, relations and situations, have their own (again, different) relationship to power, to information, to sources, and bring *their* own frameworks of interpretation to bear in order to get a meaning, or *decode* the message. **Rather than 'perfect transmission' or 'free flow', we can identify three optional typical positions in which an audience can stand to the meaning offered.¹⁵ Audiences can take the meaning with which events have been imprinted and encoded.** In that sense, they align *their frameworks of interpretation* with those of the **communicators, and decode within** the dominant, preferred or 'hegemonic' definition of events. Or they can take the **global meaning** which is offered, but make exceptions to it which **modify it in the course of relating it to their own situation.** An example here would be if an audience shares the dominant definition, 'Strikes are ruining the nation', but applies it to their situation in the form, 'However, we are badly paid and would be justified in going on strike for better wages'. Here, the dominant definition has been *negotiated*. Third, the **dominant meaning may** be perfectly understood, yet the **meaning read or decoded in the opposite way.** Someone on strike might well read that definition as, 'They *would* say that — it suits their book. I don't agree that strikes, rather than bad management or low investment, are the cause of our economic ills.' Here, the audience is **decoding oppositionally**. There is no way in which broadcasters can *ensure* that audiences will decode events within the hegemonic framework, even though they initiate the communication circuit and therefore have first go at 'making sense of the world'. There is, therefore, **no 'perfect' communication, no pure transparency between source and receiver.** The perfectly transparent medium would be the perfectly censored one — or one in which the only ideas available with which to make sense of the world were the *dominant* or 'ruling' ideas. Since events can mean more than one thing, and groups will define events differently according to their interests or social positions, and conflicts inevitably divide society precisely around which definition of social reality will or ought to prevail, **mass communication systems in our sort of society will always remain what** Enzensberger calls 'leaky systems'.

But now we must ask **where the interpretive frameworks and the 'definitions of situations' which the broadcasters deploy come from?** This is a more complex question than might first appear. The media are required to be 'balanced' as well as objective. This ensures that, with

respect to any conflict or controversy, *more than one view* will be represented. In this sense, **public affairs communication** is structured very much on the model of **the 'two-party system'**. There are always at least two sides, two views — with the media as the neutral and impartial chairperson or 'Speaker' in the middle, moderating the debate. This prevents a single, monolithic view prevailing, and **ensures a degree of pluralism or diversity.** However, we need to explore further how **'balance' and 'impartiality' actually function in practice.**

Since the broadcasters should, in the words of one important guideline, always be the last, if ever, to express a view, the views of a conflict which *are* represented must arise *outside* the media. On political events, they will be the views of the two major political party spokespeople: and they will be **quoted (verbally or visually)** — often verbatim, on camera — as a sort of witness to the broadcaster's objectivity. It is the 'Minister of Employment', not the BBC or ITN, who holds that 'Pickets are not typical, in fact they are very untypical of the way that the average British worker or trade unionist thinks.' On industrial disputes, both employers and trade unionists will also be given time to offer their definition of what is occurring. This does indeed preserve the broadcaster's impartiality. At the same time, it means that the established voices of powerful corporate groups will usually have, of right, the first opportunity, and at length, to define a conflict situation. The powerful become the 'primary definers' of conflict. They have access to the topic, they set the terms of the debate, they establish what is 'relevant' to the way the topic will be developed, and what is 'irrelevant'. Thus, in difficult economic circumstances, they can define a strike as 'threatening to an already weak economy'. This becomes the 'preferred' definition of it (consensual). Others, who (as we will show) necessarily come later, have to debate the issue *in these terms*. They will find it exceedingly difficult to establish, as an equally plausible way of debating a strike, the issue of 'low pay', or of 'comparability'. **The primary definition of a topic carries enormous credibility and authority, and is hard to shift.**

Of course, alternative views will also be represented. But they will tend to put a case *within the terms of reference* of the primary definition. It is much harder to break an existing set of reference-points and to set up an equally credible alternative. To take another example, if the definition of problems experienced by black groups in the society which prevails is, 'The cause of the problem is that there are too many of them over here', then the accredited alternative view is likely to be: 'The numbers are not as high as official sources say.' You will see that these views *differ*. You will also see that they also *agree*, in so far as they are operating on the same premise or assumption — that the problem *is a matter of numbers* (too high v. lower than is thought).

Race problems then become, by definition, *a problem of numbers*. Once this definition is in play, a hundred programmes will play infinite variations on this theme, without once challenging the underlying assumptions or the logic-in-use which flows from them. It would take an exceedingly long and skilful campaign to displace the problematic of the numbers game and replace it with an alternative framework — such as, ‘The basic problem is not numbers but the hostility of whites towards blacks.’

Such radical shifts are few and far between. And when they occur, it tends to be because the terms have shifted within the élite itself, or because society is clearly evenly divided.¹⁶ In the late 1970s, the dominant solution to our economic difficulties was said to be an ‘incomes policy’. Since this was defined by the state as ‘in the national interest’, it was taken over, and provided the baseline for media coverage of a wide range of economic and industrial issues. Now that this panacea has been replaced by ‘the need to control the money supply’, it is *this* which provides the unstated premise of such media reporting. An interviewer would be judged impeccably impartial if she framed a question on the premise, ‘Of course, since you can’t exceed the Government’s cash limits . . .’ But this is because neo-Keynesianism, to which, in different ways, *both* Labour and Conservative Governments, pre-Mrs Thatcher, subscribed, has been replaced by a new monetarist orthodoxy. Shifts of framework *within* the echelons of power *do* get rapidly transferred as the baseline of ‘reality’ in the media, for it is part of their business to be sensitive to such shifts. Sources *outside* the matrix of power find it extremely difficult to break or change the terms of debate. Thus, while it is true that a single, monolithic definition almost *never* prevails unchallenged — media definitions, in this sense, are ‘plural’ — the *range of permissible definitions* is systematically limited (i.e. not ‘pluralist’ in the full sense). The media are not ‘in the pay’ of any particular party or group — and broadcasters jealously guard this independence. This does not contradict the fact that the media are oriented within the field of force of the powerful, their definitions systematically inflected towards how the powerful forces in society define political reality.

This is a matter of *structure*, not of personnel. Indeed, it exposes the inadequacies of the concept of ‘bias’. ‘Bias’ must operate in a hidden or covert way. But the orientation of the media within the complex of power is a matter of broadcasting’s *position* (not of the broadcasters’ biases) — and functions quite openly and above-board. By definition, it is the powerful who define events — that is what we mean by calling them ‘powerful’. Since they are publicly charged with responsibility for the conduct of affairs, they are the accredited,

legitimate, authoritative sources of news. Since their decisions and actions will affect the whole population and the nation’s future, no responsible broadcasting authority could regularly ignore them. And since broadcasting must not, itself, be seen to be influencing opinions, but must quote accredited sources external to it, it must indeed *rely on them* to establish the terms of debate, otherwise it might well (as it has been, on occasion) be thought to be usurping the process of public and political accountability. Their definitions of the situation will inevitably set the terms in which issues are debated and decided. There is nothing ‘hidden’ or covert about this.

The media *are not*, however, merely the *ventriloquists of power*, because they are required to ‘*balance off*’ official views with *alternative ones*. But, just as broadcasting has first to define the consensus in order to invoke and operate it, so it too must *define what is ‘balance’*. Again, the analogy of the parliamentary system is relevant. Those who have a *required* ‘right of reply’ will tend to be drawn from ‘the other official side, the opposition’, within the complex of power. The ‘balance’ to a *Government view is an ‘Opposition’ view*. The ‘balance’ to an employer’s view is a *trade union leader’s view*. This will ensure ‘pluralism’ in the debate. But it will also systematically limit and *restrict the range* within which ‘balance’ is permitted to move. Though statement and rebuttal ensure vigorous, sometimes sharp, democratic debate, it is also, often, a conversation among groups who have many fundamental points of reference in common. Today’s Shadow Minister of Employment will inherit the country’s industrial problems of tomorrow. Both the Chancellor and his ‘Shadow’ have tinkered with monetarist solutions. Both Ministers of Labour believe in the necessity to ‘restrain trade union power’, though they differ as to means and degree. Let us not simplify the issue. *Debate*, not the monolithic presentation of a single view, is what characterizes British ‘current affairs’ television. That is why the simple conspiracy view lacks credibility. But let us not exaggerate the ‘pluralism’. The range within which debate can move, before coming up hard against those limits which define non-consensual views as ‘extremist’ or ‘irresponsible’ or ‘sectional’ or ‘irrational’, is exceedingly restricted, and the limits are systematic — *structured*, not random.

When the media move outside these permissible limits, they *encounter troubled waters*.¹⁷ *If they range too widely*, they will be *accused of giving extremist views or minority opinions credibility*. In any case, they know the accredited sources well, but beyond the corporate circle of power and influence, the movement of opinion is very much uncharted territory. On controversial issues relating to police powers, for example, the Home Secretary, his ‘Shadow’, the Chief Constable, the Police Federation have access to the topic, as of right.

The National Council of Civil Liberties may or may not be called upon to express a view — and will clearly be signalled as a minority pressure-group. The pecking-order within the system of power is well defined. Outside it, how is the broadcaster to know who should count? When does the 'Alternative Economic Strategy' of Labour's left-wing become credible enough to be an accredited alternative to Conservative and Labour economic policy? When is CND 'legitimate' enough to put its views as a credible alternative to those of the Minister of Defence? These are matters of extremely fine judgment, and how broadcasters settle them will help not to reflect, but to *construct*, 'balance'. Alternative viewpoints are sometimes 'put' on behalf of some pressure-group, not in its own voice, but through the mediation of the questioner or interviewer. You will often hear Sir Robin Day say to a minister, 'Of course, some people would say . . .' But in such cases, the media are playing a critical *mediating* role. Those whose views are 'put' will enter the debate, albeit in an indirect way. Those who don't register on the broadcaster's sensitive political seismograph will not. Like 'objectivity' and 'impartiality', 'balance', too, is not a fact but a process. **It is the result of a social practice. It takes place within a very definite system or structure of power.**¹⁸

The concepts 'balance' and 'consensus' are, therefore, closely inter-linked. 'Consensus' does not imply a unified, single position to which the whole society subscribes. It means the *basic common ground*, the underlying values and premises, shared between two positions which may, in their detail, sharply diverge. 'Consensus' depends on structured disagreement — all those shared premises which enable 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee to agree to have a quarrel'. 'Balance' is therefore *framed by consensus*. Labour and Conservative deeply disagree as to the right economic policy. But they both subscribe to the two-party system.¹⁹ The 'consensus' is the underlying premise (two-party government) which *frames* the disagreement over particular policies. It is within the limits of this consensus that broadcasting, typically, ranges. A revolutionary group which seeks to overthrow the two-party system is *not* one element in a 'balanced' debate because it does not share the consensus on the fundamental character of the political system. Groups which are not as 'far out' as that, but which are not 'central to the system', will be marginal to the consensus — and therefore marginal to how 'balance' is regularly operated in the media.²⁰

On the whole, the media are scrupulously fair, impartial and 'balanced' within the terms of reference of the consensus, as we (and they) have defined it. Thus they are not, on the whole, 'partial' to Government or Opposition party. But they are 'partial' to the system, and to the 'definitions of political reality' which the system defines. Otherwise

they would be in danger of becoming a sort of 'party in exile' — with their own powerful voice! Broadcasting cannot commit itself as to whether A or B's industrial policy will keep the wheels of industry turning. But it *is* committed to 'keeping production going', because both A and B define this as 'in the national interest'. What, at any time, can be credibly defined or affirmed to be 'in the national interest' becomes the *base-line* from which the broadcasters have to work. A former distinguished Director-General of the BBC, Sir Charles Curran, once put the point succinctly: 'Yes, we are biased — biased in favour of parliamentary democracy.'²¹ Once you think about it, could the situation be any different? Could a broadcasting authority survive for long in Britain if it were 'biased in favour of one-party dictatorship'? Could it even plausibly arise or survive? This does not mean that the limits within which 'balance' currently operates could not be widened or extended. But the 'consensual' character of broadcasting does not arise from 'bias' in the normal sense of the term, but is a structural condition on which the whole broadcasting operation depends.

We have used the analogy of 'parliament'; but in fact it would be better to think of broadcasting as functioning on the analogy of *the state*. Like the state, it must take the ground of the 'national interest'. It must stand apparently outside and above the play of partisan interest. It must balance off conflicting interests. Its personnel, like those of the state, must be 'neutral', but committed to the 'system as a whole'. The parallels are even closer. For, since broadcasting must not become a 'state within the state', it must take its 'definition of political reality' *from* the state. What the state defines as 'legitimate' is 'the reference point of the mode of all reality shown on television'. Of course, broadcasting has other countervailing responsibilities which make this reproduction less than monolithic. For it must *also* deal with conflicts (even if at the inconvenience of those in power), report trends which might be 'bad news' for the state, reflect to some degree divergencies of opinion in society at large, question and explore official views, test the coherence and internal contradictions of official policies. This helps to keep broadcasting 'open', and frequently creates a condition of 'cold war' between broadcasters and politicians. This helps to widen the way the 'consensus' is reflected and constructed by the media — but it does not displace their fundamental orientation. What is defined as 'legitimate opposition' has access, by right, to the debate on television. What lies on the margins of the state's definition of consensus will be marginal to television's discourse. What threatens the integrity of the state, especially if by violent means, is unshowable on television, except by express permission (e.g. interviews with spokesmen for the IRA). The state, ultimately, *defines the terrain* on which the representations

of the world in television are constructed.

Does this mean that television is simply – as some have suggested – an ‘ideological apparatus’ of the state? In some countries it virtually is. But in Britain, broadcasting – like the law – is regulated, in relation to the state, by way of the classic doctrine of ‘the separation of powers’. It could not otherwise fulfil its required function to be *both* an ‘impartial source of knowledge’ and yet ‘part of the system’. Curran made the acute observation that ‘the BBC’s position is one of quasi-judicial impartiality’. Despite real differences of organization and financing, so is the ITV complex, where matters of political controversy and balance are concerned. This does *not* mean, as Curran implied, that broadcasting is wholly autonomous, subject only to external influence and pressure. **But it is formally independent** – relatively autonomous. During the General Strike (1926), in the BBC’s infancy, Lord Reith argued persuasively that it was in the Government’s best interest not to commandeer the BBC, as Churchill wished, but to leave it as an independent source of information. He laid on broadcasting a double injunction: **to be ‘allowed to define its position in the country’ and to be ‘for the Government in the crisis’**. He squared the circle of this apparent contradiction in a subtle and delicate formulation: ‘since the BBC was a national institution, and since the Government in this crisis were acting for the people, the BBC was for the Government in the crisis, too.’²²

We have been arguing, then, that neither of the dominant explanations – ‘independent and impartial’ or ‘biased’ – are adequate, for they cannot grasp the *determinate relationship* in which broadcasting stands in our society. Only the concept of determinate structure will allow us to do so.

Throughout the paper, we have been discussing the *ideological* role of the media.²³ This is a difficult term to define precisely, but we have used the concept in a fairly simple way. By ‘ideology’ we understand, not highly systematic and coherent ‘philosophies’ of society, but the **sum of the available ways in which we interpret, define, understand and make sense of social reality**. In every society, the range of available ideologies will be limited. Moreover, these ‘practical understandings’ are not discrete ideas, but are linked into chains of explanations. They are not ‘free-floating’, but are structured, shaped and distributed in determinate ways. Though, in one sense, they are just the ‘ideas in people’s heads’ about what society is and how it works, these ‘ideas’ arise from the way society is organized; they are historically shaped; they are transmitted and diffused through complex social organization and by the use of sophisticated technical means.

Moreover, they have *practical effects* because they are the ideas

which organize social groups and classes into action, influence how they define reality, how they perceive conflicting social interests, and therefore what people do, who they support, what policies they back. Ideologies enter into the social and material organization of society, and influence practical outcomes. They are or can become materially effective. It therefore matters profoundly which ideas or ‘ideologies’ gain credibility, are constantly used to define and provide understandings of problems, appear, between them, to provide an adequate guide or map for us of the social world, and thus *become consensual*. The quasi-monopolistic position of broadcasting in our society gives it a profound cultural power over which ideas constantly circulate, which are defined as ‘legitimate’ and which are classified as ‘irrelevant’ or ‘marginal’. This is a matter of ideological power – and the institutions like broadcasting and the press, which command the means of ‘defining reality’, will, inevitably, play an ideological role, however inconvenient this fact of life is to the broadcasters. We have tried to show why our broadcasting system *cannot*, by definition, circulate a single, simple, monolithic set of ‘ruling ideas’ about the social world. But we have also shown why broadcasting itself is and must be an ideological practice, and why there is a systematic tendency for the ‘definitions of the situation’ which broadcasting constructs to be ones which favour the prevailing social, political and economic arrangements of the society of which it is a determinate part.

Notes

- 1 *Nationwide* has been studied in two recent monographs: *Everyday Television* and *The Nationwide Audience*, by C. Brunson and D. Morley, British Film Institute, 1978, 1980.
- 2 There have been several recent studies of news: see P. Schlesinger, *Putting Reality Together* (Constable, 1978); Michael Tracey, *The Production of Political Television* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977); P. Golding and P. Elliott, *Making the News* (Longman, 1979); Glasgow University Media Group, *Bad News and More Bad News* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976, 1980); Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, eds, *Manufacture of News* (Constable, rev. ed., 1981).
- 3 On ‘news values’, see J. Galtung and M. Ruge, ‘The structure of foreign news’, *Journal of Peace Studies Research*, vol. 1 (1965) (and references in n. 2).
- 4 On the integrative function of rituals, see S. Lukes, ‘Political ritual’, *Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1975).
- 5 The most important formulation of these requirements is in the BBC’s internal briefing document, *Principles and Practice in News*

- and *Current Affairs* (1972). See the discussion of them in S. Hall, 'Broadcasting, Politics and the State: the Independence/Impartiality Couplet', IAMCR Conference Paper, Leicester (1976) and G. Tuchman, 'Objectivity as a strategic ritual', *American Journal of Sociology* (1971-2).
- 6 For a sophisticated official statement on 'independence in practice', see articles by Sir Charles Curran in the *Listener* for 20 June 1974, 14 May and 18 November 1976. For the case on 'bias', see *Bad News and More Bad News* (see n. 2); and J. Downing, *The Media Machine* (Pluto, 1980).
 - 7 On 'selectivity', see the longer version of this article in *Getting the Message Across* (UNESCO Press, 1975). Also *ibid.* on the 'passage of a topic' from News to Current Affairs.
 - 8 On the more 'explanatory' form of Current Affairs, see Hall, Connell and Curti, 'The Unity of Current Affairs Television', *Cultural Studies* (University of Birmingham, Centre for Cultural Studies), no. 9 (spring 1976).
 - 9 On the 'interpretive work' of broadcasting, S. Hall, 'The rediscovery of ideology: return of the repressed in media studies', in M. Gurevitch, A. Bennett, J. Curran and J. Woollacott, eds, *Culture, Society and the Media* (Methuen, 1981).
 - 10 See S. Hall, 'Encoding and decoding in the television discourse', in Hall et al., eds, *Culture, Media, Language* (Hutchinson, 1980).
 - 11 On the 'denotative' and 'connotative' distinction, see *ibid.*
 - 12 For recent studies of media coverage of industrial relations, see *Bad News and More Bad News*, and Downing, *op. cit.*, and Beharrell and Philo, eds, *Trade Unions and the Media* (Macmillan, 1977).
 - 13 On the broadcaster's dilemma, see S. Hall, 'The limits of broadcasting', *Listener*, 16 March 1972; and Golding and Elliott *op. cit.*
 - 14 See K. Kumar, 'Holding the middle ground', *Sociology* (1975).
 - 15 For 'typical decoding positions', see Hall, 'Encoding and decoding', based on F. Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order* (Paladin, 1972).
 - 16 In the two most famous occasions – Suez crisis in Britain and the Vietnam War in the US – both the nation and the political elites were, in the end, so publicly divided that the broadcasters could assume a 'split consensus'.
 - 17 On 'permissible limits', see S. Hall, 'Deviance, politics and the media', in Rock and McIntosh, eds, *Deviance and Social Control* (Tavistock, 1974).
 - 18 'It [the BBC] is not only within the Constitution: it is within the consensus about basic moral values', BBC, *Principles and Practice*.
 - 19 'The basic principle of BBC News is that a mature democracy is an informed (not guided) democracy. The BBC takes it for granted that the parliamentary democracy evolved in this country is a work of national genius to be upheld and preserved. The BBC's primary constitutional role is that of supplier of new and true information

- as defined above', *BBC General Advisory Council Minutes*, 1976, quoted in Schlesinger, *op. cit.*
- 20 R. Miliband, 'Impartiality and objectivity in this sense stop at the point where political consensus itself ends', *The State in Capitalist Society* (Weidenfeld, 1969).
 - 21 Curran, in 'Broadcasting and public opinion', *Listener*, 20 June 1974.
 - 22 For a discussion of the BBC in the General Strike, see Asa Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford, 1961). Referring to Reith's Memorandum, Briggs comments: 'It clarifies the desire of the BBC to convey "authentic impartial news" while at the same time remaining in every sense of the word, "an organization within the constitution"' (p. 366).
 - 23 On the 'ideological' role of the media, see Hall, 'The rediscovery of ideology'.