



# COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS

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## Bias in the News

Over the past 100 to 150 years, print and now broadcast news have built an image as the vital support of democratic public decision-making. Journalists have presented themselves as the watchdog of government, a Fourth Estate. The ideals of freedom of the press and objectivity of news are revered as sacred institutions.

Current research on newsmaking is questioning profoundly the validity of these claims. Some researchers conclude that the snippets of information in the evening news cover over deeper issues and only create an illusion of being informed. TV news is increasingly designed as entertainment, little different from the soaps that precede and follow it. The problem, it is argued, is not deliberate intent to mislead, but a subtle, systematic distortion inherent in today's accepted news gathering practices.

This issue reviews research on four aspects of the debate: 1) the social origins of newsmaking; 2) distortion in news production; 3) analysis of news content; and 4) how the public uses news information.

REVIEW ARTICLE

## I: Research on the Social History of Newsmaking

*Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, Michael Schudson. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978).

Michael Schudson asks why the ideal of "news objectivity" suddenly became an important issue for newspapers in America about 1830. Earlier newspapers were often little more than opinionated mouthpieces of political rivals, or expensive newsheets circulated among political and mercantile elites. He proposes that the ideology of objective news as the support of political democracy originated with the rise of the "penny press" and the social transformations of the populist Jacksonian era.

The conventional history of journalism has explained the beginnings of the cheap, mass-circulation press in terms of growing literacy and technological innovations such as the fast cylinder press, the telegraph and inexpensive wood-pulp paper. However, Schudson shows that the penny press flourished well before the new printing technology was introduced. The modern popular press took hold not in places such as New England, which had virtual universal male literacy already in the 18th century, but in the fast-growing, semi-literate urban melting pots, especially in New York. The critical factors, Schudson argues, were social: specifically, a new society centred around impersonal market exchange.

The great change in the America of the 1820s and 1830s was the transition from a mercantile republic, cradled in the aristocratic Federalist values of formalism and deference, to an

egalitarian mass-market democracy where any person who had money, talent and the motive of self-improvement could bargain freely. At the same time the increased economic differentiation and ethnic diversity of the new cities made word-of-mouth information links more difficult. Newspapers, once largely subsidised by political parties, became commercial enterprises selling a commodity, "objective information," as cheaply as possible to the largest available market. Content changed to the life of the city: police stations, courts, news of all political groups. Opinion (not a saleable item) was segregated to an editorial page. People could review a potpourri of factual reports to form their own opinions. Newspapers were now subsidised by any sort of consumer advertising that appealed to the expanding mass middle-class market, and "neutral facts" were a better format for advertising.

### News Becomes a Marketable Commodity.

As Schudson traces the further development of news as a commercial enterprise, he emphasises that the very objectivity which made news a commodity in the market place was eventually threatened in a market place dominated by the large corporation. By the early 20th century it was common practice for corporate interests to employ public relations officers

making available "favourable facts." During World War I government also developed a public propaganda machine.

Journalists of the 1920s and 1930s tried to shore up the belief in objectivity by applying the techniques of empirical science. But by the 1960s, with the blatant attempts of government to manipulate the news in the context of the Vietnam War and the "imperial presidency," many young journalists saw the ideology of objectivity as hypocrisy. Schudson interprets this as a reawakening of the critical spirit, which has been a recurring theme in literature and journalism since the 18th century. This adversary culture of journalism in the 1960s has introduced three major premises that underlie much current research:-

1. The content of a news story is never neutral, but rests on a set of substantive *political* assumptions.
2. The *form of the news* — impersonal narrative style, etc. — incorporates and conceals its own bias.
3. The process of news gathering itself *constructs an image of reality* which reinforces official viewpoints.

Today, reflective journalists and scholars are not asking *how* to achieve objectivity but *whether* objectivity is possible at all. Paradoxically, Schudson thinks that the only hope for a socially balanced objectivity in news is the scepticism of journalists cast in the critical, adversary tradition, who will not submit to the arbitrary conventions of objectivity.

### **The Fourth Estate and Other "Myths" of Journalism**

*Newspaper History: From the 17th Century to the Present Day*,  
Ed. by George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate.  
(London: Constable and Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978).

The history of British journalism in the 19th century is often portrayed as the struggle of advocates of the popular classes to liberate the press from government control, remove the "knowledge taxes," and, through the mass circulation press, allow the labouring class greater political participation. The authors in this book argue that both the intentions and the effects were often quite different.

George Boyce reviews evidence which indicates that the

concept of the Fourth Estate was an ideological construction created to raise the journalistic status and secure for the press a recognised place in the British political system. Instead of opening up government and politics to public questioning, most leading journalists were in collusion with important political figures and often manipulated public opinion in their favour.

In an especially valuable essay, James Curran shows that the drive to repeal the "knowledge taxes" in Britain from 1820 to roughly 1860 must be seen in the light of fears of rising British industrialists regarding the radical working-class newspapers and the failure of repressive laws to control this underground press. Every court conviction of editors of radical newspapers only gave them more publicity and circulation. In parliamentary debates both traditionalists and middle-class reformers wanted to control the radical press, but the latter group proposed as more effective opening up the possibility of a cheap, innocuous press for the working classes. In fact, once the taxes were removed, the small impoverished workers' newspapers could no longer compete with the heavily capitalised mass-circulation press and generally went out of existence.

A series of chapters covering different historical periods document a steady trend towards concentration of control over the popular press in Britain in the hands of a few corporations. Philip Elliott shows that the supposed development of journalistic professional independence in the 19th century with its ideals of neutrality and objectivity was an illusion, given the subordination of reporting to the organisation and proprietors of newspapers.

The various authors open a serious question for further research: a long-term decline in the variety of opinion and the vigour of political debate in the British press. Murdock and Golding propose the thesis that "the increasing conformity of the British quality press, in style and substance, is an example of the fundamental tendency of oligopolistic competition to serve the centre of the market at the expense of the minority tastes."<sup>1</sup>

## **II: Distortion in the Production of News**

*Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*, Gaye Tuchman (New York: The Free Press, 1978)

Much recent research on news has focussed on the unintended but systematically biased view of the world that results from routine, accepted practices of news gathering and the bureaucratic structure of news organisations.

In her landmark book, Gaye Tuchman shows that the news net and news beat collect information at centralised, legitimated institutions — government offices, public services and corporate headquarters — and this steady supply of partially assembled data or pseudo "media" events already bears an "official interpretation." The news organisation then further categorises these accounts as international, national, or municipal and assigns them a pre-defined typification of hard and soft news, women's or financial page, and so forth.

Mark Fishman in *Manufacturing the News* analyses how public bureaucracies have developed a symbiotic relationship with the news media and use the news to project their own view of reality.<sup>2</sup> He gives an illustrative example of how the public relations of the Senior Citizens Robbery Unit of the New York police interacted with the media's demand for sensational themes to create the impression of a major wave of

crime against the elderly. Statistics indicated that there was actually a decrease in this type of crime at the time.

### **The News and Public Policy**

These analyses open up disturbing questions regarding the role of the media in democratic decision-making. Tuchman notes that in the 18th century model the free press supposedly placed before the citizenry a variety of reasoned alternatives for debate and selection of the best alternative. But the deepest social problems and inequalities in distribution of power that might represent real political alternatives and truly "new" news are often experienced most deeply by dissident, marginal, lower-status groups. Typically, these sectors can bring an alternative into the public debate only through some special access to the news media.

Anne Rawley Saldich in her book, *Electronic Democracy*,<sup>3</sup> suggests that TV opens up new access to dissident movements and cites the examples of coverage of protests against the U.S. Vietnam involvement and of American Indians at Wounded Knee.

Tuchman contends, however, in a fairly detailed summary of how the women's movement has been handled in the U.S. media, that the news practices tend to restrain controversy and distort alternative proposals. Initially, the news transformed the women's movement into novelty news such as bra burning or other soft news that is an entertaining curiosity but not an issue that must be seriously debated, investigated and responsibly acted upon by the general public. Once the women's movement became hard news it was presented in terms of the superficial journalistic narrative telling the who, what, where without getting at the reasons behind the event. Seldom does the public have the opportunity to understand an issue from the minority point of view or perceive the deeper social grievances that underly the movement.

The studies of Tuchman and others also reveal contradictions in the claim of the media to be a Fourth Estate and watchdog of government. Because newsmakers generally rely on government bureaucracies as the easiest source of political information and verify the "objectivity" of data by cross-checking largely with official data, even to criticise government, news reflects a status-quo, "all-is-well" point of view. Government and corporate interests are so intertwined that the 19th century distinction of "public" and "private" no longer has meaning. As one block, they define what questions are to be asked and how they are asked so that only rare, superhuman investigative reporting, such as that by a Woodward and Bernstein, can pose challenging questions. Tuchman contends that because the "people" are not invited to negotiate definitions of reality mutually, the news-consumer passively observes issues as an external natural order like earthquakes and volcanoes.

Tuchman also argues that "freedom of speech" means the freedom of the proprietors and staff of news organisations. In practice, the public is asked to trust in the professionalism of newsmakers to present all sides of an issue. But professionalism means verifying with official safe sources and recasting an event in terms of the acceptable language and categories of hard news. In this process, groups fighting for freedom are typed as terrorists and dissenters as malcontents. Professionalism all too often limits the right to free access and the public's right to know.

### The Epistemology of News

The problems of objectivity in news and whether the media can claim to be a fair forum of free public discussion have led research on newsmaking into questions about news as a mode of knowing. Tuchman, drawing on philosophers of social science such as Alfred Shutz, the ethnomethodologists, and the sociologists of knowledge such as Berger<sup>4</sup> and Goffman, argues that newsmakers actively invent social reality. The attempt of journalists to justify their objectivity by using the model of physical science is not only invalid but also socially dangerous because it leads them to reify their constructs of reality. On the basis of this uncertain concept of objectivity and scientific professionalism, the media then claim privileges and immunities as the embodiment of the freedom of speech tradition.

Tuchman suggests that news production is more akin to the social sciences and is subject to the pitfalls of that scientific method. Not only is the raw material of news a subjective human interpretation of reality, but news practices constitute a second-level selective interpretation. She proposes that journalists be more aware of how news sources are influenced by social context, especially position in a power structure, and how journalists themselves are influenced by their social

background, especially the social organisation of news production. Otherwise the naive empiricism of journalists inevitably legitimates the status quo.

### Comparative International Studies of News Organisations

*Making the News*, Peter Golding and Philip Elliott. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1979).

Nearly all current studies of news stress that the most influential variables in both the production of news and news content are the complex socioeconomic and political relationships within the larger national system. Surprisingly, the study of Golding and Elliot is unique in comparing broadcast news organisations in three countries: Ireland, Sweden and Nigeria. They focus on how broadcast news in various national contexts can overcome the problem of a superficial collage of unrelated facts and reveal to audiences *social process and use of power*.

"Social process" here refers to the analysis of the coherent line of interacting historical causes of a situation or event in the news which enables the audience to see clearly who and what is affecting their lives and what their own history-making role might be.

In the three-country comparison Golding and Elliot found that "even in highly varied cultural and organisational settings, broadcast news emerges with surprisingly similar forms and contents"<sup>5</sup> — perhaps indirect support for the thesis of Tunstall that there is a fundamental Anglo-American format for the media around the world. In Sweden an alternative, in-depth news programme has been introduced to give more background, but this usually tends to be a summary of recent, interrelated stories, a compilation rather than an analysis. In Nigeria there was a strong interest in a more African type of "development news" stressing the educational function of news, a more explicit channel of communication between government and the governed, presenting development success stories for other communities to emulate, and investigative reporting often quite critical of government action.

The analysis of "use of power" in news showed that the battle of various interest groups which shape a political decision remains invisible, especially the large corporate interests. We are allowed to see only symbolic manifestations of decisions: a shot of legislative discussion or the executive authority signing the bill.

Golding and Elliot conclude that as long as news is defined as "news" it is never going to be anything but superficial. "Studies of comprehension and retention have repeatedly shown how little audiences get from broadcast news."<sup>6</sup> The huge investment in speedy news collection contributes little to the enlightenment of audiences. They suggest nothing less than "a reconsideration of the role and structure of broadcasting as a knowledge-creating medium, and a radical questioning of the complex of relationships between broadcasting and society."<sup>7</sup>

### How to Reform the News

*Deciding What's News*, Herbert J. Gans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

The research of Tuchman, Golding and Elliot and others is concerned primarily with the societal and news organisation factors that influence the production of news. Herbert Gans also analyses these "efficient causes", but then asks what the societal function (final cause) of news may be. He concludes that the central purpose of news is (and should be) to

construct a nation and society as a social unity. News should therefore bring into the "symbolic arena" all known perspectives of every constituent group so that each group is aware of its own views and the views of all other groups. The disproportionate symbolic power of now dominant groups would thus be reduced.

On the basis of this functionalist approach, Gans presents an elaborate proposal for achieving "multiperspectival" news. He recognises that market factors determine what becomes news, even in non-commercial agencies. Newspapers and broadcasting attempt to get the raw materials of news from easy, steady, cheap sources (corporate and governmental bureaucracies), transform this into a news format in the most cost-efficient manner, and then create a market for the product among potential consumers. However, to insure competitive, fresh, "hot" news, news organisations are far more beholden to source power than to consumer power.

Ideally, "multiperspectival" news would overcome the bias toward powerful sources by providing more representation of the activities and views of lower-status and dissident groups. The centralised national news would have to become more varied, but the major expansion would be in special-interest newspapers and magazines directed to specific homogeneous audiences.

Gans sees that not only would "multiperspectival" news be more expensive, but it would also meet political and economic resistance. One alternative would be an independent government endowment to support innovative news formats. But, in any event, change is likely to come through political and economic pressure from audiences,

especially from those who feel strongly that their perspective is not represented.

### The Values of Journalists

*The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work*, John W. C. Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William W. Bowman. (Urbana, Ill.: The University of Illinois Press, 1976).

Although research on news production rightly focusses on the news organisation, the education, aspirations and values of individual journalists may also be a significant factor apart from the organisational context.

Golding and Elliot found that nearly all broadcasting journalists of their sample in Ireland, Sweden and Nigeria were convinced that as individuals they should have no pronounced political convictions or that, at least, these should be kept out of their work. Their training and career ideal is that of neutrality. In practice most journalists conformed to the implicit values derived from the prevailing social consensus or ruling ideology of the country.

However, in one of the most extensive studies of the journalistic profession, Johnstone et al. found a trend away from the neutral, craft journalist toward a more critical, "participant" journalist who takes a more active and creative role in the discovery of news, emphasising personal interpretation and investigation. The major factor in this trend seems to be the rise in general (college) education background (not necessarily specialised journalist training) of journalists regardless of age.

## III: Analysis of News Content

*Bad News* (Vol. I, 1976) and *More Bad News* (Vol II, 1980), University Media Group. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976, 1980).

### Trade Unions and the Media

Recent content analysis of news media has been especially concerned with the means of access for and presentation of minority sectors of society. The Glasgow Media Group has carried on an extensive study of the British industrial news presented by the BBC and ITV (commercial) television. The basic study selected a four-month period in 1975, focussing on the treatment of trade union activities and points of view. Their two volumes report a detailed examination of the ideological orientation of both the spoken commentary and the visual presentation.

The Glasgow Media Group was particularly effective in contrasting the news content with an account of actual events. For example, the analysis of TV reporting of the British economic crisis shows that broadcasters consistently mentioned excessive wage demands as the most serious cause of the problem when, in fact, economic planners of various political persuasions were holding that wages were not the major factor. Problems stemming from management, such as the low rate of industrial investment, were seldom explained or were mentioned in a marginal, fragmented fashion. Similarly, in an analysis of a garbage collectors' strike, the reporting stressed the management appeal to consumer inconvenience and health hazards, but never clearly stated the deeper causes of the strike and never broadcasted an interview with the strikers. Their results confirm other studies which show that the news media favour higher-status news sources.

### Bias in Visual Presentation

Since television news is now the major information source

of the public in most industrial countries, the visual language of film and video recording is a critical dimension of news content analysis.

Tuchman notes in *Making News* that a lexicon of visual techniques has grown up among video news broadcasters which provides a background of objective facticity for news events and tends to cast filmed personalities in a stereotyped role-status system. While news reporters and higher-status individuals are given advantageous shots which strengthen the authority and credibility of their statements, "ordinary people" and groups associated with "disorder" are presented as amorphous symbols of a larger group or event.

One of the most extensive studies of the visual content of TV news has been done by the Glasgow Media Group. They observed that the use of short film clips on TV is still determined by the conventions of print journalism and that the meaning is provided by the spoken commentary. In their comments on the industrial news coverage they confirm Tuchman's observations: officials and other high-status personages tend to get favourable treatment, for example, in terms of captioned appearances and longer interviews. However, the thinness of the results of the visual content analysis in *More Bad News* reveals the incipient stage of theory and methodology in this area. As Paul Hartmann comments in his review of the book, "the provision of methods and analytic categories capable of capturing at all adequately the complexity and richness of the visual experience offered by film and television has long proved one of the most intractable problems in content analysis."<sup>8</sup>

# IV. How People Use the News in Community Issues

*Community Conflict and the Press*, Phillip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue, and Clarice N. Olien. (Beverly Hills, CA and London: Sage Publications, 1980).

A critical point in the evaluation of news services is how the information of the press and broadcasting is used by people as they participate in public decision-making. What role does "news" play within a complex pattern of information sources and communication channels? This may be even more difficult to analyse than news production and content because there are so many possible variables, and public decision-making contexts vary so greatly.

*Community Conflict and the Press* is a particularly valuable conceptual and methodological model. This research focusses on conflictive public decisions in more manageable comparative units of analysis, small cities and rural communities, but this enables them to examine in depth the history of specific community issues and the role of the news media over a period of years. All of the seven issues examined were cases of local communities in the U.S. trying to defend their interests against the state or federal government or against large corporations.

The studies reported include a wide array of variables such as community social structure, strength of grass-roots advocacy organisation, interpersonal communication channels, and various news media, including local and metropolitan press, television and radio. They address critical problems in this research tradition: the social control function of the press, the selectiveness of news reports, the interaction of the media with local power structure, the knowledge gap between higher and lower status groups created by different educational backgrounds and varying access to key information sources, and the influence of degree of conflict on the use of news.

## Importance of Grass-Roots Organisation

The research results show that the level of local, citizen organisation — intermediate between the mass media and the individual — is a crucial factor in bringing an issue to the attention of the media in the first place. Organisation also heightens public interest and attention to news and builds interpersonal channels of communication so that information is spread more equitably. Where there was strong local organisation, the knowledge gap was overcome and people were using the available information more effectively to influence the outcome.

The authors examine closely the function of news in various stages of a community conflict, showing, for example, how news legitimates an issue as valid matter for public debate and how local groups use the press at different stages of conflict.

Surprisingly, however, there is little analysis of the relation between the information supplied by the press and the outcome of public decision-making. Cited news sources (usually leaders) generally felt that the information of the press or broadcasting was not particularly important for them. Virtually all of the citizen movements to influence the outcome of state or government interventions in local communities appear to have failed.

The authors do not tell us whether, after all of the voluminous coverage in local and metropolitan news, the people at least had a deeper understanding of the social process and the power structure affecting their lives so that in future issues they might be better able to defend the quality of life in their communities. All of the sound and fury of the conflicts

reflected in the press and broadcasting seems to be little more than a curious charade — leaving the march of events to continue on as "normal".

## What Kind of News Does the Public Want or Need?

John Hulteng, in *The News Media: What Makes Them Tick?*<sup>9</sup> notes that audience research tells TV producers that viewers want lively, entertaining TV newscasts, brief reports, lots of action, and not much detail. Newspaper reader surveys typically show that comics, sports and human interest items are the sections with greater readership. However, audience ratings generally reveal high viewing of what is available, not necessarily what people want. Most editors and journalists feel that ratings do not reflect the complexity of preferences of different parts of the audience or the complexity of different needs at different times. Gans (*Deciding What's News*) found that working journalists generally prefer to follow their own professional instincts in providing information that they think the audience needs and will tolerate. But the business executives, on the basis of audience ratings, may be determining the trend towards more superficial, "happy talk" news.

In one of the few recent studies of uses and gratifications in National TV news, Mark Levy concludes that one of the major factors in news watching is the desire to be informed, especially discovering news items to be followed up in greater detail later.<sup>10</sup> However, diversion — the joking of newscasters, curious and funny events — seems to be the second most important motivation. Also important is the reassurance that the viewer's own life is not so bad after all and that the nation's problems are under control or being solved. But Levy also found dissatisfaction with TV news, especially the feeling that much of what is presented is not really important or worthwhile.

John Phelan observes in *Mediaworld: Programming the Public*<sup>11</sup> that the 18th and 19th century ideal of public debate in the media as the basis of an informed and free citizenry is still the fundamental creed of journalists. However, with the advent of the mass commercial media, the forum and setting for public debate have changed radically. The chasm between what is professed and practiced by journalists renders the ethics of public matters irrelevantly ritualistic. Whether this chasm can be bridged by a more adequate philosophy of public debate or whether a reorientation of the media is possible remains to be seen.

1 Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, "The Structure, Ownership and Control of the Press, 1914-76," in *Newspaper History: From the 17th Century to the Present Day*, ed. by George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate. (London: Constable and Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978, 1978), p. 147.

2 Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

3 Anne Rawley Saldich, *Electronic Democracy: Television's Impact on the American Political Process*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979).

4 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday-Anchor, 1967).

5 Peter Golding and Philip Elliot, *Making the News*. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1979), p. 207.

6 Golding and Elliot, *Making the News*, p. 218.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Paul Hartmann, "Book Reviews, *More Bad News*." *Media, Culture & Society* Vol. 2, No. 4 (October, 1980), pp. 389-392.

9 John L. Hulteng, *The News Media: What Makes Them Tick?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979).

10 Mark R. Levy, "Experiencing Television News," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Autumn, 1977), pp. 112-117.

11 John M. Phelan, *Mediaworld: Programming the Public*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977).

# Current Research on News Production and Content

## AUSTRALIA

**Rodney Tiffen** (U. of Sidney, Sydney NSW 2006) is engaged in a two-year project, "News and Power", studying the role of news media in contemporary Australian politics and exploring how the processes and forms of news affects political outcomes through a series of case studies of leaks, background briefings, scandals and crises. Recent articles and books treat Australian coverage of the Third World and issues such as the Vietnam war.

## AUSTRIA

**Fritz Karmasin** and **Maximilian Gottschlich** have completed research on the image of the journalist as he sees himself and as he is seen by the public and politicians (*Beruf: Journalist, Eine Imageanalyse — Bevölkerung, Politiker, Journalisten urteilen*. Institut für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft, University of Vienna, Dr Karl Lueger-Ring 1, 1010 Vienna).

## GERMANY

**Hans Mathias Kepplinger** (Institut für Publizistik, University of Mainz Saarstrasse 21, 6500 Mainz) is co-editor of *Kommunikation*, a series published by Karl Alber Verlag, Freiburg/München. He is editor of Vol. 8 (*Angepasste Aussenseiter: Was Journalisten denken und wie sie arbeiten*) which presents essays of 15 authors, including **Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann**, on attitudes and working methods of journalists.

**Peter Ruge** (Institut für Publizistik, University of Mainz) is the author of *Praxis des Fernsehjournalismus* (Kommunikation series), a handbook on television production for producers, viewers and critics.

## GREAT BRITAIN

**Peter Aymler** (North East London Polytechnic, Romford Rd., Stratford, London E15 4LZ) is studying the representation of trade union issues in the British national press.

**Philip Elliot** (Centre for Mass Communication Research, 104 Regent Rd., Leicester LE1 7LT) is engaged in a major comparative study of journalism and journalists in Britain and Germany analysing education, recruitment to profession, etc.

**Peter Golding** (Centre for Mass Communication Research) has completed a study of Information and the Welfare State, a study of provisions and content of news about social security.

**Hilde Himmelweit** (London School of Economics, Houghton St., London WC2A 2AE) is doing a content analysis of British mass media news coverage of Russia following the Russian invasion of Afghanistan.

**I. Inglis** (Newcastle Polytechnic, Ellison Place, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 8ST) is studying sport as news.

**Greg Philo** (Glasgow Media Group, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ) is doing content analysis of political party news.

**Paul Wharton** and **Howard Davis** (Goldsmiths' College, University of London, Lewisham Way, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW), part of Glasgow Media Group, are doing a comparative international study of six TV channels in Germany, UK, and USA regarding international news.

## ISRAEL

**Hanna Adoni** and **Akiba Cohen** (the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Givat-Ram, Jerusalem), are participating in a cross cultural study of the presentation of social conflicts in TV news and their perception by adolescents. This project involves **Jay Blumler** (England), **Friedrich Krilli** (West Germany), **Deanna Robinson** and **Charles Bantz** (U.S.) and **Karen Honikman** (South Africa).

**Itzhak Roeh** (Communication Institute, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) member of the Israel Broadcasting Authority is studying TV news as a factor in the creation of current ideologies and, with **Dov Shinar**, the treatment of minorities in news coverage of the Israel Broadcasting Authority.

## SWEDEN

**Karl Erik Rosengren** (Dept. of Sociology, University of Lund, Magstratsvagen 55N, s-222 44 Lund,) is participating in the Media Panel Research programmes and studying cultural indicators.

**Sven Windahl** (Växjö University College, Box 5053, S-350 05 Växjö), is the leader of the Media Panel Research Programme studying the causes and effects of media use among children and adolescents. He is author of a book (with **Denis McQuail**) on communication models.

## THE UNITED STATES

**William Adams** (The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. 20052) is editing three books: *Television Coverage of the Middle East*, *Television Coverage of International Affairs* and *Media Coverage of the 1980 Campaign*, all to be published by Ablex. **Michael Robinson** is director of the Media Analysis Project at the same university.

**David Altheide** (Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85281) is doing content analysis of U.S. portrayal of Iran during the hostage crisis. He has also recently completed a study, *Bureaucratic Propaganda*, which analyses how public information is collected and edited in order to promote self-serving organisational goals, including evangelical crusades.

**Charles Bantz** (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55453) is cooperating in a six-nation cross-cultural study of adolescents' perceptions of social conflicts in TV news and films. He is also studying language use on national network news in the U.S. and has recently completed an article on "Community Leaders: Perceptions of Access and Fairness" (to be published in the *Journal of Broadcasting*).

**Daniel Drew** and **Byron Reeves** (U. of Wisconsin, 821 University Ave., Madison, WI 53706) are studying the socialisation of children to and by the broadcast news media, especially what children learn from TV news. Dr. Drew is also interested in how adults process TV news information and the effects of TV production techniques on learning.

**Mark Fishman** (Brooklyn College of the City U. of New York, Bedford Ave. and Ave. H, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201) is studying how crime officials create "news waves." A forthcoming article, "Police News: Constructing an Image of Crime," examines the processes in police departments that determine what the media will know of crime.

**Herbert Gans** (Columbia University, N.Y., NY, 10027) is planning research and books which touch on the consequences for news media and media reform of economic austerity and decline in the U.S. and the role that news play in the realities and concept of nation and society.

**Todd Gitlin** (University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720) is currently doing research on the relation between visual and auditory expression in TV news. Major interests concern the ways in which network TV *entertainment* addresses social issues and the significance of TV in the construction of people's mental image, conscious and unconscious, of what is real and what is expected of them.

**Richard Hofstetter** (U. of Houston, Texas 77004) is studying how people acquire information from TV regarding public affairs and political leaders; also, analysis of TV news content and public reaction to this content. Recent research include ascertainment of black community needs for public television.

**Grace Levine** (Quinnipiac College, Mt. Carmel Ave., Hamden, CONN. 06518) is studying whether repeated exposure to TV news portraying victims of human crises and catastrophes as helpless victims causes a feeling in TV viewers of lack of control over the environment.

**Mark R. Levy** (University of Maryland, College Park, Baltimore, MD 20742) with **Sven Windahl** of the Swedish Media Panel Project is studying audience activity in response to TV news with a sample of 500 women. He is also writing a theoretical article, "Disclaimed News" drawing on Goffman's notion of "role distancing" to explain how news workers cope with problematic events.

**V.M. Mishra** (Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824) is continuing research on mass media and law enforcement. He is studying processes and effects of media coverage of law enforcement events, institutions and agents and is publishing a monograph on media-police relations. He has also conducted research on religious journalism.

**Dan Nimmo** (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 37916), author of numerous books on political communication, continues research on U.S. TV news coverage of crises and disasters — Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant, Jonestown tragedy in Guyana, Iranian hostage Crisis and eruption of Mt. St. Helen.

**Deanna Robinson** (University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403) is currently studying the mass media in the People's Republic of China including trends in new media formats following the current political changes.

**Dan Schiller** (Temple University, Philadelphia, 19122) has recently completed *Objectivity and the News: the Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism*, (The University of Pennsylvania Press, Spring, 1981). He offers a new interpretation of the factors influencing the rise and significance of the "penny press" of the 1830s and 1840s.

**Robert L. Stevenson** (School of Journalism, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514) is participating (with **Annabelle Sreberny-Hohammadi**, **Kaarle Nordenstreng** and **Frank Ugboajah**) in the preparation of a report on "foreign images" in news, a project undertaken by IAMCR for UNESCO, and is currently working on a critique of the theory and research method of public opinion polling, particularly as polls are used by the media as an example of "pressure journalism".

**James W. Tankard, Jr** (The University of Texas at Austin, 78712) has recently done research on the differences between viewers and non-viewers of television.

**Gaye Tuchman** (Dept. of Sociology, Queens College and the Graduate Center, CUNY, 33 West 42nd St., New York, 10036) is doing research on women's opportunities to be artists and writers in 18th and 19th century Britain and the U.S. This is related to the development of 19th century popular culture and the emergence of the popular media.

PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

# The Contribution of Research to News Reform

The recent research on news production and content concludes almost unanimously that there is a systematic distortion in the news representation of public reality. It is not a question of deliberate bias, but a result of the present conventional news gathering and editing practices. News tends to favour consistently one view of events:— that of higher-status groups and official bureaucracies. Vital social-change tendencies indicative of deep problems in public policy are passed over.

The factors influencing this distortion are also becoming clearer: the ease and cost-effectiveness of gathering partially assembled news from official sources; pressures to build a secure web of verification that will withstand the attacks by powerful political and economic forces; in the face of daily deadlines, the tendency to quickly reduce all idiosyncratic events to categories that are safe and do not require problematic analysis.

## Does News Make a Difference

Unfortunately we do not have enough studies of how the use of distorted news in public decision-making can severely affect the public welfare. One well-documented case is the account of how the American public was prevented from getting an objective view of the Vietnam conflict because of over-reliance on official government sources and the compromising ties of reporters and editors with the powerful.

The great danger is that the present organisation of news production and the institution of "news" in general is contributing to an increasing concentration of social power and greater rigidity in democratic societies. Given the ideologies of the Fourth Estate, freedom of the press and news objectivity, the public — including news agencies — are led to believe that the press is promoting intelligent public decision-making. In fact, quite the opposite may be occurring. There is evidence that news is misrepresenting real causes of problems, that the systematic denial of rights of large sectors of the public is ignored, that the decline in the quality of life is not averted to. As Golding and Elliot note, the public is never helped to understand the deeper social process and manipulation of social power behind the events so that it can be a forceful actor influencing its own destiny.

The research of Golding and Elliot, Gans and others leads them to call for a restructuring of news organisations and radical changes in the media-society relationship. But how is this going to happen? Profound changes in communication institutions are usually aspects of broader social changes. So far there is little research pointing to long-term tendencies toward the social changes these proposals imply — except perhaps research showing that the national liberation movements in the Third World may be bringing forth a new information order.

## Where Should News Research Focus?

In socially differentiated urban industrialised societies, we do find strong minority rights movements which challenge specific imbalances in power distribution. The movements of ethnic and racial minorities, the women's movement and independent labour organisation movements are a few examples. Inevitably a critical demand of these movements is access to the media and a just presentation of issues in the news. Research which reveals bias against minority groups in the news can play a valuable role.

Studies of a specific area of news distortion may be particularly effective because these can examine concrete cases in depth and provide detailed evidence of the contrast between the reality of an event and the news reporting. It is more difficult for news organisations to ignore this kind of data.

In Britain, studies of the Glasgow Media Group provided evidence that trade unions are not adequately presented in the BBC and ITV news. Research on the women's movement in the news has done the same. Studies of this kind are likely to analyse news within a special area of social process and misuse of power and so reveal the superficiality of much of the news on these critical issues.

## A Holistic Approach in News Evaluation

News research is more adequate and effective if it examines distortion in all the stages of the process: production, content, and how the public perceives news and uses the information in national or community decision-making. Explicit linkages between these three aspects are more feasible if the focus of the research is more limited.

Research on news related to specific minority issues is also likely to have more direct policy implications. The motivation for this kind of research frequently arises out of a close identification with a minority or lower-status group — from the people who can see and feel news distortions from the inside. It may also make research results more directly available to the organisations seeking political and economic action.

## Value of Research for News Organisations

In recent years reporters and editors have vindicated their role as a Fourth Estate and their claim to represent the freedom of speech tradition in so far as they have given fair access to minority movements or have challenged abuses of power. When research evaluates the performance of the news regarding dissident and lower-status groups, it is helping the news media be true to its own best tradition.

*Robert A. White*  
Editor

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