



# CHAPTER 7

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEWS

### FOCAL POINTS

- News as sets of manufactured representations of the world
- News values as criteria for the selection and construction of stories
- Questions of bias and arguments about news as ideology
- Infotainment and criticism of the 'dumbing down' of news
- News in digital and online environments

## INTRODUCTION

Most people would probably agree that, sometimes, the news falls short of presenting a balanced and truthful reflection of the world. Accusations of bias or lack of balance in coverage sometimes come from academics, but just as frequently from members of the public, politicians or interest groups. Over the last decade or so, for example, Fox News has been subject to particularly frequent criticism that its coverage of a wide range of issues has favoured right-wing perspectives and failed to live up to its own claims to be 'fair and balanced'. During the same period, the BBC, whose charter specifically requires impartiality in coverage of current affairs, has found itself subject to accusations of both right-wing and left-wing bias. Newspapers are also a regular target for accusations of unbalanced coverage, with 'red-top' UK tabloids such as *The Sun* and *The Mirror* often singled out for criticism.

Annoyance about perceived bias in news coverage can often reflect a belief that such instances constitute a betrayal of what news can and should be. Here, biased news is contrasted with ideals of news as a vital public service that provides neutral information and truthful facts. Consistent with notions of media as mirror, this view suggests that news should offer an undistorted reflection of the world. It also informs the way some forms of news are regulated. While bias is permitted and expected in UK newspapers and online news sites, for example, television broadcasters are subject to a statutory public interest requirement to 'ensure that news, in whatever form, is reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality' (Ofcom 2016). The qualifier 'due' here recognises the impossibility of covering 'every argument and every facet of every argument', but the aspiration for essentially unbiased news is clear.

It will become apparent in this chapter, however, that news can *never* constitute an unbiased mirror on the world. Although based upon real events and controversies, the content of newspapers and bulletins is manufactured and constructed in particular ways according to prevailing cultural values, audience expectations and institutional priorities. What we read, view or listen to comprises not a neutral account of the world, but one or more versions or *representations* of that world. Some may be more detailed, better substantiated, faithful in intentions and inclusive of different viewpoints than others – and we may well wish to support and encourage these. But none are unbiased. The content of news, therefore, tells us as much about the practices, values and structures of those who produce and consume it, as about the world it purports to represent.

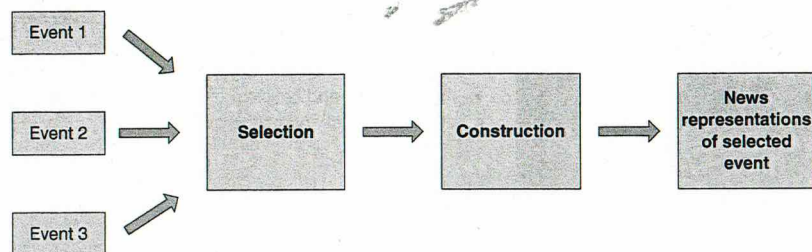


Figure 7.1 News filtering

When considering the ways news is manufactured, it is valuable to envisage a filtering process to illustrate how the plethora of events, issues or viewpoints that could be covered on a given day are streamlined into the content of a news website, broadcast bulletin or printed newspaper (see Figure 7.1). The processes involved are complex but we can usefully distinguish between two sequential stages: the *selection* of events and issues on which to base stories; and the subsequent *construction* of such stories.

## SELECTION, GATE-KEEPING AND AGENDA SETTING

Discussions about bias often focus on the way stories are told by news providers. Before deciding how to tell a given story, however, outlets must select which events, topics or controversies to cover. Through taking such decisions, news organisations act as *gate-keepers* with the capacity to affect what we know, care and talk about and, conversely, what passes under our collective radar. This apparent power to shape public priorities is known as *agenda setting*, a term associated with research by McCombs and Shaw (1972), who identified a correlation between the amount of news coverage devoted to an issue and the importance attributed to it by the public. Such findings may suggest that news gate-keeping determines what people think is important, though we should note that the empirical direction of causality here is ambiguous – it is not clear, in other words, whether stories included by media shape or reflect public priorities.

So what factors influence whether an event will be included in the news? My writing this paragraph is an event, as is your reading it. Yet, none of us would expect these things or most of the other events in our daily lives to be reported on by professional journalists. But what is it about such events that is unsuitable compared with the kinds of stories which regularly are included? Detailed consideration of the criteria used by journalists and editors in evaluating newsworthiness can provide greater understanding of the priorities of news media. As well as excluding a host of undeniably trivial events, these criteria, which are known as *news values*, also can result in selections and exclusions that are more controversial.

## NEWS VALUES

As we shall see later, there are differences of priority and emphasis between news outlets in terms of the blend of stories covered by each at a given time. Yet analysis suggests such outlets also tend to share a number of core criteria, or news values, which determine story selection. The best-known attempt to outline these shared news values is provided by Galtung and Ruge (1973), who identify 12 criteria that are intended to be cumulative rather than independent of one another: the more that apply and the greater the extent to which they apply, the more likely an event is to be covered.

### 1. FREQUENCY (AND IMMEDIACY)

For an event to make a news story, argue Galtung and Ruge, it helps if its time-span is compatible with the frequency with which news is published or broadcast. Criminal or violent incidents tend to be ideal because they play themselves out in a short time-span between one

edition of a newspaper or bulletin and the next. In contrast, gradual improvements in a country's education system are unlikely to make the news unless highlighted by a discrete event such as the release of a report or a school visit by a member of government. Similarly, the slow process of repairing a war-torn country may receive less coverage than the discrete event of the bombing which damaged it. More recently, some have connected this notion of frequency with an increasingly prominent specific role for *immediacy* or *recency*, which refers to the particular emphasis placed by news providers on breaking new stories (e.g. Bell 1991).

## 2. AMPLITUDE

Amplitude refers to a threshold of noticeability. The more extreme or dramatic an event is within its category, the more likely it is to receive prominent coverage. And in the age of television and online news, many argue that the specific role of spectacle and drama in the selection of news stories is becoming pivotal (Baker and Dessart 1998). A story is particularly likely to be covered if the drama is captured directly through sound, image or film (Harrison 2006). A dramatic police car chase is more likely to be covered if it was caught on video, for example.

## 3. CLARITY

The propensity for an event to be presented in a clear or one-dimensional manner can increase its chances of receiving coverage. Events make good news copy, it is argued, when ambiguities about cause, meaning or significance are at a minimum. Stories that can involve clear attribution of right and wrong and obvious victims and villains fit well within this category – and replicate the kinds of moral clarity and simplicity we are presented with in much fictional media. Acts of criminal violence, for example, can easily be centred on blameworthy individual perpetrator/s and individual victim/s with whom audiences can empathise. In contrast, arguments about the detail of political policy tend to be complex, messy and uncertain.

## 4. CULTURAL PROXIMITY

News providers tend to favour stories that involve practices, places or people that are culturally familiar to their audience. News is ethnocentric, argue Galtung and Ruge, in that it is biased towards that which seems closest to us. Thus, among Canadian news providers, disasters in Canada itself or in countries regarded as culturally similar to Canada, receive greater coverage than similar events in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, events in culturally and geographically distant places may still sometimes be newsworthy if they have some other form of relevance. A disaster in South Africa may receive more news coverage in Japan if Japanese citizens were among the casualties.

## 5. PREDICTABILITY

Newsworthy stories tend to connect to our expectations about how the world works. Sometimes this may relate to specific anticipated events. Media speculation about the possibility of violence at protest marches can create expectations that then lead to the prioritisation of coverage of any actual violence. In other cases, stories can become newsworthy because they confirm broader social expectations or stereotypes. News stories about young people getting into trouble, for example, can activate stereotypical expectations about youth delinquency.

## 6. UNEXPECTEDNESS

Crucially, however, Galtung and Ruge argue that predictability works alongside a tendency to emphasise events that are extraordinary or unusual as compared to the normal events of most of our everyday lives. A story about the disappearance of a child may be liable to fit with certain established expectations (about the danger of paedophiles, for example) at the same time as attaining its newsworthiness primarily because of the rarity of such an event. It is often the way elements of predictability work together with unexpectedness that is critical then.

## 7. CONTINUITY

Once a story has entered the news agenda, it may gain sufficient public interest to give it the momentum to continue to be newsworthy. This can prompt news providers to allocate significant space to ongoing stories even if there have been few developments. In 2007, the disappearance of a young child, Madeleine McCann, dominated headlines across the UK for several months. Even in the absence of major developments in the case, news providers continued to prioritise the story by focusing on the behaviour and public statements of McCann's parents and a mixture of speculation and hearsay. The level of interest generated by the initial coverage made it imperative for outlets to continue to find something to say about the story.

Variations on this news value have been emphasised by other commentators. Rock (1973) emphasises that, once a story has been ratified as news through inclusion by one provider, it often will be picked up by other outlets, reflecting the professional influence of journalists on one another and the desire not to miss out on a story that has momentum. The point arguably has become even more important today, with online and television news providers often influenced by one another throughout the day as well as by the morning's newspaper front pages. And in the digital age, particular stories can gain or retain newsworthiness through the visible momentum they develop through mentions on social media too (Grzywinska and Borden 2012).

## 8. COMPOSITION

The notion of composition emphasises the need for bulletins or newspapers to fit together as a whole. Providers may seek to complement stories with others that connect to the same theme or, conversely, to achieve a balance of types of story, which may mean giving prominence to some domestic stories on a heavy foreign news day, for example, or slotting in something light and trivial on the day of a big political story.

## 9. ELITE NATIONS

Quite simply, it is suggested that events that relate to the most powerful nations in the world are more likely to be covered than those taking place in poorer, less influential places.

## 10. ELITE PEOPLE

Similarly, stories about powerful or famous people are more newsworthy, on the whole, than those who are poor or unknown because the actions of the former are liable to be of greater consequence or interest. Celebrity stories have become particularly valuable because they encapsulate extraordinary levels of wealth, power and influence at the same time as having proximity and relevance to the lives of ordinary people (from relationships to babies to weight loss, for example), engendering identification and empathy (see Cashmore 2014).

### 11. PERSONIFICATION

Personification refers to the extent to which a story can be represented through a focus on the intentions, actions or emotions of individuals. Rather than emphasising the determination of life by structural forces outside people's control, news tends to present a world dominated by individual morals, decisions and behaviour. Such a focus is felt to engender identification and emotional engagement from users in a way that emphasis on broader societal structures cannot. The notion of personification helps explain the increasing emphasis on human interest stories, including those about crime, celebrities, disasters and the over-coming of adversity – as well as the tendency to tell stories about structures or policies through an emphasis on individuals.

### 12. NEGATIVITY

Finally, Galtung and Ruge argue that negative news stories dominate the news agenda because they tend to fit well with other news values. Negative stories, they argue, often concern discrete short-term events, are easier to present in an unambiguous manner and tend to involve rare or unexpected phenomena. A fall in a nation's crime figures may well receive less coverage than a particular one-off criminal incident on the same day. As well as being a negative rather than a positive crime story, such an incident is likely to fit better with established expectations, offer greater potential with respect to personalisation and form a self-contained story with clear villains and victims.

### OUT OF DATE?

Since Galtung and Ruge developed their explanation, other theorists have sought to adapt or expand on their schema (e.g. Harcup and O'Neil 2001) while some have dismissed their work as unsuited to the analysis of twentieth century news (Brighton and Foy 2007). Amalgamating the categories developed by a range of scholars, including Galtung and Ruge, Harrison (2006) identifies the following largely self-explanatory categories as of particular importance to story selection: availability of pictures or film; short dramatic occurrences; novelty value; capable of simple reporting; grand scale; negative; unexpected; expected; relevance/meaning; similar events already in news; balanced programme; elite people/nations; personal or human interest framing.

The value of more recent work in clarifying existing themes and identifying the importance to contemporary news of criteria such as visual imagery and recency/immediacy is clear. We might also want to consider adding the theme of *sexual appeal or intrigue* as a distinct category in itself, particularly in light of the orientation and content of click-driven online news sites. Nevertheless, it is striking how closely compatible Harrison's amalgamated list is with the original Galtung and Ruge model, something that arguably renders suggestions that the latter is entirely unsuited to contemporary news wide of the mark.

### CASE STUDY: MAJOR TERRORIST ATTACK STORIES

The biggest news story around the world in the last few decades was the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11th, 2001. The newsworthiness of the story may

seem obvious, but it serves as a valuable case study with which to illustrate the continuing usefulness of much of Galtung and Ruge's model. A clear set of events unfolded in a manner compatible with the frequency of publication of newspapers and the desire for immediacy that characterises online and television news coverage. The amplitude and unexpectedness of the events was enormous, as was their potential for negativity – the tallest buildings in the world were destroyed, the most powerful country in the world was being attacked, the explosions, fires and falling buildings were as dramatic and spectacular as one could imagine and the human costs were extensive. The event had the potential to be presented in simple, unambiguous terms and also had a clear personal angle, with respect to the presentation of violent, destructive attackers and helpless, distraught victims. The event involved an elite nation, a variety of elite people and offered cultural proximity for some nations and relevance for others. The story also involved elements of predictability, cohering with some Western stereotypes of extremist Muslim fanatics, for example. And it offered a clear demonstration of *continuity*, the slightest new development or speculation dominating the news agenda for days, weeks and months afterwards. Perhaps the only factor it failed to satisfy is *composition*, as the story was so big that its relationship to other stories was of little consequence. It became what Liebes (1998) terms a 'disaster marathon', in that real-time news devoted most if not all of their time to a single unfolding story for several days.

More recently, the terrorist attacks on Paris in November 2015 gave rise to prominent and ongoing coverage that often took 'disaster marathon' form. Although the attacks were smaller in scale and less visibly spectacular than the September 11th attacks, they satisfied many of the same news values. Interestingly, however, the coverage of the Paris attacks also generated public debate about the priorities of Western news providers. Of particular concern to some critics was the stark contrast between wall-to-wall coverage of Paris and minimal coverage of a terrorist bomb attack orchestrated by the same group in Lebanon a day earlier. Both attacks had claimed scores of lives and tapped into similar news values, but the stark difference in levels of coverage illustrated the extent to which news agendas can be determined by a combination of perceived cultural proximity and the elite status of nations such as France. The disparity also demonstrated the importance of unexpectedness as a news value in that, for complex reasons, in much Western public perception, a deadly terrorist attack in France felt more unusual, surprising and arresting than an attack on Lebanon.

### CONSTRUCTING STORIES

According to Bell, journalists are 'the professional story tellers of our age' (1991: 147). Having selected particular events on the basis of their story-potential, they and their editors make a series of decisions about how to turn them into a good story, arranging headline, commentary text, images, illustrations and/or film and/or audio footage accordingly. Each element will connect to the broader *angle* on the story the outlet is seeking to achieve. As well as determining what will make a good story in the first place, news values influence the version of events constructed. An event selected on the basis of its potential as a human interest story will be represented with particular emphasis on this angle. Conversely, a story

which fits awkwardly with some news values may be constructed in a manner which attempts to compensate for this. Consider the increasing focus on individual personalities in political news stories, for example.

Semiology and discourse analysis (see Chapter 4) can help us understand how different elements of news stories work together to create a particular angle or impression. Headlines, images, footage, music and commentary all can be viewed as sets of signifiers that invoke particular connotations, while the written or spoken language used can be analysed with respect to vocabulary, syntax, grammar and other features. It can be particularly helpful to think about news content as sets of paradigmatic selections and syntagmatic combinations (Hartley 1982).

Focused on comparing each element of a news report with alternatives that might have been used, paradigmatic analysis reminds us that, for every headline, caption, photo or interview quote included, others were rejected. Let's take the example of images. One of the best-known media clichés is that the camera never lies. Yet each image captures a selective viewpoint and editors often select one or two images from a range of possibles. Paradigmatic analysis helps us understand such decisions and their impact on the interpretations readers are being invited to make. If a murder story includes a large black and white close-up of the scowling face of the perpetrator, we might ask why a close-up rather than a medium or distanced shot, why a scowling face rather than a smiling one, why black and white reproduction rather than colour and, indeed, why an image of the perpetrator rather than, say, the head of the police investigation.

The use of language in news stories is equally important. Headlines identify the outlet's main angle and influence our interpretation of the story. They can also be analysed using a paradigmatic approach to discourse analysis focused on the selection of words. If presented with the hypothetical headline 'Terrorist Killed by US Drone Strike' we might seek to better understand the likely connotations by comparing the words present with possible alternatives. Why not 'bomb' instead of 'strike' for example, why 'terrorist' rather than 'father' or 'residents', and why 'killed' rather than 'assassinated'? The idea here is not necessarily to infer that the words used are 'wrong' but rather to understand what impact the choices made have upon preferred meanings.

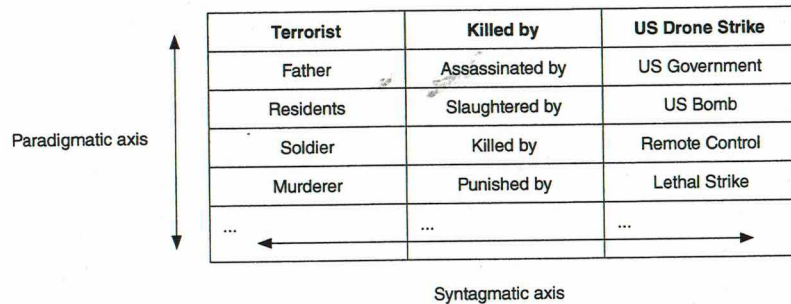


Figure 7.2 Simplified illustration of syntagmatic and paradigmatic news analysis

Syntagmatic analysis, meanwhile, involves an assessment of the semantic impact of the way story components have been arranged and combined. Therefore, having examined each of the words in our headline separately, we then need to consider how they work together (see Figure 7.2). The term 'strike', it could be argued, implies a clean, precise attack, something reinforced by the emphasis on the single 'terrorist' who has been killed, rather than, for example, any other people who happened to be in the vehicle, building or area. As well as inferring a single casualty, the emphasis on 'terrorist' serves to dehumanise the person identified, reduce them to the status of inhuman enemy and protect the audience from mixed feelings about the event. The decision to use 'killed' rather than 'assassinated', meanwhile, avoids connotations of possible illegality. Taken together, it could be argued the headline infers a precisely targeted attack with a single casualty whose terrorist status justifies the attack. The audience, it could be argued, is protected from worrying about who else might have been hurt, injured or otherwise affected and reassured as to the precision, cleanliness and, perhaps, justified nature of contemporary warfare as carried out by the US. This example is a hypothetical one and it is, of course, vital to understand that such interpretations are to an extent subjective. Nevertheless, it is reflective of numerous recent media stories involving US interventions in Iraq and Syria and also connects to academic analyses of previous wars, including the Gulf Wars of 1990 and 2003, in which US and UK authorities sought to promote the use of terminology such as 'surgical strikes' that inferred the cleanliness and precision of contemporary military technologies as a means to maintain public support (Allen and Zelizer 2004).

On a broader scale, syntagmatic analysis emphasises the context into which individual components are placed. A piece of video footage may be open to a range of interpretations, but simultaneous audio commentary or on-screen text often serves to clarify. The presence of on-screen captions such as 'Striking Back' and 'War on Terror' which accompanied footage of post-September 11th US military action in Afghanistan in 2001 helped frame such pictures as depicting a just response to terrorist provocation rather than, for example, an attack on a sovereign nation. And if a black and white mug-shot of a perpetrator of violent crime is juxtaposed with a colour picture of the victim smiling with her family, then the combination may contribute to a powerful narrative involving an innocent, family-oriented victim slain by a ruthless, heartless villain.

Because news representations of events revolve around story-telling, narrative analysis can also be valuable in making sense of them. News stories often approximate elements of the characters and structure of fictional stories (Lule 2001). When reporting crime stories, media often strive to construct idyllic representations of victims, whose normal, happy family life is cruelly disrupted or ended by an inherently cruel, villainous perpetrator. Such a depiction activates news values of clarity and predictability through drawing on deeply embedded conventions of fiction running through countless fairy tales, children's cartoons and movies. The ability to replicate elements of familiar fictional plots is part of what makes stories attractive to media as well as an influence on the version of such stories we are presented with. In addition to the victim and the villain, the hero is another favoured character, part of what makes rescue stories – particularly if they involve women, children or cute animals – particularly newsworthy.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OUTLETS

One of the criticisms of attempts to develop universal sets of news values is that they can gloss over potentially significant differences between one outlet and another that affect both the selection and construction of stories.

### MEDIUM

News on outlets that allow greater frequency of update tends to be dominated by recency and immediacy. Covering breaking stories faster than one's competitors and continually updating content is an increasing priority for online news sites and television news channels. Both seek to generate an emphasis on fast-moving real-time coverage, the increasing use of regularly updated live-blogs on some news sites replicating the continuous coverage that characterises news channels. In contrast, print newspapers provide a more structured, tightly prepared presentation, with particular emphasis, where possible, on carefully planned exclusives. As a result of not being confined to a serial real-time stream, both newspapers and their online siblings also can cover a far larger overall number of stories and features than television or radio news and many have responded to declining print circulation by increasing their overall quantity and range of content.

News coverage on outlets that enable effective visual communication, meanwhile, tends to place particular emphasis on this (Harrison 2006). In particular, the availability of enticing footage of dramatic or emotional events often results in prioritisation of a story and, particularly on television news, journalists will prioritise visual angles on stories they cover. Visual emphasis on sexualised female images of one form or another is a further notable feature driving story selection and construction on some online news sites, including – though not limited to – *Mail Online*, whose highly successful business model relies at least in part on the display on the right hand side of the site of regularly updated images of conventionally attractive celebrities and other women in revealing clothes. While also a feature of some offline outlets, such imagery has become of particular importance online, acting as effective 'click-bait' on a medium that is saturated with content and that allows precise measurement of numbers of views for each unit of content.

### STYLE AND MARKET POSITION

News outlets of the same medium also can differ in respect of their style and approach. In the UK, distinctions often are drawn between populist 'red-top' newspapers like *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror* and highbrow or 'quality' publications like *The Daily Telegraph*. The former adopt an informal, opinionated style, place strong emphasis on enticing illustrations and are oriented to personalised human interest stories, celebrity gossip, sports and the construction of sensation and emotion. Arguably this amounts to a particularly strict and intensive application of the kind of news values outlined earlier. In contrast 'quality' newspapers have been able to apply at least some of these news values somewhat more loosely, placing emphasis – at least some of the time – on in-depth coverage of complex politics, financial and international stories and adopting a somewhat less individualised tone.

Such distinctions with respect to style and approach reflect the need to deliver consistent, clearly defined and loyal audiences to advertisers. Broadly speaking, more populist news providers tend to be associated with audiences of a lower social class position on average and, consistent with this, go out of their way to orient their presentation, style and subject matter to 'ordinary' people. Importantly, though, readers of popular formats also tend to be more demographically diverse than those of high-brow providers, which are dominated by highly educated professionals. Curran and Seaton (2010: 96) explain that this reflects long-standing differences in funding, with quality papers reliant on delivering narrow, high-spending, elite audiences to advertisers willing to pay a premium, and the popular press more focused on attracting advertisers through quantity of readers.

### POLITICAL STANCE

With the exception of those operating under statutory requirements to be balanced (UK television news, for example), news providers are often associated with a particular political orientation and this too affects news values. A pro-Republican outlet in the US may devote greater space to a story about a Democrat political scandal than a Republican one, for example. Editorial positioning forms an additional element of the targeting of a loyal readership, but it can also be influenced by the views and interests of proprietors. Few would regularly adopt a position at odds with their readers, but as we saw in Chapter 3, a succession of media 'barons', from William Hearst to Rupert Murdoch, have used their newspapers as a means to promote their own political agendas (Eldridge et al. 1997).

### SIMILARITIES: BACK TO BIAS AND IDEOLOGY?

In spite of the importance of such differences, if we consider the range of conceivable versions of news at a given time, then arguably it is the similarities between outlets that are more noteworthy. For this reason, the efforts of Galtung and Ruge and others retain value in seeking to map out the priorities that underlie so much journalism. Such approaches, however, do not go as far as some Marxist thinkers, who argue, not only that news collectively presents a monolithic and selective version of the world, but that this representation is systematically oriented towards a bourgeois, neo-liberal perspective. Whilst they do lament the 'distorted' view of the world created by news media, Galtung and Ruge interpret this as a complex set of biases attributable to journalistic procedures and priorities. For Stuart Hall (1973: 182), such identification of what he terms 'the formal elements in news making' is a useful step, but one that fails to identify the ways news values trigger, reinforce or 'index' the circulation of dominant ways of thinking about the world.

News values, from this viewpoint, are rooted in ideology: they emanate from and reinforce an existing consensus controlled by the powerful (see Chapter 6). We might argue, for example, that an emphasis on personalisation in news is rooted in pro-establishment, neo-liberal ideas about individual choice, sovereignty and responsibility that serve to obscure the ways structures of inequality constrain individual lives. Likewise, dominant ideas may be strengthened by a tendency to prioritise cultural proximity, to tap into what confirms existing

expectations and indeed to focus on celebrity gossip, sex or spectacular negative events. Our engagement with extraordinary murders, explosions and disasters, alongside our addiction to the spectacular intrigue of the lives of the rich and famous, serves to reinforce the normality and desirability of the everyday status quo within our living rooms, it might be argued, and to distract us from the policies or agendas that constrain our lives.

## CLASS BIAS

Marxists, then, argue that the selection and construction of stories reflects systematic political and class bias as much as it does formal news values. In the 1970s and 80s, the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) claimed through a series of powerful content analysis studies that UK news consistently favoured capitalist, middle-class messages that reinforced the existing political order (1976a; 1976b; 1982). Television coverage of a series of industrial disputes was accused of bias in favour of employers and against striking workers. Greater attention is deemed to have been afforded, for example, to the negative impacts of strikes on the economy or consumers, than to the poor pay and working conditions against which workers were protesting. Also, while striking workers were typically depicted in the context of the 'event' imagery of picket lines and protests, employers appeared as part of what were deemed 'factual' sequences, through footage of them working in offices. Employers and government ministers, meanwhile, are deemed to have been given an easier time by interviewers than trade union representatives. For the GUMG, this represented just one example of the exclusion of working-class viewpoints by middle-class journalists who had little connection with or understanding of them (1982). Given this inevitable class bias, as the GUMG saw it, the aspirations of the country's then television news providers to impartiality are regarded as an ideological mask – a means of parading subjective class ideology as objective reporting.

Having carried out his own analysis during the same period, however, Harrison (1985) rejects the GUMG's accusations of class bias, arguing that such assertions were themselves biased by the group's Marxist understandings of the world. The GUMG's content analysis is deemed to have been selective and its criticisms questionable. While it is far from easy to arbitrate between such competing versions of the same coverage, there are also some other criticisms of the GUMG that are worthy of consideration. Nick Stevenson (2002), for example, questions what he deems an ambiguous position on the question of objectivity, whereby news was seemingly attacked by the GUMG both for its lack of objectivity and its quest for objectivity. Absolute neutrality may indeed be unattainable, argues Stevenson, but an aspiration to treat issues in a fair-minded, balanced way may be preferable to the abandonment of such goals. A further problem with the GUMG's analysis, identified by Stevenson (2002), is their emphasis on the personal middle-class background of journalists as the primary explanation for biased coverage. While personal background may indeed have been of some significance, the extent of the emphasis on it appears to neglect the role of the institutional environment, working practices and priorities under which journalists operate. If Galtung and Ruge underestimated the connection between news values and broader ideology, then the Glasgow group's approach to ideology and bias may have benefitted from greater attention to the kind of operational factors that drive news priorities.

## INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

Other theorists *have* attributed biased or ideological meanings to the way news providers are owned, financed, controlled and operated. As we have seen, Herman and Chomsky's analysis of the filtering of media by powerful owners, advertisers and interest groups focuses especially on news and 'factual' content (see Chapter 6). According to this view, subordinate or oppositional events, issues and voices are excluded because the news production system is controlled by, paid for, fed by and centred upon vested interests.

Sure enough, news is overwhelmingly controlled by large-scale and increasingly concentrated corporate interests. In 2008, two thirds of UK national newspaper sales were controlled by just three corporations (Curran and Seaton 2010). In turn, news providers themselves are reliant for much of their content upon a small number of news agencies, or 'wire services' that make money through generating and providing content to subscribing outlets. The majority of international news originates from just three of these: Reuters, Associated Press and Agence France Presse, who each have numerous local branches around the world. A UK study by Lewis and colleagues (2008) found that 49% of press stories had originated from copy supplied by news agencies.

A further vital source of news copy is provided by press releases and other activities engineered by public relations (PR) organisations seeking to promote the interests of their clients, who include individuals, corporations, politicians or other organisations. The objective of press releases is to feed ready-made stories to journalists in the hope of getting good publicity for their client. By writing-up events, product launches, announcements or research findings in a length and style suited to news, PR professionals make it as simple as possible for journalists to complete and file the story. In a scenario in which it is becoming harder to make news profitable and where journalists are expected to produce 'more and more with fewer and fewer resources' (Davis 2013: 96), the number of stories that originate from press releases and other PR activities has sharply increased. Lewis and colleagues' aforementioned UK study (2008) found that 19% of press and 17% of broadcast news consisted of entirely or mainly reproduced public relations material, while McChesney and Nichols (2010) suggest that 50% of US news originates from press releases. That so much of the news we read is originating from the paid-for marketing materials of vested interests has significant implications for notions of journalistic independence and implies further concentration of news agendas in the hands of the powerful (Davis 2013).

The impacts of reliance on advertising, meanwhile, look set to become more stark as news shifts further away from direct consumer payment and towards online open access. It isn't only that "don't bite the hand that feeds you" is written on every newsroom wall', as Bob Franklin (1997: 95) puts it, but also that advertiser funding has a broader influence on the kinds of news that are profitable. In the print newspaper market, the rewards for delivering high-spending premium consumers to advertisers has created a market-bias towards bourgeois-oriented political news. Curran and Seaton (2010) point out that, in 2009, half the UK's daily newspapers were competing for just 25% of newspaper readers, such is the premium paid by advertisers for access to this affluent minority. The situation appears to be similar for online news where, in 2012, the published cost per thousand readers of a mid-page banner advertisement on the *Financial Times'* online site was over eight times

higher than that of *The Mirror* and four times that of the highly successful *Mail Online* site (Jackson 2012). For Curran and Seaton, such patterns lead to reinforcement of inequalities of power. Serious, detailed coverage of politics is largely confined to publications oriented to elite consumers who, as a consequence, are more informed and influential than the majority of readers, who are left with populist journalism whose financial model requires audience maximisation through sensationalised coverage of crime, celebrity, sex, sport and personalised forms of politics (Curran and Seaton 2010: 91).

### THE POWERFUL INFLUENCING THE POWERFUL

Importantly, the ideological influence of news organisations not only involves the possibility of directly influencing audiences. Every bit as important is the direct influence they can have over politicians and other powerful figures as a result of their *perceived* ability to affect public opinion. In the UK, the perceived power of *The Sun* to influence voting behaviour, for example, has prompted politicians to go to considerable lengths to secure its support. *The Sun's* decision to support David Cameron's Conservative Party in the 2010 General Election was accompanied by extensive interaction between Cameron and senior figures in the then News International both before and after he became Prime Minister in 2010 (Gaber 2012). In particular, Cameron developed close relationships with Rebekah Brooks, then Chief Executive of News International, and Andy Coulson, former editor of *The News of the World*, who became Cameron's Communications Director. Such a situation renders it hard to dismiss the notion that news can serve powerful interests.

In the UK, the links between news organisations and powerful political and public figures have been illuminated by the Leveson Inquiry, set up in 2011 following revelations of widespread illegal phone-hacking by major newspapers, including *The Sun's* then sister paper *The News of the World*. For several years, the newspaper had been hacking the phones of politicians, celebrities and members of the public as a means to get exclusive stories. More significantly, politicians, police and others had failed to speak out or properly investigate this, in spite of clear evidence as to the scale of illegal activity. What apparently amounted to a collective cover-up appears to have reflected a culture of carefully cultivated personal relationships between News International staff and high ranking police and politicians – alongside an intense concern among the latter two groups to manage press coverage of themselves and their organisations by maximising positive stories and minimising negative ones.

For, as well as proving invaluable friends, powerful newspaper groups can make career-threatening enemies for public figures, not least if they have access to private phone records. The perception that newspapers can make or break political parties, institutional reputations and individual careers, then, had apparently enabled the country's most powerful newspaper group to wield the most extensive influence (Gaber 2012). Ultimately, the phone-hacking scandal resulted in the resignations of Andy Coulson, Rebekah Brooks and others, the closure of the *News of the World* and substantial embarrassment for its parent company. There was also much talk of tighter regulation of newspapers, with the Leveson Report eventually recommending in 2013 a form of self-regulation underpinned by the state. A few years later, however, public interest in the case has died down, attempts to create tighter regulation have foundered and few believe anything to have substantially changed in the relationship between newspapers and politicians.

### INFOTAINMENT AND THE PERSUIT OF CLICKS

For some commentators, concern relates as much to the notion that news is becoming increasingly superficial as to the identification of explicit bias or ideology (Gans 2004). There has for some decades been concern about the light, entertainment-oriented approach of overtly populist outlets such as the UK's 'red-top' newspapers, but more recently concern has focused on the apparent drift of *all* news outlets towards such an agenda. 'Quality' newspapers, for example, have been accused of responding to declining circulation figures by placing greater and greater emphasis upon sports coverage, entertainment news and a range of consumer and lifestyle issues (Barnett 1998; Temple 2006).

Similar concerns have been expressed in relation to what is sometimes deemed a populist shift in television news in recent decades (Dahlgren 1995; Langer 1998). The special status afforded by US networks to news as a subsidised flagship of brand prestige was diluted by the intensification of competition brought about by multi-channel television in the 1990s. Increased pressure for news to be profitable in its own right prompted a transformation towards so-called *infotainment*. Informing audiences about world events in a thorough, trustworthy, fair-minded manner was no longer sufficient – they also needed to be entertained. Emphasis shifted towards those serious stories with the greatest immediate visual, emotional and human interest potential, alongside an increasing proportion of lighter content such as sports and entertainment. According to Postman and Powers (1992), the underlying concern of news producers increasingly was to try to 'grab you before you zap away to another news show' (cited in Langer 1998: 4). A few years later Bob Franklin explored the extent to which the minutiae of television news was becoming driven by viewing figures, quoting a senior UK news executive as follows:

I know on a minute by minute basis what time people turn off and on during the previous night's news. I'm having that developed into a schematic analysis for the production team to see, so we are more and more focused on the maximization of the audience ratings. (cited in Franklin 1997: 256)

There can be little doubt that, since that time, such pressures have intensified. An emphasis on presentation and tempo has become particularly paramount, with pre-recorded reports as concise and fast-moving as possible and snappy exchanges between presenters and reporters preceding rapid movement onto the next story. The sense of urgency is further strengthened by a focus on live, breaking news. Bold 'LIVE' captions, rolling on-screen tickers summarising latest developments and speculative two-ways with a range of reporters, witnesses or commentators at the scene are intended to captivate audiences into the feeling of watching events as they happen, alongside dramatic, spectacular and emotional footage wherever possible.

In recent years, audience-maximisation pressures are becoming particularly acute in the case of online news sites, where the availability of precise information on the number of clicks, likes and social media mentions generated by each image, video or article is beginning to drive news agendas as never before. As part of what Anderson (2011) refers to as the 'culture of the click', homepages are constantly updated and reorganised, while new stories are commissioned according to data about what audiences are viewing and sharing. Such data are becoming integral to newsroom cultures and priorities, leading to increasing pressure to balance existing



journalistic values with the relentless pursuit of clicks (Lee et al. 2014). Alongside a broader pressure on journalists to produce more content and on outlets to deliver stories relating to audience trends as fast as possible, such pressures are argued to be contributing to a climate in which journalistic originality, depth, care and quality are being sacrificed in favour of content that is quick, inexpensive, new and immediately appealing (Davies 2008).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, meanwhile, studies indicate that most-clicked stories tend frequently to fall within what some term 'soft news', which does not address public affairs or politics (Bokzkovski and Peer 2011). In the case of *Mail Online*'s site, the formula for success has centred, amongst other things, on a stream of constantly updated celebrity stories accompanied by images of attractive, largely uncovered female bodies on a right hand panel, something that contrasts at least in some respects with sister paper, *The Daily Mail*'s more conservative agenda. And although much of their emphasis remains on more weighty stories, even more 'serious' providers such as the *Guardian* usually feature a substantial number of images of celebrities and sports personalities on their main home pages designed to attract attention and clicks – and the effectiveness of these in generating views is clear from the outlet's constantly updated list of 'most viewed' stories.

The difficulty with all this, for some critics, is that, much though they may enjoy being entertained by this fast-paced emphasis on spectacle, personality, entertainment, sex and emotion, audiences may be unlikely to develop from such infotainment a useful critical understanding of the social and political world. As well as becoming increasingly distracted by trivial matters emanating from lifestyle, celebrity and sports journalism, people's understanding of those serious issues touched on may increasingly centre on the immediate emotion and spectacle of incidents, rather than the broader picture of which they are a part, or so it is feared. As Peter Dahlgren (1995: 56) put it in relation to television news two decades ago: 'these production values of rawness and immediacy... do not necessarily enhance our understanding: the close-ups on trees may obscure the forest.'

## CONCLUSION: SIGNS OF HOPE?

There are some important criticisms we might make of those who bemoan the ideological role of news or the perceived drift towards infotainment. Notions of news and news values as rooted in ideology are subject to the criticisms of broader Marxist approaches to ideology outlined in Chapter 6. Not only can they treat viewers as largely passive dupes, manipulated by dominant meanings, but they also may under-estimate the increasing diversity of versions of news on offer to contemporary consumers. The overall differences between the editorial stances of mainstream outlets may not amount to as much as we might hope, but especially if one takes into account the increasing range of columnists who contribute to the online versions of some newspapers, it would be wrong to say that the version of the world we are presented with is entirely monolithic.

Meanwhile, contemporary digital and online environments are playing host to a massive increase in the range of alternative sources of news and comment available, from sites oriented towards the perspectives of ethnic or sexual minority populations to individual bloggers focusing on a range of issues and concerns. Bringing together news making and

dissemination technologies, mobile media such as phones and tablets, alongside other digital devices, increasingly are enabling ordinary members of the public to contribute to, produce, disseminate or analyse news in a range of ways. From distributing eye-witness images to news organisations, to publishing DIY video or blog reports on events, such activities are sometimes referred to as *citizen journalism* and they play an increasing role in the range of versions of world events available to us (Allan and Thorsen 2009; Gillmor 2006).

Particular attention in recent years has been focused upon the role of the exchange of comments, images, stories and footage on social media as an influence on various stages of the news process. Not only do newspapers closely gauge and respond to social media mentions of stories, but it is also increasingly common for stories to develop independently via a combination of citizen journalism and social media sharing – and for news organisations to cover such stories only once they have gained grassroots momentum. In 2014, news outlets across the world ended up covering a story about prominent UK scientist Tim Hunt making apparently derogatory comments about female scientists at a conference. The story had come to light as a result of one of the delegates at the conference tweeting about what he had said and subsequent retweeting and discussion on Twitter, Facebook and other platforms on a massive scale. As it happens, there are ongoing controversies surrounding the accuracy and impact of this particular story – something that perhaps draws attention to potential difficulties with the notion of news generated from social media. Nevertheless, the propensity for the public to distribute stories and exert collective influence over the news agendas of major providers is viewed by some as a form of democratisation (Shirky 2008).

It is equally important to remember that, on occasion, mainstream media outlets, themselves, have brought about change through holding those in power to account, something which sits uneasily with more deterministic models of ideology. *The Washington Post* and *New York Times*, among other publications, played a key role in the exposure of a US political scandal known as Watergate, which ultimately prompted the Republican president, Richard Nixon, to resign. Meanwhile, although the episode demonstrated plenty that was wrong about the power of news providers, the UK phone-hacking scandal was itself exposed as a result of ongoing investigative journalism from the *Guardian* newspaper. That newspaper was also involved, alongside the *New York Times*, in reporting an incendiary series of revelations about the surveillance activities of US and UK intelligence agencies originating from whistle-blower and fugitive Edward Snowden in 2013. Those who subscribe to notions of news as ideology may claim, with some justification, that such instances relate to the exposure of selected excesses, while leaving broader systems of power unscathed. Nevertheless, they illustrate that the relations between news providers and other powerful groups can sometimes be far from cosy or amiable.

Though there is some merit in their observations, those who criticise the perceived 'dumbing down' of television news, meanwhile, sometimes appear to assume that news either was, could or should ever be an untarnished source of objective, rational information (Langer 1998). As we have seen, news is always partial and biased as a result of the circumstances in which it is produced. This includes the version of news often longed for by critics of dumbing down, which tend to represent a particular rationalist, dispassionate and, some would argue, bourgeois approach to the world (Temple 2006). In implicitly lusting after this elite form of news, Temple argues, such critics fail to recognise the potential for contemporary news formats to engage members of the population who would otherwise be excluded.

Some years earlier, Fiske (1991b) argued that if ordinary people are to engage with news and think about events then producers must find ways to appeal to their tastes and sensibilities, something that may include rejecting out-dated paternalist approaches. According to this view, popular news may sometimes amount not to 'dumbing down' but 'reaching out' (Barnett 1998). Rather than dismissing popular news altogether, commentators such as Fiske, Temple and Dahlgren call for such providers to balance their emphasis on popular appeal with responsible, informative coverage of matters of importance (Dahlgren 2009).

None of this means that the concerns of critics of ideology or of infotainment are illusory or insignificant, however. The news values that govern the selection and construction of stories do result in the overall dominance of a restricted set of understandings of the world and, for better or worse, tend to be supportive of existing structures of power. Likewise, it is hard to dispute that the increasing focus of various news outlets on keeping audiences entertained and maximising clicks has resulted in an emphasis on immediacy and instant appeal and, at least sometimes, a reduction in depth and detail. It is important that academics continue to subject news to critical analysis in these and other respects. Such criticism should ask how representations are selected and constructed, hold the versions of the world with which we are presented to account and contribute to our ability to distinguish between more and less useful versions of news. As well as being subject to controversy and debate, however, such judgements will always be relative ones, for ultimately all news is borne of selection, manufacture and bias.

## QUESTIONS/EXERCISES

- 1 How do the following terms relate to the process of news construction: gate-keeping; agenda setting; news values; selection; construction?
- 2 Visit the homepage of a major news outlet and assess the way the most prominent stories are positioned and covered in relation to Galtung and Ruge's list of news values. Which news values are particularly important for each story and are there any that appear particularly consistently?
- 3 Find an example of a crime story in a newspaper or on a news website. In what ways does the way the story is constructed draw upon familiar narrative structures or character types?
- 4
  - a) What is Hall's criticism of Galtung and Ruge's approach to news values?
  - b) What criticisms can be made of Marxist approaches to news?
  - c) Why should the increasing shift of news towards infotainment be the cause of concern? Are such concerns justified?
- 5 Does the increasing relationship between news and social media represent a positive or a negative development do you think? Why?

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Allan, S. and Thorsen, E. (eds) (2009) *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*. New York: Peter Lang – Collection of chapters focused upon different manifestations of 'citizen journalism'.

Cohen, S. and Young, J. (eds) (1973) *The Manufacture of News: Social Problems, Deviance and The Mass Media*. London: Constable – Classic collection on news, including crucial contributions by Galtung and Ruge and by Hall.

Glasgow University Media Group (1976a) *Bad News*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul – Famous content analysis of UK news coverage which accused the country's main broadcasters of systematic class bias.

Lee, A., Lewis, S. and Powers, M. (2014) 'Audience Clicks and News Placement: A Study of Time-Lagged Influence in Online Journalism', *Communication Research*, 41(4): 505–30 – Recent quantitative analysis of the significance of the measurement of clicks in the placement and prioritisation of news stories.

Temple, M. (2006) 'Dumbing Down is Good For You', *British Politics*, 1(2): 257–73. URL: [www.palgrave-journals.com/bp/journal/v1/n2/pdf/4200018a.pdf](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/bp/journal/v1/n2/pdf/4200018a.pdf) – Defends the popularisation of news on the basis that contemporary formats are more inclusive and less elitist than traditional approaches.