

5 SELECTION AND CONSTRUCTION

News values

Imagine a football game. The players are on the field going about the business of football. Their behaviour is full of purpose (to contain the initiatives of the other side and to gain the advantage for their own), and it is ordered, with shared rules, conventions and styles governing the unpredictable immediacy of the run of play. The spectators, for whom all this energy is expended, are absorbed in watching.

But on the sideline, player number twelve wants to get on to the pitch to take part, and to be seen by the spectators. How is the substitution to be done? If he leaps about, gesticulating wildly, his frantic antics might be noticed as a distraction and an amusement, but they won't get him on. To succeed he needs, first, to be known and recognized as a bona fide player. Second, he (or his accredited 'representative', the manager or coach) must go through an established routine to catch the referee's eye. And finally, some other player has to be displaced from the field to make room for him. Only then will he make his mark and, if he's lucky, gain the attention of the spectators.

Events don't get into the news simply by happening, no matter how frantically. They too must fit in with what is already there (just as a circus clown would find it hard to succeed as a sub for a football team, whatever the opposing fans may say). Events need to be known and recognized, coming from a known and trusted — and preferably a 'representative' — source. To win inclusion in any

particular news, they must fulfil a certain number of criteria; in short, they must be seen as newsworthy. Finally, newsworthy events themselves must jostle for inclusion in the limited number of slots available.

In order to pick out newsworthy events from the jostling crowd of clowns on the sidelines of their game, journalists use an informal paradigm of news values. In a famous study, Galtung and Ruge (1973) isolated a series of conditions which have to be fulfilled before an event is selected for attention. Some of these are general conditions, applicable not just to news, but to the perception of events at large. They apply to news-selection the world over. The others are more 'culture-bound'; these are the news values underlying selection in news media in the 'north-western corner of the world'. Here is their list of *general news values*:

1. *Frequency* The time-span taken by an event. Murders take very little time and their meaning is quickly arrived at. Hence their frequency fits that of daily newspapers and programmes. On the other hand, economic, social or cultural trends take very much longer to unfold and to be made meaningful: they are outside the frequency of daily papers. Thus they have to be 'marked' (if they are reported at all) by means of devices like the release of reports or statistics on a particular day.

2. *Threshold* The size of an event. There is a threshold below which an event will not be reported at all (varying in intensity between, for instance, local and national news). And once reported, there is a further threshold of drama: the bigger the story, the more added drama is needed to keep it going. War reporting is an example of this. Already very big news, its coverage is unlikely to increase unless an especially cataclysmic event happens. But of course the added drama does not have to originate in the event. After the murder of John Lennon, for example, events which in themselves would normally not reach the threshold of newsworthiness were made into dramatic stories in order to keep the pot boiling. Thus we read in the *Sun*

Heart-broken John Lennon fans in America are getting a helping hand with 'grief therapy'.

Special 'Grief Clinics' have been set up in New York to aid those who cannot cope with his death.

Hundreds of Beatle fans, ranging in age from 14 to 41, have called to join the groups. (etc.) (19 December 1980)

The same story appeared in that day's *Daily Express* – under the headline of 'Grief Clinics'.

3. *Unambiguity* The clarity of an event. Events don't have to be simple, necessarily (though that helps), but the range of possible meanings must be limited. In this way news-discourse differs radically from literary discourse. In news, the intrinsic *polysemic* (ambiguous – capable of generating many meanings) nature of both events and accounts of them is reduced as much as possible; in literature it is celebrated and exploited.

4. *Meaningfulness* (a) Cultural proximity: events that accord with the cultural background of the news-gatherers will be seen as more meaningful than others, and so more liable to be selected. This works in two ways. First, Islamic, third-world and oriental events may not be seen as self-evidently meaningful to Western reporters unlike European, American or even Russian events. Second, within 'our' culture, events connected with underprivileged or ethnic groups, with regions remote from the centralized bases of news organizations, or with specifically working-class culture, will be seen as less intrinsically meaningful than those associated with central, official, literate culture.

(b) Relevance: events in far-off cultures, classes or regions will nevertheless become newsworthy if they impinge on the news-gatherer's 'home' culture – usually in the form of a threat; as with OPEC and the (mostly Arab) countries with oil – their lifestyles, customs and beliefs are suddenly fascinating for Western journalists.

5. *Consonance* The predictability of, or desire for, an event. If the media expect something to happen, then it will. The classic case-study of this phenomenon is by Halloran *et al.* (1970) (summarized in Murdock 1973), where it was found that the news coverage of the anti-Vietnam war demonstration in Grosvenor Square, London, in 1968, concentrated almost exclusively on what was expected – namely violence. Very little occurred, but it was massively reported, whereas the issues at stake in the demonstration were ignored.

6. *Unexpectedness* The unpredictability, or rarity, of an event.

Of course it is within the *meaningful* (4) and the *consonant* (5) that the unexpected is to be found. Hence the 'newness' of unexpected events usually gets discovered in thoroughly familiar, expected contexts.

7. *Continuity* The 'running story'. If an event is covered, it will continue to be covered for some time.

8. *Composition* The mixture of different kinds of event. If a newspaper or TV bulletin is packed with major foreign stories, a relatively insignificant domestic story will be included to balance the mixture. Alternatively, if a major story is running, other similar events may be selected for inclusion in a 'round-up' of stories on that subject.

In addition to these eight general news values, Galtung and Ruge propose a further four which are of prime importance in western media. They are:

9. *Reference to élite nations* Stories about wars, elections and disasters are good examples of this tendency. Wars involving the USA, USSR, or forces explicitly allied to one or the other, will be reported, whereas others go virtually unnoticed – like the Indonesia/East Timor conflict, the Chad civil war and the Nicaraguan revolution. Elections in France, Germany and Italy will receive more coverage than those in Latin America, Africa, etc. And of course there is the famous head-count equation for disasters: disasters in Bangladesh, for example, need thousands or hundreds killed to reach the newsworthiness threshold, whereas those in 'élite' countries will be newsworthy with progressively lower body-counts.

10. *Reference to élite persons* Firstly because it is assumed their actions are more consequential than the daily activities of ordinary people – they 'affect our lives'. Secondly, the social activities of élite people can serve as representative actions – their weddings, opinions, nights out and domestic habits are taken to be of interest to us all, since we too engage in these things. But who cares how I wipe my nose, if we can watch Rod Stewart doing it?

11. *Personalization* Events are seen as the actions of people as individuals. Individual people are easier to identify – and to identify with – than structures, forces or institutions: hence 'the government' is often personalized as 'Mrs Thatcher', etc.

12. *Negativity* Bad news is good news. It is generally *unexpected* (6), *unambiguous* (3), it *happens quickly* (1), it is *consonant* (5) with general expectations about the state of the world, and hence its *threshold* (2) is lower than that for positive news.

These basic news values give a good idea of the kind of event that will survive the selection process. The list also provides clues as to the priority different stories will be given – the more of these conditions a given story fulfils, the bigger it will be. Take the murder of John Lennon. Its *frequency* was right (although it happened after the British dailies had 'gone to bed', so it was already a running story by the time they caught up on the following day); its *threshold* was no problem (although I heard one complaint on the radio that news editors are older than the generation for whom Lennon was significant, resulting in coverage which was deemed inadequate); it was certainly *unambiguous* and *meaningful* (everyone has heard of the Beatles); it was *consonant* in several ways – rock stars die young, New York is a violent city (much of the coverage centred on the twin themes of mugging and gun control), and modern society is characterized by the assassination of élite people by fame-seeking nutters; it was *unexpected*; it concerned two *élite nations* (Britain and the US); John Lennon is a prime *élite person*, whose place in the cult of *personality* (the 'star system') was of the first order; and it was *negative*. Hence its *continuity* was assured, and other killings were *composed* with it to form part of the same story. It had the lot.

However, there are certain stories which at first sight seem to achieve wide coverage without fulfilling any of these news values in an obvious way. An interesting recent example is one that concerns the theoretical perspective I've relied on in this book, that is, structuralism and semiotics. On the face of it an unlikely topic for full-page articles in the news pages of the national and Sunday papers, but suddenly in January-February 1981 they blossomed with bluffers' guides to structuralism. It was an attempt to clarify a dispute in the University of Cambridge, where a lecturer associated with structuralist writings, Colin MacCabe, was refused a permanent post. The way the dispute was reported did exploit a number of our news values (like personalization, negativity, reference to élite persons and institutions), but the news values themselves give little clue as to why the story was deemed newsworthy in the first place.

In fact the 'MacCabe Affair' provides us with a useful reminder.

News values can actually disguise the more important ideological determinants of a story. It might seem implausible to link the Cambridge dispute with a recently shown television drama series (*The History Man*), and to link both of these with the twin themes of government economic policy and public sector spending cuts. But it is noteworthy that this unusual conjuncture of fact, fiction and political economy did not go unnoticed at the time. Colin MacCabe was explicitly compared with Howard Kirk, the fictional character of *The History Man* (*Sunday Times*, 25 January 1981, p. 13) and within weeks the papers were giving prominent coverage to various plans for savings among universities and polytechnics, plans which included letting some go bankrupt. It may be that the 'newsworthiness' of the MacCabe Affair consisted in *making* the link between fiction and fact — by the time Cambridge itself has been tarred with *The History Man's* brush, the credibility of any opposition to the cuts is seriously undermined. As Terence Hawkes reported in *Time Out*:

Significantly it was *The Listener* which overtly imprinted the model onto the real world by roguishly placing a still from *The History Man's* credits on the cover of the issue in which Noel Annan was recently advocating health-giving university cuts. The political implications of those cuts were thus easily masked and objections to them stifled. (*Time Out*, 20 March 1981, p. 54).

Of course news values are neither natural nor neutral. They form a code which sees the world in a very particular (even peculiar) way. News values are, in fact, an ideological code — as we shall soon see. Meanwhile, one of their ideological implications can be stated here, interestingly in the words of a working journalist who uses them every day. Writing in the *New Statesman*, the journalist Anna Coote outlines what news values are, and how they are ranked. She goes on to suggest they are fundamentally sexist:

We concur in decisions about what is a 'good story' and what is not, what is central and what is peripheral, what is 'hard' news and what is 'soft'. . . . These [news values] have been developed, of course, by white, middle-class men, generation upon generation of them, forming opinions, imposing them, learning them and passing them on as Holy Writ. We have inherited a *hierarchy* of news values. What are the major stories of the day? The

economy, industry, politics (of Whitehall and Westminster), foreign affairs, and so on, down the scale. A 'hard' story is generally deemed to be one based on facts, on something precise which has happened, in a particular sphere already labelled 'Important'. A story based on description, individual experience, nuance — a 'human interest' story, perhaps, or something which has happened in a sphere *not* labelled 'Important' — may be considered 'good', but is nevertheless 'soft' or 'offbeat'. Why? Where did these ideas come from? Are they objective, universal, or simply man-made? (*New Statesman*, 2 January 1981, p. 11)

Clearly news values are man-made, in both the generic and the gender sense of 'man'. But it seems an individual journalist, whether male or female, is unable to escape their institutionalized force (presented as the *right* way of doing journalism), even when s/he contests their ideology.

Mapping reality: consensus and dissent

While news values are crucial in the paradigmatic *selection* of events, they play only a part in the syntagmatic *construction* of those events into stories. Just as our football player, once selected, must play by the rules and in the spirit of the game (so he can't suddenly decide to pick up the ball, trade blows with an opponent, or join the opposing team), so news events are assigned to their 'proper' place in the order of things. As Hall *et al.* point out,

If newsmen did not have available — in however routine a way — such cultural 'maps' of the social world, they could not 'make sense' for their audiences of the unusual, unexpected and unpredictable events which form the basic content of what is 'newsworthy'. (1978, p. 54)

At the most general level, these maps assume society to be:

1. *Fragmented* into distinct spheres — sport, politics, family life, etc.
2. Composed of *individual persons* who are in control of their destiny, so that actions are the result of their personal intentions, motives and choices. 'Newsworthy' people are usually associated with only one sphere of society.
3. *Hierarchical* by nature: some people, events, spheres are more

important than others. And the hierarchy is *centralized* both socially and regionally.

4. *Consensual* by nature. The notion of 'the consensus' is a basic organizing principle in news production. It is worth looking at in some detail.

Consensus

First, consensus requires the notion of unity: one nation, one people, one society, often simply translated into 'ours' – 'our' industry, 'our' economy, 'our' nuclear deterrent, police force, balance of payments, etc. Within the notion of unity goes the notion of diversity, plurality, fragmentation. The different spheres of society interlock in institutions, organizations and personnel, each with its own special interests, idiosyncracies and fund of stories. Within the notion of fragmentation goes the notion of hierarchy, with all the spheres ranked in order of importance and all, of course, represented by their associated personalizations. Hence, as Hall argues,

Newspapers are full of the actions, situations and attributes of 'elite persons'. The prestigious are part of the necessary spectacle of news production – they people and stabilize its environment. But the very notion of 'elite persons' has the 'routine knowledge of social structures' inscribed within it. . . . 'Elite persons' make the news because power, status and celebrity are monopolies in the institutional life of our society. In C. Wright Mill's phrase, 'elite persons' have colonized 'the means of history making' in our society. (1973, p. 183)

Of course there are major contradictions within the consensual model. It requires both unity and fragmentation, both the notion of 'elite persons' and the 'assumption that we also all have roughly the same *interests* in the society, and that we all roughly have an equal share of power in the society' (Hall *et al.* 1978, p. 55). This 'equal share' is of course institutionalized in 'our parliamentary system', 'our democratic institutions', and in the guaranteed 'freedoms' of speech, of access to wealth in the 'free market economy', and so on. Disputes have 'normal channels' in which reconciliation can be effected, whether those disputes are personal (the law), commercial (the law), industrial (ACAS as a last resort after institutionalized 'free collective bargaining'), or political (parliamentary or local politics).

We are left with a closed societal circle, with everyone inside. In the consensual model, there are no dissidents, since everybody has access to the expression and resolution of their grievances in the official establishment of social institutions.

Hall *et al.* see this 'background assumption' as crucial, going far beyond the recognition of shared language and knowledge:

In recent years, however, this basic cultural fact about society has been raised to an extreme ideological level. Because we occupy the same society and belong to roughly the same 'culture', it is assumed that there is, basically, only *one* perspective on events: that provided by what is sometimes called *the* culture, or . . . *the* 'central value system'. (ibid.)

Hence 'this view denies any major structural discrepancies between different groups, or between the very different maps of meaning in a society' (ibid., p. 55), and so it takes on political significance. Groups outside the consensus are seen as deviant and marginal, be they skin-heads or strikers. The bread and butter of news is conflict, violence, rivalry and disagreement. But for all these negatives to be newsworthy, a prior assumption of the 'underlying' consensus to which they are a threat must be at work.

Here one of the consensus model's contradictions becomes crucial. If 'we' are characterized by a consensus, then how is *dissent* to be understood?

Mapping the outsiders: dissent

First it should be made clear that the often rough handling of dissent and alternative views of social structures is not the result of personal animosity on the part of individual broadcasters and journalists towards those views. On the contrary, the way dissent is made sense of, made to mean, in the media is determined by the impersonal social process of newsmaking itself, as a professional practice. In other words, the assumptions we have been discussing are not 'personal opinions' in the usual sense, they are the routine mental orientations shared in a necessarily unreflecting way by busy people; their efforts are directed not towards criticizing and making explicit their own model of society, but towards recording and making sense of the doings and sayings of others. Hence, the political consequences of the consensual model of society are just that: political consequences not political intentions.

However, the consequences are quite striking. For instance, since journalists are in business to make sense of social events, it falls to the media to *make sense of* dissent; it is not enough simply to *report* its manifestations, they must be assigned a place in the mental map. If we look at an alternative to the consensus which is given wide publicity in the media, the ways in which dissidence and dissent are made sense of will become clearer.

The major alternative model to the consensual that can be seen regularly in British media does reserve a vital and important role for dissidents. This is the model of society used to make sense of events in the USSR and other 'soviet bloc' countries. Here there is said to be no institutional place for conflict — all such countries are seen as, above all, 'one-party states'. They are characterized as such — and as different from ours — by the existence of (the word looks familiar now) 'dissidents', whose only recourse is to act *outside* the 'official' channels of their society.

Of course there are groups and individuals in 'our' society who also act outside the official channels. But they are not seen as dissidents: they are seen as deviants. This characterization is an effect of the consensual model and, conversely, of the association of dissidence with totalitarian régimes. The terms used to characterize strikes, direct action and other expressions of dissent concentrate on notions of irresponsibility, irrationality, and either mindlessness or bloody-mindedness; there is always the implication of violence. This is, according to Hall, 'the most salient, operational "news value" in the domain of political news', because, he argues,

at the level of 'deep structure', political violence is 'unusual' — though it regularly happens — because it signifies the world of politics *as it ought not to be*. It shows conflict in the system at its most extreme point. And this 'breaches expectations' precisely because in our society conflict is supposed to be regulated, and politics is exactly 'the continuation of social conflict without resort to violence': a society, that is, where the legitimacy of the social order rests on the absolute inviolability of 'the rule of law'. (1973, p. 184)

Hence manifestations of dissent are seen as containing the 'threat of violence', and the threat of violence is 'anti-social' in the profoundest sense. Exactly *whose* 'society' is being so threatened is not an open question, since the consensual model requires 'society' to be everyone. Dissidents, then, are mad or malicious.

We can see what happens to dissent by making use of a diagram (fig. 2). If we think of the consensual model in spatial terms, it looks like a set of concentric circles, with 'civilized society', complete with all its various spheres of activity, personalities and media coverage, at the centre. Beyond its boundaries matters get progressively less easy for this central system to tolerate.

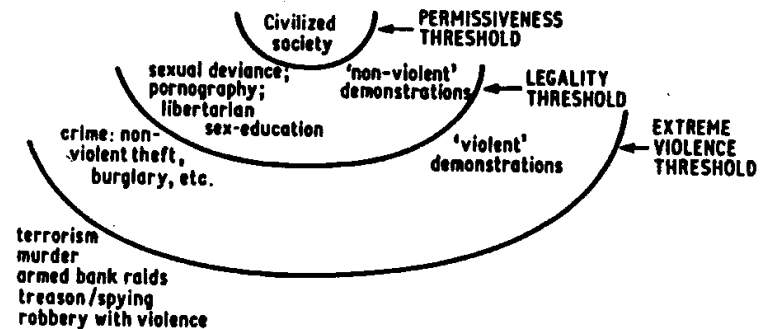


Fig. 2 (From Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 226)

Several forces can be seen at work here. First there are the thresholds themselves. Beyond the bounds of 'civilized' society, but within the law, is the area of *moral* disapproval, which can be applied to dissent as well as to non-family sexuality. The further the acts are from the centre, the more likely it is that they will be seen as either violent in themselves, or leading to violence. Second is the phenomenon called 'convergence' by Hall *et al.* In figure 2 political dissent is listed alongside more traditional crime: to the extent that an association between the two can be established, it is possible to see 'political dissent' as 'crime', as in the notion of 'student hooliganism' applied to the protest movements of the 1960s. As Hall *et al.* comment,

The public might be reluctant to see the strong arm of the law arbitrarily exercised against legitimate political protesters. But who will stand between the law and a 'bunch of hooligans'? Imaginary convergences therefore serve an ideological function — and that ideological function has real consequences, especially in provoking and legitimating a coercive reaction by both the public and the state. (*ibid.*, pp. 224–5)

Perhaps 'the public' is not now thought to be so squeamish — see for example the 'News at Ten' in Chapter 4. Finally there is the notion of *escalation*. Reading into the centre from the periphery of the diagram, it is easy to see the 'milder' dissidence as causally connected to more 'extreme' kinds of violence. Hence 'non-violent demonstrations' can be seen as the 'thin end of the wedge' — and be dealt with accordingly.