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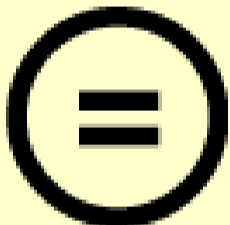
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The Media, Resistance and Civil Society

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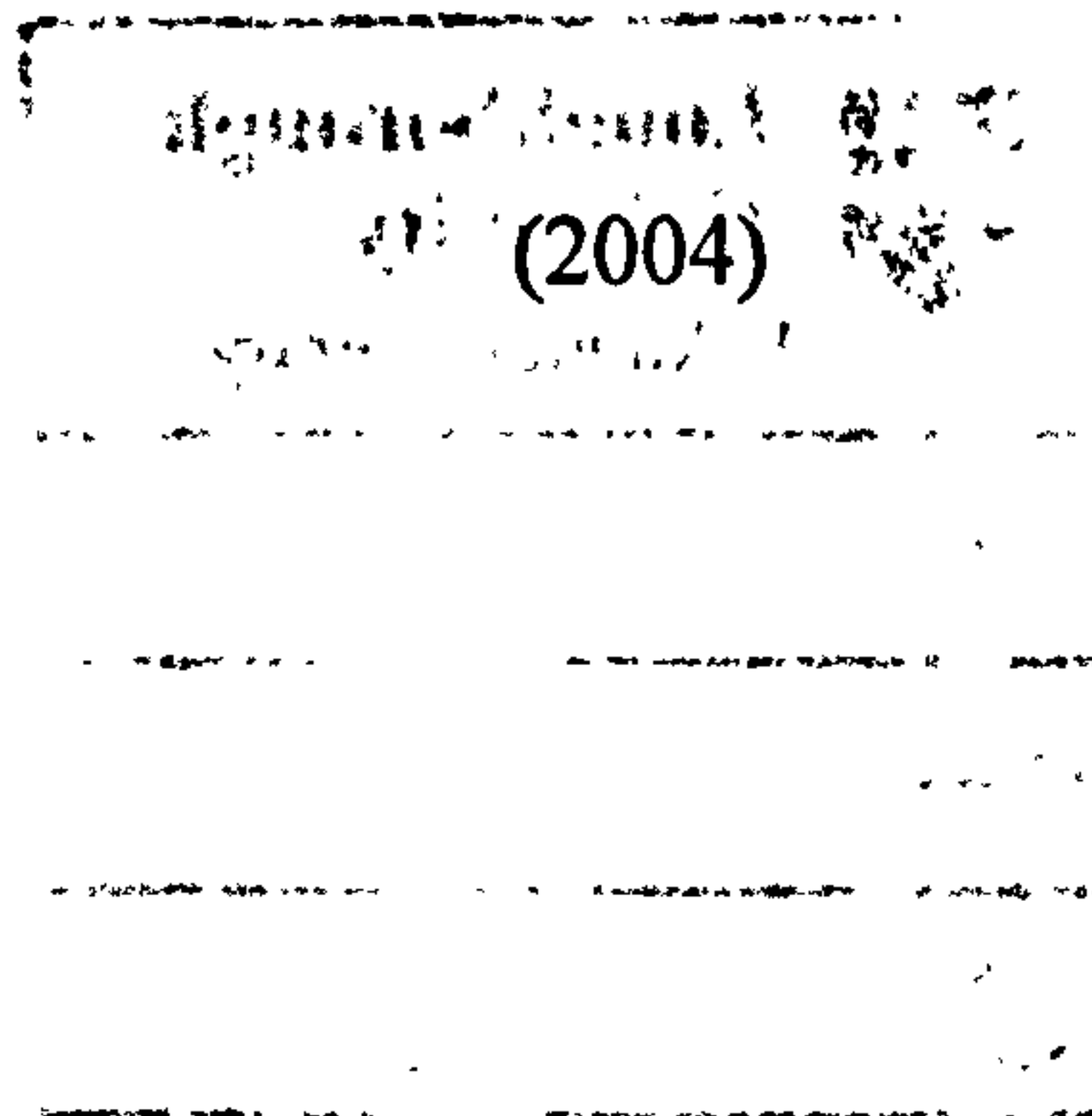
Natalie Fenton

A Doctoral Thesis by Publications

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the award of

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University



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Fenton, N., Golding, P. and Radley, A. (1995) 'Charities, Media and Public Opinion.' in *Research Bulletin*, Winter 1995, No.37, pp.10-15, HMSO.

Fenton, N., Bryman, A., Deacon, D. with P. Birmingham (1998) 'Constructing Social Science in the Newsroom' (pp.95-118) in N. Fenton, A. Bryman, D. Deacon with P. Birmingham, *Mediating Social Science*, London: Sage.

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Downey, J. and Fenton, N. (2003) 'Constructing a Counter-Public Sphere' *New Media and Society* (5)2:185-202. (Included in Section 3)

Abstract: The Media, Resistance and Civil society

The relationship between the media and social/political mobilisation is a specifically modern phenomenon, contemporaneous with and responding to dominant capitalist communications. Today the trend towards concentration marches forth, policies of privatisation and deregulation of the media reveal a world-wide trend towards the commodification of information, culture and hence, of democracy. We are witnessing the privatisation of access to information and culture with the shrinking of public space in communications. My research begins from the standpoint that we can not ignore that we still live in deeply unequal capitalist societies, driven by profit and competition operating on a global scale. It is also undeniable that we live in a media dominated world with many different ideas and identities in circulation at any one time. We need to understand the former to appreciate the latter - the relation between individual autonomy, freedom and rational action on the one hand and the social construction of identity and behaviour on the other. The mainstream media as part of the political and economic infrastructure of society both disguise inequalities and frustrate any attempts to contest or reveal them. As a consequence dissident or oppressed groups have had to seek alternative means to be heard and to mobilise. These means include both organisation (investigated here in the form of the voluntary sector) and communication (including mainstream and 'alternative' media) within civil society. My research investigates *why* it is felt there is an ever pressing need to present oppositional views, *how* strategies of organisation and communication have been deployed and with *what* success. This research examines the relationship between the media and resistance - either as a dominant social force which through uniformity of representation encourages digression, or as a means of forging other identities and developing alternative political projects.

The Media, Resistance and Civil Society

List of Items by Section, Main and Supplementary Submissions and Contribution to Co-authored Supplementary Items.

Section 1: Struggles in the Mainstream

Main:

Deacon, D., Fenton, N. and Walker, B. (1995) 'Communicating Philanthropy: The Media and the Voluntary Sector in Britain.' *Voluntas* 6(2):119-139.

Fenton, N., Golding, P. and Radley, A. (1995) 'Charities, Media and Public Opinion.' in *Research Bulletin*, Winter 1995, No.37, pp.10-15, HMSO.

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Supplementary:

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Author's contribution: 33%

Section 2: From the Mainstream to the Margins

Main:

Fenton, N., Passey, A. and Hems, L. (1999) 'Trust, Voluntary Sector and Civil Society' *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 19(7/8): 21-42.

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Supplementary:

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Author's contribution: 33%

Section 3: Dissenting in the Margins

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Section 4: Understanding Mediation and the Concept of Resistance

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Fenton, N., Bryman, A., Deacon, D. with Peter Birmingham (1998) 'Understanding Social Science' (pp.118-143) in N. Fenton, A. Bryman, D. Deacon with P. Birmingham, *Mediating Social Science*, London: Sage.

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Section 5: Theorising Media, Resistance and Civil Society

Main:

Fenton, N. (2000b) 'The Problematics of Postmodernism for Feminist Media Studies' *Media, Culture and Society*, (22) 6: 723-741.

Fenton, N. and Downey, J. (2003) 'Counter Public Spheres and Global Modernity' *Javnost – The Public*, (X) 1: 15-33.

Supplementary:

Downey, J. and Fenton, N. (2003) 'Constructing a Counter-Public Sphere' *New Media and Society* (5)2:185-202.

Author's contribution: 40%

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The Media, Resistance and Civil Society

Introduction

The relationship between the media and social/political mobilisation is a specifically modern phenomenon, contemporaneous with and responding to dominant capitalist communications. Today the trend towards concentration marches forth, policies of privatisation and deregulation of the media reveal a world-wide trend towards the commodification of information, culture and hence, of democracy. We are witnessing the privatisation of access to information and culture with the shrinking of public space in mainstream communications. My research begins from the standpoint that we still live in deeply unequal capitalist societies, driven by profit and competition operating on a global scale. We also live in a media dominated world with many different ideas and identities in circulation at any one time. We need to understand the former to appreciate the latter - the relation between individual autonomy, freedom and rational action on the one hand and the social construction of identity and behaviour on the other. The mainstream media as part of the political and economic infrastructure of society both disguise inequalities and frustrate any attempts to contest or reveal them. As a consequence dissident or oppressed groups have had to seek alternative means to be heard and to mobilise. These means include both organisation (investigated here in the form of the voluntary sector) and communication (including mainstream and 'alternative' media) within civil society. My research investigates *why* it is felt there is an ever pressing need to present oppositional views, *how* strategies of organisation and communication have been deployed and *what* the likelihood of success is in relation to increasing political fragmentation and ever expanding concentration and privatisation.

The central terms invoked in this thesis – civil society, the voluntary sector, mainstream media and alternative media are all problematic. In working with them I seek to define their ambit and further clarify their usage in relation to each other. The concept of civil society is important because of the emphasis it places on the role of the voluntary sector in enhancing the democratic functioning of society. Civil society is also linked to the concept of the public sphere which emphasizes the media as the means to achieving a fully functioning democracy.

At the broadest level this research asks: Is the mainstream media part of civil society? Can alternative forms of media help create unified resistance or do they contribute to the fragmentation of civil society? What does it mean to talk about a collective counter politics that exists largely in non-mainstream media? The voluntary sector is a vital part of civil society and the subject focus of my research. Exactly what constitutes the voluntary sector is widely debated; here I take two particular aspects for closer interrogation:

1. Mainstream, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) typified by large, professionalised, national or international organisations covering both service provision and advocacy, that may use mainstream or other media. There has been a considerable growth in NGOs most of which, seek to use information and communication technologies as tools of advocacy and organisation (Downey and Fenton, 2003). A central question is whether these groups in civil society can intervene in the mass media public sphere and change the agenda through setting off a critical process of communication.

2. The political fringe where often deliberately disorganised groups function explicitly to bring about social and political change. Non-mainstream political voluntary activity is independent of the state, based on the popular production of messages, a public coming into being and making itself heard in opposition to state-orchestrated voices and the megaphones of multi-national corporations, using channels and technologies that are readily accessible and available, with messages distributed freely.

The terms 'mainstream' media and 'alternative' media offer a means of distinguishing between two very different types of cultural production. There is a prevailing belief exemplified in the work of Herman and Chomsky (1994) and the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980) that the organizational structure and professional ideologies of the mainstream media produce a media system that is monolithic and impenetrable to those who flout its unwritten rules.

O'Sullivan identifies two defining characteristics of alternative media practice: "a democratic/collectivist process of production; and a commitment to innovation or experimentation in form and/or content" (O'Sullivan et al., 1994: 205). This differentiation

takes into account not only content, but presentation and organisational procedures. Traber (1985) also finds social change at the heart of alternative media practice.

To appreciate fully alternative media production requires an understanding of the mass media and the success or otherwise of attempts at accessing, participating in and presenting alternative views within it. When considering alternative media in all its creative and oppositional glory, it is imperative to acknowledge that political and social changes are inextricably linked to changes in the production and distribution capacities of mass communication systems, both as the hardware of social organisation and as marketers of mass culture. The practices of alternative media are inseparable from the structure and organisation of the dominant communication order. No study of the media, resistance and civil society is complete without a consideration of the nature and practice of both mainstream and alternative media – how attempts to be represented in the former compare and contrast with a desire to establish the latter and the difficulties and dilemmas therein. It is here that the foundations of my research lie.

I have organised this research into five sections allocating key publications to each. The first section refers to work that has considered the construction of mainstream news and current affairs and attempts by NGOs (including campaigning/advocacy groups) and individuals (social scientists) to access mainstream media and present their own interpretation of the world. The second section attempts to explain the growth in alternative media activity by recourse to theories of social change and the concept of trust. Section three considers some of the work that is taking place in the margins and the potential in particular for the internet to transform civic engagement. Section four links the social construction of self to the individual autonomy of media audiences and considers media theories on the nature of mediation and processes of communication as well as reporting on the methodologies employed. Section five attempts to outline an approach to the theorising of the media, resistance and civil society that develops the concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 1992) in relation to counter publicity, political fragmentation and the possible forging of political projects through mediated solidarity.

On reading the published pieces submitted for this thesis you will find overlap and repetition. This work was not written to be read in one volume. As ideas have developed and been published in different contexts the intellectual premise on which they are based is repeated. Similarly, as individual publications may speak to more than one theme some are included in more than one section. Much of the research referred to below has been co-authored. Where it is included as a 'main' item the research is my own except where a footnote indicates otherwise. For 'supplementary' material I have indicated my approximate percentage contribution to each piece. As is the case with all intellectual endeavours I am indebted to my co-authors, colleagues and peers for their stimulation and direction. The way in which this research has been drawn together and the ideas that come from that linkage are my own.

Section 1: Struggles in the mainstream

My interest in the comparison of mainstream and alternative accounts of public issues began with work on the televisual presentation of nuclear energy (Corner et. al., 1990b).¹ The research compared mainstream documentary coverage of nuclear energy with industry promotional material and alternative video. It revealed how an apparently objective traditional documentary can frame meaning in particular ways by appropriating meaning from the anti-nuclear energy lobby to question the safety of nuclear energy. It also explored the way in which non-mainstream groups can exploit established audiovisual cues in a subversive manner to frame meaning in particular (oppositional) ways and the extent to which audiences were at liberty to identify and interpret such shifts.

To pursue an interest in voluntary campaigning groups' use of the media I undertook a major project into the voluntary sector and the media.² This included analysis of the representation of NGOs in mainstream news, the various forms of NGO internal and external communication

¹ This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and conducted with John Corner and Kay Richardson. I was the sole researcher employed on the project and took particular responsibility for investigating and analysing the production, content and reception of the alternative video. All publications were written as a team.

² This research was funded by the Home Office and conducted with Peter Golding and Alan Radley. I was the sole researcher employed on the project and responsible for all data collection, analysis and write-up.

and public attitudes to voluntary organisations and charitable giving (Fenton et al., 1993 1995; Deacon, Fenton and Walker, 1995).

Much research on mainstream news journalism maintains that because of its routinisation and codification as a profession it is implicitly exclusive. Those who wish to receive mainstream media coverage must, on the whole, observe the rules of media staging. The research included on relations between journalists and social scientists (Fenton et al., 1997, 1998)³ and on NGOs in the news (Deacon, Fenton, Walker, 1995)⁴ demonstrates this. Voices that are critical of the status quo are present as this fulfils certain news values but the types of organisations/individuals and the occasions on which they are allowed to speak are severely restricted. This research reveals several difficulties in using the mainstream media to try and present non-mainstream views:

- Mainstream news conforms to pre-established notions of what is and what is not news.
- It is of very limited value in empowering marginalized, oppressed or exploited sectors of society because it has become personalized and individualized.
- Because of its compromising nature, it frequently erodes the dignity of those people whose interests it purports to reflect i.e. conforms to a professional journalistic agenda.
- It remains hierarchical and operates a hierarchy of credibility for news sources.
- It is frequently undemocratic and preferences organizations that speak on their terms and are professionalised in the processes of mainstream news management.

Clearly, mainstream media do not put up established or hegemonic barriers that are so impenetrable that no counter-arguments appear but they do decide which oppositional voices will be included. Frequently this comes down to economics - the poorer you are as an organisation and the less cultural and financial capital you have the less likely you are to become a credible source of opinion. Oppositional voices must learn to mimic journalistic discursive strategies and to court journalists accordingly to gain coverage. As such, critical

³ This research was funded by the ESRC and conducted with David Deacon, Alan Bryman and Peter Birmingham. I was the lead researcher on the project and had particular responsibility for writing up the book chapters on journalists and audiences hence their inclusion in this volume.

⁴ Deacon and Walker researched journalists' attitudes to NGOs as part of an ESRC funded project.

mediation is most often domesticated, absorbed and incorporated by professional cultures of the newsroom rather than offering radical alternatives. This is not to say that news sources are powerless. By playing strategically and performatively the rules of the media game sources can achieve coverage and influence its framing but this is contingent on the nature and context of the issue and communicative event. Instances where alternative voices speak on their own terms are rare.

This research shows that the mass media permeate - and may be experienced as part of - the daily life of civil society insofar as they appear to present a range of voices and debates, but as large corporate industries which are in varying degrees subject to state power and operating within established professional ideologies they also reside within the steering systems of modern society. They are, in other words, to a great extent beyond the reach of citizen practices and interventions. This partly explains why many oppositional groups have preferred to conduct their struggle for social change outside of the dominant political public sphere occupied by mainstream media. But a fuller explanation of a move to the margins requires consideration of media forms and mediated voices in the broader context of social, political, economic and technological change.

Section 2: From the mainstream to the margins

Recently there have been claims that there has been a rise in alternative media linked to counter activity i.e. activity that is purposefully directed in opposition to the status quo. The proportion of people engaged in protest politics rose dramatically in the late twentieth century. The World Values Study of the mid-1990s compares trends from the mid 1970s to the mid-1990s in eight nations confirming that the experience of protest politics has risen steadily over the years (Norris, 2002). To explore the reasons for this further I turned to my research on public attitudes to charitable giving and to volunteering (undertaken as part of the project on NGOs and the media) that had brought to the forefront the issue of trust (Gaskin et al., 1996). The shrinkage of the state through initiatives such as privatisation, marketisation and deregulation means that decision making has flowed away from public bodies and official government agencies that were directly accountable to elected representatives, devolving to a

complex variety of non-profit and private agencies operating at local, national and international levels. Because of these developments it has become more difficult for citizens to use conventional state-oriented channels of participation as a way of challenging those in power, reinforcing the need for alternative avenues and targets of political expression and mobilization.

A belief that democracy is not being enacted has been linked to a demise of trust in traditional institutions of control such as government and other state institutions constitutive of the dominant public sphere. In an attempt to understand the growth of 'resistive work' my research explores the concept of trust and how it may be experienced differently in relation to different sectors of society (Fenton et al., 1999⁵, Fenton, 2000a, Gaskin et al., 1996⁶). The British Social Attitudes Survey 1996 indicated that the public had experienced a profound loss of faith in the institutions of the state. A large-scale comparative analysis based on national surveys points to declining public trust in politicians in a range of 'mature' democracies (Putnam and Pharr, 2000). With the state in retreat - not simply in the neo-liberal sense but more broadly in terms of public support – this research suggests that civil society, or certain parts of it, become foregrounded as alternative arenas of public trust, information and representation (Fenton, forthcoming; Fenton and Downey, 2003).

This research reveals that the defining characteristics which mark out some NGOs and campaigning groups from the state and market sectors - non-profit, responding to localized need, oriented to certain values and so on - are paramount in building relations of trust with members and with the wider public. The relationship between organizational forms, in particular the encouragement of democracy and inclusivity based on active participation, and the potential for trust to develop is crucial to contemporary society and its practices. Much alternative media and some NGOs operate explicitly on this basis. When the dominant public sphere is felt to betray or to be no longer capable of allowing for critical rational engagement then trust is diminished allowing oppositional groups the opportunity to flourish. The chapter

⁵ This research was funded by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). I conducted all the research, analysis and write up.

⁶ This research was funded by the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector. I managed the research project.

included on audience understanding of social science in the media and the research on nuclear energy reveal an increasing distrust of expert discourse in deference to the 'authenticity' of experiential lay discourse by audiences who also treat the mainstream media with scepticism while being simultaneously beholden to the limits of its ideological representations. A decrease in trust of statutory authorities has encouraged an increase of trust in NGOs which are felt to offset the formalism, proceduralism and commodification of the state and market spheres. A decrease in trust and an increase in counter publicity and advocacy are tied to an intensification of globalisation, marketisation and individualism through the rise of neo-liberalism and also to the technological potential to link geographical distances, political causes and organise trans-local protests. Hence, the focus in Section 3 on alternative media in the context of global capitalism.

Section 3: Dissenting in the margins

At the onset of every new communication technology there have been claims for its democratic potential on grounds of accessibility, ease of use, communicative capacity – the ability to link citizens together and empower both individuals and a body politic. However, history has shown that the real benefactors of new communication technologies are those who can gain the most materially by an increased capacity to gather, store, manage and send information. This media/cultural imperialism thesis assumes that institutional infrastructure and technology work together in a uniform way to benefit only their owners and managers.

Others claim that around the world groups of people are using new technology as a tool to change their local communities. One example brings this debate into sharp focus - the 'Internet'. The Internet is said to offer radical potential for increased democracy by providing open access to a wide range of information, connecting people to people and people to information giving everyone access to the information they need when and where they want it, at an affordable price. The capacity of the Internet to facilitate international communication between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) thus allowing protesters to respond on an international level to local events while requiring minimal resources and bureaucracy is explored in the articles that develop the notion of counter public spheres (Downey and Fenton,

2003; Fenton and Downey, 2003). These papers reveal an organising model for a new form of political protest that is international, decentralised, with diverse interests but common targets. On this basis it is argued that the internet represents a new technology that may have the *potential* to communicate and mobilise political agency and as a consequence reinvent activism. In post-industrial societies, where traditional institutions have become less popular alternative avenues for oppositional expression and protest have evolved often with the help of the internet to transform civic engagement. The internet can be seen as a building block for contemporary civil society and resistance. However, the prospects for success must be set against the vastly unequal resources at the disposal of NGOs and trans-national corporations and the increasingly privatised nature of communication systems.

Section 4: Understanding mediation and the concept of resistance.

This research is concerned to address the possibilities and problems for alternative cultural production and increase our understanding of the notion of 'resistance' in media studies. Put crudely, there are basically two approaches in media studies - the first is located firmly in political economy and views the media as promoting the dominant ideology of the ruling classes: in spite of their liberating potential the media of modern mass communication have contributed to the creation of new levels of social stratification - communication classes which in turn engender new forms of domination - the mass media are an obstacle to liberation and overwhelm all other forms of non-mass media. This is explored in Section 1.

The second approach is more closely located in cultural studies. The basic argument is that the mass media give us citizens of the media: people able to manipulate imagery and information for their own ends, to build their own identities and local politics from the vast array of mediated bits and pieces they have at their disposal. Through this social and political agency occurs offering the possibility of oppositional political projects emerging. This is explored in Sections 2 and 3.

Traditionally political economy has tended to read the state and other superstructural forces from the specific configuration of capital at any one time and insists that this is the starting

point of social analysis. Cultural studies reminds political economy that the substance of its work, the analysis of communication is rooted in the needs, goals, conflicts, failures and accomplishments of ordinary people attempting to make sense of their lives. Cultural studies has recognised the energising potential of multifaceted forms of social agency each of which brings with it dimensions of subjectivity and consciousness that are vital to political praxis. But cultural studies conceptions of power have a tendency to be rooted in individual subjectivities, their identities and collective action rather than as political economy would have it, structured in the institutions of society. Debates from both camps are required to inform a thorough analysis of the role of the media in society. In other words, structural inequities must be taken on board along with cultural complexities of consumption to resist a simplistic retreat to either.

This approach was adopted in *Nuclear Energy* and further elaborated upon in *Mediating Social Science* (Fenton et al., 1998). In an attempt to make sense of the nature of communication and social agency the research made strenuous efforts to adopt a holistic approach to the study of the media. In order not to prioritise one particular phase of communication (and by implication the power of one type of agency) a number of potential definers of meaning including social scientists as sources, journalists, funding bodies and public relations departments were examined. The chapter on audiences included here considers active audience perspectives that celebrate the resistive capacity of the individual consumer and the power of the audience to subvert texts. How much freedom and autonomy do audiences have to undermine the intended meaning of texts and subvert the relations of power within which they are located? If audiences can resist and reconstruct meanings at will what need is there for alternative media? An exploration of the resistive power of the audience was also part of earlier work (Corner, Richardson and Fenton, 1990) included here. This research suggests that the capacity to establish voices (both by news sources and audiences) in opposition to the status quo is restricted and contingent on many factors. Traditional mass media are unlikely to provide a means by which oppositional voices can be relayed to audiences and enhance critical, rational understanding. Differently located audiences may derive particular interpretations of texts but the text itself is rarely subverted. This research establishes that interrogating the role of the media in society does not start or stop with the interpretation of it by audiences or the analysis of it as a text. Although audiences are active, their activity is still subject to a number of

structural constraints. The media messages matter because they make some interpretations more likely than others. The cultural capital that audiences bring to media texts are not uniform – different people from different social backgrounds will have different social and interpretative tools at their command. By ordering the distribution of cultural tools as well as cultural products, social structure serves as a constraint on the process of meaning-making. Cultural consumption is a social act; it is always affected by the social context and the social relations in which it occurs. In other words, audiences may be active producers of meaning but the process takes place in conditions and from commodities that are not of our making. Once the role of production passes to the consumer as in much alternative media production the nature of the beast changes but it is still circumscribed in the social structures from which it emerged. It is not suffice merely to celebrate agency/resistance or to detail the structures of power. We must always attend to the dialectical relationship between agency and structure, cultural production and consumption.

Once this theoretical stance is established then methodological consequences flow from it. The struggle over meaning takes place between the process of production and the act of reception both of which are determined by their place in a wider social, political, economic and cultural context. Choices made by the audience must be looked at within the social context of their daily life and the content itself must be interpreted according to the social and political circumstances of its production.

Methodology

A range of methodological approaches have been employed at various points throughout this research depending on the questions being investigated. The aim has been to gain as complete an understanding of the communication process as possible covering social context and political environment, production, media texts and reception. This has involved multi-method approaches and a range of analytical skills (Deacon et al. 1998) attempting always to interrogate the process of communication in a manner which embraces the complexities therein.

1. Voluntary sector and the media (including alternative media)

To investigate both the nature of communication between and within the voluntary sector and the mainstream media and alternative/advocacy media the research has embraced 4 main methods:

- A quantitative content analysis of national and local media (radio, television, newspapers, free publication) to ascertain the degree and the form of images of the voluntary sector.
- A postal questionnaire to a representative sample of voluntary organisations to explore their fundraising and campaigning, use of personnel and the media (mainstream and alternative) in the furtherance of their aims.
- 10 case studies of voluntary organisations including a number of in-depth interviews with officers involved in communications and public relations.
- 13 case studies (including interviews and analysis of archival material) of organisations involved in the practice and production of non-mainstream media.

2. Concept of trust and the voluntary sector

- 8 focus groups of young people.
- 10 focus groups of adults.
- Semi-structured interviews with journalists, campaigners and corporate sponsors.
- National quantitative survey of public attitudes to voluntary sector (1992).
- Follow up national survey on public attitudes to voluntary sector (1997).

3. Popular presentations of public issues (including nuclear energy and social science)

- Quantitative content analysis of news and current affairs coverage (local and national newspapers, television, radio and magazines).
- Qualitative content analysis of print, television and radio news and current affairs used in audience reception research.

- Mail questionnaire survey of social scientists' views about media coverage and their own practices.
- Mail questionnaire to social scientists who had received coverage.
- Semi-structured interviews with social scientists who had received coverage.
- Semi-structured interviews with journalists identified in the content analysis.
- Semi-structured interviews with production personnel of documentary, promotional and alternative video.
- Semi-structured interviews with representatives of funding bodies and government departments.
- Tracking of journalists at three conferences; participant observation at the offices of *The Guardian*.
- Focus group and individual interview analysis of audience reception of media items.

Section 5: Theorising Media, Resistance and Civil Society.

Central to this thesis are the concepts of the public sphere and civil society. When the terms civil society and public sphere are taken up for theoretical use it is crucial to keep them distinct and analyse the relationship between social institutions and discourse. Calhoun (1993) reminds us that what is at issue is the relationship between patterns of social organization (e.g. NGOs) within civil society and a certain kind of discourse and political participation (mainstream or alternative media), a public sphere in which rational-critical arguments rather than the statuses of actors are decisive. It is not helpful to collapse discourse or politics into social organization as though neither culture nor the wills of actors mattered. Neither is it helpful to forget how much democratic life depends on specific kinds of social organization even though they do not necessarily and deterministically produce it. Public communications are part of the process of realizing the public sphere allowing us to analyse how shared democratic values and the identification as democratic citizens are achieved and maintained; how political/civic cultures are generated.

Much has been written about the way in which mainstream communication monopolies dominate the public sphere with the implication of consequent restrictions to the public

democratic consciousness. But comparatively little research has considered non-mainstream communications whose principal aim is to provide oppositional cultural fodder. Habermas' (1989) focused on the bourgeois public sphere to show its rise and fall, the rise of a critical public and its decay. He argues that the increasing complexity and rationalisation of societies over the course of the twentieth century together with the growth of the mass media have transformed the public sphere. Horizontal communication between citizens is increasingly replaced by vertical communication between mass media, beholden to the state, to capital and to consumers. In advanced capitalist societies mass cultural production and some would argue our means of expression has been largely subsumed within the interests of multi national conglomerates operating globally for the pursuit of profit (Downey and Fenton, 2003). This understanding of the public sphere puts it beyond the reach of citizen practices and interventions and has material and symbolic consequences for the way we live our lives and imagine our world.

To take account of an alternative media that is democratic in terms of access and control and has distinct progressive political aims requires a more sophisticated understanding of the public sphere. I do this by making use of Dahlgren's (1994) analytic distinction between the common domain and the advocacy domain. In this functional differentiation, the common domain is the arena which strives for universalism. It is here that we find for the most part the dominant media, which ideally provide information, debate and opinion for all members of society. The advocacy domain consists partly of time and space made available by the dominant media and partly of a plurality of smaller civic media from political parties, interest groups, movements, organizations and networks. This distinction allows us to consider not only the official public sphere of the dominating, but the 'counter' public spheres of the dominated as well (Fenton and Downey 2003, Downey and Fenton, 2003). This resists relegation of the concept of the public sphere to a normative ideal and suggests that it is still possible to acknowledge the neo-liberal politics of the present while looking for ways in which a public sphere can be realised outside of the mainstream in multiple forms of counter publicity.

The role of the advocacy domain and its relationship to the dominant public sphere raises several issues. Not least, are the group and individual identities in the advocacy domain the

"authentic" expression of civil society breaking into the world of corporately controlled mass communications and using the products and systems of that world for their own plural purposes? Or, on the contrary, are they a determined symptom of that world? How much room for manoeuvre do agents actually have within a symbolic system in which both the power to create symbols and access to the channels of their circulation is hierarchically structured and intimately integrated into a system of economic production and exchange, which is itself hierarchically structured (Garnham, 1992)? Those social groups identified as potential agents in this shifting coalition largely exist in terms of group identities created via the forms and institutions of mediated communications or via consumer-taste publics that themselves use their badges of identity, symbols created and circulated in the sphere of advertising. So, although the functional differentiation of common domain and advocacy domain is helpful it would be a mistake to treat them as distinct entities. There is between them a substantial degree of interdependence and overlap. A counter-public can not emerge today outside or independently of existing industrial-commercial especially electronic publicity. Alternative media can not be explained without recourse to mass media – the former exists only by dint of its relation to the latter.

Early Habermas largely neglected the advocacy domain or the component of anti-publicness within the public sphere. In his later work (post 1989) he introduces certain revisions and elaborations. These relate in particular to instances of intentional political mobilisation that seek to undermine or usurp the dominant public sphere. Habermas recognises not only the existence of alternative public spheres but also their capacity for challenging domination. Rather than see the public as cultural dupes Habermas now emphasises the 'pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public' (1992: 438) that is able to resist mass mediated representations of society and create their own political interventions. This resists the technological and economic determinism of both the critics and the prophets of the information society and opens a space to consider the possibilities of intervention and transformation, the abilities of individuals and groups to remake society to satisfy their own needs and purposes – using the instruments of production and communication against capitalist social relations and values.

Once the public sphere is defined as a horizon for the organization of social experience, it follows that there are multiple and competing counter publics, each marked by specific terms of exclusion (class, race, gender...) in relation to dominant communications, yet each understanding itself as a nucleus for an alternative organization of society. The "proliferation of subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1992: 69-70) does not necessarily lead to a multiplication of forces. Unless powerful efforts at alliances are made - and such efforts have been made, successfully, especially in the area of the environment and ecology - the oppositional energy of individual groups and subcultures is more often neutralized in the marketplace of multicultural pluralism or polarized in a reductive competition of victimisations.

Habermas (1992) himself notes that the mechanism for counter publicity may *not* work because of a fragmentation within civil society. The notion of fragmentation in modern life and in particular of political culture is fuelled by the rise of identity politics that focuses on consumption not production. Issues that relate to lifestyles are fore-grounded over and above the domain of work. Party allegiances and class alliances give way to more fluid and informal networks of action. Postmodern theorists celebrate fragmentation because it allows the recognition of diversity in political desires, acknowledges difference between individuals and debunks the myth of homogenous political units leading ultimately to liberation. Feminism in particular has struggled with this debate. In my article 'The Problematics of Postmodernism for Feminist Media Studies' (2000b) this is explored further and the conclusion bears relevance to all work on political agency and resistance. For political efficacy there must be more than the apparent freedom that comes with embracing difference and diversity, more than just an increase of instances of alternative media or advocacy groups. By recourse to Bauman (1997) I argue that if we accept the description of society as fragmented, in order to create a viable political community then solidarity is crucial. Solidarity is the necessary condition and the essential collective contribution to the well being of liberty and difference – the one thing the postmodern condition is unlikely to produce on its own without a political intervention (Dean, 1996,1997).

At a theoretical level it is possible to draw out from the rich literature in this area a number of elements that would constitute a politics of solidarity in difference. Philosophical positions

(Habermasian and post-structuralist) previously treated as incompatible can be seen to have points of congruence. Mouffe (1992, 1993) asserts the need for a framework agreement of political values or grammar of political conduct to provide the foundations for citizen engagement. This, she suggests is more compatible with modern democratic pluralism than the notion of a common good enshrined in traditional civic republicanism. There must be a commitment to the value of difference that goes beyond a simple respect and involves an inclusive politics of voice and representation. It also requires a non-essentialist conceptualisation of the political subject as made up of manifold, fluid identities that mirror the multiple differentiations of groups. Chosen identities at any one time can not be taken as given or static – political identities emerge and are expressed through an on going social process of individual and collective identity formation. As Rheingold (2002) notes, advances in personal, mobile informational technology are providing rapidly the structural elements for the existence of fresh kinds of highly-informed, autonomous communities that coalesce around local lifestyle choices, global political demands and everything in between. These multiple networks of connected citizens and activists link diverse communities providing the basis for the possibility of a new politics of alliance and solidarity to overcome the limitations of postmodern identity politics. So, although corporate media power and concentration seem stronger than ever and the resources of global communication networks larger than ever it is also true that new media (from mobile phones to digital radio to the internet) are increasingly used by networks that aim to challenge the discourses the mega industries promote. It is of course about much more than new technology. It has arisen from the cultural dimensions of globalisation – particularly the globalisation of markets and labour: the increasing fluidity and mobility of political identities within and across national borders; a greater awareness of and engagement with the global scale of problems raised by corporate neoliberalism as well as the increasing permeability of media distribution channels themselves to alternative flows that spread counter messages at a speed deriving from the global reach of the discourses they attack (Bennett, 2004).

Conclusion

This research suggests that the underlying social and political dynamics of political resistance have changed due to the ways in which economic globalisation has refigured politics, social institutions and identity formation within societies. It also suggests that there are important non-economic spin-offs from globalisation that shape the nature of mediated activism: the freeing of identity from the conforming dictates of modern organisations; the refiguring of time, distance and place; and the construction of interlinked communication networks that drive and harmonise the first two factors. Worthy of further critical attention in relation to this thesis are the debates regarding the transfer of "organized capitalism" to "disorganized capitalism" with "flexible accumulation" as brought forward by some authors who try to give a political economic explanation for postmodernism (e.g. Offe, 1985). Also, the increase in national, transnational and global movements of citizens and of mediations that suggests a new way of being no longer easily divisible into public and private spheres (Urry, 2003). It does not seem unlikely that the bourgeois public sphere as studied by Habermas was grafted onto organized capitalism, while today a more and more disorganized public sphere, whose political and cultural contours have barely been studied, is under construction. The nature of disorganisation in the public sphere results in ever increasing overlap into the private sphere. Growing mediatisation, the linked "decentring of identity" and the increasing importance of off-stage behaviour also seem to point in that direction. This indicates the importance of ensuring that research agendas are able to embrace both consumption and citizenship, the economy and politics, public and private spheres of activity. In doing so we need to know more about the developing interrelations between the situated processes of production, content and consumption/reception and the wider processes through which mutuality is fostered. What features of contemporary society motivate activists to form networks that are once fluid, collective and individualistic? Is mediated solidarity possible? An empirical appreciation of these factors will warrant an important adjustment to media hegemony theories.

The past decade has been marked by cultural activism that uses new communication technology to spread radical social critique and alternative culture. Whether this signals an increase in unpredictability, disjunction and improvisation with the 1980s turn to post-Fordist economy of cultural diversification, or whether it is rendered irrelevant by the concomitant move towards ever greater privatisation, remains a crucial and open question. One thing

however remains clear from this research, a cultural politics of counter publicity has to begin by understanding the complex dynamics of existing public spheres (both dominant and counter), their embeddedness in global and local parameters, their unstable make up, their particular ways of dis/organizing social and collective experience - gaps and overlaps that can be used for agency and solidarity. Without this, critical theory risks losing a “dreaming forward”, (Ernest Bloch), a way of imagining a better tomorrow. This research and all that will follow it is dedicated to that task.

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The Media, Resistance and Civil Society

Section One: Struggles in the Mainstream

Main:

Deacon, D., Fenton, N. and Walker, B. (1995) 'Communicating Philanthropy: The Media and the Voluntary Sector in Britain.' *Voluntas* 6(2):119-139.

Fenton, N., Golding, P. and Radley, A. (1995) 'Charities, Media and Public Opinion.' in *Research Bulletin*, Winter 1995, No.37, pp.10-15, HMSO.

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Fenton, N., Bryman, A., Deacon, D. and Birmingham, P. (1997) "'Sod off and find us a boffin": Journalists and the Social Science Conference', *The Sociological Review*: 45(1):1-23.

Supplementary:

Corner, J. Richardson, K. and Fenton, N. (1990b), 'Textualising Risk: TV Discourse and the Issue of Nuclear Energy', *Media, Culture and Society* 12(14):105-124.

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*Communicating philanthropy: the media and the voluntary sector in Britain**

Abstract

Whether in looking for resources or doing their work, voluntary and charitable organisations have always needed to publicise their existence. However, major changes in the role and funding of the sector in Britain have meant that the issue of publicity has gained particular salience. This article discusses these changes and provides preliminary findings from a large-scale investigation into media and public attitudes towards voluntary and charitable activity. It explores how voluntary activity is reported by mainstream news media, and how these presentations are framed by media professionals' perceptions of, and value judgements about, different types of voluntary action.

Introduction

The extent to which voluntary groups and charities in Britain are able to meet the challenge of rapid shifts in social policy, and to which the general public responds to calls for greater community involvement and 'active citizenship', depends on the form and nature of communications between them. Communication about the voluntary sector in Britain occurs both informally and formally, at micro and macro levels. On the one hand, it works through word of mouth, through casual, but often influential, networks. On the other, it operates in a broader and more structured way: via organised publicity activities intended to convey information and images to wider audiences.

This article addresses the more formalised aspects of voluntary sector communication, and explains why such performative communication in the sector has assumed far greater importance in recent years. In particular, it examines how voluntary organisations are presented in mainstream news media in Britain. Such an exploration of the media's

role in promoting and explaining voluntarism is particularly timely due to two related political developments. The first concerns structural changes in the fiscal base and political function of the sector. The second relates to coincidental alterations in its communication environment. The article begins by discussing these contextual matters, and then presents preliminary findings from an extensive research programme conducted at the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University into the media, public opinion and voluntary activity. We outline results from a large-scale content analysis of media reporting of voluntary activity, and then discuss journalists' perceptions of the sector. The research demonstrates that the prominence of voluntary agencies in mainstream news is not solely determined by the different promotional capabilities of voluntary agencies, but also by the assumptions, practices and judgements of media professionals.

Paradoxes and pressures: the changing funding and function of the British voluntary sector

Over the last two decades voluntary action and provision in Britain have been extensively encouraged. In the statutory social welfare system of the 1970s, the rhetoric of community and participation heralded a new age for voluntary organisations. In particular, a new partnership concept of statutory-voluntary relationships arose (Wolfenden, 1978). This concept was subsequently reappropriated by the Thatcher government to fit the rhetoric of citizenship which has acquired new inflections within the social policy language of successive Conservative regimes (Berger, 1990; Commission on Citizenship, 1990; Golding, 1990).

The ideological antipathy of the Thatcher administration towards the perceived excesses and inadequacies of the welfare state, compounded by a series of public sector borrowing crises, produced a political commitment to reduce government spending. As an attempt was made to limit the frontiers of the state, the voluntary sector was expected to step into the breach, fortified by corporate and public altruism. In 1981, Margaret Thatcher declared herself 'determined to shift the emphasis of statutory provision so that it becomes an enabling service — making it possible for volunteers to do their job more effectively' (*The Guardian*, 20 January 1981), and this ambition has survived her demise. In 1991 John Major stated he wanted to 'see voluntary bodies established ever more firmly as a powerful independent force in our society' whose role would 'displace outmoded conceptions of the welfare state' (Charities Aid Foundation, 1992a). More recently, the Home Secretary has called for the creation of a

new 'volunteer army' that will enable individuals (and their families) to restore the fabric of local communities and 'take more power over their own affairs' (*The Times*, 28 February 1994).

On a purely quantitative level, the recent expansion in the British voluntary sector has been dramatic. For example, more than 30,000 new charities have appeared in the last decade in Britain (Charities Aid Foundation, 1993b), and according to current estimates, more than ten charities are being registered each day (*The Guardian*, 10 March 1993). However, the increased expectations of, and demands upon, the sector have in turn created a series of tensions and paradoxes, the most serious of which relate to its funding and political function.

The financial base of voluntary provision in Britain has significantly altered over the last decade. First, the nature of statutory sector support has changed, most significantly through the emergence of a 'contract culture' where voluntary organisations are required to compete for contracts for the provision of public services (Taylor, 1992). Second, the government's attempts to foster private support — whether in the form of public, trust or corporate donations — have met with variable success, being particularly adversely affected by the recent economic recession in the UK (Charities Aid Foundation, 1993a). Currently, therefore, voluntary organisations are having to compete ever more widely, with more and more organisations, for a shifting and, in some regards, shrinking pool of resources. Of course, this competition is far from even. For example, the larger, professionalised organisations, with trained personnel and greater material resources, have been shown to be more adept and varied in their fund-seeking strategies (Aldridge et al., 1992). Furthermore, they are most likely to have the necessary skills and information to cope with the requirements of grant application procedures and to meet governmental accountability standards (Deacon and Golding, 1988; Gidron et al., 1992).

The uncertainties created by the financial changes in the voluntary sector have been exacerbated by broader quandaries about the appropriate political and social function it should fulfil. Although the government has encouraged the growth of charities and voluntary organisations, it has been less willing to accept a similar increase in their public influence (Golding, 1992). However, despite this governmental reticence, a broad consensus has emerged within the British voluntary sector that urges a more active, campaigning role for organisations. For example, the report of a working party convened by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (1990) and chaired by Lord Nathan stressed:

Campaigning is a crucially important aspect of the voluntary sector's contribution to society. The quality of people's collective and individual decisions benefits

greatly from the way in which voluntary organisations, formed around a particular cause, contribute their distinctive knowledge and expertise (p.25).

This role has also been acknowledged by governmental regulators of charitable activity, albeit more conditionally. As the Chief Charity Commissioner recently commented,

It is clear that charities can — and arguably should — contribute to informed public debate, including political discussions and campaigning, on issues within their own experience which are relevant to fulfilling their charitable aims (*The Guardian*, 22 June 1994, p.10b).

However, this situation, where voluntary organisations can be at once *agents* of governmental policy as well as *advocates* of groups or espousers of causes, is a recipe for uncertainty. On a basic level, advocacy may place groups in direct conflict with the institutions that support them. On another, campaigning can often take groups uncomfortably close to the terrain of party politics, which — for organisations with charitable status at least — raises a host of serious issues, as regulations prohibiting inappropriate political activities by charities are both long-standing and becoming increasingly stringent (Randon and 6, 1994).

These broad contradictions and tensions in the funding and function of the voluntary sector in Britain have meant that the need for voluntary agencies to communicate effectively with the general public and external agencies has never been more acute, whether in appealing for funds or in contributing to broader political debates. However, here again, voluntary organisations are confronted with uncertainty, as their communication environment is itself undergoing a process of transformation, both technologically and regulatively.

Lost opportunities or new horizons? From social action to social advertising

From the early 1980s it was recognised that the growing availability of new communications technologies (e.g. Cable, DBS, Teletext, Prestel, etc.) offered an increased variety of opportunities for voluntary groups in their publicity work (e.g. McCron, 1983; Ware, 1989). For this reason, many voluntary agencies became actively involved in the initial policy debates concerning the introduction of the technologies (e.g. the 'Cable in the Community' consortium in the early 1980s). Despite this pre-emptive action, questions remain as to whether these technological developments, and the manner in which they are being introduced, will facilitate a greater participation for voluntary groups in the new communications arena, or lead to their progressive exclusion (Morrison et al., 1987).

Linked to these technological developments, successive Conservative governments' reappraisal of many of the founding precepts of 'public service' broadcasting continues to have major ramifications for the sector (Congdon et al., 1992). At the centre of this debate have been worries as to how voluntary groups will fare in any future, market-led media system (NCVO, 1989), and in particular the prospects for Social Action Broadcasting (SAB) whose ideals are firmly grounded in the general principles of public service broadcasting (Sargeant and Jones, 1989).

Actual definitions of SAB are imprecise and frequently contested by voluntary groups and broadcasters. Nevertheless, a commitment emerged among voluntary organisations, broadcast media and some statutory agencies in Britain during the 1970s towards collaboration in socially purposive programming aimed at educating and mobilising the public on social issues. This has resulted in many media and voluntary sector initiatives that have both formalised links between the two sectors and provided essential back-up to SAB campaigns (Morrison et al., 1987; Community Service Volunteers, 1990).

Although many SAB initiatives have exposed tensions between voluntary organisations and media professionals (Partridge, 1988), their well-intended principles are still highly valued within the sector, and organisations have fought hard to preserve them. For example, the 1990 Broadcasting Bill, which dramatically increased the competitive pressures on commercial broadcasting in the UK, was the subject of a major, if ultimately unsuccessful, voluntary sector campaign to have the legislation amended to guarantee airtime for voluntary and community groups (Broadcasting Consortium, 1990). Since the passage of the Broadcasting Act in 1991, this Consortium has remained in existence to influence broadcasting policy (Charities Aid Foundation, 1992a).

As the future of demarcated space for public issue broadcasting has been called into question, new commercial opportunities have been presented to voluntary organisations to promote their news, views and appeals through terrestrial broadcast media. For example, the BBC's new night-time commercial television service, BBC Select, currently transmits an unscrambled monthly television service aimed directly at voluntary organisations. Voluntary Sector TV (VSTV), which was launched in June 1993, offers charities 'two distinct opportunities to access transmission time for their own communication purposes' (BBC Select, 1993, p.9). The first is for organisations to buy 30 seconds of airtime in a slot on a monthly programme entitled, *The Social Agenda*, which presents news items and discussions about issues concerning the sector. The second is the opportunity for voluntary organisations to screen their own tailor-made programmes. However, this option comes at a considerably higher price. Aside from production

costs, the initial tariffs ranged from just over £1300 for a ten-minute programme, to nearly £6,000 for a 60-minute programme. These costs have recently increased by a further 20 per cent.

Another significant commercial development was the removal of a long-standing ban on charitable advertising on commercial television and radio in 1989. Although the anticipated stampede of large charities to colonise the airwaves hasn't yet materialised, several organisations have productively used television advertising, alongside other publicity campaigns, to highlight issues and raise money (Fenton et al., 1993).

The critical point about these new opportunities is that their availability is directly linked to an organisation's ability to pay. For example, events since 1991 have done little to dispel initial concerns that the prohibitive costs of broadcast advertising would exclude all but the very affluent charitable bodies, and potentially exacerbate the marginalisation of many groups in broadcast media.

One major consequence of these developments is that the prospect of gaining editorial coverage in the media has become increasingly appealing to those voluntary agencies concerned with promoting their work and views. The benefits do not just relate to simple cost effectiveness. Gaining regular and favourable media attention can also increase the prestige of an organisation and the persuasiveness of its arguments. As Gandy (1982) notes:

Information that would be accepted only with caution if its source were identified as a partisan in a debate is much more powerful if it is a received objective fact, reported by an uninterested journalist (p.14).

However, if the mainstream media are becoming increasingly important forums for the dissemination of information about the sector, there is a need to consider what types of voluntary activity and organisations, across a disparate and heterogeneous sector, are given greatest prominence and why.

The survey: sampling and methodology

To answer these questions we present the findings from a content analysis of news coverage from a six-month sample of national and local press and broadcast coverage in the UK between February and July 1992, and from detailed semi-structured interviews with 38 news and current affairs professionals from domestic media in Britain. The national press sample comprised of two daily 'broadsheet' newspapers (*The Guardian* and *The Independent*) and three daily 'tabloid' newspapers (*The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror* and *The Sun*). The distinction between broadsheets and tabloids relates not only to size (the tabloids are smaller and generally cheaper), but also to image and persona. Each newspaper type employs

particular verbal, rhetorical, visual and presentational codes. The tabloid press are commonly referred to as the 'popular' press, as their circulation far exceeds that of the broadsheet press. They prefer a linguistic style that is based on truncated syntax and vivid vocabulary; their presentation and format is short and highly visual. In comparison the broadsheets, commonly referred to as the 'quality' press favour a style that is more elaborate and in-depth. Sunday newspapers were also analysed but are not included in this article. The national press sample comprised all editions of *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror* and *The Sun* during the six-month sample period. The local press sample was made up of the main daily and free sheet papers produced in four local regions in the UK. The broadcast analysis comprised the BBC1's 9 p.m. news, ITN's News at Ten, Channel 4's 7 p.m. news, Radio 4's 6 p.m. news (and their weekend equivalents), and daily local radio news programmes from each of the four sample areas.

Media representations of voluntary organisations

Who are the most prominent voluntary sector voices?

Our media content analysis revealed that certain types of charities and voluntary organisations received a disproportionately large amount of coverage. On a basic level, media prominence was closely linked to the financial resources of organisations. For example, the top 80 fund-raising charities listed in *Charity Trends* in 1992 (Charities Aid Foundation, 1992b) accounted for over a third of the named charities in coverage. In addition, certain media outlets gave more coverage to charitable or voluntary organisations than others. Voluntary agencies most frequently appeared in the broadsheet press, being mentioned in approximately two thirds more items than the tabloid press. The quality press also used a far higher percentage of charity and voluntary groups as main actors in an item (67 per cent of all occurrences noted) compared with only a minority of tabloid items (47 per cent).

Beyond these general observations, a number of other interesting patterns emerged in the reporting. The first related to the areas of voluntary activity highlighted in coverage. A senior officer of a national charity recently bemoaned the unfair advantages that 'cuddly charities' have in gaining public sympathy and support in an increasingly harsh financial environment — i.e. organisations 'concerned with causes which involve the elderly, children, animals or life-threatening diseases and so appeal to the emotions more readily' (*The Third Sector*, 16 December 1993, p.8). Our research highlights the media's role in targeting attention on these areas of voluntary activity (see Table 1).

Table 1. Main areas of voluntary activity reported in television, radio, quality and tabloid press in the national media

	Broadsheet coverage		Tabloid coverage		TV coverage		Radio coverage		Total coverage	
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)
Medicine/health	119	(16)	130	(41)	35	(24)	17	(24)	516	(27)
Environment	121	(16)	17	(5)	32	(22)	13	(19)	230	(12)
Children	65	(9)	21	(7)	12	(8)	8	(11)	156	(8)
Animals	37	(5)	36	(11)	13	(9)	2	(3)	147	(8)
Other	426	(56)	121	(37)	57	(38)	30	(43)	877	(46)
Total	768	(100)	325	(100)	149	(100)	70	(100)	1926	(100)

Across all media, the most prominent area of voluntary activity reported was 'health' comprising 27 per cent of all items coded, followed by 'the environment' at 12 per cent and 'children' and 'animals' both at 8 per cent. In contrast, groups representing ethnic minorities or dealing with race relation issues were the main actors in only 0.2 per cent of charitable coverage. Similarly, groups concerned with poverty accounted for only 0.4 per cent of items, as did groups working in the area of alcoholism. Groups representing single parents and the unemployed did not figure at all.

'Health' and 'animals' were most prominent in tabloid coverage. Furthermore, the marginalised areas of activity previously noted only appeared in the quality press. For example, no tabloid items featured ethnic minority organisations or groups for ex-offenders.

A second interesting feature relates to the relative prominence of organisations with different functions. The main voluntary organisation identified in each news item was assigned a *principal* function from a list developed from earlier typologies of organisational function in the voluntary sector (e.g. Johnson, 1981; Brenton, 1985; Deacon and Golding, 1988). This typology distinguished between service-providing organisations, pressure groups, appeal funds and other organisations (e.g. self-help groups, umbrella organisations and research organisations). Obviously, such categorisation has limitations, not least because many organisations are multi-functional. Even so, we felt it was both feasible and analytically useful to assign a main function to organisations. In most instances this main function was inferred from information provided in the news item (for instance, biographical snippets about the organisation, and the actions and views attributed to it in the piece). Occasionally, when this difficult to deduce on the basis of textual information, background information¹ was consulted.

Table 2 shows that the general service-providing charities and voluntary organisations gained most coverage overall, comfortably exceeding the coverage given to pressure groups. This is an interesting finding, as one would consider the latter to be the most obviously 'eager' news sources (Gans, 1979) because their political legitimacy is more clearly dependent upon the 'oxygen of publicity' (Lipsky, 1970). Table 3 shows the distributions of organisations by function as between the different newspapers. Whereas in the broadsheets pressure groups were nearly as frequently featured as service providers, the tabloids gave far less coverage to pressure groups and far more to appeal funds, a difference that was statistically significant. The statistical significance of a number of other relationships was also explored. This analysis found that while the differences in coverage as between service providers and all other types of function were not significantly different between broadsheets and tabloids, the former were more

Table 2. Type and frequency of charity group in the news

	No. of cases	(%)
Charity general	842	(44)
Pressure group	474	(25)
Appeal fund	281	(15)
Research charity	148	(8)
Advice giving	86	(5)
Umbrella group/co-ordinators	34	(2)
Training	5	(0.3)
Total	1926	(100)

Table 3. Type of named voluntary group compared between the quality and tabloid press

	Broadsheets				Tabloids					
	The Guardian		The Independent		Daily Mail		Daily Mirror		The Sun	
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)
Service provider	182	(45)	182	(51)	56	(48)	56	(43)	31	(39)
Pressure group	156	(38)	122	(34)	16	(14)	16	(12)	5	(6)
Appeal fund	18	(4)	13	(4)	23	(20)	40	(31)	32	(41)
Other	52	(13)	42	(12)	22	(19)	17	(13)	11	(14)
Total	408	(100)	359	(100)	117	(100)	129	(100)	79	(100)

likely to report on pressure groups, and less likely to cover appeal stories. *Within* the tabloids, it also emerged that the difference between *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* in appeal reporting was significant.

How did organisations get coverage?

The main impetus for media coverage came from voluntary organisations and charities 'doing their work' (Table 4). On one level this provides some measure of how voluntary activity *in its own right* is seen by journalists as a legitimate subject of news reporting. However, it also reveals how voluntary agencies have to perform for media attention, rather than just receiving it automatically. As we discuss later, this tells us something about the relative status of the voluntary sector as a news-gathering arena for the media.

However, if certain types of voluntary organisations are having a degree of influence in getting their views onto the media, we need to consider the sorts of news agenda to which they are contributing. This requires consideration of the *themes* of voluntary sector news coverage.

Whose agenda? Themes in voluntary sector news

More than half of the themes coded in the analysis dealt with *charitable/voluntary acts and charitable giving* (Table 5) (When giving is

Table 4. *Nature of the event reported*

	<i>No. of cases</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Work of a charity	310	(28)
Response to government initiative	195	(17)
Funds raised	139	(12)
Launch of a charity report	88	(8)
Launch of a campaign/appeal	68	(6)
Results of charity research	59	(5)
Charity misconduct	59	(5)
Protest or demonstration	41	(4)
Launch of an organisation	31	(3)
Response to independent research	26	(2)
Disaster	18	(2)
Response to government research	12	(1)
Annual report of a charity	8	(1)
Total	1126	(100)

all a matter of time', *The Independent*, 28 May 1992, p.12; 'Can you spare some investment advice for a worthy cause?', *The Sunday Times*, 1 March 1992, p.13). Most of this sort of coverage focused on the personal motivations of the giving public or the personal responses of the receiving organisations ('Across Europe with a lorry load of jumble', *The Independent*, 11 February 1992, p.13; 'Two oxen, a plough and the seeds of hope', *The Daily Mirror*, 19 March 1992, p.13). The second most common thematic area of coverage was *statutory/voluntary relations*. This broad category covered those instances where voluntary agencies acted either as awareness raisers over specific issues ('No time for tears: Comic Relief's Tony Robinson on the Third world crisis', *The Daily Mirror*, 16 April 1992, p.38) or as monitors of state and private activity ('Ministers urged to abolish social fund "lottery"', *The Independent*, 9 July 1992, p.7; 'Do not aid the hand that tortures', *The Independent*, 21 May 1992).

There were also many significant absences in media representations of voluntarism and charity. For example, only 2 per cent of coverage considered whether voluntary activity works as a *catalyst* for beneficial social change ('Empowerment for the people — survival for the planet', *The Guardian*, 4 April 1992, p.35) or, negatively, as a *sustainer* of dependency and inequality ('Another Telethon? What help is that if you're disabled', *The Independent*, 8 July 1992, p.15). Similarly, any active citizen looking for an informed discussion on the implications of the growing role of the voluntary sector in welfare provision in Britain, would gain scant insights from popular news media. Only 2 per cent of themes (see *charities and society*) related to questions about the most appropriate social function voluntary activity should fulfil

Table 5. Most mentioned themes of media reporting on the voluntary sector

	No. of cases	(%)
Charity and charitable giving	4220	(52)
Statutory/voluntary	875	(12)
Necessity/appropriateness of voluntary activity	770	(10)
Fundraising	753	(9)
Efficiency/wastefulness	404	(5)
Volunteers/volunteering	364	(4)
Local/national/international	172	(2)
Charitable recipients	165	(2)
Catalytic/sustenance nature of voluntary activity	128	(2)
Charity and society	151	(2)
Total	8002	(100)

(‘NHS relies on charity to save lives’, *The Guardian*, 30 March 1992, p.2; ‘Does Charity begin at home or in Europe?’ *The Independent*, 13 March 1992, p.25). Particularly interesting was the lack of negative commentary on the voluntary organisations. For example, themes which illustrated the voluntary sector as sustaining need rather than working to dissolve it came to only 0.4 per cent (‘Story that is fast losing its appeal’, *The Guardian*, 26 May 1992, p.17), and those which were critical of fund-raising in any way came to only 0.8 per cent (‘Sick of AIDS hogging cash’, *The Sun*, 4 May 1992, p.18). When critical coverage did occur it mainly focused on the fraudulent activities of individuals involved with charitable enterprises, rather than broader considerations about the purpose and value of formalised altruism (‘Charity to close after inquiry’, *The Mail on Sunday*, 22 March 1992, p.6; ‘Jail for “Lady” who stole £3m’, *The Daily Mail*, 28 March 1992, p.1).

Once again, thematic variations were evident across media sectors. The tabloid press was fixated on fund-raising, charitable giving and the receipt of funds (accounting for three-quarters of their coverage in these areas), and had little interest in the broader political contributions of the sector (‘Diana’s unsung heroes. Do you know someone who deserves our good Samaritan award?’, *The Daily Mirror*, 8 July 1992, p.18). For example, only 1 per cent of *The Sun’s* reporting addressed the political relationship between voluntary agencies and other institutions and individuals. This reveals that, although voluntary agencies fulfil a dual purpose in the broadsheet press, as agents of action and sources of comment, in the populist press they are almost exclusively represented in the latter capacity.

Producing voluntary sector news

These preliminary data reveal the media reporting a limited range of voluntary activity and opinion. However, it is one thing to identify broad patterns in coverage and another to account for them. One of the main aims of our research programme was to try to explain the factors that combine to build media discourses on voluntarism. At root, there are two factors that influence how voluntary activity is reported by the mainstream media. The first relates to the publicity strategies and resources of organisations; the second to the perceptions and practices of journalists and editors involved in the news production process.

Research into voluntary sector news management has consistently demonstrated that well-resourced, professionalised organisations are both more likely and better able to provide a steady stream of news

releases, publicity gimmicks and PR material, than poorer and more informal organisations (Deacon and Golding, 1988; Fenton et al., 1993). Such findings may not be surprising, but they do provide an important basis for explaining the patterns of voluntary sector representation in the mainstream media. However, they represent but one element of the agenda-building process. To understand fully the origins of media reporting, we must also address the views and activities of the key intermediaries in the news production process: the journalists and editors who commission and author these accounts. For news is far more than the sum of opinions and information received by news organisations. Media professionals necessarily exercise value judgements in selecting and filtering the information they receive and in directing their news gathering. As such they are active participants in the encoding process, who have a 'licensed autonomy' (Curran, 1990) and a 'discretionary power' (Semetko et al., 1991) to reframe and reinterpret the information they process and the occurrences they witness. In the remainder of this article we focus on journalists views of the voluntary sector, which is one of the most underresearched aspects of voluntary sector communication.

The view from the newsroom: journalists and the voluntary sector

Being good at giving news

There are some charities that really have got no more idea than the man in the moon of how to communicate with the media (national TV journalist).

Although the journalists interviewed often expressed reservations about the growing slickness and professionalism of the publicity work of many large organisations, they were far more sympathetically disposed to those organisations able to draw their attention to issues in an interesting and 'professional' way, and respond efficiently and positively to any approaches they might make. By the same token, organisations who failed to appreciate the pressures and demands of the news-gathering process were spoken of with a thinly-veiled contempt,

When it comes to needing to phone someone and say 'what's happening with that?' and it turns out to be this sort of enormous mushroom, that everyone's sharing the responsibility and you think 'I shall never get any sense out of anybody' (national tabloid journalist).

Within this formulation, media prominence is seen as a measure of competence. Furthermore, the recurring reference to practicalities appears to demystify the news-making process, implying that any organisation with a neat press release, eloquent spokesperson and a

little insider knowledge will be guaranteed media exposure. Therefore, if organisations fail to secure coverage it is their own fault for not having appreciated the market conditions.

However, while not denying this is an important aspect, journalists' suggestions that news presence is exclusively a matter of eloquence and competence are somewhat disingenuous, not least because they (conveniently) obscure the active and significant intervention made by the media professionals themselves in filtering and appraising voluntary sector messages. Journalists don't just passively relay information, they inevitably 'make meaning' by processing it into news. This is an unavoidable consequence of the news production, as there are always more stories that could be news than there is available news space. News has to be selective. Therefore, to properly understand the dynamics behind the reporting of voluntary sector activity, we need to delve more deeply into the journalists' accounts, to explore the professional value judgements that guide them in their selection.

The relative news value of the voluntary sector: being nice isn't enough

I am arguing for social stories in the face of stories about German elections, Italian elections, peace breaking out in Bosnia, chaos in Russia, war here, there and everywhere. I can't go in saying it would be awfully nice to do something about deaf kids having nice summer camps or running out of money for their summer camps unless it's something really that affects a lot of people (national TV, specialist social affairs correspondent).

Seymour-Ure (1987) suggests there exists a hierarchy of 'political leadership arenas' in terms of national news media coverage in Britain. At its apex are the government and the parliamentary opposition, who are almost guaranteed media attention. Below them are a host of institutions and individuals who, the lower down they feature, can have progressively lower expectations of attracting media attention as of right. On the evidence from the journalists' interviews, voluntary organisations feature fairly low down on this ranking, at least within the national media. As one TV news journalist put it, voluntary sector stories 'don't acquire quite the same journalistic priority in newsrooms as other stories'. Journalists were also hostile to any suggestion that the sector should be treated as a special case. As another commented, 'You know, we are a newspaper. We're not a charity ourselves.'

Consequently, it was repeatedly stressed that if voluntary groups or charities want coverage then they must be prepared to compete for it, by providing stories that conform to the professional news values that guide the news selection process. Numerous studies have identified the crucial role that news values play in determining which events are most likely to be presented as 'news' (e.g. Galtung and

Ruge, 1969; Chibnall, 1977; Golding and Elliott, 1979; Ericson et al., 1987). These values are a product of the pressures of the news production process and embody professional assumptions about the interests and needs of the mass audience. Essentially, the less complex and ambiguous an issue is, the more readily it can be personalised and dramatised, shown to have clear and immediate implications, and is consonant with previous news frameworks, the more likely it is to be reported. On one level many journalists felt that voluntary agencies lacked a sense of what sorts of information would be likely to make a good news story. As one social affairs correspondent complained,

The sector as a whole is very naive in what it thinks the press can do for it and what it can do for the press ... Though I do get lots of approaches from smaller charities, they uniformly tend to be along the lines of 'Can you give us a bit of a write-up for this or that?' Rather than by trying to stimulate our interest by saying 'We are doing this and the reason you might be interested is because this reflects a general issue concerning a sector in society'. And it's very heartening but very rare that I get an approach from a charity who are offering an idea that is going to work.

On another level, there was also a feeling that long-term altruism provides an unpromising basis for immediate, short-term news reporting. As one BBC journalist put it,

I think the problem for charities is that a great many of them are doing extremely good work but without any dramatic highs and lows. And in a curious way the media demands highs and lows in order to make up a story.

Amidst these general discussions about 'news-worthiness', journalists repeatedly emphasised two important criteria that influence their decision to approach a charity or voluntary group, or follow up one of its leads. These were *topicality* and *generality*.

Because the voluntary sector is not seen as a significant leadership arena in its own right, it largely has to defer to news agendas determined by other institutions and events. One consequence of this is that charities or voluntary organisations working in areas that become *topical* in the news agendas may suddenly find the media very receptive to their views and, indeed, find themselves pursued by journalists. But groups working in areas that are absent or marginalised from the mainstream news agenda will find journalists far less receptive. With the content analysis, it is clear that the relative prominence of environmental groups during the sample period was linked to the general salience of environmental issues in the news agenda at that time, following the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the UN Earth Summit in Rio.

The second criterion that journalists used to assess the news-worthiness of a story was the test of *generality*, and reveals their

concerns about the broad relevance of a story. Although journalists, as mass communicators, can only ever imperfectly 'know' their audience (McQuail, 1969), their work is driven by a concern that they are talking to as wide a number of its constituents as possible, in meaningful terms. This emphasis on the general applicability of news has two implications for the reporting of voluntary sector activity. First, it leads to preferential initial treatment by national journalists for those organisations with strong nationwide support (instead of what one journalist described as 'the smaller, maybe more grass-rootsy ones who you don't really know who they represent'). Second, it has advantages for those organisations who deal with issues of a general rather than minority interest. This explains the prominence of the 'cuddly charities' in news reporting and the concentration on charitable acts that provide 'Pictures of dogs ... Pictures of donkeys ... Stories about new units opening in hospital ... Stories about new ways of helping sick children' (broadsheet journalist). After all, everyone worries about their health and recognises they should be kind to children and animals. It also explains the almost complete absence of ethnic minority organisations from mainstream news reporting, particularly in the most popular media (who are most dependent upon achieving mass circulation). As one tabloid journalist candidly admitted,

If it's something that affects a minority of the population then it is by definition a minority of our readership, and therefore it's, by definition, not going to get in the paper.

The importance placed on broad news values by journalists highlights the active role they play in determining which types of organisations get featured and when, and shows that media presence depends on far more than just the ability of organisations to deliver information regularly, neatly and coherently to news desks. However, the interviews also revealed another range of judgements that guide the news selection process, and influence which types of organisations are reported and whether their views are taken seriously. These concern journalists' perceptions of the credibility of different types of organisations.

The hierarchy of voluntary sector credibility: fair comments or half truths?

Groups that have a real axe to grind, we would steer clear of (national TV, specialist social affairs correspondent).

Theorists from a range of traditions and political viewpoints agree that news discourses are dominated by the views of elites (Sigal, 1973; Hall et al., 1978; Gandy, 1982; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). In

producing news, journalists seek to report the views and activities of 'authorised knowers' (Ericson et al., 1987): individuals or institutions who because of their social, political or economic status are seen to have some claim to speak authoritatively on topical issues. This deference to authority is bound up in the professional ideology of journalism, with its commitment towards objectivity and impartiality (Hall et al., 1978). In the interviews we not only sought to assess journalists' views of the news value of the sector, but also their opinions about the credibility of voluntary organisations as news sources. It soon became evident that journalists make clear distinctions when assessing the credibility of voluntary sources, and these have a significant influence on who and what they report.

Journalists often welcomed the partiality of organisations who were prepared to enter the political fray, and make critical interventions on broader matters of public policy. Indeed, several indicated they increasingly relied upon certain voluntary agencies for controversial comment, particularly about government policy. As one journalist put it, voluntary groups have 'a lot less to lose than a PR spokesperson' and are thus able 'to speak out boldly against the government'. This would explain the frequency with which news coverage of charities and voluntary groups features them criticising the actions of others.

However, although these critical interventions were readily appreciated by journalists, they made clear distinctions as to which organisations' views could be taken on their own merits, which required further corroboration or balancing, and which should be ignored. The main distinction drawn was between pressure groups and other types of voluntary and charitable agencies, particularly service providers. Indeed, many journalists did not include pressure groups in their definitions of the voluntary sector. (As one journalist explained, a pressure group 'is not sort of helping people in the way that a charity does ... [Is not] a worthy cause which would make you think "yes!"') Pressure groups were perceived to lack the involvement and support of an identifiable client group, which, in the journalists' eyes, lent authority to the views and opinions of those organisations that had such backing:

Because of their breadth of experience and because they're in touch all the time with the sort of problem with which they're dealing, that sorts of transcends their particular thrust (national TV journalist).

The suspicion of pressure groups applied even when they claimed to impart factual information. For example, one journalist expressed his concern over information provided by a prominent environmental pressure group:

I happen to think that they trade on our ignorance of scientific matters and so

I get a bit wary of that simply because we don't have anyone on the staff expert enough to know whether or not they're telling the truth.

However, such professional scepticism applied far less rigorously to caring or service-providing organisations. For example, a BBC journalist described two hypothetical scenarios where he would treat a caring/service-providing organisation like Age Concern in very different ways. If Age Concern were to release a critical response to the government's plans to put Value Added Tax on fuel bills, he would feel compelled to balance it with an opposing viewpoint. However, if the same organisation released a report on the incidence of hypothermia, he would be prepared to run the story on its own because 'it's based on facts, it's not speculation, and it's not interpretation'.

Clearly, a hierarchy of credibility operates in journalists' selection and treatment of voluntary organisations. Pressure groups are more useful as a source of controversial reaction rather than informed comment; and journalists always listen out for the sound of grinding axes when assessing the information they present. However, the information and views of caring and service-providing organisations are seen as having a greater authority, because they are seen to be based on practical experience rather than political vendettas. By the same token, the greater the size and operation of an organisation, the greater authority is attributed to its views, due to an assumed increase in the ability of the organisation to be representative. This would partially explain why caring and service-providing organisations have a greater prominence in news coverage than campaign groups, even though one would expect the latter to be more explicitly media-orientated. It also provides an explanation as to why, in the national media at least, the bigger and broader a charity is, the better.

Summary and conclusions

In this paper, we have explained why the need for voluntary and charitable organisations in Britain to communicate their needs and views to a broad audience has never been more acute. Furthermore, we have suggested that domestic mass media constitute very important forums by which public images of voluntary activity are promulgated. However, our research shows that the national media in Britain present a very selective portrayal of voluntary activity, which prioritises 'big charity provision' over smaller self-help; general, non-contentious areas of activity over minority or controversial work; and caring and service-providing organisations over explicitly campaign-orientated groups. Within these general patterns, there were variations in reporting across

media sectors, with the most restricted definitions of voluntarism to be found in the popular tabloid media.

To explain these findings, we have explored journalists' perceptions of the voluntary sector and their accounts of their news-gathering and selecting. These interviews show how the news values of journalists, and the 'hierarchy of credibility' they employ to discriminate across a heterogeneous sector, play a major part in overrepresenting certain types of voluntarism, and ignoring others. In their search for topicality and generality, national journalists look for large organisations, dealing with large issues, covering large areas, on behalf of large numbers of people. Furthermore, their professional commitment to objectivity and impartiality often makes them uncomfortable with the more self-evidently campaign-orientated organisations, whereas they have fewer qualms about reporting activism based on altruism.

Notes

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- 1 Particularly useful in this regard were the organisational summaries incorporated in various local and national voluntary directories, which often gave clear pointers to the prime objectives of organisations.

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2 Charities, Media and Public Opinion

Natalie Fenton, Peter Golding and Alan Radley

This report of a two-year study of charities measures public attitudes to charitable giving and volunteering. It also examines the media image of charities. The research concludes that there is greater public awareness of the role and importance of voluntary organisations.

The voluntary sector is in a period of rapid change. It is expected to provide more and more services previously provided by the state, while receiving less core funding from central and local government and a decreasing level of voluntary contributions. The larger charities and voluntary groups, with highly developed internal structures and ready resources, are responding to this change by intensifying their communication activities. Where possible they employ professionals for fundraising and campaigning. A growth in the use of the media by the voluntary sector is part of this increasing professionalism.

The need to understand motivations for giving and volunteering has never been greater. This includes whether motives vary among different groups in society; what is the impact of public policy and the media on giving and volunteering; and whether images fashioned by voluntary

organisations themselves influence public giving and volunteering. A two-year research project (May 1991-May 1993), in the Communication Research Centre, Social Science Department at Loughborough University, sought to address such concerns.

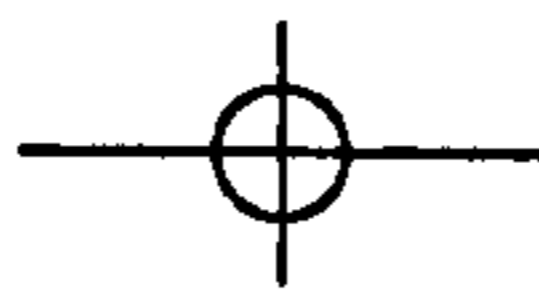
The study comprised four major elements:

- In-depth group discussions about charity and charitable giving.
- A national survey in England and Wales of 1006 people during September 1992, to measure attitudes to charities.
- A national postal questionnaire and ten case studies to investigate charities and voluntary groups' own communications strategies.
- An examination of the images of and information about charities made available to the public via the media.

Public Attitudes to Charities, Charitable Giving and Volunteering

The national attitude survey revealed that half the respondents thought charities provide more services now than three years ago; only 8% thought they provided less. This points to a general awareness of the





increase both in voluntary organisations and their widening role as service providers.

The vast majority of people (94%) said they give to charity. Over half did not believe that donations reach the people for whom they are intended, and that charities are to some extent corrupt. Linked to distrust of charitable organisations are distinctions between where a charity operates geographically:

- 45% of all respondents said they did not mind where a charity was seeking to provide services
- 21% preferred local charities (those in their own region)
- 31% preferred charities operating in Britain, and
- only 3% expressed a preference for overseas charities.

Reasons for preferring charities in Britain were based on a desire for knowledge of the charities' activities. The closer the charity to the respondents' own environment the easier it was to gain information on their activities, the more accountable they were perceived to be and less likely to waste time and money.

Charities as organisations are viewed in contradictory ways. They are expected to be amateur in style and motive, yet professional in their efficiency and effectiveness. In seeking funds, they should inform the donor about why funds are needed and what the consequences of donation might be. The majority of people wanted people who work for charities to do

so for love of the cause, not for financial gain. Emotional appeals are suspect, yet readily conceded to be necessary because effective. The public recognise the need to have their attention sought, their minds focussed on need. Yet undue tin-rattling, emotional blackmail, invasion of privacy or personal space is resented.

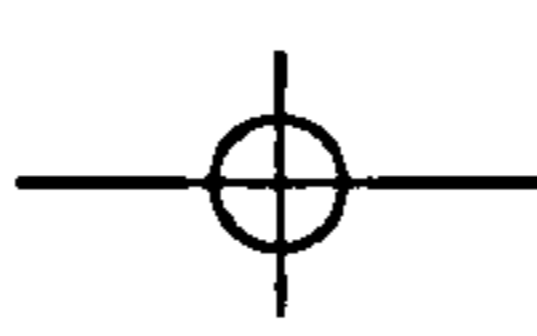
The survey revealed three clusters of reasons for giving to charity: trust, duty and reciprocity. These reflect that people prefer some sense of active involvement in the process of charitable giving, to conceive their action as positive, effective, considered, and direct. They wish to be in control.

Trust. 74% said they would only give if they knew where the money was going. 63% said that with a small charity they felt their donation would be put to good use, while 51% did not think that a bigger charity would be more efficient. Trust required charities to avoid politics. Only 26% of respondents said they would give to charities which were involved in politics.

Duty: Giving is also an expression of citizenship duties. To give to others less fortunate is a social obligation. 78% said they give as a way of being thankful for their own situation, and 77% said it allows them to give something back to society.

Reciprocity: requires that the donor receives something in exchange for their gift. This exchange can be material such as a raffle ticket or entertainment, or abstract, for example assurance of protection from suffering.





Public Attitudes to Fundraising

Attitudes to fundraising can be grouped according to whether fundraising is by broadcasting, written requests for funds, events or direct requests. Of these, the most traditional methods of fundraising such as through a staged event were the most popular. These entail a personal exchange with the donor directly involved and in control of the giving process. Such methods satisfy the demands for trust, duty, and reciprocity which as suggested above, underpin the major clusters of attitudes to charitable giving. The least favoured method of giving was in response to direct requests such as direct mail or door-to-door collections. This is seen to be intrusive as the donor is not in control, the request is initiated by an 'other' and it becomes an uncomfortable transaction. However, when asked how they actually give to charity the results are somewhat different. With the highest percentage of people giving to door-to-door collections (72%). Thus, although people do not like door-to-door collections in practice they are a successful method of raising funds.

Public Attitudes to the Role of Statutory and Voluntary Sectors

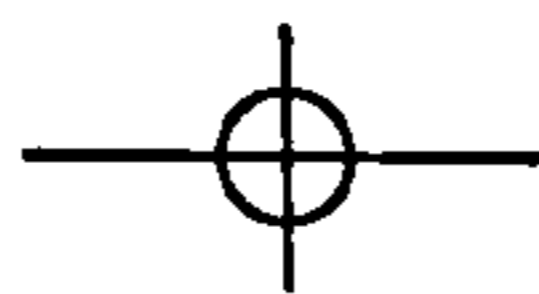
From the mid 1970s onwards the intention of the government has been to reduce the role of the state in welfare provision and to compensate for this by expecting more from other sectors. Attitudes to the relationship between the voluntary sector and the government are rooted in this shift. Attitudes expressed in the survey about the balance between voluntary and statutory services

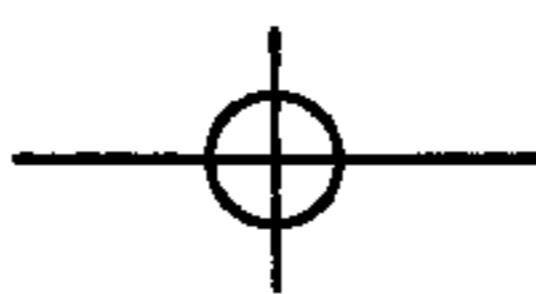
can be grouped into three types:

Government as a central role: approximately nine people out of ten (92%) thought that the government has a basic responsibility to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves. 84% thought that the government should provide for basic services which affect everyone and charities should fill in the gaps. This shows a great deal of support for a broad based welfare state.

Charities as a residual role: these responses recognised that provision by the welfare state was shrinking, resulting in charities providing more and more services. There was clear concern about this course of events. 87% thought the government ought to help more and not rely on charities to raise money and provide services. This was linked to public response to the change in welfare provision. 41% thought the public should not give to charities to compensate for cuts in government spending. These responses varied little across socio-economic groups.

Charities as a central role: these attitudes support charitable provision because of deficiency in statutory services. 78% agreed charities react more quickly and more efficiently to needs than government. 67% agreed there have to be charities to give people the opportunity to give and participate in society. 79% agreed that charities gave people the choice which services to support. Notably 68% agreed that if the government stop providing services, people would continue to give for fear of others suffering. Since people do not





agree with this in principle, it is reasonable to assume giving would be reluctant.

Public Attitudes to Volunteering

Almost half the respondents had done voluntary work at some time. Where people live, their household income and work status are all significant determinants of their likelihood of volunteering. Reasons for and against volunteering were both personal and public and can be further defined as demonstrative, social and instrumental.

the vast majority of voluntary organisations. Voluntary donations are falling yet 36% of the groups who replied to the postal questionnaire described these as their main source of funding.

Fundraising expenditure has a clear influence on the extent of fundraising by any one group. Only 40% of those who spend nothing at all on fundraising have increased their promotional activities over the last five years, compared to all of those who spend over £10,000. 47% of

Reasons given why people do voluntary work

Social reasons		Demonstrative reasons		Instrumental reasons	
Enjoy it	93%	To give themselves a position in the community	45%	To give something back to society	86%
Get a sense of personal achievement	86%	To feel important	39%	To try and change society for the better	82%
Have Spare time	81%	To be seen to be doing good	40%		
A chance to learn new skills	65%				

The Communication Activities of Charities and Voluntary Groups

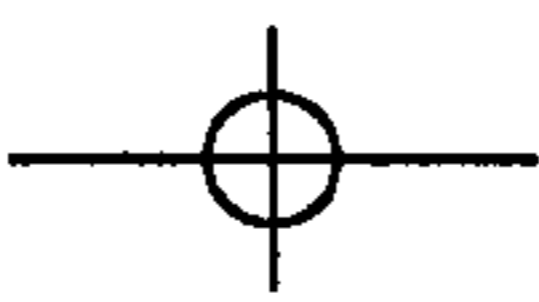
The communication activities of the voluntary sector have changed considerably over the last five years. The ever-rising number of voluntary organisations and ever-growing demands on their resources are putting unprecedented strains on the sector. From the smallest community-based self help groups to multinational charities administered by paid professional staff, the ability to generate income and voluntary support is now critical to

the sample population said they would like to undertake more promotional activities if they had the resources.

The larger the annual budget of a group, the more likely they are to use television as part of their communications activities. Only 15% of those groups with an annual budget up to £20,000 made use of television compared to 68% of those with an annual budget of £100,000 plus. Annual budget was also a significant factor in the use of television advertising¹.

¹ 16 groups had made a charitable television advertisement - of these, 12 had annual budgets of over £20,000. Of the 13 who said they would use television again all had annual budgets of over £50,000.





Similarly, those with larger annual budgets do more market analysis, develop more sophisticated techniques of market segmentation and rely less on calculated guess work. The research illustrates that promotional and extended fundraising activities are the luxury of the few large, established groups. Smaller groups with lower budgets cannot afford to invest in sophisticated fundraising methods and marketing expertise; while larger groups continue to grow because they possess the resources to maintain their public profile and fundraise on several different levels.


Case studies of ten voluntary groups illustrated increasing professionalism in the areas of public relations, campaign work and fundraising, particularly in the larger groups. These groups employed a growing number of paid professionals to do work once undertaken by volunteers. This tide of change aroused concern both about smaller groups who cannot afford such measures, and about possibly contradictory images which might produce a mismatch of messages between fundraising and promotional/campaign work and the prioritising of fundraising over all other communication activities.

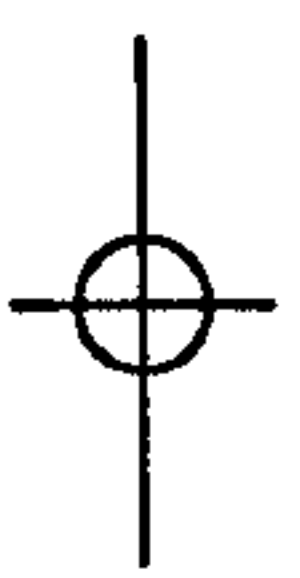
Analysis of Media Content Relevant to the Voluntary Sector

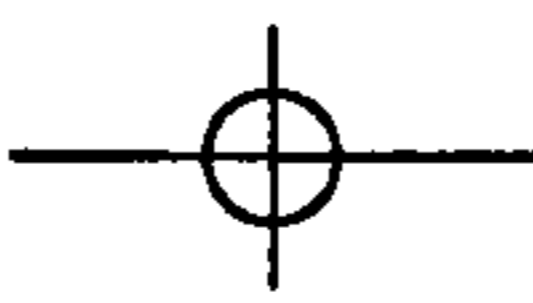
Images and arguments provided by the voluntary sector about the failings of public policy inform national and local media. Appeals are aimed not only at the public purse but more frequently expound the need for social and political change.

An analysis of local and national radio and television news and newspaper content was undertaken over a six-month period. The most frequently mentioned voluntary organisations in the news are those most noted for campaigning and as policy advocates. The single most common theme in media content was the voluntary sector acting as awareness raisers on specific issues, stories in which the item would be concerned with bringing an injustice to the public's attention. This accounted for 7% of all coverage which included reference to the voluntary sector. 7% of coverage recorded failings of the welfare state with direct criticism of the state apparatus. A combination of all themes which provide a critical assessment of the state amounts to 21% of coverage. This includes reporting that more should be done by the state, that charities should not be doing work felt to be state responsibility, the voluntary sector monitoring the welfare state or legislation which hinders charities.

The voluntary sector is frequently opening the door to public debate. The government has been keen to laud the achievements and potential of charities and voluntary groups but, as charities have to meet the increasing demands of policies such as the recent Community Care Act, so their resources are further stretched. With charitable donations remaining relatively static, the voluntary sector is being placed under increasing pressure. It appears that this process has generated a more politically astute and assertive voluntary sector, both in the approach to fundraising

media
vs  state
commentators -
not campaign





(they are increasingly becoming more professional) and in the ability to publicly renounce public policy.

Conclusion

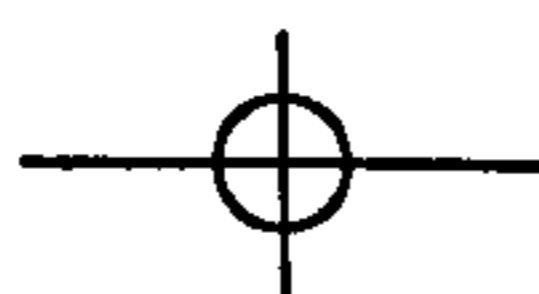
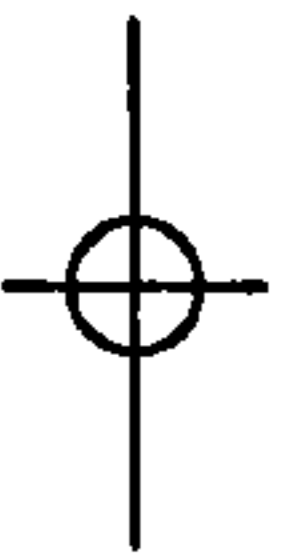
The research illustrates that the British public are aware of the changing nature of the welfare state and the growing role of the voluntary sector in the provision of welfare services. These attitudes are situated in time and place, influenced by levels of knowledge and experience of the sector itself, by the social and cultural circumstances of each individual.

The survey shows that people prefer local voluntary organisations. Local voluntary groups enable people to be in control. Trustworthiness must also emanate from the subject of charitable help. When the subject is considered too large for charitable provision (as in general health care and education), the voluntary sector cannot be relied upon to sustain the service.

The analysis of media content and communication activities of the voluntary sector tells us that vital tasks are carried out by voluntary action in a welfare system, such as monitoring for the public, sponsoring civil and social cases of importance neglected by the public sector or providing new identities to disenfranchised and marginalised groups. In this sense voluntary organisations can contribute to the 'recovery of citizenship' in the most powerless groups, whose voice cannot make itself heard by its own strength in the welfare system. With this new tough and assertive voluntary sector comes the

increasing recognition that fundraising ventures cannot and should not be seen as distinct from general advocacy and promotional activities.

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Mediating Social Science

Natalie Fenton, Alan Bryman
and David Deacon
with Peter Birmingham



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**TEXT BOUND INTO
THE SPINE**

6 Only those variables that revealed significant associations are presented in Table 1. Seniority, age and gender revealed no relationship with any of the motives listed. Furthermore this table only lists cross-tabulations with the eight most prominent motives indicated by respondents. Such an analysis of the remaining motive categories was meaningless because they were very rarely cited.

7 For the purposes of this multivariate analysis all six variables were dichotomized: senior/non-senior; female/male; <45 years/46 years>; respondents with external research funding/respondents without external research funding; respondents with a high or medium publication profile/respondents with no or low publication profile; respondents who had used PR services/respondents who had not used PR services.

8 For this table significance levels were relaxed from $p < 0.01$ to $p < 0.05$. This is because significance levels are influenced by changes in the base number of cases involved in a cross-tabulation.

Constructing Social Science in the Newsroom

Who are these people? God knows – but they give great copy. They're a godsend. You are looking for a commentator, preferably with doctor in front of their name, and in five minutes you've got 400 words to fill out your feature. It's absolutely brilliant. You ring up the British Psychological Society, say you're doing a piece on one-armed mothers who leave their husbands for their gay uncles, they give you five numbers to call. You ring one of them up and they say, straight off, how much am I getting for this? You say you'll stick £100 in the post, and it's 'Great. What do you want to know?'. . . If you're talking about Diana [Princess of Wales], say, they'll tell you 'if we're talking about a woman who's rich and separated, with two kids and a big house' . . . and they're off. (Tabloid features editor, *Independent on Sunday*, quoted in the *Independent*, 21 January 1996: 6)

This chapter focuses on media professionals' attitudes to social scientists and their research. This perspective is vital because news is far more than the sum of opinions and information received by news organizations. News professionals necessarily exercise value judgements in selecting and filtering the information they receive and in directing their news gathering. They are active participants in the production process, who have a 'licensed autonomy' (Curran, 1990a) and a 'discretionary power' (Semetko et al., 1991) to reframe and reinterpret the information they process and the occurrences they witness. These processes occur within the confines of the institutional and ideological structures of the mass media. As Bruck (1992: 142) comments:

The media do speak in their own particular ways about the world. They produce particularly structured accounts – their own discourses – and employ reporting dynamics that textually characterise coverage but are organizationally routed. . . . The media have networks of authorities, of people who are to be interviewed and assessed, people they pay attention to and listen to. And the media have their specific ways of presenting events, making their stories work, seeking their continued audiences' assent. . . .

In doing all this work the media employ their own well described codes and conventions – their modes of speaking and editing, of contracting voices and stories. The discursive material they work with, however, is not their own. . . . *In news analysis, we need to make the analytical separation between the discourses the media produce and the discourses they use as material to build on, to process and deliver. We need to be interested in the structures of transformation.* (Emphasis added)

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This chapter attempts to explain some of the 'codes and conventions' and 'structures of transformation' involved in the social scientist-journalist relationship. The discussion is grounded in evidence drawn from two major empirical exercises. Firstly, detailed interviews with 34 news professionals selected by means of a purposive stratified sample based on the reporting of social science research during the period of media content analysis. The sample was stratified in terms of media professionals from broadcast media (local and national radio and television journalists), and print media (local and national press, broadsheet and tabloid press, weekday and Sunday press, women's monthly and weekly magazines and men's monthly magazines). Secondly, the 'tracking' of journalists at three social science conferences involving the close observation of journalists' movements and activities throughout the conference, supplemented by a series of informal discussions with selected journalists, to gain further insight into the reasons for their actions and decisions. The rationale for this form of investigation was that the academic conference is one of the more obvious sources of information about social science research which journalists utilize. Three annual social science conferences were chosen on the basis of their media activity and discipline. The organization of one conference adopted a very proactive media strategy, investing considerable time and resources in facilitating media links. The second had put some thought into media coverage but on a considerably smaller scale and the final one had given almost no consideration to the media at all. Each conference covered a different social science discipline.

The Associative Status of Social Scientific News

Journalists repeatedly stressed that social science had associative rather than intrinsic news value, that it only became worthy of their attention if it achieved newsworthiness by association. This can be explained by examination of both structural and ideological factors of the various news media.

Structures that Influence

The primary structural factor for the status of social science news was the type of journalist doing the reporting. News gatherers can be crudely divided into two strands - the specialist correspondent and the generalist reporter. The specialist is dedicated to the pursuit of news in a particular subject area or 'beat', such as crime or foreign news or science; while the generalist cuts across boundaries, providing a broad-sweep approach to news gathering and fitting into no particular news specialism. As one news editor put it: 'generalists know a little about everything and a lot about nothing'. The specialist correspondent is more common in the quality

media, which favour a more in-depth and analytical approach to reporting than the more popular media (Tunstall, 1996).

The division of responsibility among specialists has evolved to enable news gathering to be organized routinely to ensure that individual and identifiable journalists are located at those points where news is likely to be made (Tuchman, 1978). In our own study, coverage by specialist correspondents accounted for 20 per cent of the total coverage of social science. No individual specialist dominated the reporting, which was diffused across 23 different types of specialist correspondent.

The science correspondent is a well-established post on most British national broadsheet newspapers but our study shows that science correspondents actually cover extremely little social science. This confirms Dunwoody's (1986b) findings that these journalists typically express little interest in covering the social sciences, viewing the findings of social research as too commonplace. Given that there are no specialist journalists who dedicate their time and energies specifically to its representation, it is not surprising that the coverage of the social sciences tends to be thin and sporadic, rather than in-depth and consistent.

The content analysis of media coverage suggested interesting differences in the ways specialists and generalists used social scientists in their coverage. The majority of social science news was reported by general news reporters with a byline (accounting for 51 per cent of the total media coverage). Table 5.1 summarizes the nature of coverage in the broadsheet press (where the majority of coverage occurs) in relation to the type of journalist doing the reporting. Although in both cases social scientists were far more frequently featured presenting research, a significantly greater proportion of generalist items featured them as 'pundits' - adjudicating on issues already active on the media agenda.

These differences in reporting can be explained in several ways. A specialist journalist is assumed to have a level of expertise in his or her subject area. However, as Tunstall and others have commented, the designation of a journalist as a specialist has more to do with an editor's decision and organizational needs than with special competence in a specific field. As he puts it, when a journalist is designated as a specialist by his editor the journalist becomes if not an instant expert, at least an

Table 5.1 *Type of broadsheet journalist and the reason for inclusion of the social scientist*

	Specialist		Generalist	
	%	N	%	N
Social scientist as researcher	93	(92)	81	(182)
Social scientist as pundit	7	(42)	19	(42)
Total N		(99)		(224)

P < 0.01

instant specialist' (1971: 76). Consequently, in many instances specialist reporters must be seen to be knowledgeable about a designated area in which they have no previous expertise.

I'm mindful of the need to try and get it right, however imperfect and rushed the process is. And that if I don't get it right . . . you're likely to get some kind of kickback and the specialist readers who know what you're talking about are likely to let you know you've got it wrong. (Specialist correspondent, broadsheet newspaper)

I did an English Literature degree then I went to Reuters and I just got shoved into all this market stuff and I had absolutely no idea what a bond was or anything . . . I just sort of learned it as I went along. When I was at the *Financial Times* it was a very specialised audience so you write to quite a high level and you assume a lot of knowledge in the readership. . . . I write because I want the Chancellor to read what I'm writing . . . I want to be as right and as sophisticated as I can be. (Specialist correspondent, broadsheet newspaper)

Because of the need to appear knowledgeable in their own right, specialist correspondents felt less inclined than generalist reporters constantly to substantiate points with reference to specialist sources. This does not mean that they were not reliant on social scientists as sources. On the contrary, because in many instances specialists had to be seen to be knowledgeable about a designated area in which they had little previous expertise, their credibility depended upon them establishing specialized networks of sources who were willing to offer information and advice on the legitimacy of a potential news story, even though they were not necessarily included in the final report.

Where I learn more and need more research is on the subjects that I don't know as well. . . . There's an awful lot of research and experts that I would call on when it's not my particular specialism. (Specialist correspondent, broadsheet newspaper)

The need to live out the role of a 'specialist' meant that the correspondent's relationship to the social scientist was viewed as an important one that should be treated with care. In talking about one of the social science conferences a journalist commented:

we don't want to bite the hand that feeds us. They do invite us here, they do try and write press releases for us. . . . If we disparage them day in, day out, it's going to be counterproductive. (Specialist correspondent, broadsheet newspaper)

This is reflected in social scientists' views of specialist correspondents as journalists who are the most accurate, receptive and conscientious in their reporting (see Chapter 4).

Specialists, often with the help of their sources, can identify shifts or moments of interest in a particular field and present these to the editorial staff from an informed viewpoint. On this basis, with time, specialist correspondents may acquire a good deal of tactical autonomy within the news organization. This is a result of their accrued knowledge, reputation and byline, their specialized sources of information, their personal choice of

which stories to cover and also their membership of an informal group of 'competitor-colleagues' (Tunstall, 1983). Competitor-colleagues are an important part of the specialist correspondent's professional life. They offer the journalist a system of peer review. As Sahr (1993: 156) identifies:

editors and producers within news organizations judge the credibility of individual news reporters by examining what competing reporters produce. Departing from the 'accepted wisdom' is risky for any individual journalist, unless other reporters also move toward that view. That is, to a large degree journalists serve as their own most important reference group, so that in their presentations they are . . . 'rivals in conformity'.

This was borne out in our study:

Interviewer: Would it be a disaster if you hadn't got a story when everybody else had?

Specialist correspondent: Yes it would. If you missed or got wrong one of these regular things, it just sort of makes you look really stupid.

This system was also apparent among the journalists observed at the social scientific conferences. The occasion of the conference was more likely to attract specialist than generalist correspondents because they were more interested in keeping up to date with a particular subject area:

I need to come, I need to look, need to watch, need to go and sit and listen to some papers. The individual detail of the papers isn't necessarily going to get into the piece but they are interesting, some of them in their own right. But it also gives a general feel of what people are looking at. (Specialist correspondent, broadsheet newspaper)

The conference also offered an opportunity for networking and building up the contacts specialists often rely upon:

Interviewer: Is there a sense in which once you've met somebody at a conference they then become a regular news source for you?

Specialist correspondent: Yes, that often happens. You think that person is interesting, they're obviously doing work that is a bit different, they are articulate, they are willing to speak to the wicked media. So you put them in your contacts book and you do tend to keep in touch with them and ask them what they're doing.

At the conferences we studied journalists spent much of their time conferring with each other and exchanging information so that everyone had the same material. At one of the conferences several of the journalists travelled there together, ate together and picked out the stories they would focus on before the conference began. These were mostly specialist correspondents, forced into close contact with one another due to their restricted brief:

Interviewer: What about the role of other journalists here, do they play a part in your selection?

Broadsheet journalist: Oh yes, let's be honest, it's absolutely crucial. We're all meant to be deadly rivals and independent free agents, but we sit round in a circle and ask each other what we think are the best stories of the day. Partly

this is out of peer group respect. . . . And it's partly because you don't want to get into trouble from our news desks when there's a big story in the X paper and Y paper and it's not in the Z paper. So it's back covering, mutual reassurance. We work together a lot more closely than is generally recognized. That may or may not be a good thing. . . . But it's reassuring to know that people whose opinions I respect also think that this is fresh, interesting and different.

So, in a bid to demonstrate their status as specialists, to achieve credibility both inside and outside the profession, specialist correspondents were more source dependent. They also occupied a more privileged position than to the general news reporter, operated in a more focused news-gathering arena and had more autonomy from the news-desk. As such, they tended to be more source orientated than audience orientated, more subject-led than story-led:

in terms of boiling it down, why we would do one report rather than another, quite clearly we'd be guided by our specialist correspondents . . . journalism is founded on the rock of specialist correspondents . . . so if a specialist correspondent . . . comes to me and says 'I think this report is important', then I'm going to take it seriously. (Television news editor)

If I feel strongly as a specialist correspondent something should be covered I would go and argue my case strongly. So I would press them even if there was an initial reluctance on an item. (Specialist correspondent, BBC radio)

It's not so important for me to go for the news-breaking stories. . . . There's always going to be a question in your mind. The question in my mind [is], 'What has sociology got to contribute at the moment to the understanding of society, has it receded in some ways as a subject or is it actually going through an interesting phase?' (Specialist journalist, broadsheet newspaper, talking about a sociology conference)

Their concern with current social issues and trends gives them not only a privileged status as participant, ready to summon, interrogate and judge those who possess intellectual competence, but also the power to designate those whose advice is worthy of attention.

General news reporters, on the other hand, had less personal contact with the social sciences than specialist journalists and were more driven by existing news frames. There are differences in the reporting of different types of journalist: 'the more autonomy reporters have the more "individualised" the story; the more the story is a product of a particular individual endeavour, the more it will reflect its author's interests' (Negrine, 1996: 88). Similarly, the less autonomy a reporter has the more the story conforms to general news criteria and the less it will reflect its author's interests:

Interviewer: Do you ever read social scientific journals?

Local general reporter: No. The nature of the job is such that you have to know a little about all kinds of things but not a lot about any of them. I can be doing one sort of story one minute, I can be chasing a fire engine down the road the next. That's the nature of the job.

This type of reporting puts more emphasis on the requirement of objectivity. The nature of generalist reporting seems to stress that journalists should not let their own values into stories, and that they have to balance the viewpoints of others. This was often achieved by interviewing and quoting sources from all sides of an issue:

If the basis, the thrust of the story is about a dispute, is about confrontation, two sides saying different things, then I would actually seek out different opinions. . . . To illustrate the rift and to try to give the reader, *not being an academic myself*, only reporting these, trying to give the reader both sides or as many sides as possible. (General reporter, tabloid newspaper; emphasis added)

The important point of this quotation has been put in italics. The reporter is not an academic: that is they are not a specialist, therefore cannot report in a manner that assumes a certain amount of knowledge or with a voice that embodies a degree of expertise.

Whoever is doing the reporting, at the core of both types of reporting remain the interests of the news organization. The bottom line for all news media is to maintain or increase their readership/viewership. This usually means conforming to tried and tested formulas of routine news gathering and processing and involves particular professional ideologies of exactly what counts as news.

The Associative Status of Social Scientific News: An Exercise in Ideology

The fact that social science is not intrinsically newsworthy is not just related to the structural division of news reporters but also to the similarity of the subject matter dealt with by journalists and social scientists. Social science research was often seen to fall within the area of the daily mundanities of news coverage and as such was often classified as 'common sense'. As social scientists may rely on personal observation and insight, it is also hard to differentiate their methodology from the practices of the intelligent reporter who may well believe that no special training or expertise is required to understand the phenomena typically examined in the discipline. Because of this shared territory, the journalists we interviewed often expressed distinct lack of enthusiasm when social scientists reported their research in an area of common reference:

a large bulk of the research often tells me what I already know . . . people often say why have they spent two years researching that when everybody knows it, at the cost of five million pounds. I am really looking through for surprises for bits of information that I didn't know about. (Tabloid journalist)

Thus the lack of coverage of social science can partly be explained precisely by its commonality with the sphere of the journalist. To the extent that the issues and subject matter of the social sciences were seen as being part of everyday life, enquiry in the social sciences was sometimes seen as trivial. This commonality reached further into what we have termed *epistemological*

consonance. Journalistic epistemology is distinctly positivist. Journalists tended to have a strong belief that the 'facts' can be neatly dissociated from 'opinion', that their own craft involves holding a mirror up to reality so that they can relay the 'truth', untainted by personal subjectivity:

What I have tried to do with my reporting is just report what I observe, that's all we're meant to do as reporters, is just reflect what is there. It's not for us to interpret, it's for us to reflect what we see. (BBC journalist)

The tenet of journalism that the 'facts' are indisputable and can be extracted is a fundamental part of a journalist's professional value system. This system tended to encourage a preference for social scientists and research that shared similar beliefs and intentions: that is, research that adopted a broadly positivist framework. Even when a social scientist did not hold such a position, the success of their media interaction would often depend on them assuming an aura of facticity.

I think that social scientists, they seem to start from a much broader cultural base. And they must be more rigorous in a sense but also use their data more honestly and genuinely try to tease out facts as opposed to that type of social science where one collects together facts in order to prove a point, which is all too prevalent I think. (Magazine journalist)

Of course, on some occasions, commonality with the journalists' subject matter which is then *perceived* as an indication of the extreme banality of a study can, inadvertently, increase its news value (although not in a way likely to please the social scientists involved):

what I used to do which was very easy and rather cheap . . . I had a thing I called 'The Award for the Silliest Research of the Year' . . . it was totally unfair to the researchers who had got no comeback . . . and I suppose the criteria for judgement there is one's own prejudices. But it tended to be research which sounded so bloody obvious like . . . you find people dancing in discos. (Sunday broadsheet journalist)

Research lands on your desk and it seems so outrageous to you, its conclusions, that it's been newsworthy because of its ridiculousness, if you like. So you're seeking to discredit it. (Broadsheet journalist)

However, this aspect should not be overemphasized: as Chapter 2 shows, instances of such negative reporting were rare.

Thus, although many journalists defer to the expertise of social scientists in many cases and in many areas, they also displayed a general ambivalence about the scientific status of many social sciences (and social scientists). Tensions entered this relationship when the social scientific research was deemed too intuitive:

X did a review piece on this conference last year and caused a real row within the profession [psychology]. And I think he was quite right. These people stand up and take taxpayers' money, talk for an hour and say the blindingly obvious. (Specialist correspondent, broadsheet newspaper)

too counter-intuitive:

that stuff that came out recently about juvenile offenders and it came out with the staggering conclusion that juvenile offenders are likely to be short. I think it was something like 39 per cent were below average height, 38 per cent were above height . . . and it was true as far as it went but I would have thought completely meaningless. (Broadsheet journalist)

too mundane:

I mean there's no point in writing something that's worthy that people are going to yawn and turn off and head straight for the sports pages. We know we're competing with plane crashes and political speeches and even Lady Di going off skiing. So our stories have to make people think 'I didn't know that' or 'that's interesting or a bit different', or 'well blow me down' . . . So we do try and emphasize the novel over the worthy all the time. (Specialist correspondent, broadsheet newspaper)

or too arcane:

I am an intelligent person. If I read an article where [in] the first two or three paragraphs I come across 20 words that I don't really know what they mean, you don't understand what it is talking about, that is bad social science. (Magazine journalist)

The more the source came to understand the needs of the journalist the greater the ability of sources to ensure that their research becomes news. 'Sources wishing to communicate in the news media must share values with journalists, including core values of the dominant culture' (Ericson et al., 1989: 14). The next section explores the nature of the values that journalists employ in their assessment of social science as news.

What is Newsworthy Social Science?

We have established that the shared territory of the journalist and social scientist can partly account for its low level attraction to the mass media. It is not newsworthy *per se*, but it can achieve newsworthiness. To be accepted into the news arena social scientists must accept the pre-existing definitions of newsworthiness. This, of course, limits the agenda-building power of social scientists themselves. Whether they seek to challenge, inform or confirm public understanding of social issues through their media contact, social scientists are, in the final instance, subordinated to an agenda that is not of their making. In other words, although social scientists may exert some influence in shaping media evaluations of particular issues, their interpretative power – to shape the priorities and subject area of media debate – is far more limited. From our study it appeared that the agenda social scientists must work within is bound by four main criteria: topicality, generality, distillation and illustration.

Topicality

Topicality means many things in news but mostly it refers either to issues currently in vogue or those that are already established on the media map. Social scientists working in areas that are deemed topical in the news agendas will be more likely to attract media attention; those working in areas that are absent or marginalized from media coverage will tend to be neglected.

often I go up to the news-desk and say there's a good report coming out tomorrow on this. The reasons why I call it a good report may have more to do with topicality rather than me necessarily judging it in terms of being a particularly wonderful piece of social science research. (Broadsheet journalist)

Interviewer: Why is that interesting?

Broadsheet journalist: For two reasons: topicality, you're hitting a current story, the rows over Parkhurst and all that, and that's always crucial; and secondly, it's interesting in itself, it begs the question why . . . a relatively dry story in terms of statistics but in terms of what it means to people, stories on the papers and in the news about prisons . . . [it] becomes interesting.

if somebody came to me now and said I've got evidence which shows that young people might be led into committing murder by watching violent videos, I might be interested. But I'd have been a darn sight more interested if they'd made that call the day after the James Bulger trial. Timing is important . . . this isn't only popular newspapers, any newspaper, they're obsessed with one issue; two weeks later they've forgotten about it. (Tabloid journalist)

Generality

If *topicality* was a test for the 'hard news' status of a potential social science status, then *generality* was the measure of its inclusion as 'soft news'.¹ Although journalists can only ever imperfectly know their audience (McQuail, 1969) their work is driven by a concern that they are talking to as wide a number of its constituents as possible. This led to preferential treatment by journalists of research on issues they consider to be of general interest, and explains the prominence of research on education, children and gender in coverage. The transformation of an event or research finding into something deemed to be of universal significance (i.e. newsworthy) relied on the image of the general reader. As James Carey puts it:

The god term of journalism – the be-all and end-all, the term without which the entire enterprise fails to make sense – is the public. Insofar as journalism is grounded, it is grounded in the public. Insofar as journalism has a client, the client is the public. . . . The canons of journalism originate in and flow from the relationship of the press to the public. The public is totem and talisman, an object of ritual homage. . . . But for all the ritual incantation of the public in the rhetoric of journalism, no one quite knows any longer what the public is, or where one might find it, or even whether it exists any longer. (1987: 5)

When asked who this general reader might be, journalists were typically vague. They described the general reader as the 'person in the pub' or even 'my mum'. But a news story exists only for the moment, it is here today

and gone tomorrow, distanced from the readership and subject to the internal dynamics of the profession. The constant reiteration of 'only giving the readers what they want' masks the structuring forces of the journalistic profession itself:

Interviewer: How do you judge what the public want?

Broadsheet journalist: That's really very, very subjective. It's not just an individual subjective thing, it's the culture of the newspaper you work on, it's part of the whole culture of journalism if you like. A very, very difficult thing to pin down. It's a thing we all become infected with ultimately.

Interviewer: How do you know it's what the readers want to hear?

Local newspaper journalist: I am a reader as well.

Interviewer: So you base it on your own interpretation?

Journalist: And I speak to a lot of people, my mates, people in the pub. It's common sense, isn't it? It's true, it's like how would you tell a good story in the pub?

The defining characteristic of generality was described as 'something that is intrinsically interesting'. In the first instance this was most definitely not something that was primarily educational or informative or contributing to debate, but was more likely to be construed as 'entertaining'. The implications of judgement based on the 'imagined audience' are an individualizing of public issues, a narrowing of debate, and a limiting of detail. This would partly explain why the subject area of most reported social science related to issues of 'social integration and control', as these were perceived as the most likely concerns of the person in the street. It also explains the absence of methodological detail in social science reporting, which was assumed to be either of little interest or too complex for the average reader.

The subject, it depends on the area it was. If it was something like bullying, truancy, drug use, something like that, then I would definitely look at it. But if it was a dry subject I probably wouldn't really look at it. (Sunday broadsheet journalist)

Anything that's surprising, really and interesting . . . we had one, somebody had done a report on the fact that if you lived in Wales or in Norfolk you were more likely to get sent flowers to you by your partner. And it's really stupid, but people love it. People love that sort of thing. (Magazine journalist)

I've never had the impression that there's ever been a general acceptance that violent videos do lead people to do terrible things. My view is that most people think it's possible but that's all. So if you produce evidence which says this proves it happens I would say, 'wow, that's interesting'. But if you produce evidence which says it doesn't happen, I would say that nobody has ever convinced me that it does anyway, so it's less interesting. But I know what you're getting at. You're getting at why do we pick on supposedly sensational findings in reports rather than the unsensational. Well there's the answer, because we're interested in the interesting, not the uninteresting. (Tabloid journalist)

Topicality and generality can be subsumed under the meta-theme of relevancy or the 'so what?' factor – this means several things, including: is it a cause for concern, is it controversial, is it different or amusing?

What a total waste of time that was - tells you absolutely nothing about nothing.
(Broadsheet journalist at a conference)

The 'so what?' question rests on the perceived relevance of the research for the person in the street. Journalists were often willing to engage in considerable self-criticism, but would join professional ranks against criticism from academics who they believed were either too narrowly scientific, that is, too saturated in their own subject area to be interesting for a general audience; or too broadly ideological, that is, so tied up in philosophy and theory that they ceased to be topical.

A lot of scientists just don't want to communicate with the media or they can't. They can't string two words together to make an interesting common-sense sentence. A lot of scientists just talk in complete psychobabble. I mean social scientists as well . . . a lot of them have [such] a condescending attitude that a journalist couldn't possibly understand what they were saying. And also they're so used to communicating with their peers that they haven't the faintest idea how what they're saying or what they're discussing appears to the average human being who is a newspaper reader. (Broadsheet journalist)

Once you get through to them the only real problem we have is if they get very technical, which is no good for us. Or even very strongly into kind of feminist ideas. (Women's magazine journalist)

Similarly, the social criticism and commentary that frequently often form part of social science research were often vilified as pure opinion or political lobbying and as not relevant to the general readership. The reasons for this lay partly in the lack of resolution they offered. As Canter and Breakwell (1986) have said, journalists require answers dealt in broad strokes, uncontaminated by qualifying caveats, doubts or limitations:

They feel more on solid ground as it were, the old-fashioned empirical research that sociology still can do, that's the kind of thing that's going to attract a news story rather than the guy who does a . . . kind of serial analysis . . . that's got nil interest because it's purely academic, as it were, theory. Obviously it's going to be things that are actually seen to have found out something about our society in a measurable way . . . that is going to appeal to the news editor more. (Broadsheet journalist)

Of course, there were times when journalists wanted social scientists to provide social criticism and commentary. However, this was always on the journalists' terms - they decided who should be the arbiters, and sought them out when required. Social scientists did not have the power to presume such status.

The subject areas that received coverage did so because, it was claimed, these were what the public was interested in. Experts confirm journalists' relative autonomy and are the source of their own intellectual credibility, which rests on claims of transparency and the objective presentation of the 'real' on the one hand (thus they cannot be held accountable for this knowledge, they are only reporting), and the claim to represent the public rather than the truth on the other (Beaud and Panese, 1995). The problem

With this, as Garnham points out, is that it leaves the news arena free either to consumption choice on a market as the only test of value or 'to the untrammelled exercise of the critical judgement of cultural producers themselves, often, of course, in the name of a notional audience or public, but apparently not subject to the same critique as their sister and brother intellectuals in other fields of cultural production' (1995: 382).

Distillation

As noted above, the methodological preferences of news professionals tended towards positivism. This relates to their own professional value system and underpins the journalistic creed 'let the facts speak for themselves'. In turn, this encourages a penchant for research that deals in statistics and is empiricist in inclination. As seen in Chapter 2, sociology was the subject area most frequently covered in the mass media but it was psychology, a discipline which is more obviously experimental, that was most often referenced explicitly. It appeared that these differences reflected a hierarchy in journalistic perceptions. Psychology was given greater public credence by dint of positivism:

There's more scepticism about social science research . . . we tend to take [sic] a childlike faith in pure science research . . . I think there is probably a lingering animosity towards social science, a phoney science some people would call it . . . psychology is more of an exact science . . . I think sociology is top of the list for hostility in the press and in the public's mind. (Tabloid journalist)

Having said this, the national survey of social scientists revealed that the social scientific discipline itself was not a predictor of media contact, that it was secondary to other news values and to the eagerness of the social scientists to seek and attract media coverage. Still, we can say that social science research was treated with a degree of scepticism not generally applied to the natural sciences:

I don't, incidentally, actually think that Dr X's research is as open minded as it might be. He uses very political language and I think as a journalist you've got to be aware of that, that social scientists, like economists . . . virtually always, without exception come from the left . . . there's a danger there that if you report Dr X's findings as though they are fact, people watching the telly know that isn't true. (BBC journalist)

Research that did not adhere to a positivist framework posed the sort of *epistemological conflict* between social scientists and journalists suggested in the above quotations (Golding and Elliott, 1978). Whereas the key premise of the enterprise of most social science is that knowledge is constructed, and can never be 'value free', the underlying assumptions of journalism are precisely the opposite - that by presenting 'facts' they can reach a level of objectivity in their reporting that precludes judgement and bias: 'this sounds desperately populist but what we're about is trying to come up with the truth . . . by reporting the bare facts' (independent radio journalist).

This view led to a general suspicion of social scientific theory and what were interpreted as value-laden judgements posturing as science. Theories proposed by social scientists were expected to serve as instruments of prediction, as is the conventional wisdom for the natural sciences. The news value of a piece of research increased if it could offer precise conclusions, preferably relating to current social policy, and without equivocation: 'If we published stories with nuances in it [sic] rather than news then people wouldn't buy the newspaper' (tabloid journalist).

As a result, journalists often reported research findings in more categorical terms than the researchers themselves felt comfortable with. The consequence of this is often what was at the heart of social scientists' complaints about media coverage. In being translated into a media report, they sometimes felt, their research had taken on a specious definiteness (see Chapter 4). It is relevant that the above quotation is from a representative of tabloid journalism, a section of the press that devotes considerably less space to social science and features relatively little extended social analysis compared to the quality/broadsheet press. Although journalists may feel frustrated with the timidity of social scientists in making policy recommendations or engaging in direct political debate, those who pride themselves on their in-depth coverage of social issues (such as the broadsheet press) also recognized that an epistemological conflict between themselves and the social sciences exists and is sometimes impossible to resolve:

the subject is frequently a more nebulous one and I don't mean that pejoratively. But it involves a degree of analysis which doesn't necessarily, almost by definition, doesn't come to a firm conclusion. So you wouldn't expect, from a social scientist, a hard and fast statement of fact. And if you did get one you'd probably find another social scientist who'd take a radically different view. So almost by definition you're edging these sorts of stories towards a longer-term treatment. Otherwise you iron out all the subtleties and you can't really explore very much. . . . And you end up with needing to do a probably longer report examining the pros and cons of the argument and it doesn't really lend itself to news. (BBC news editor)

Although journalists of all persuasions seemed to prefer containable facts that led to conclusions they also felt the need to preserve their professional integrity. This meant ensuring that a certain piece of research really was news and that it really did reveal what it claimed to. To these ends, in selecting social science research for inclusion in their news round journalists showed an awareness of scientific validity. Interestingly, and corresponding to journalists' positivist inclinations, this was largely assessed via the methodology implemented; ultimately, verification of sound research meant a large sample:

We don't want methodology and we don't want endless pages on significance ratios and confidence integrals but yes, if a scientist has studied three people we're not as interested as if they've studied 3,000. (Broadsheet journalist)

If it's a survey with less than 500 people you'd be a bit suspicious of it. We kind of half developed an in-house policy that we don't use it unless it's more than 500

because it's getting ridiculous, so many people publishing surveys based on not very strong evidence. (Broadsheet journalist)

Normally I wouldn't mention the number of people who've been interviewed in the story, but if the research document didn't give me those figures I'd be suspicious. (Tabloid journalist)

The desire for research that was both quantitative and unequivocally conclusive also lent itself to a preference for research that was simple to summarize, although frequently, as Chapter 3 illustrates, methodological details would not make it to the report itself. Thus, however impartial a journalist claimed to be, for the purposes of news reporting an expert is an expert because the journalist tells us so. The result is that any assessment of credibility is the product of a journalist's own professional ideology and organizational constraints (such as meeting deadlines and condensing material); it is not objective and does not allow the audience the opportunity to assess the degree of expertise for themselves or to assess the journalist's assessment of the credibility of a particular inclusion.

Illustration

The gathering of news was based on quantifiable measures – how wide did the research reach? – but it also included a qualitative assessment of the ability of the research to arouse empathy in the readership/viewership. Getting a point across was felt to be much easier, and likely to engage the interest of the audience more directly, if it made use of personal case studies illustrating the issue being reported. Quantitative measures were necessary and increased the validity of the research for the journalist but were not felt to be particularly attractive to the audience. The research needed to be 'brought to life':

You'll see more and more social science work will be presented in terms of statistical relationships or certainly in terms of the case histories, newspapers love case histories, and personalized-based case histories. So work which either presents easily assimilable graphics or case histories . . . which can give specific examples which are accessible, those get snapped up quite quickly. (Broadsheet journalist)

The importance of the potential for research to be personalized should not be underestimated. All news media, especially the popular media, prefer concrete presentation to abstract concepts. This offers further evidence of the epistemological conflict between the professional and intellectual cultures of journalism and the social sciences. Whereas the social scientist seeks to extrapolate from the particular – to explore broader, longer-term principles and issues – the journalist's impulse was to pin matters down to 'real people', 'real issues' and current concerns.

The biggest problem with academic research is trying to make it sexy, trying to find that angle that the news desk is going to jump on. Because just figures are not enough, you need to bring it alive. People don't want to read just rows and rows of figures, they want to read about people. (Broadsheet journalist)

This could be the reason why the analysis of media content revealed a surprisingly high proportion of qualitative research, and it highlights how journalists' judgements about 'credibility' can conflict with their broader news value system:

The journalist will say, 'can't we have some names here?', because names are far more meaningful because they make an assumption that if you don't identify somebody . . . the credibility rating with the reader goes down enormously. (Broadsheet journalist)

Statistical research may seem more 'scientific' and 'objective', and it is obviously easier to quote in a short article and soundbite, but it can seem dry and arcane, anathema to news professionals. Qualitative research offers the prospect of presenting 'real people', inviting identification and intrigue. It is this duality that leads to claims that expertise is continuously pitched against the testimony of experience. What has been described as the ethos of radical populism (Murdock, 1993) is evident across all media. What is more, in our discussion of audience reception of mediated social scientific research it is clear that case studies and personal experience are accepted and often prioritized as a form of knowing (see Chapter 6).

Once a story has been accepted on principle there are practical considerations that the journalist must take into account that also play their part in the final nature of the coverage of social science.

Pragmatics: Accessibility and Approachability

The pragmatics of the reporting of social science meant two things: social scientists had to be available and willing to assist the journalist as and when the journalist required them to do so; and they had to be able to translate complex findings into concise, straightforward points, uncluttered by theory and specialist language.

You don't have three paragraphs to explain one point. So you want someone who can be quite creative with the language they use. I mean X is a good case in point because he is like Mr Jargon. And Y is the opposite . . . you ask him a question and he'll say it in an intelligent way and then he'll interpret it for you. And that's really good. He may not be the best in his field but he's done enough to achieve credibility and he can relate to your readers. And that, in the end, has got to be one of the most important things. (Magazine journalist)

The journalist must be able to understand in five minutes what may have taken the social scientist years. This explains why social scientists who were proactive in seeking media attention and had proved themselves to be good at translating complex findings into news discourse found themselves more readily reported on; not only because they proclaimed themselves available but also because their willingness reduced the risk of the journalist getting it wrong.

What I do is jot down the names of particularly useful people, particularly good broadcasters. It's a combination of the two things. Sometimes it'll be people

you want to go back to just to call on the phone to check something out. Other times it will be because people have been extremely good broadcasters. (BBC journalist)

They're there, they're available, they know what they're talking about and they can express it clearly, intelligently, in a fashion which is intelligible to everybody. And we use the same experts in many cases as the heavy papers, but the best ones are as quotable in the *Sun* as they are in the *Financial Times*, because if they've got common sense they can express views without using jargon in a way which everybody can understand. (Tabloid journalist)

The relationship between the source and the journalist resides in mutual benefit rather than conflict. It is important to remember that a conflictive relationship was the exception rather than the rule. However, for the most part, social scientists did have to ensure that they corresponded with journalistic assessments of news value, as discussed above. Complexity and equivocation were seen as the enemy of good copy. Journalists professed disdain for social scientists who ignored the requirements of mass media composition and could not or would not produce a media-friendly statement. A multi-layered approach to an issue did not enable the journalist to get an instant hold on the 'key points'. Inconclusiveness merely added complexity and did not fit favourably with the need for news to be instantly comprehensible, brief and resolute.

I think if you say 'if' or 'but' you weaken the story immediately . . . it comes under the heading of waffle. (Tabloid journalist)

A lot of them speak in such jargon and also are so non-judgmental that even if you present somebody who had cut the throat of his own child they'd say, 'we can't judge in this case . . . it could be this it could be that', so that's no good. (Magazine journalist)

Assessments of Credibility

It is not just news values and the pragmatics of news gathering that guide the selection of certain types of social science. The perceived credibility of a news source was a crucial factor in its inclusion and treatment in the news. Credibility judgements were made about the type of social science research, favouring those positivist in approach. There was also evidence of a further hierarchy of credibility operated by journalists on social scientists or institutions of social scientific research. As Sahr (1993: 160) notes: 'at any particular time, from the journalist's perspective, some expert sources will be credible and others not. Journalists do not simply select some experts randomly and label them as credible. Journalists are hardly in a position to judge the expertise of experts. Instead it appears that experts are largely certified - or credentialed - by institutional elites.' The reporting of social scientific knowledge was influenced by a set of criteria designed to appraise the credibility of different types of social scientific knowledge.

Willingness to use social scientists and to report what they do and say as news depended on the level of authority attributed to them. Substance and

professional image were interrelated. What the social scientist says will be reported seriously to the degree that they are thought to be important. As Blumler and Gurevitch (1986: 89) point out 'journalists react to all special groups and individuals, not only via news-value criteria, but also according to the degree of respect (or lack of it) to which they are regarded as being entitled by the dominant value system'. In this way credibility is conferred by academic status, with a professor, in the British higher educational system, at the top of the hierarchy. Prolonged periods of research or work in an area also signified experience and this was used to assess validity:

If I ring up and I'm told that Professor So-and-so is out but one of the researchers is happy to talk to me about what they're doing, fine. Usually I won't say no, but I still want to talk to the professor. I just carry on and quote them [the professor]. (Broadsheet journalist)

I would think Nottingham University is more prestigious than Trent because it's an old university, a traditional one . . . apart from anything else I went to an old university so it makes me feel better to think I'm one of them sort of thing, so there are those sort of subconscious prejudices. (Local journalist)

Although the value and extent of a social scientist's expertise were judged prior to their inclusion in media coverage, as Chapter 2 shows, evidence of these was often excluded from the coverage itself. However, judgements of institutional integrity were very basic and were not concerned with the nuances of institutional status and performance that are gaining importance within the social sciences in the UK (see Chapter 4).

Interviewer: Would you ever differentiate between universities at all?

Broadsheet journalist: Not too much because I think there are some very well thought of researchers in some not so well thought of universities and vice versa so you can't make too fine judgements on that. Generally if there's somebody in a university, an academic in a university, I'd give it a certain amount of credence.

Furthermore, a social scientist who was proactive in seeking media attention could override such hierarchies.

If I was to get a press release tomorrow saying, 'I'm a psychologist at the University of Manchester and I specialize in . . .', then as soon as I wanted a psychologist that would be the person I'd ring. (Magazine journalist)

Ultimately, time constraints meant that a source who approached a journalist was more likely to gain coverage as long as she/he met the dominant criteria of newsworthiness discussed above. To these ends, peer appraisals of authority and media appraisals of authority can turn out to be quite different.

For social scientists to assume the role of arbiter, journalists required them to be seen to be dispassionate, intelligent and objective. In particular, they should be seen to be impartial, and not peddling a particular political agenda. This encouraged a preference for academic sector research, especially when it came to arbitration. Social scientists from universities were used to inform and legitimize the objectivity of the reporting. An

academic was less likely to be perceived as having an institutional bias whereas private research institutes and government departments were viewed more cautiously:

In terms of having an expert, if we're doing a story where the [Conservative] government is saying one thing and Labour is saying another about say, community care, you might want to get someone in who is not in either camp but who is a sort of expert in the subject because they've researched it, and can tell us about the trends. Not saying one side is right or the other, but saying this is what's been happening. (Regional BBC journalist)

Academic research would have to come top of the list really, simply because of the time devoted to it and supposedly the impartiality of it. Government research is not usually going to go against government policy. (Tabloid journalist)

While this may be the preferred selective mechanism of journalists, it appears that the publicity strategies adopted by private research institutes often meant that their research achieved a higher profile than academic research. In the study of news and the production of news, the source-journalist relationship has often been identified as a means whereby sources may be able to ensure that their perspectives frame the reports of events (Negrine, 1996). This is as true of social science research as in any other area. Studies into this relationship also point out that different sources of information have different degrees of access to, and control of, resources, which leads to an unequal ability to gain media attention (Schlesinger, 1990; Deacon and Golding, 1994). Again, the same can be said for sources in the social sciences. Chapter 4 shows that not only are independent research institutes likely to dedicate more resources to publicity than the average university but also that they undertake more applied research which is most likely to fit within the broader news agenda than basic or 'blue skies' research undertaken largely in the university sector. In the case of government departments, their control of resources to seek media attention or distribute research findings freely is restricted by the Official Secrets Act. Thus social scientists in independent research institutes may be viewed with more scepticism than those in universities, but because journalists must work within a very tight time scale and are often event driven with little time to adopt an indeterminate, proactive search strategy they may rely on a narrow range of sources already known to them and known to be amenable to media contact:

That I would say is an absolutely normal journalistic process. That's purely people that you have found to be reliable and you believe their judgement to be independent and good. (BBC journalist)

There are certain people, especially in the education field, like X or whatever, you just think, 'I'll give him a quick call, he knows exactly what we want or need'. (Broadsheet journalist)

To be treated as authorized witnesses, social scientists had first to pass a range of credibility judgements made by the media professionals, which covered the origins of their research, their professional status, and the

methodology of their research. Significantly, these validity assessments occurred in the pre-production stage, and little of this information filtered through to actual media copy. As a consequence of this, the reader/listener/viewer has little opportunity for independent appraisal of the validity of the social scientific accounts presented to them, and can only assume the research has merit and importance on the basis of its inclusion. Even more significantly, our research revealed that those social scientists who actively sought media attention could bypass the requirements of credibility as long as they complied with the requirements of media staging. This opens potential avenues by which 'pseudo social science' can gain greater media attention than it is due.

The journalistic factors that determine the nature of social scientific coverage discussed so far relate to all aspects of the mass media. However, Chapter 3 revealed that there are real differences in the reporting of social science between various sectors of the mass media. How can we account for these?

Explaining Variation between Media

One of the obvious reasons why social scientists are proportionally more prominent in the broadsheet press is due to the greater availability of news space in this sector. The broadsheet press is quite simply more hungry for content than the tabloid press and most television and radio news. However, the interviews with journalists confirmed that this was not the only reason. Another important reason for the variance lies in the different goals of particular news organizations.

Broadsheet and broadcast journalists were far more mindful of what Tunstall (1971) terms 'non-revenue' or 'prestige' goals in their reporting. Whatever their general reservations about the scientific status of much social science research, these journalists recognized that it constituted a form of detailed authorized knowledge that it was important to relate.

I think the feeling is that a broadsheet paper like X which is fairly upmarket, intellectual readership, not a large readership, 300,000, probably a large number of these people are teachers, academics and so on. But they're going to be more interested in looking at the state of an academic discipline. (Specialist correspondent, broadsheet newspaper)

However, in the popular press these informational ideals were far less evident, and reporting was driven far more by populist goals than by judgements about what readers might need to be well informed. In this form of populism, lay opinions tend to override or preclude expertise.

Anything that is really eye catching and different would make a news story. We have to balance particularly on this kind of newspaper . . . between information and entertainment. So that it's quite possible that a very worthy piece of research which you yourself might think was very useful, wouldn't be published in the *Daily Mail* or *Daily Express*. (Tabloid journalist)

Because something that's newsworthy to our readers . . . is different to something that's newsworthy to say people who read the *Guardian* because they're interested in nuances in many cases. We're interested in news. (Tabloid journalist)

We're guided, I think we would like to say, by the views of our readership, which we think represents a lot of common sense . . . I wouldn't say we think for them but I think we do articulate for them. (Tabloid journalist)

Certain types of media and certain types of journalist were more directly targeted by social scientists. For example certain broadsheet newspapers are seen to attract a type of audience that may be more interested in the sorts of specialist information they are seeking to disseminate. Such audiences can usually be classified as an elite/intellectual group. What is more, such newspapers are more likely to employ a host of specialist journalists whom the sources recognize as being those most likely to be interested in their material and to understand their research, and who will require them to make minimal translatory effort. Such forms of 'appropriate communication' direct publicity efforts of the sources to particular outlets to the neglect of others who are deemed to be uninterested, unsuitable or too risky because they may be misunderstood.

We have explained the paucity of reporting on the social sciences as symptomatic of its associative status which stems from journalistic ambivalence, epistemological consonance and the lack of specialist designation. This enables us to understand why source performance, that is, the willingness of the social scientist to be proactive in seeking media attention, was shown to be such a significant factor in determining media presence.

We have also considered the broader factors that determine the newsworthiness of social scientific knowledge and why certain types of social science are deemed more credible than others. This helps us to understand why there is so little negative coverage: if social scientists are felt to lack intrinsic newsworthiness then those who fail the tests of credibility outlined above are simply considered not worthy of comment and in most cases are seen as irrelevant and ignored. Thus it is fair to presume that a measure of the limited accreditation of social science is not found in the hostile treatment meted out by a sceptical media, but in the disregard and neglect of social science that is perceived, in journalistic terms, as irrelevant.

Collectively, these findings raise serious questions about the role of the media in providing a wide range of information on the social sciences for rational and informed public debate. In the British mass media, social scientific knowledge tends to fulfil a confirmatory and legitimacy role – it has an associative status. Only very rarely is its exploratory potential welcomed or utilized. Furthermore, when it is presented, its authoritative-ness has to be accepted on a *prima facie* basis – that is, it is significant because it is present. Once social scientists have passed the relevance and credibility tests their authoritative-ness is often elaborated and extended to imbue the item with political and intellectual weight. Such reification can, in its own way, be as damaging as overt hostility or deliberate

misrepresentation, as it does nothing to promote informed and critical lay understanding of the nature of social scientific knowledge. Precisely because social scientists are rarely 'advocates' in media coverage, but are accepted by journalists and function more readily as arbiters, the reification of social scientific knowledge can occur.

The interviews with media professionals suggest several reasons for the limited presence and ambivalent status of the social sciences in media coverage. News values drive journalists towards research that shares their applied and immediate concerns and necessitate a distillation and simplification of what are often complex findings. Here we see the other component of the 'hermeneutic circle' discussed at the end of Chapter 3 (see page 63). However, requiring social scientists to conform to a journalistic agenda rooted in untested assumptions about audience needs and concerns inevitably exposes the status of social scientific knowledge to lay critique. On the one hand, the selective and bowdlerized presentation of research dealing with active public concerns risks appearing self-evident, and therefore banal and trivial. On the other, research that provides a counter-intuitive perspective can invite an acerbic and critical response, in which the scepticism of social scientists is not seen as a measure of their expertise, but as indicative of how divorced they are from 'real world' concerns. Although such views are reported, instances are rare.

For the most part the social scientist-journalist relationship exists in a state of relative indifference. To the extent that social scientists desire media coverage it is usually coverage that is deemed positive and/or coverage that will broaden their role as pedagogues. While journalists are concerned that their coverage is of interest to a wide audience, to be interesting includes being entertaining as well as informative. This is a difficult and essential task if information is to escape being viewed as a totally arbitrary phenomenon. Journalists must first order their own ideas and perceptions, then classify and arrange information according to its importance, and carry it all out in record time. Social scientists recognize these professional disjunctions and, for the most part, are prepared to put up with them. This results in a relationship that for the majority of social scientists is more compliant than conflictive.

Social scientists and journalists share common ground in subject matter but differ substantially in working practices: journalists work on the immediate without the luxury of standing back from events; they must produce information daily and without fail. Social scientists are not subjected to the daily restructuring and structuring of the world as events unfold. Both researchers and journalists use intuition and subjectivity and turn to the procedures of rational organization and formalization on which the quality of their work depends. Any tension that does exist between the two professions rests to some extent on their points of convergence and pivots on the point of divergence: journalism's prime concern is as an agenda setter, telling us where, what and who are worth observing (Katz, 1989); a social scientist's prime concern is interpretation.

To make social scientific knowledge attractive to the mass media depends, to a certain extent, on a social scientist's personal profile and public image as an expert. Those who want their ideas to survive in an age dominated by the mass media must, for the most part, observe the rules of media staging. In this manner expertise filters into ordinary understandings to the extent that it becomes popularized by experts who have learned to mimic journalistic discursive strategies. Social scientists who regularly appear in the media have become efficient at popularizing the presentation of knowledge to the public by adopting the discourse of the media professional. In this manner social scientists can ensure favour within the media but run the risk of succumbing to the transformation of knowledge rather than its critical mediation. This may in turn create a systematic over-representation of certain types of social scientific knowledge: of the empirical over the theoretical, of short-term over long-term analysis; and of the applied over the abstract. Of course the role of the mediators and the form of the media content mean very little until we can assess the complete act of mediation. To do this we must turn to those who consume the material produced.

Note

- 1 According to Tuchman (1972: 114), 'hard news' concerns 'information people should have to be informed citizens', whereas 'soft news' deals with 'human foibles and "the texture of human life"'.

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'Sod off and find us a boffin': journalists and the social science conference

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Abstract

Social scientists perform a multi-functional role as researcher, teacher and expert. The academic conference provides an opportunity for all these roles to be engaged and as such is a political and social site where meaning is debated and new research born. The conference is also attractive to journalists as news fodder. This article considers the relationship between journalists and social scientific organizations in the context of a professional conference and seeks to explain the tensions that exist. It concludes that the two cultures of journalist and academic are in conflict where they converge.

Introduction

It is well documented that the media perform an agenda setting function, influencing public conceptions of the importance of various issues (eg Protess and McCombs, 1991). Therefore, how the social sciences are presented in the mass media will potentially influence public frameworks for understanding society and social problems. However, it has also been noted that there is a relative lack of ink and air time given to new knowledge generated by social science research activity as compared to the natural sciences (Evans, 1995), and when social science research is covered by the media it is sometimes presented as self-evident and banal (Fenton et al. 1995). Both these points raise critical questions about the structural barriers and tensions in the mass mediation of social scientific knowledge. It is to these questions that this article is addressed. Specifically the article focuses on the interaction between news media and social scientists in one of the principal

public fora for the dissemination of social scientific research and debate: the professional conference.

The academic conference accords social scientists the opportunity of performing their multi functional role as researcher, teacher and expert (Nowotny, 1981). As researchers, social scientists present their most recent work to their peers; in their role as teacher social scientists may contribute to public understanding of society by the dissemination of their informed opinion; and in their role as expert they are able to comment on the work of their professional allies and on public issues of the time. Viewed in this way the academic conference becomes a political and social site, where meaning is debated and agendas for future research are born. The last two functions of teacher and expert are further enhanced at a conference by the presence of the media. The perception generated by the subsequent media coverage doesn't just strike at the self-esteem of social scientists – it also potentially affects research funding (Frost, 1995). Major funders are increasingly concerned with dissemination and general outputs of research results and researchers are facing pressure to demonstrate value for money, policy relevance and accountability. In addition recent changes in the distribution of research funding with the establishment of new universities has increased competition between institutions. Thus, besides the intrinsic motivation to share knowledge not only with their peers but also with the broader public, social scientists and their employers increasingly acknowledge the instrumental value of publicity for raising funds and exerting political influence. This instrumentalism is often evident in conference organization to the extent that media coverage may be viewed as an indication of the success of the conference as a whole. In other cases, our research suggests that professional associations in the social sciences attribute a more marginal importance to media considerations. Some accept the role the media can play to help the public image of a particular discipline but don't have the necessary resources to dedicate to the cause; while others stick to a more cynical view of the media as sensationalist news-mongers to be avoided. Therefore, in many conferences journalists are often seen as a relevant audience but one that is still secondary to other interested academics.

These factors combine to make a study of the news generating ability of an academic conference in the social sciences interesting and timely. But to date there has been surprisingly little research into this area. This article considers the relationship between jour-

nalists and social scientific organizations/professional associations; and the relationship between journalists and social scientists at a conference. This is considered in the wider context of formative influences of mass mediated public debate in the area of social science.

The social science conference and the media: methodology

As part of a large research programme investigating the representation of social science research in the British mass media we focused on the academic conference as one of the more obvious sources of information about social science research which journalists utilise.¹ Three annual social science conferences were chosen on the basis of their media activity and discipline (psychology, sociology and criminology). The organization of the psychology conference adopted a very pro-active media strategy, investing considerable resources and staff time in facilitating media links. The sociology conference had put some thought into media coverage but on a considerably smaller scale and the criminology conference had given almost no consideration to the media at all.

Each area of social science covered reflects differences in journalistic perceptions and pre-conceptions about the nature of the subject area, its scientific credibility and its degree of likely news value. To appreciate journalistic interpretations of discipline relevance it is necessary to recognise the epistemological conflict that exists between social scientists and journalists (Golding and Elliott, 1979). Whereas the key premise of most social science is that knowledge is constructed, and can never be 'value free', the underlying assumptions of journalism are precisely the opposite – that by presenting 'facts' they can reach a level of objectivity in their reporting that precludes judgement and bias. This aspect of journalistic professionalism encourages a predilection for certain types of social science, namely those that deal in statistics and are empiricist in inclination. Hence the social science that is deemed most news worthy is often that which mimics closely the styles and methods of the natural sciences. In this manner the credibility of the social scientific endeavour is assessed. However, this is coupled with the oft contradictory desire to produce news that has a human face and deals in personal experience thereby allowing audience identification. In this way, psychology, a discipline which

is more emphatically experimental than, for example, sociology gains credence by dint of positivism, but also because its subject matter is, first and foremost, people. The psychology conference was the conference that attracted the most journalists from broadsheet and tabloid press, the majority of whom were specialist, medical or science correspondents and received widespread media coverage. Sociology on the other hand, is generally less experimental and has society (an altogether less tangible area) as its subject matter. The sociology conference attracted very few journalists and these were general feature writers; subsequent media coverage was sparse. Criminology fulfils another criteria of news worthiness – that of topicality. Social scientists working in areas that are deemed topical in news agendas are more likely to attract media attention (Fenton et al., 1995); crime is enduringly topical. It also deals directly with individuals and is deemed to be of general interest to readers because, from the journalist's point of view, everyone knows someone who is a potential victim. However the criminology conference attracted only two broadsheet journalists both of whom were home affairs correspondents and it received the least media coverage of all the conferences.

At the three conferences journalists were tracked for a period of two days. This involved a close observation of journalists' movements and activities throughout the conference, supplemented by a series of informal discussions with selected journalists, to gain further insight into the reasons for their actions and decisions. Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with press officials of the professional associations (where they existed) and with social scientists who were the subject of media attention during the conferences.

Professional associations and the social science conference

Aside from journalistic assumptions regarding the news attraction of the different disciplines, the publicity seeking strategies of the professional associations also play a part in the amount and type of coverage any particular conference may attract. The association planning the psychology conference went to great lengths to facilitate contact between journalists and social scientists. A large press office was in operation throughout the duration of the conference, staffed by paid professional press officers and 'runners' who were on call to locate psychologists the moment a journalist decided

their paper may be newsworthy. Rows of telephones lined one end of the room; there were quiet interview rooms for broadcast journalists, a fax machine, a photocopier and extensive information on the conference itself, including all the press releases sent out prior to the conference. The journalists were provided with refreshments and taken out for a meal. All in all, every effort was made to maximise media coverage:

I'm the paid press officer so it's my full time nine to five job . . . and as part of that I have to . . . make sure that the wider public via the media knows about psychology, in particular what's new in psychology but also how psychology relates to the world in general (press officer).

Organization of media coverage for the sociology conference operated on an altogether different scale. One person, a full time lecturer and former journalist, took responsibility for media co-ordination on a voluntary basis. There was a press office and a telephone and fax machine.

We're an organization to further sociology as an academic discipline and the public thing is not necessarily central, but it's become more so in recent years I think . . . It decided in fact that it ought to have more public profile because . . . sociology got a bad press, all of a sudden people started saying 'wait a minute where is the association?' So the association is really to further sociology in all its forms (press officer).

At the criminology conference nobody was assigned to deal with the media and the journalists were left totally to their own devices.

Conferences bring together hundreds of researchers to discuss progress of their work. Traditionally, however, the conference has taken place predominantly out of public view often with academics consciously seeking to avoid the media in case they are hostile and critical:

Over the years I've been asked to go on television, I've always refused; to go on the radio, I've accepted only once; and to advise on print pieces, I try to help. But when for example I did a paper at the X conference . . . I got slagged off in the Y paper who distorted what I'd said, and attacked me for holding

views I don't hold. The [journalist's] whole column was an attack on me that week – the feelings of being savaged are indescribable, I felt physically sick. I shall never speak at the X conference again . . . My aim is to avoid all media coverage of my work wherever possible (social scientist).

Lately, signs have emerged that such attitudes may be changing as a consequence of broader transformations in the social scientific community. This is largely due to two main factors: the first relates to issues of collective identity – those involved in the social sciences are beginning to wake up to the necessity to promote their discipline(s) in order to resist trends in higher education policy, which are geared towards steering students and research funding away from the social sciences and into the natural and applied sciences. The second is based on individual survival – as institutions of higher education are forced into the marketplace and competition for research funding becomes ever more intense publicity is seen to be of instrumental value (Dunwoody and Ryan, 1985; Peters, 1995). In this climate the media have taken on a new importance.

Evidence of this growing media orientation can be seen in the increased emphasis on presentational matters. The British Psychological Society (BPS) explicitly encourage media contact and their members participation in public dissemination activities (Canter and Breakwell, 1986). Training programs and publications prepare academics to deal with the media or to communicate specialist information to non-specialist audiences. Social scientists write articles for newspapers and magazines, provide documentation, diagrams and graphs, and co-operate readily with TV teams etc. In 1993 the Economic and Social Research Council published a booklet on media guidelines, recognising 'the enormous influence the media has' (ESRC, 1993). This is now issued to all researchers funded by them. But, despite these developments it is not a relationship that many social scientists feel altogether comfortable with. The public service ethos of education and research does not lend itself easily to concepts of the hard sell and profiteering related to self-publicity. A study of social science in the media in the USA by Weiss and Singer (1988) revealed barriers to the popularisation of social science similar to those of the natural sciences. Academic researchers do not have a history of encouraging communication in the public domain. There are numerous complaints by social scientists who report negative experiences

with the mass media which are often seen as inferior forms of communication open to high levels of inaccuracy (Haslem and Bryman, 1994). In a study by Dunwoody and Ryan (1985) it was noted that social scientists believed that communicating with fellow social scientists had priority over any obligation to get research findings into the public domain which is often seen as little more than self-aggrandisement. Even as competition for dwindling research funding increases such a sense of priority remains today. Certainly this was a persistent theme to emerge from our interviews with social scientists:

I am unhappy that we must now disseminate to the general public rather than the academic community, with popularising journalistics and policy makers then disseminating to public or government. The media are not in the business of helping us with this new demand or so-called accountability – they are in the business of entertainment and profit (social scientist).

Basically I'm more interested in networking with academic colleagues. It's what my peers think of me and my writing that are important to me (social scientist).

Many professional associations recognise the tension this presents. On the one hand there is a desire to raise the public profile of a particular discipline, to increase its potential influence and popularise knowledge by actively promoting media coverage; on the other, there are concerns about how media reportage may misrepresent or misunderstand social scientific endeavour. As the press officer at the sociology conference put it:

The Daily Mirror came along last year and they wrote a piece about lesbian sociologists with big boots and short hair. They [the sociologists] weren't very pleased. And I did warn them.

The academic conference and the social scientist

Incentive of a news source

Historically the social sciences have been coupled with social criticism. Weber's social scientists were duty-bound to separate their commitments as critics from their calling as analysts of society; criticism was to be performed after hours, if at all. But Weber himself thought that sound social science made for good criticism

(Gitlin, 1990). Intellectuals in the social sciences in particular have felt they have a role to appeal to the national conscience, to create a space for shared moral indignation and thereby function as a citizen of a democracy (Rorty, 1991). The mass media are seen by many to be a conduit to this function. As Fraser notes, 'something like Habermas's idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic practice' (1992: 111). But the life of an academic is also a distinctly professional life and as such is often criticised for being at one remove from the rest of society.

There are many pressures and motives that drive social scientists away from general public exposure. There are those who fall into the role of a cynical outsider. These are intellectuals who have little or no faith in a democracy and therefore see little point in creating public space for discussion. It is not clear that theorising contributes enough to the resolution or even common understanding of society, particularly when it is relayed via media that are subject to deregulation, conglomeration and proliferation. Why should academics help press barons exploit their workers and/or manipulate their consumers more easily for the sake of profit? As one of our respondents put it:

I have a very low opinion of media coverage of anything as it rarely presents all the facts – merely serves its own need for sales.

Our interviews and observations of journalists at work at these conferences confirmed the importance they attributed to what Tunstall (1971) characterised as 'audience goals'. Within these defining priorities, the sin of boring or antagonising their imagined audience is perceived to far exceed the sin of letting them continue in a state of misinformation (see also Rorty, 1991). Such entertainment objectives are based on working within the confines of circulation figures and the ratings. This leads to a further anxiety:

That those who would make you famous cannot also be counted on to make you desirably famous – rather than notoriously infamous – is one of the sudden after-shocks which follows the initial blast of media attention (Altheide, 1982 quoted in Adler, 1984).

The fear of being professionally undermined and the scepticism towards their public role are two of the factors that lead to the

public voice of social scientists being subject to the self-insulation of a profession. One obvious way this occurs is through the complexity of academic prose. Some go so far as to say that the ability to write opaque prose provides academic credibility and ensures that all scholars are comprehensible only to each other and thus incapable of rousing wider discussion or reaction at all (Gitlin, 1990). Academics, it is argued, tend to write in the styles they see published in the journals that serve as the gatekeepers for their profession. There is clearly a hierarchy of importance with public journals and popular media firmly at the bottom of the pile. This form of 'self-enclosure' remains an obstacle to public intellectual life. There is no professional recognition for getting media coverage of research and little point because their sphere of influence is so limited:

I would like to generate more widespread interest in the research work that I carry out, and believe that more effort on my part to interact with the media . . . would probably be helpful. However, as an academic, I am judged primarily by my output in refereed academic journals and presentations at academic conferences and I have not felt able to invest the time and effort into promoting my output to the media in order to gain the (indirect but potentially helpful) benefits that might result (social scientist).

At an academic conference all of these issues come into sharp relief. The social scientist desires professional credibility, which requires publications and research money. These are attained by showing all the traits of membership of a profession. By its nature a profession is exclusive. Social scientists find themselves in the unusual position of wanting to be at once of the profession and to reach outside it into the muddy waters of political influence and public persuasion in their role as a social critic. As we discuss later, this dual role creates anxieties for many social scientists who find it difficult to switch easily between the two and is a cause of considerable frustration for the journalist.

Relating to the journalistic idiom

The academic style of writing is in sharp contrast to that of journalism. Conference papers are no exception. Peters (1995) points

out that negative stereotypes of experts towards journalists are not a major source of tension in the interaction between members of the two groups, but rather that problems in transmitting meaning from expert sources to journalists and finally to the mass media audience are important. He suggests that the source of the tension lies in the differences between scientific and journalistic cultures, where journalists accept an entertainment function of the mass media more readily than experts; experts and journalists differ in their preferred style of reporting; and experts expect the media to support their goals while journalists have an indifferent attitude towards the experts' goals. In our own study, journalists spoke frequently of their respect for the knowledge of social scientists; but also had a certain degree of contempt for their lack of understanding of how the mass media operate and the likely parameters of public interest. Social scientists were referred to as 'boffins' – clever but not in the 'real' world:

They lack a sense of humour gene. If there was an earnestness scale, 1 to 10 with 10 being the most earnest, a lot of them would be up there in the 9s or certainly the 8s. But that doesn't mean they don't know their stuff. Sometimes you do have to drag it out of them like pulling teeth. And many of them are suspicious of the media and think we'll trivialise what they do . . . some of them are very unfamiliar with our demands (broadsheet journalist).

The tension between scientific and journalistic cultures that Peters (1995) refers to, was clearly evident in our own research:

I have to say I have become somewhat cynical about the way the media picks up research. With one of two exceptions coverage is distorted, out of context, focusing on the sexy aspects of the research while neglecting huge swathes of the rest, often extremely political/partisan, inaccurate (often getting simple details wrong), while at the same time unquestioning of the figures. Perhaps this is the nature of the press, but their bottom line is getting that headline figure which makes for a snappy introduction in the current 'hot' area they are writing about. However, I am not in a position to avoid press coverage and I think it is researchers' responsibility to put out information in the context of all its strengths and limitations, while accepting that at the end of the day they cannot control how their figures are used (social scientist).

Some social scientists perceive difficulty in getting their message accurately (as defined by them) across to journalists. This apprehension appears to be heightened at a conference when research is more generally open to scrutiny and is not common to all social scientists (Fenton et al., forthcoming). Part of the problem may be due to difficulties in explaining complex matters to non-experts:

The media only like simple answers to simple questions – our problem is we can provide neither (social scientist).

It is difficult to bridge the gap between popular discourse and sophisticated vocabulary and to be a public intellectual in a commercial and at times anti-intellectual culture (Rosen, 1994). Another problem may be rooted in the different concepts of message quality embedded in the journalist and scientific cultures.

Journalists often see the theoretical ruminations of social scientists as a retreat into social irrelevance. This is where the public relations professional and press officer can perform an invaluable role in easing the passage of information between the academy and the mass media. The press officer reassures the academic and encourages them to meet the media professional half way by writing press releases in a style deemed attractive to journalists:

Broadsheet journalist: This press release on 'exclusions from secondary schools' is really good, well written.

Press officer: Yeah, the person who wrote it has been on a media training course, you can teach them to do it.

Broadsheet journalist: Oh yes, I know you can. Now sod off and find us a boffin.

Likewise, an unhelpful or absent press office is a potential barrier to communication. At the criminology conference journalists were clearly unhappy that they had to do all of the chasing and news hunting themselves with no aid from the conference organizers at all. This resulted in less direct media coverage but did mean that the journalists had to attend the conference sessions rather than sit in a press room and wait to be spoon fed, thus potentially giving the journalists themselves a better understanding of the issues under consideration.

The powers of enclosure and disclosure

Once at a conference the journalists have to make the investment of their time pay dividends ie they need to file some stories. In this sense the social scientists can be in a powerful position of control and news management. The journalist wants something the social scientist has got. Sometimes the recalcitrance of a particular social scientific source to disclose information can make that knowledge even more desirable to a journalist. If it is being with-held then the chances are that it is controversial and thereby newsworthy. Journalists in the study pointed to examples where government research was not disclosed because the results went against government policy. At the criminology conference a paper on young offenders was withdrawn, instantly causing suspicion and further enhancing its attraction. This creates anxiety on behalf of both social scientists who fear for their funding and future: 'this could mean the end of our bloody careers here you know' (government researcher); and the institution from which the research arises: 'never give a paper until you've published it, otherwise you look a prat and your motives are questioned' (head of a department of government research). Because of the fear of trivialisation and the fear of reprisal from funders or employers, social scientists may wish to avoid any controversy:

. . . people don't want to be controversial . . . because they see that as going against them in their institutions, it's a problem. And there's a lot of fear in their everyday lives as academics, and that stops them (conference press officer).

In the natural sciences research from industry is viewed more cautiously than research from universities or government departments (Hansen, 1994). For the same reasons of vested interest distorting research findings, in the social sciences research from government departments is deemed less credible because of its perceived dependence (Fenton et al., 1995):

Academic research would have to come top of the list really, simply because of the time devoted to it and supposedly the impartiality of it. Government research is not usually going to go against government policy (tabloid journalist).

The conference and the journalists

As news gatherers journalists are attracted to the academic conference as an arena with an abundance of news possibilities:

It's a source of readily accessible science, psychological stories that hopefully our readers will be interested in . . . that they might talk about down the pub that night. It's always a good touchstone for a story (broadsheet journalist).

The level of attractiveness of a conference to a journalist is increased if other journalists are also likely to attend. This both confirms the news worthiness of the conference and provides professional support and companionship for its duration. At the conferences we studied the journalists tended to stick together rather than use the conference as a networking opportunity:

Oh God, I don't want to go and sit with a whole load of academics, I can't think of anything worse, I'd rather eat on my own (broadsheet journalist).

The timing of the conference is also a factor that governs whether or not journalists are likely to attend. This relates to seasonal timing – bank holidays, Christmas and August are classic slack news periods and a conference organized for these times is more likely to attract coverage; and yearly events – a conference taking place during a general election, the Queen's speech or Budget Day is considerably less likely to gain media attention (White et al., 1993).

Hunting as a pack

Where one specialist correspondent goes others will be sure to follow. This is partly to keep the news desk happy – if one paper has a story that another has missed questions may be raised about a journalist's news gathering abilities; and partly for professional support – each looks after the other in order to ensure a story is not pre-empted and rendered useless. It has been noted that specialist correspondents exist in a relationship of competitor-colleagueship, joined by their profession but operating within a

market system (Tunstall, 1971). At conferences journalists spend much of their time conferring with each other and exchanging information so that everyone has the same material. At the psychology conference several of the journalists travelled there together, ate together and picked out the stories they would focus on before the conference began. These were mostly specialist correspondents who, because of their restricted brief are forced into close contact with one another:

Interviewer: What about the role of other journalists here, do they play a part in your selection?

Broadsheet journalist: Oh yes, let's be honest, it's absolutely crucial. We're all meant to be deadly rivals and independent free agents, but we sit round in a circle and ask each other what we think are the best stories of the day. Partly this is out of peer group respect which is true. And it's partly because you don't want to get into trouble from our news desks when there's a big story in the X paper and Y paper and it's not in the Z paper. So it's back covering, mutual reassurance. We work together a lot more closely than is generally recognised. That may or may not be a good thing . . . But it's reassuring to know that people whose opinions I respect also think that this is fresh, interesting and different.

It is the nature of specialist reporting that the journalists see each other regularly at major diary events throughout the year. Indeed specialist journalists on different newspapers often get to know each other better than they know many colleagues within their own newspapers. As one put it:

You get to know them better than you do your husband or wife . . . professionally speaking (specialist correspondent, broadsheet).

This self-described 'honour among thieves' (broadsheet journalist) was also evident during interviews with social scientists. For example, at the psychology conference social scientists were called to the press room to be interviewed. A gang of journalists would gather round and try and tease out a news story from the research in question. Most of the social scientists we spoke to seemed to have preconceived ideas about the type of media they prefer. Many felt happier with journalists from a broadsheet newspaper

and would more readily respond to their questions. Journalists from other media may be denied a response but the pack will join forces so that often the broadsheet journalist will ask a question that seems more appropriate for a tabloid journalist to ensure that everyone has the responses they are searching for. The stories themselves will develop different angles according to the style and approach of the media concerned, but the choice of story is frequently the same.

Sometime in the afternoon of the conference journalists with news stories will sit down to write their copy. This process is also subject to peer assessment as aspects of the research are verified and the 'story' confirmed amongst the pack. They ask each other 'What's the line? What's the intro.?' In other words, what is the most important point that emerged and what will be the first 30 lines of the story? (White et al., 1993):

Broadsheet journalist 1: New test on foetuses to diagnose Down's Syndrome is being developed,

Tabloid journalist: New test, that's a bit rich isn't it.

Broadsheet journalist 2: Well he did say, I'll have to look at my notes, but yes he said it could be used to diagnose Down's Syndrome earlier.

Tabloid journalist: Yes but he didn't say they were developing new tests.

Broadsheet journalist 1: Anyway X don't go all proper on me about that, just because you're getting hassle from your news desk, you're supposed to be here for support not criticism.

This quotation brings to light the strategies of surveillance that journalists adopt. They have a very short time in which to assimilate specialised material. The more complex or specialised a piece of social science news is, the more 'translatory work' it will require on the part of the journalist to make it intelligible and interesting to the readers (Hansen, 1994). Other journalists will help them through the complex material, share quotes and discuss the implications offering each other a safety net to avoid misrepresentation in the process.

When there is little that fits with the journalists' perceptions of newsworthiness as was observed at the sociology conference, the journalist is put in the role of manufacturing something that is news-like. This sometimes leads to hostile news coverage, as something that is not newsworthy is by extension perceived as not

worthy of public attention and therefore of questionable social and financial value. This danger was clearly recognised by the press officers working at the conferences. As one put it:

What are you doing here and what are these papers? What are these people up to get vast sums of public money? That's the issue now . . . what I think is happening is that actually the story of the conference is actually [the discipline] rather than what they're doing . . . and indeed are they in fact doing anything real or not?

Press interviews

Come on everyone it's the bonking psychologists (broadsheet journalist).

The press interviews at conferences warrant individual attention as the questions asked by journalists starkly exposed their criteria for sorting the newsworthy research from that deemed uninteresting. As such, the interviews are indicative of the values journalists place on news. In general, questioning tended to conform to a predictable set of criteria:

How big is the finding? – This criterion means not only are research findings original and new to the discipline but more importantly are they new to the general public or are they confirming things already known. A constant reason for rejection of research for a news story was 'it's been done to death'. For example, a paper on sexual relations between psychologists and their patients was used for a story on the basis that it revealed that female psychologists were engaging in sexual relations with patients as much as male psychologists. So although the research itself may well be familiar territory, a different light is shed upon it. The size of the finding also relates to the journalists' perception of its relative importance. In scientific terms a conference paper could be presenting the results of a huge research project. In journalistic terms this could be doing nothing more than confirming the obvious. Because the social sciences often deal with what are perceived to be the mundane realities of everyday life this is a frequent criticism. The research is deemed to be stating what everyone knows and to have spent time and money investigating what

is already common sense prompting the sarcastic response 'well I never did':

Yawn, yawn . . . Oh God so the more you practice relaxation techniques the better you are at it, whoopee! (tabloid journalist).

How general is its relevance? – This criterion refers to the perceived ability to generalise from research findings. The issue which affects the most people is inevitably seen as more newsworthy than that which affects few, except of course when it is novel or quirky and news worthy due to its entertainment value. This is because although journalists can only ever imperfectly know their audience (McQuail, 1969), their work is driven by a concern to speak to as wide a range of its constituents as possible.

Is it linked to current public issues? – Social scientists working in areas that are deemed topical in news agendas will also be more likely to attract media attention. Of course a news agenda is not always predictable months ahead when a paper is proposed for presentation at a conference. Consequently, a social scientist who just happens to be giving a paper on race and crime shortly after a chief inspector has suggested there is a link between the two is going to find themselves hot news property.

The 'so what?' factor – this means several things including is it a cause for concern, is it controversial, is it different or amusing?:

What a total waste of time that was – tells you absolutely nothing about nothing (broadsheet journalist).

There is some overlap with the criteria discussed above but the main distinction is the perceived relevance of the research for the person in the street. Journalists are often willing to engage in considerable self-criticism, but will close professional ranks against criticism from academics who are either too narrowly scientific or too broadly ideological. Policy analysis and recommendations are felt by journalists to come from very thin empirical slices of much more complicated realities, or from ideological positions that are debatable from the outset. Because these do not fulfil the criteria of generality and topicality they hit the 'so what?' nail on the head. Such scholarly input says little to those who have to meet

daily deadlines within the unforgiving constraints of market-oriented management (Bennett, 1993). This is in part due to the fact that intellectual demands are often large and diffuse and not easily pinned down to winnable short-run reforms. Issues that arouse public controversy on the other hand are exactly that.

Social criticism and commentary that often form part of social science research and the reporting of research results can be all too easily vilified as pure opinion or political lobbying. What is more it is rarely resolute. Journalists require answers dealt in broad strokes, uncontaminated by qualifying caveats, doubts or limitations (Canter and Breakwell, 1986):

They feel more on solid ground as it were, the old fashioned empirical research that sociology can still do, that's the kind of thing that's going to attract a news story rather than the guy who does a . . . kind of serial analysis . . . that's got nil interest because it's purely academic, as it were, theory. Obviously it's going to be things that are actually seen to have found out something about our society in a measurable way . . . that is going to appeal to the news editor more (broadsheet journalist).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of the conference in getting media coverage for the social sciences. Our research reveals very real tensions both within the profession of social science research and between the social scientist and journalist.

As a profession it is recognised that the social sciences suffer something of an image problem. This is due partly to long term government policy to reduce spending on the social sciences and increase spending on the natural sciences and partly due to their proximity to mundane aspects of life. If it is viewed as science at all it is seen as 'soft' science that deals more in common sense than discovery and expertise. The need for social sciences to be more aggressive and proactive in promoting the various disciplines has been accepted in different degrees by different professional associations.

Between social scientists and journalists the tensions can be explained in part by the sharply differentiated cultures of public dissemination. To the extent that the social scientist desires media coverage it is only for coverage that is deemed positive and/or cov-

erage that seeks to broaden their role as pedagogue. While journalists are concerned that their coverage is of interest to a wide audience, to be interesting includes being entertaining as well as informative. This is a difficult and essential task if information is to escape being viewed as a totally arbitrary phenomenon. Journalists must first order their own ideas and perceptions, classify and arrange information according to its importance and carry it all out in record time.

The strength of the natural sciences lies in the fact that they enable the production and reproduction of procedures through experimentation. The subject matter of society also allows for the formulation of models, but it differs radically from other subjects in that it is generally less predictable. Social scientists and journalists share common ground in their subject matter but differ substantially in their working practice: the journalist works on the immediate without the luxury of standing back from events; they must produce information daily and without fail. Social scientists are not subjected to the daily restructuring and structuring of the world as events unfold. Both researchers and journalists use intuition and subjectivity and turn to procedures of rational organization and formalisation on which the quality of their work depends. Thus the tension between the two professions rests to some extent on their points of convergence and pivots on the point of divergence: journalism's prime concern is to be an agenda setter, telling us where, what and who are worth observing (Katz, 1989); a social scientist's prime concern is interpretation.

Journalists necessarily exercise value judgements in selecting and filtering the information they receive. They have a 'licensed autonomy' (Curran, 1990) and a 'discretionary power' (Semetko et al., 1991) to reframe and reinterpret the information they process. This occurs within the institutional and ideological structures of the mass media. News values drive journalists towards research that shares their applied and immediate concerns and requires a distillation and simplification of what are often complex findings.

This article has sought to show that the conference represents an important forum within which the mass mediation of social science takes place. For journalists it offers an arena in which they might encounter interesting newsworthy pieces, while for the social scientist there is the possibility of mass media attention that might be unwanted or sought after. Unfortunately, for journalists, most of what is encountered at a conference is unsuitable or worse from

the perspective of the news values that they carry around with them. They want to find papers that address currently popular topics or that sound entertaining. Social scientists' criteria for assessing the value of conference papers are quite different and they may feel very ill at ease with media attention because of the scare stories about colleagues' treatment at the hands of journalists (Haslam and Bryman, 1994).

Some social scientists court the media, but may be singularly unsuccessful in gaining media attention because of the failure of their work to fit with journalists' news values and agendas. Those social scientists who want to function in a public sphere dominated by the mass media must, for the most part, observe the rules of media staging. In this manner social scientific discourse filters into lay discourse to the extent that it has become popularised by social scientists who have learnt to mimic journalistic discursive strategies. Social scientists who regularly appear in the media have become adept at popularising the presentation of public knowledge by being highly selective in their use of concepts and neglectful of theoretical integration in favour of discrete facts and points. By adopting the discourse of a media professional a social scientist may ensure favour within the medium but runs the risk of succumbing to the transformation of knowledge rather than its critical mediation (Fenton et al., forthcoming). It is, however, far easier to adopt a cynical and generally structuralist view by directing criticism at the carrier (an entertainment dominated, consumer-fed media) than the source (the social scientist). Any attempt to transfer knowledge from a specialist, the social scientist, to another type of audience involves a degree of popularisation. Simplification and distillation occur constantly within academia and education; it is not the sole preserve of mass mediation. What we see in the relationship between social scientists and the media is a clash between the cultures of two quite different enterprises (Peters, 1995). We can see this being worked out in the microcosm of the conference. The press officer (if such a figure is present) mediates the exercise, pushing social scientists who want media attention forward, calming those who do not want such attention but who have attracted the interest of journalists, and generally facilitating the interests of the latter. With the interaction between social scientists and the journalists and the clashes of culture that are often forthcoming (though by no means always), the conference supplies an intensive microcosm of these wider processes.

Of course, the academic conference is only one means by which social scientific knowledge is disseminated and where journalists and social scientists may come into contact. Others such as telephone requests for 'expert' commentary on topical issues, the launch of a publication, general press releases, press launches, personal relationships etc. all play their part in the popular presentation of social scientific knowledge. But the conference reveals some of the main features in sharp relief while supplying some unique dimensions, such as the importance of interactions between and discussions among journalists in the process of media reporting of social science research, the opportunity of large numbers of social scientists and journalists to encounter each other (or entirely ignore each other), and the press officer as a kind of 'honest broker' in the overall mediation of these encounters. More importantly, this microcosm of the social scientist–journalist interaction raises questions about the extent of media knowledge of the social sciences and social scientists and the largely uncorroborated anxiety or hostility towards the media on the part of the social scientists themselves (Fenton et al., forthcoming). For the social sciences truly to function in the public sphere these are questions that must be grappled with.

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Notes

- 1 The study also included extensive analysis of media content; mail questionnaires to social scientists whose research was reported in the media during the media analysis phase; a mail questionnaire to a national random sample of social scientists to determine their views about media contact and publicity more generally; detailed semi-structured interviews with a range of media professionals, social scientists, funding bodies, representatives of professional associations, universities, and government departments; and focus group interviews with media audiences to explore their understanding and perception of social science.

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Textualizing risk: TV discourse and the issue of nuclear energy

John Corner, Kay Richardson and Natalie Fenton

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Questions about the nature of television as a medium of public information and as one of the principal agencies of popular political knowledge have long been the most central on the media-research agenda. This centrality is due not only to the perceived scale and penetration of television services in respect of the official and everyday life of developed nations but also to the often beguiling richness of the audio-visual discourses which television has developed as part of its generic formation. It has, of course, been all too easy to move from observations about scale and textual complexity into assumptions about power or 'effects', and perhaps the strongest current tendency in communications inquiry is the attempt to theorize and research reception as a necessary part of understanding both television's textuality and its possible influence. At the same time, there has been renewed research emphasis on the institutional settings of television, within which specific structures of funding, policy, production and distribution shape a programme's general mode of address to its audience and its relationship with other institutions and sites of national polity and culture as well as its particular representations. In Britain, as the television/video field becomes subject to deregulated variation, thus redefining the medium's public and private character, such concern about television in relation to the public sphere as a whole has a special salience.

This article is a first report on an ESRC case-study¹ which worked within this general framework of concerns in an attempt to understand some of the communicative relations surrounding differing accounts of nuclear power in Britain, produced during the two years following the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. These accounts include work from corporate/promotional and independent/critical perspectives as well as from broadcast television.

Here was an issue generating major public interest and anxiety about possible risk which, by the specialized nature of its principal data and debates, placed the viewer in a position of more than usual dependence on mediated exposition. What representational means were thought appropriate to the tasks of description, explanation and argument? How did the overall rhetorical design of programmes as well as their local selections and treatments relate to the broader bodies of information and debate developing on the topic? And how did viewers make sense of, and respond to, the different visualizations, testimonies, interviews and commentaries which they watched and listened to?

We use the term 'textualization' here to keep an emphasis on the processes by which each programme becomes a discursive and rhetorical entity, a discrete public utterance, made up in large part of references to, and representations of, those extra-televisual discourses upon which it reports. As in all news, current affairs and documentary television, this is necessarily an exercise in *selective transformation*, by which contingent and perhaps conflicting realities become the material for a textually complete account, however provisional this account may declare itself to be in respect of the substantive topic. 'Textualization' opens analysis out on to the three phases of television as a public information process. It opens, at one end, on to the structured range of *possibles* from which an account is selectively documented and organized. It then opens on to (or into) the conventions of audio-visual signification and the generic rules out of which the text is built. Finally, at the other end, it opens on the play of viewer perceptions, cognitions and values as that text is watched, turned into meanings and given a public significance.

In developing our investigation into a specific instance of this process, we have been influenced by a number of theoretical and substantive studies. Previous 'issue-based' work on television and public knowledge has been of value, particularly where questions of generic form and extra-televisual discourses have been addressed (for example, Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott, 1983 on treatments of terrorism). The post-Morley development of reception studies has been of considerable importance to us (see particularly Morley, 1981; Lewis, 1983, 1985; Richardson and Corner, 1986; Dahlgren, 1988) and we hope to offer a more sustained account of this part of our research elsewhere (Corner, Richardson and Fenton, forthcoming). Perhaps, though, the most directly pertinent and stimulating precedent has been provided by the work of Roger Silverstone (see Silverstone, 1983, 1986). Silverstone's interest in the discourses of television science, both at the level of the referentiality and artifice of specific textual forms and also at the level of deeper cultural engagement (a level related in his work to ideas about the 'mythic' functions of television) has an illuminating relevance for our study of how one of the most

awesome products of twentieth-century science and technology is depicted and talked about.

Before we proceed to consider the three texts upon which this preliminary report will focus and the different kinds of sense which sample viewers made of them, it will be useful for us briefly to remark on some of the key components of that broader discourse about nuclear energy in Britain from which they drew their referentiality and purposes. For insofar as these texts wish to position their viewers, visually and propositionally, in relation to the matter of 'risk', including here the significance to be given to Chernobyl, their sense of what the viewer might at present think and therefore of what might usefully be said and shown relates directly back to this (for several recent studies in risk analysis and the media, see *Journal of Communication* 37, 1987).

Nuclear energy in Britain

The use of nuclear-generated energy for civil purposes is no longer an uncontroversial policy in this country. Nuclear energy has lost its credibility as the modern, clean, safe alternative to the old, dirty, hazardous ways of mining and burning fossil fuels. The control of radioactivity is now a major concern at all nuclear installations, civil and military, because of what is known, or feared, about the effects of radiation upon health and upon the environment.

The health debate has focused upon cancer clusters around nuclear installations (the subject of the Black Report, 1984); disproportionate numbers of children born with genetic defects; workers whose health has suffered, not always immediately, after overexposure in industrial accidents. The causal connections in these cases rely upon probabilistic argument and in consequence are strongly contested. Then there is the possibility of accidents at nuclear plants, resulting in meltdown and explosion, as at Three-mile Island and Chernobyl. Of particular concern to the public in the 1980s was the prospective danger of living near a nuclear waste dump. Plans for shallow trench burial of low-level waste were abandoned by the government just before the 1987 general election because of the hostility of protesting local communities.

The case in favour of nuclear energy relies upon the industry's ability to show just how seriously it takes these risks, in plant design, in routine safety precautions, and in emergency planning: all subject to inspection by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) and all the subject of criticism by opponents at some point or other in the history of British nuclear power. The industry and its government sponsors are now able to argue that the risks to the global environment are greater from coal-fired power

stations than from nuclear stations because only the former contribute to the 'greenhouse effect' by increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. (Although environmental groups [Greenpeace; Friends of the Earth] reject the assumption of an either/or choice which this argument seems to imply). The economic case for nuclear electricity has never been strong, though comparisons with fossil-fuel electricity are problematic and contentious. It is now argued that prudence in ensuring a diversity of fuel sources is an economic justification for nuclear power, hedging against interruptions to oil and coal supplies and price increases in times of shortage.

The much publicized accidents at Three-mile Island in the USA, March 1979 and at Chernobyl in the USSR, April 1986 focused international attention upon the nuclear industry. The immediate shock of the latter has faded but has left a residue of anxiety about a technology which, when it fails, not only destroys life in the immediate vicinity but also threatens health and livelihood on an unprecedented global and time scale. The fallout over Britain is still having its effects in certain farming communities in the Lake District, Scotland and Wales where radioactive materials may have found their way into the food chain. For public opinion, the disaster foregrounded two central questions; could Chernobyl happen in Britain and was the government's practical reaction to the disaster honest, responsible and effective? For the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), the disaster required a major public relations effort if earlier levels of public confidence in nuclear energy were ever to be restored. Recently leaked documents indicate the thoroughness and concern with which the Board went about reviewing its public-relations policy and its strategy of response to public anxiety (see *The Guardian*, 1 and 2 June 1989, for details and commentary).

Three interventions — a textual comparison

Each of the three texts chosen from the sampled material for this phase of the study attempts to make a different kind of intervention into the post-Chernobyl debate about nuclear-energy policy. They were selected for their varying institutional origins, divergent perspectives and contrasting approaches to representing 'the issue'. They also offer a certain degree of generic representativeness: the large-budget, public service broadcast documentary which seeks to conduct a balanced inquiry for the critical enlightenment of its national citizen-viewers; the corporate promotional video which engages with a 'public issue' in order to promote the interests of, and limit the damage to, specific industrial and commercial institutions and, finally, the low-funded independent video which hopes to generate

anxiety and oppositional feelings and to open up 'official' perspectives for questioning.

We will proceed by first of all outlining the general character of each and then by developing a more intensive discussion of what and how they signify.

The example of public service broadcasting was the final episode of a BBC 2 *Brass Tacks* documentary series *Taming The Dragon*, screened on 22 October 1987. The series was in three parts, involving a general introduction to the technology and its problems in Britain, the economics of nuclear energy and the current risk/benefit debate. This final part, *The Uncertain Legacy*, focuses upon long-term pollution of the environment and risks to health. It is fifty minutes long and takes the form of a strongly questioning documentary with the journalist David Taylor as a presenter providing extensive narration and on-screen reporting from various interior and exterior locations. Taylor takes the viewer through his interpretation of the issue with a pronounced narrative thrust (a *quest* for satisfactory answers) and an emphasis both on the reality of the risks and on the weaknesses of the official position. Ordinary people (the ill, families of the ill, communities under threat and protestors) are presented mostly as seriously and *justly* concerned about risk in the light of the growing body of scientific evidence being adduced by lawyers, doctors and scientists.

For obvious reasons, the promotional film we examined takes on a very different outlook and form. *Energy: The Nuclear Option* is a twenty-nine minute videotape made by Software Production Enterprises for the Central Electricity Generating Board and publicly distributed in 1987 by the CEGB film and video library. Its primary aims are to address the increased public anxiety about nuclear energy following Chernobyl and to put the case for the economic necessity of nuclear power and for the acceptability of the levels of safety maintained by the industry in Britain. It pursues this aim by an expository mix of commentary-over-film and interview in a design which attempts to mimic certain aspects of current-affairs public service broadcasting, in particular London Weekend Television's *Weekend World*. It achieves this mainly by using Brian Walden as its high-profile presenter addressing the viewer directly in the guise of an impartial presenter/investigator working from a studio base. Such a programme cannot afford to give too much legitimacy to the oppositional view lest it move the viewer towards the openness of critical reflection rather than the closure of reassurance.

The independent video item selected for study, *From Our Own Correspondent*, is only ten minutes long and is produced and distributed as part of *Northern Newsreel* Number 9, 1988 by Trade Films of Gateshead. *Northern Newsreel* is a regular video bulletin distributed to organizations on a mailing list made up mainly of trade-union branches,

community action groups and organizations of the Labour movement in the region. The tapes are designed as input for debate rather than as 'coverage' of an issue. *From Our Own Correspondent*, in its use of dramatic simulation, is entirely different from the other two texts in rhetorical design as well as in its perspective on the issue. The pivotal point comes in an imaginative twist in its narrative whereby the audience, who are initially led to presume they are watching a Soviet news report on Chernobyl, have their assumptions undermined when the power station disaster being reported on is revealed to have occurred at Hartlepool. The propositional basis for the scenario is relatively undeveloped in the item, and seems to rest primarily on a correlation along the lines 'they said it couldn't happen at Chernobyl, but it did; they say it couldn't happen here, so it probably will'.

The following discussion looks in more detail at these three texts. For the purposes of this article our comments are based primarily on shot analysis, using videotape study with accompanying soundtrack transcripts; but they are also necessarily informed by the later stages of our research on reception and the interpretations and comments made by samples of viewers.

1. The Uncertain Legacy (BBC2)

The Uncertain Legacy ends upon this thought:

The case for nuclear power rests upon a balance between benefit and risk. But how can we draw that balance when the risk is so uncertain?

It alludes thereby both to the various causes of anxiety about health risk and, in a minor key, to the inconclusiveness of the evidence which it has explored, inconclusiveness which, here, warrants less rather than more confidence in the industry. The programme, whilst circumspect in its 'authored' pessimistic claims, works to give coherence, credibility and resonance to fears that arise in contemplating the health risks of nuclear power technologies.

The opening sets the tone. The pre-titles graphics, common to all three *Taming the Dragon* episodes, give way to a visual sequence which makes an economical point. During a series of shots of a rural landscape accompanied by slow, eerie music, there comes into view a Geiger counter at ground level. It is ticking. What had looked fully 'natural', is not. The programme title comes on screen — and we find ourselves in a primary school classroom, during a lesson on energy. 'What kinds of power station are there?' asks the teacher. 'Nuclear', a girl tentatively responds. Then the narrator's voice (David Taylor) is heard for the first time, contrasting

the optimism of the past with the 'gloomy lessons' that have since been learned about nuclear power.

It turns out that the normality of the classroom is also an illusion. For the narration goes on to tell us that:

Stogursey Primary was the first school in the country to be supplied with potassium iodate tablets. If taken immediately after a nuclear accident they will prevent radioactive iodine from entering the children's thyroid glands.

The salience of this introduction does not just depend upon the contrast of benign appearance and hazardous, invisible reality. It also trades upon the potential shock impact of the very idea of an innocent population who *as a matter of course*, are the recipients of special concern, a reminder of the difference between an industry which is safe because its risks are few and one whose 'safety' requires high degrees of routine surveillance and precaution-taking.

Such images of family and community, of which the programme provides several, are poignant when conjoined with a voiceover speaking of how their lives may be affected by living in a nuclear environment, however hypothetical, implicit or qualified the suggestion of effects may be. The visual signification of radioactivity has to come to terms with the fact that, as one farmer says, 'With radiation you can't see it, you can't smell it and you can't feel it.' The familiar device of the Geiger counter is used just once, as noted above. From an American documentary on the effects of the Three-mile Island accident are drawn images of disruption to the natural order: a home-video shot of a cat so ill it cannot stand to drink a saucer of milk; a dandelion leaf three times normal size. The commentary multiplies these instances to create an impression of generalized sickness. Most potent of all, visually, is the introduction to a sequence on Trawsfynydd power station in North Wales, which begins with the camera moving quite fast above and near the surface of Trawsfynydd lake, then going underwater, whilst Taylor speaks about the radioactivity discharged into the lake:

... This early morning mist is actually steam rising from the warmest lake in Britain. Its ghostly beauty is created by the discharge of thousands of gallons of radioactive effluent from Trawsfynydd nuclear power station. . . . Beneath its surface lies buried a whole spectrum of radionuclides — plutonium, cobalt, caesium, americium — some of which will last virtually for ever, polluting the lower depths.

The viewer does not see radionuclides, only a murky underwater scene and the stones on the bottom of the lake, but the previous sight of mist, together with this imaging of the 'depths', is evidence enough and the invisibility of its cause enhances rather than detracts from the rhetoric of

danger. Similarly, when the text images 'nuclear waste', metal drums are used as the signifier. The daunting scale of the disposal problem is evoked for the viewers as they see column after column of metal drums, entirely filling the screen and apparently requiring the camera to pan and tilt in order that the amount be recordable. This is the rhetoric of excess, and the image needs very little help from the accompanying soundtrack.

The narration of *The Uncertain Legacy* appeals to the rationality of the concerned citizen, asking viewers to follow and assess statistical argument. It even takes us through its own case-study in Somerset, giving evidence for high levels of both leukaemia and birth abnormalities leading to infant death in the late 1960s and 1970s. The conclusion, on camera, is nevertheless that:

... of course you can prove anything with statistics. And whilst these figures strengthen the argument that we're dealing with radiation-induced disease, they do no more than that. There is no smoking gun, no evidence of Hinkley Point's involvement.

It is not only the viewers' rationality which the narrative calls upon but also their anxieties about human interference with the forces of nature, a classic ingredient of our culture's myths of science. This is most directly confronted in a shift from an interview with Lord Marshall, CEBG chairman, where he attempts to lessen what he sees as the irrational fear of radioactivity, back into the narration:

MARSHALL: . . . It's all over the place. God put it there. Uh, now when you think how much radioactivity is in everybody's house and everybody's garden, and then you think about the very small amounts we produce, then what we produce cannot really be a serious threat to mankind or any individual.

[Cut to long shot of Trawsfynydd lake]

TAYLOR: If there's radioactivity in the garden, there's a great deal more of it in this lake. And it's not God but the CEBG that put it there.

It is with this anxiety that the programme ends, when it addresses the 'unwanted legacy' of nuclear power — radioactive waste. For, like Frankenstein, the scientists' creation here appears to be beyond human control:

But what's to be done with the nuclear waste? They can load it on to a train but they cannot tell the train driver where to go.

What of the contribution that 'other voices' make to the programme? There is a variety of these and some say things inconsistent with the programme's line. The deployment of other voices, although no doubt some of their 'independent' features come across to viewers, is under the tight control of the master narrative as in the Marshall interview above.

where the confidence of the interviewee is undercut by the subsequent remarks of the narrator. The treatment of 'ordinary people' generally frames them as seriously worried about risk, for instance the Seascale couple volunteering for body-scan testing:

We've come because of our families who live in Lancashire and they're so worried by all this publicity that we decided that this would be a good way to reassure them that everything's all right.

Taylor's preface to this overlooks the contrast between the speaker's own confidence and her relations' anxiety:

When the mobile van visited the Cumbrian village of Seascale so many people made appointments it had to stay for an extra week. By being scanned they can still their inner fears about having Sellafield's reprocessing plant as their nearest neighbour. It's a kind of nuclear neurosis which has spread far and wide.

One interesting pattern of interpretative framing Taylor deploys we have called the 'silly statistics' pattern. It is used whenever an expert talks about industry-produced radiation by drawing homely analogies with cigarette smoking, chest X-rays and sunbathing. Taylor routinely queries the source of these figures. For instance, when the subject under discussion is the radioactive fish in Trawsfynydd lake and the power-station manager claims that:

You would have to eat something like half a pound of fish every day for the whole 365 days of the year to receive the equivalent dose of one chest X-ray.

Taylor's question — 'And where did you get *that* statistic from?' — undermines both the credibility of the comparison and the authority of the speaker.

2. Energy: The Nuclear Option (CEGB)

The concluding statement of this video programme, read to camera, is in striking contrast to the one discussed above, both in its explicit assessment of risk and in its play-off of reason against fear:

It can't be guaranteed that nothing will ever go wrong of course. Life's not like that. It *can* be reasonably argued that the nuclear-power industry can be regarded in the same way as any other complex technology, and recognized as a normal and necessary part of our daily life and not like some mysterious monster to fill us with irrational dread.

Here, the 'normality' of nuclear power is precisely what is being affirmed

rather than queried. The technology is rhetorically retrieved from being an alien industrial process into being 'part of our daily life'. Once there, its novel risks appear to become addressable within the terms of proverbial platitude. The (only) alternative, to treat it as a 'mysterious monster' (as the BBC's 'dragon' might suggest), is irrational.

The entire project of this brisk, factually assertive programme is to give these closing propositions maximum force. As we have indicated earlier, the primary organizing form of the piece is 'borrowed' from broadcast television current affairs, a borrowing signalled most clearly by the use of Brian Walden. This model allows the programme a bracing, 'newsy' start (the government's decision to proceed with the Sizewell B reactor) and thereby avoids one of the potential problems which a promotional tape might have in opening its address to the viewer — too strong an indication of persuasive intent. The model also frames the exposition as essentially one of impartial, journalistic inquiry. Speaking of those members of the public who 'harbour grave doubts' about nuclear-power stations, Walden remarks:

They ask 'Why do we need these new nuclear power stations when so many other energy sources are available?' 'Even if nuclear power is in some ways preferable to the alternatives, do the benefits really outweigh the risks?' These are the questions we'll be trying to answer in this programme.

The ventriloquistic device of stating in direct speech the likely reservations of the anxious and the critical follows from the principle of not letting opposition voices speak for themselves whilst nevertheless still generating a sense of immediacy and fair-mindedness in the examination of their case.

A secondary, organizing principle derives from the decision to use Sir Frank Layfield's report (he was Chairman of the Sizewell inquiry) as the main source of reference on questions of risk, safety and efficiency. The Layfield report provides the programme with a kind of 'authorized version' of the nuclear-power issue, upon which its own more freely ranging sermon/analysis can be based and to which it can regularly return for instructive citation, cueing viewers towards the final ('correct') conclusions.

The programme's visuals are primarily given over to the denotative task of illustrating the technology and its operational processes and to accessing those representatives of the industry whose unanimous testimony to efficiency and safety parallels the Layfield findings. The key theme of how British nuclear reactors *differ* from those of Russia and the USA is also developed in this way, requiring the programme to offer detailed graphics of reactor design and operation and taking it into a far more sustained technical exposition than is to be found in the other programmes. The emphasis here on risk limitation (failsafe devices, routine inspections,

thickness of reactor walls, etc.) carries with it the possibility of a 'boomerang' effect in viewer perception of risk levels. However this may be, the programme feels able to claim on the strength of these depictions that:

There is no risk of a Chernobyl-type accident to set against the benefits.

And, more conclusively still:

All the evidence suggests that the benefits outweigh the risks. The benefits are great but the risks are small.

Such emphatic confidence, however, serves to return the piece to a direct confrontation with the very grounds of its own existence:

Why, then, has so much suspicion built up among the public?

To answer this, the video employs the established *Weekend World* convention of a final interview — here with Lord Marshall, the CEGB Chairman. This is the only interview in the programme to follow a sustained question-and-answer structure, with Walden in shot. It is, of course, essentially an exercise in persuasive theatricality, whereby an assumed adversarial stance on the part of the interviewer is actually used to support the presentation of the interviewee's case. Marshall is taken through a number of 'speaking opportunities' with a sufficient display of interviewer firmness to prevent outright damage to Walden's integrity. Questions are met with a mixture of half-concessions, displacements and rejection. Public anxiety is largely the CEGB's fault — because they have not been effective communicators of the facts. The fear that power stations can explode like nuclear bombs is groundless (though Marshall's own description of Chernobyl is sufficiently vivid to prompt Walden into asking if it wasn't 'just a little bit like a bomb', a point which despite its dependence on a slippage from 'nuclear bomb' to 'bomb' was cited as significant by some of our respondents).

3. From Our Own Correspondent (Northern Newsreel Trade Films)

From Our Own Correspondent undertakes to establish the enormity of the risk entailed in the operation of nuclear power plants by providing a dramatic narrative about a disaster which has not yet happened. In contrast to the two preceding texts the focus here is not on benefits versus risks and as a consequence the item does not follow the format of 'balanced inquiry'.

The narrative's sequences are marked by changes articulated around Russia and Britain, the imagined and the real, emotion and rationality. The opening sequence is crucial. The item begins with what is recognizable

as footage from Chernobyl, from a setting which appears to be a Soviet newsroom. This puts the viewer in a position of relative comfort: the news format is recognizable and the setting is distant. A degree of ambiguity enters with the fade in of music, unusual to the familiar news genre. Over this comes the English translation of a Russian commentary. The Russian speaker assumes a presenter/narrator role, across scenes where soft edits establish contrast between the rural setting (fields) and the power station itself (wire fencing). From within this sullen but calm setting comes the revelation, quick and unexpected, that the disaster established in the opening took place at *Hartlepool*, in England, undercutting the viewer's expectations and comfort. The rearticulation is severe, and its implications reverberate throughout the rest of the piece. Further rearticulations follow, most importantly in the closing sequence, when roller captions are placed over a frozen shot of Hartlepool Power Station. These relocate risk in the realm of the real by describing the controversial reduction of the contingency planning zone around the Hartlepool plant and by giving brief details of a recent accident there. This final shift from dramatized fiction to the revelation of an *actual* Hartlepool accident attempts a propositional 'anchoring' of the account, by establishing the facticity of several contingent elements within it. In this denouement a moral is drawn:

According to the CEGB the events depicted in this film could never happen. The Russians said the same before Chernobyl.

The reasons for the scenario are thus indicated, though our experience with viewers suggests that this resolution does not invariably 'explain' the text to their satisfaction.

The viewer's relationship to these concerns of risk and threat are developed visually through a series of contrasts and oppositions within the narrative extending even to the use of natural lighting: sunlight is associated with the calmness of 'normal life'; darkness with chaos and disaster.

The imagery in these dramatized scenes carries the weight of victims' personal distress and outrage, channelled most forcefully through two interviews with a parent/evacuee, one at the time of the disaster, one a year later when her son has been diagnosed as suffering from leukaemia. The text moves between enacted scenes of evacuation, and temporary rehousing, and scenes presenting the imagery of the disaster's aftermath: an abandoned battered doll on the beach; the wire fencing around the derelict plant; deserted streets and houses.

Like the two other texts, *From Our Own Correspondent* uses a central narrator — here, the Soviet news reporter. Although her 'real' credibility is undermined by her fictitious identity (an identity projected into virtual stereotype by a red beret and a red microphone!) her function is vital

in rendering propositions and images comprehensible, significant and affective, guiding the viewer through the various rearticulations.

Although the explosion at Hartlepool was smaller than that at Chernobyl, its consequences have been greater due to the high number of people living nearby. Complacency, official secrecy and the controversial decision to allow some of these plants to be privately owned, these are some of the factors that contributed to the disaster.

The evaluation here is explicit and strong — stronger than in *The Uncertain Legacy*. It is a controversial conclusion but the clearly dramatic nature of the material allows the comment to be understood as indicating possible causes of a future disaster — on this response viewers then construct their own assessment of present risk levels and their determinants. Again, unlike the other texts, the only voices called upon are those of 'the affected community'. Whereas the CEGB wants to reduce public fear through official reassurance and technological explanation, here the invitation is to believe that an emotional response is a rational one, considering the scale of the risks involved. Chernobyl, rather than being marginalized in its significance for British nuclear energy, provides the model for dreadful prophecy.

Textualizing risk — respondent accounts

In broad terms, the audience research based upon these texts is intended to explore the extent of respondents' convergence/divergence in their understandings and evaluations, bearing in mind their diverse group affiliations, and with particular reference to the theme of risk as discussed in the foregoing pages. We conducted screenings and discussions with fourteen groups (five members average) ranging from preconstituted groups of local political party members, through Rotary Club and Friends of the Earth members, to researcher-constituted mixed groups of workers from local industries such as the Littlewoods factory, as well as four pilot interviews with individuals drawn from University of Liverpool clerical staff. Below we give a sample of quotations from the audiotapes of these discussions, to indicate in general terms the range of the material. This phase of the research is ongoing at the time of writing and the quotations are intended to be suggestive of some of the key features which we are identifying within the emerging framework of our audience analysis.

Most groups identify a 'bias' in each programme but vary as to how far they find the bias a cause for complaint. Thus *The Uncertain Legacy* and *From Our Own Correspondent* are universally judged 'anti' and *Energy — the Nuclear Option* 'pro' the industry. Sensitivity to programme bias and

engagement with the programme's arguments interact strongly, though *From Our Own Correspondent* is less straightforwardly confronted as an exercise in argumentation than the others. We encountered different responses to the ultimate inconclusiveness of probabilistic reasoning. Thus, a group from the Heysham nuclear plant, who see *The Uncertain Legacy* as part of the public relations problem that the industry faces, is robust in challenging it on the merit of the arguments, wavering slightly but not for long over the question of leukaemia clusters:

1. (Heysham workers group)

S1: I think perhaps there is some concern about the leukaemia, but not necessarily . . .

S2: I think it wants examining . . .

S3: . . . that was something that they never compared against other areas with high instances of leukaemia that are away from nuclear-power stations.

If the basic rhetorical structure of this argument is the move from affirmation of the *problem* to qualifications that weaken its force, then its converse, from groups more sympathetic to *The Uncertain Legacy*, takes the form of a move from the affirmation of *inconclusiveness* to the referencing of intransigent data, sometimes indirectly:

2. (Labour party group)

No, he did say it's inconclusive, but just the coincidence really, to me, [?], it must be more than a coincidence, they hinted it was more than a coincidence.

Energy: The Nuclear Option has a more emphatic conclusion than *The Uncertain Legacy*. And yet, paradoxically, even the explicit and sustained emphasis upon safety by means of which the former moves to its reassuring conclusion is reworked into anxiety within some of our respondents' accounts:

3. (Women's discussion and action group)

It's sort of counter-productive isn't it? Because they kept talking about these safety things and safety things and then safety things and you think 'God it must be bad because they've got to have all these safety things' and when that engineer was talking about the construction and how safe the construction of the actual building was I started thinking about Ronan Point and places that have fallen down.

The dense factuality of the reassurance can set up suspicions which then serve to heighten the read significance of any inconsistencies or 'slips' which are perceived:

4. (Unemployed group)

. . . I mean all he's saying is 'an eight-foot solid concrete block encased in

another four-foot solid concrete block' — so big deal we know we can get blown off the face of the earth. . . . The guy at the end actually sort of showed the contradiction 'cause the bit about Chernobyl, he said it blew a ten by ten square yard concrete block, and so you knew . . . it just made him look like a block of concrete.

5. (Conservative Party group)

Well of course he said in the first place Lord Marshall said, 'Well it doesn't explode like a bomb you know' and then in the next breath of course he said 'the top blew off Chernobyl'.

Viewers' perceptions of risk in *From Our Own Correspondent* fluctuate according to evaluations of the subjective, dramatic approach and how it interacts with the directly informative. An acceptance of the dramatic as a legitimate portrayal of the probable often seems to lift the text out of the realms of argument as such. Because the item does not pretend to be an objective exposition, any sense of bias is more difficult to locate than it is in relation to the two other texts:

6. (Unemployed group)

S1: It wasn't biased though, because it took ordinary people who aren't in the planning and management. All they're doing is living their lives and they've been affected. . . . So she wasn't coming with any bias you know, her family had been affected by it, she'd lost her home.

S2: I think it was biased because they put forward a scenario that the nuclear industry doesn't even recognize as existing.

S3: It probably had a tinge of bias but you didn't notice it because it was ordinary people talking who aren't involved in either side, who aren't in Greenpeace or deciding what's going on.

Respondent groups foreground a variable range of scenes, images and arguments, but also converge on many key points, relevant to our interest in risk. For instance, it is striking how many groups, without prompting, alluded to the 'silly statistics' in *The Uncertain Legacy* and registered 'silliness' — either as an effect of narrational control or on their own account.

7. (Medical students group)

It was made biased because all you ever saw was saying things like you know, 'you get less radioactivity from carrying a nuclear fuel rod than if you kick a pregnant cow', or something, and you know, it made them look really stupid, but I don't know whether they had made a whole interview and just cut out that bit out to make them look pretty stupid. 'Cos then the interviewer'd go 'where did you get that figure from?' and they'd say 'oh well, our scientists produced it you know.'

8. (Conservative Party group)

They inferred, didn't they, that the statement such as uh, 'smoking one cigarette

in a lifetime', they inferred that that was not in any way a very well-founded statistic, which it, makes one think 'oh well, you can ignore that' — and yet we had no one there to say 'oh yes, it is, because of so and so, and so and so, and so and so.'

The speaker in extract 7 apparently believes the comparisons inherently ludicrous, and edited to show this, whereas the speaker in extract 8 allows there could be merit in the comparison if properly explained.

Perhaps the most common feature of the readings we collected of *Energy: The Nuclear Option* is the registering of a problematic tension between its investigatory and advocacy discourses. Description of it as an advert often precedes critical rejection:

9. (Selections from 3 groups)

- a. I thought it was more like an advert than a discussion really. (medical students)
- b. It was almost like a party political broadcast. (mixed group 2)
- c. I didn't find it reassuring, I just felt we were being brainwashed, quite frankly. (Conservative Party group)

Walden's professional reputation is then most often seen as incompatible with, and/or improperly exploited by, this approach:

10. (Friends of the Earth group)

The way he asked the questions was supposed to be challenging, the way he said them was like he didn't believe what he was saying. . . . He was totally unconvincing anyway because of the way he presented the argument before. He's somebody that the public see as impartial so to use him in a partial setting I don't think really works.

Unlike the other texts, convergence in respondents' accounts of *From Our Own Correspondent* comes through its *emotional* appeal. All groups recognize this — if they accept the appeal and develop a sympathetic identification, then the range of 'taken' meanings is enlarged and strengthened.

11. (Women's discussion and action group)

- S1: I mean I think at any time emotion will trample over reason anyway and I think that it played on that. I don't see anything wrong in that.
- S2: And I think it made you stop and think 'Yes and we could end up in them barracks, we could lose our homes and end up like that woman ended up' and it brings a message across to you more strongly.

In some groups the appeal is recognized but has an adverse effect as it is judged to be inappropriate, distinct from and inferior to an attempt at an objective understanding:

12. (Conservative Party group)

It's appealing to your emotions, which are, you know, emotions aren't sometimes the basis that one should form a judgement on, are they? And a certain amount of hysteria is developed in that film . . .

Reactions to all three programmes are responsive to their extra-rational dimensions, the metaphorical licence they take either visually or verbally. Respondents draw from the visual imagery of *The Uncertain Legacy* in articulating anxieties about the nuclear industry and/or in criticizing the text (treating the legitimacy of certain affecting images as questionable in this supposedly rational context). The Trawsfynydd lake images are found particularly potent:

13. (Social and Liberal Democrat group)

I think to a certain extent with the Trawsfynydd, the, the fact that they, sort of, sunk into the murky depths of the, of the lake, it sort of made it seem a bit, well, dirty almost, and they were saying '[?] there's such-and-such a level of plutonium, and . . .

14. (Medical students)

S1: I think basically, well, with the steam from the lake it was like, it was abnormal, you know.

S2: Quite frightening.

S3: Quite frightening, yeah.

S1: . . . and then you saw the fishermen just going casually on it, you know, doing normal activity, and that just clashed with, normal and abnormal, you know. And it made you think, you know, these guys will be eating the fish.

The figurative use of phrases to give a degree of extra-rational support to the position being advanced is often remarked upon in response to *Energy: The Nuclear Option*. Lord Marshall's comment about the 'laws of physics' not *permitting* a British accident (as if they somehow constituted a legislative system) is a case in point, and its element of nationalist appeal sometimes provided an amused critical parody:

15. (Women's discussion and action group)

At one point we were all laughing weren't we? British physics. It can't happen here, physics wouldn't allow it. Our physics are British.

16. (Labour Party group)

S1: 'It can't happen in our country'

S2: Oh, that was it

S3: Yes, that's right. The laws of physics don't allow it to happen in our country. The laws of physics are different in Russia you see. [laughter].

From its combination of fact and fiction, symbolism and revelation,

From *Our Own Correspondent* often yields comments on 'bad acting' and clichéd images which detract from a perception of overall seriousness. Some viewers find the dramatic scenario hard to reconcile with the final, captioned shift to real events:

17. (Labour Party group)

The first bit for me was just like a play and I didn't believe that could happen even. . . . The acting was rubbish I thought . . . and it just didn't give me anything. I didn't feel any fear coming over me or anything.

18. (Individual respondent)

Because it was make-believe all the way through when it came up with the statistics at the end I didn't know whether that was the end of the film or if that was the policy. . . . when I did reach the end I realized it was because it said that in March 1987 there was an accident in Hartlepool and it discharged a tonne of water, but I wasn't sure whether it really was. I got mixed between the reality and and . . .

It would be premature to offer here a discussion of how variations in group identity correlated with differences in accounts, and inappropriate to do so except in the context of details about how groups were selected, how they were briefed, what our questions were, and so on. When the full report of the reception study is published (Corner, Richardson and Fenton, forthcoming), detailed attention will be paid to these questions of research design. One comment, however, is worth making here. By showing each group three texts we were inviting respondents themselves to compare the three. As can be seen, critical attention to textual form on their part is an inevitable result, much more so than if they had seen only one programme. This provides enhanced opportunities for research with a comparative theme but its difference from normal viewing situations, in particular its heightening of viewers' awareness of TV as selective mediation, has to be borne in mind when using the data.

Conclusions and further developments

In this article, we have explored the rhetorical design and discursive operation of three very different televisual accounts of the risks involved in nuclear power. We have done this in part by examining comparatively their relations both to the topic and to the viewer. Some aspects of the comparison we have found to be illuminatingly generic in character — a function of distinctive institutional origins and purposes. By regarding each account as a 'textualization' from a broader sphere of discourse and debate, we have considered key components of current reasoning and mythification regarding nuclear energy and examined a number of visual

and verbal instances of their textual representation. We also hope to have indicated something of that variable process of 're-textualization' which occurs when viewers register, accord significance to and evaluate, the flow of words and images.

If anything is central to the nuclear-risk debate as it is articulated both by texts and by viewers it is the question of 'proof' versus 'probability'. The discourse of this debate, as conducted in the public sphere and mediated by television, poses questions both of the past: 'Has anyone been made ill or killed by the industry?' and of the future 'Will there be a nuclear accident in Britain and what will be its effects if there is?' With regard to the first, conclusive 'proof' would require watertight epidemiological axioms and a closed causal narrative (one from which all alternative explanations of individual or collective suffering have been eliminated). These are impossible conditions. So the choice is between 'talking up' an effects scenario, maximally into probability so convincing it amounts to proof, or talking it 'down' into mere possibility, improbability or even impossibility. Future danger is an even more speculative matter. Of course, possibility/probability is not *just* a matter of rhetoric: it is reasonable, other things being equal, to find certain kinds of evidence persuasive!

Programme makers and programme viewers are in a quite different relation to the 'evidence'. Nevertheless both use the language of proof and probability as a resource. Viewers too 'talk up' (or down) risk in their accounts of the programme — or show themselves perplexed by the ultimate indeterminacy of the issue. In moving on to develop a 'macro' analysis of our group accounts, we will need to retain a focus upon this 'micro' level too — the level at which viewers' own discursive resources and strategies can be related to those of the programmes they watched.

Note

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TV-am and the politics of caring

Tony Wilson

I

Recent television research has demonstrated a new interest in what has traditionally been referred to as 'uses and gratifications' theory. This, of course, is a theoretical model of the relationship between television and its audiences. Unlike the older version of the model, however, its current resurrection as a guiding paradigm for research relates the use of a text to its interpretation: 'Questions of interpretation and questions of use have not previously been investigated in relation to each other' (Morley, 1986a: 3).

An audience's use of a text presupposes and indeed produces particular interpretations of its content. Consumption generates its own epistemology. Within the experience and lifeworld of the family the text is read in terms of its relevance to the viewer's interests and needs, in turn related to the social roles of leisure, preparation for work, and the private domain of the familial. The processes whereby these needs and uses are satisfied are governed by rules, constituting norm-governed activities in the sphere of domesticity. The individual member of an audience negotiating a programme to be viewed is likely to be subject to a range of manifestations of power being exercised in the interpersonal relationships of viewing.

To argue that the uses of television are role-related and that their exercise is rule-governed, often within the space and time of the family, is not to assert a determination of conscious need by social role. For the viewer can 'read' the roles which he or she inhabits in particular ways, inflecting them through an individual experience and understanding of the world. The concept of 'role' allows a theorizing of the relationship between subject and society which neither implies a determination of behaviour by social structure nor a reducing of the societal to the individual. It is, I

The Media, Resistance and Civil Society

Section 2: From the Mainstream to the Margins

Main:

Fenton, N., Passey, A. and Hems, L. (1999) 'Trust, Voluntary Sector and Civil Society' *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 19(7/8): 21-42.

Fenton, N. (2000a) 'Critical Perspectives on Trust and Civil Society' in F. Tonkiss, A. Passey, N. Fenton, and L. Hems, (eds.) *Trust and Civil Society*, pp 151-174, London: Macmillan.

Supplementary:

Gaskin, K., Vlaeminke, M. and Fenton, N., (1996) *Young People's Attitudes to the Voluntary Sector*, London: The Commission for the Future of the Voluntary Sector, NCVO, ISBN 0 7199 1506 6.

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TRUST, THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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The voluntary sector in Britain has grown extensively and is now an essential part of society. Part of this growth has seen the voluntary sector taking on more and more roles previously confined to the responsibility of the state. Cultural and social

change in post-welfare Britain has at once led to a more professionalised voluntary sector and led away from civic involvement by the exclusion of those groups who are outside traditional democratic channels. At the same time the advocacy and campaign roles of the voluntary sector have come under scrutiny from the voluntary sector itself, policy makers and the public. These roles have not only survived but have been signalled as central to the existence and survival of a thriving voluntary sector and the development of civil society.

This has occurred against a background of diminishing public confidence in traditional political systems. The British Social Attitudes Survey 1996 showed that the public had experienced a profound loss of faith in the institutions of the state. Its efficiency and morality have been questioned. Around the same time work by the think tank DEMOS showed that disengagement is more profound among the young (Gaskin *et.al.*, 1996). The DEMOS report speaks of 'a deep seated rejection of society's central institutions...an historic political disconnection' and a 'potentially explosive alienation' among young people (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995). Other reports on young people and citizen service have claimed that the lack of engagement in social values and activities have created problems of 'privatism and social withdrawal, crime, drug abuse, incivility and other public vices' (Briscoe, 1995). In the UK, the Henley Centre has been tracking confidence in national institutions for the past 13 years. This data reveals a decline in *confidence* in a wide variety of institutions - parliament, the church, the media, the legal system (Henley Centre 1997).

In 1996 charities were incorporated into the Henley Centre survey for the first time. A third of the sample said that they had a great deal of or quite a lot of confidence in charities compared to 25% who had confidence in the church and 11% in the government. However, charities scored lower than schools, the

National Health Service, the BBC, Banks. The Police, The Royal Mail and the Armed Forces.

Confidence is different to trust. Confidence refers to situations where alternatives are not considered or where people simply proceed. It predicts future behaviour and relates to the ability to deliver. Trust involves the choice of one action in preference to another, despite the possibility of being disappointed by other actors. As a consequence 'trust is only possible in a situation where the possible damage may be greater than the advantage you seek' (Luhmann, 1988:97). Trust engages personal feelings of faith and hope making the bond between trust and truster a fragile one. If trust is broken it is difficult to restore. It has been argued (Gambetta, 1988) that it is possible to have confidence without trust but not trust without confidence: 'Trust remains vital in interpersonal relations, but participation in functional systems like the economy or politics is no longer a matter of personal relations. It requires confidence but not trust' (Luhmann, 1988:99) Seligman (1998) also makes a clear distinction between trust and confidence: 'control or confidence is what you have when you know what to expect in a situation; trust is what you need to maintain interaction if you do not' (Seligman, 1998:1).

In 1997 the Henley Centre explored trust explicitly, asking how much people trusted different bodies to be 'honest and fair'. Here, 56% of people said they trusted charities compared with 74% for school teachers, 67% for the police and 59% for the BBC. Previous research on motivations and barriers to charitable giving states that to give money to charity requires that we trust our donation will be put to good use (Fenton *et.al.*, 1993).

Both trust and confidence are related to expectations. Peters *et.al.*, (1997) have found marked differences between the expectations people have of different institutions within society in the US, namely industry, the government and citizen groups. The government was expected to show a great deal of commitment to communicating information about environmental risks, but was

not expected to show much care and concern. In contrast, industry was expected to show care and concern when communicating risks as well as be responsible for disclosing information, while citizen groups should have high levels of knowledge and expertise, as well as commitment. If particular groups do not conform to these prior expectations then they are likely to lose the trust and credibility of the public. What the public expect charities to be is crucial for the extent of trust shown in them.

This illustrates that trust is a social concept shared by a number of individuals in a particular social configuration. The cultural context that engenders a 'culture of trust' (Sztompka, 1998) or alternatively a 'culture of fear' (Furedi, 1997)¹ impacts upon individuals' relationships to each other, to institutions, to organisations and to society generally. As will be shown below, the public expect charities to hold different values from other sectors; to show a level of commitment to a cause or an issue and to be non-profit making. For values-based organisations trust is a critical issue. Such organisations frequently operate in a less regulated culture, with this freedom comes uncertainty. Trustworthiness may be difficult to assess due to a lack of information or a deficit in cultural competency to elicit understanding of the monitoring mechanisms that may exist. The issue of accountability comes to the fore along with the dilemma of communicating and informing whilst appearing to be cost effective and non-commercial which often brings a clash of values that are difficult to disentangle and can result in a loss of trust.

The act of trusting is often a leap of faith which may be inspired by a judgment of confidence. Most judgments, whatever the issue, are made according to the information available from the media, education, friends, family and others and evaluated against previous experience and information (Fenton *et.al.*, 1998). Previous experience is patterned by gender, class, age, ethnicity, nationality, geography etc. It is misleading to try to redeem public perceptions as rational without an analysis of how and why people make judgments. Public perceptions of charities are changing as a

direct result of the increased prominence of the roles they are being asked to perform. However, understanding of the precise nature of the heightened profile of charities is low (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997).² The public recognise that charities are doing more and more and that the number of voluntary organisations is growing without necessarily understanding how or why. It seems likely that trust is related to the specifics of the information content and other sources which make it credible. One of the benchmarks of citizenship is the ability to make informed decisions. When choice is limited or confused, trust is low.

The erosion of public confidence in charities appears also to be related to the new fundraising blitz. As 'the whole culture of fundraising becomes commercialised and is expressed in competitive strategies' (Leat, 1995), the public feels the brunt and begins to resist. The majority of people prefer to give when they know where the money is going, and high pressure fundraising techniques are strongly disliked (Fenton, *et.al.*, 1993). The growth of professionalism, marketing and PR is in conflict with the altruistic amateurism which constitutes the image of charity in most people's minds (Fenton, 1994). Expenditure on marketing and administration soars and the public is suspicious. The harder organisations try to raise funds from the public the more they risk losing support because of the amount they are seen to be spending on non-operational activities (Rochester, 1996; Leat, 1995). With the prediction that fundraising from the general public will continue to become expensive, aggressive and competitive without increasing significantly the total amount raised (Rochester, 1996), it needs to be asked what damage is this doing to public trust and confidence?

Fukuyama (1995) argues that because the erosion of secondary institutions in the US (which includes voluntary organisations) has gone too far, the foundations for the relations of trust have been badly damaged. While recognising that voluntary organisations have increased in number Fukuyama also notes that many are very large membership organisations with little, if any, real membership

participation. This has occurred alongside a steady breakdown of older communities like neighbourhoods, churches and workplaces. Both contribute to increasing isolation and atomisation of individuals. If we refer back to the distinction made between trust and confidence by Luhmann (1988) and Seligman (1998) we can see that Fukuyama often confuses and conflates the two concepts. As participation in civil society lessens, control over decisions that may effect our everyday lives diminishes along with the knowledge of what to expect and confidence levels fall. According to Fukuyama the US is in danger of losing its art of association. The ability to associate is based on the strength of commonly shared values. When such values are influential it facilitates the subordination of individual interests to those of larger groups. This process leads to the consolidation of trust which is not necessarily linked to individual agency or knowledge. Fukuyama contends that today individualism is less and less curbed by commonly shared values. American society is evolving from a culture of trust to one of distrust. He observed that 'the inherent tendency of rights-based liberalism to expand and multiply those rights against the authority of virtually all existing communities has been pushed towards its logical conclusion' (1995: 41). As a result social capital (the ability of people to work together, (Putnam, 1995)) has diminished, and civic engagement suffers. Fukuyama's argument looks towards communitarianism as a means of strengthening civil associations.

The communitarian approach regards the 1980s as a decade of greed in capitalist societies that went too far and wishes to rescue the community and establish a new relationship between it and the pursuit of individual self-interest. This culture of greed, which ignored the destructive consequences of unrestrained egoism, is held responsible for the breakdown of elementary forms of social solidarity and the weakening of trust. It is believed that the trust, norms and networks that facilitate co-ordinated action can be developed in part through citizens working together in voluntary organisations (Nye, 1997).

If we accept Fukuyama's argument we accept that for charity as a generic entity and charities as specific organisations to thrive, they must hold high levels of public confidence that will in turn engender trust. In this context, which is further explored below, it becomes evident that trust is important in relation to the voluntary sector in particular for 3 reasons: to build and sustain social citizenship; to create and maintain confidence in the abilities of voluntary organisations and thus maintain public giving (of both money and time); and to develop and help protect political space for lobbying and campaign oriented functions (a distinctive space that is becoming less clear with the blurring of boundaries between sectors, as more charities operate within the contract culture and appropriate the techniques of business in an increasingly competitive environment).

If it is true that trust is in decline in developed capitalist societies we need to consider the socio-cultural and political-economic changes that have taken place to understand why this is so. Changes in material circumstances may affect what can be done while changes in social values affect what is considered desirable. The material and the structural configurations of society relate to value systems. The next section will approach this through the two key themes chosen because of their particular relevance to the voluntary sector: the individual and the social; the local and global. It will draw on the authors' own recent empirical research on trust and voluntarism in the UK. This research programme comprised of four strands:

- * archival research into existing studies of trust and confidence across all sectors.
- * ten focus groups held with a cross section of the general public in Autumn 1997.

The groups were divided according to the relationship with voluntary organisations, including givers and non-givers, volunteers, younger and older professionals, social security

claimants and religiously committed.

- * expert interviews with eight relevant industry commentators, including journalists, campaigners and corporate sponsors.
- * a quantitative survey of 1,045 adults aged 16 and over carried out in December 1997. The respondents were selected according to a systematic probability sample designed to be representative of all adults in Great Britain.

The individual and the social

The UK conservative government of 1979-1997 was based on an ideology of economically centred individualism, consumerism and citizenship. The concept of consumption and citizen participation (invoked by citizenship) also resonates with a very different ideology that emerged from the 1960s and 1970s of participatory democracy in service planning and delivery. There is a huge gulf between these two ideologies that the introduction of the concept of communitarianism tried to bridge. As noted above, the growth of individualism and the breakdown of community has been used to explain the decline of trust. Commentators have remarked that the rise of individualism, especially in the 1980s, has been at the expense of sociability and civic-mindedness. Such arguments are based on the assumption that if individual self interest is allowed to develop unhindered, conflicts of interests will override relations of trust. Durkheim argued that society which was composed of isolated individuals pursuing their own narrow objectives could not survive for long. According to Durkheim calculating individuals pursuing their own self interest undermined social solidarity. To overcome this danger society required a morality of co-operation and a network of secondary institutions which bound people together - these would help to mediate the pursuit of self interest by creating social bonds (Furedi, 1997).

In Britain the 1980s saw the New Right attempt to remove limitations on the accumulation and power of capital in the marketplace. Their project was to roll back the priorities of the

social democratic state with its commitment to welfare, full employment and 'high' taxation to fund these. The role of the state would instead be to remove the restrictions of the free market in labour (unions, minimum wages etc.), to de-regulate and allow larger units of capital to form (to increase profitability) and to reward the wealth makers. To do this they reduced direct taxation to allow the market to develop in an unfettered and global fashion (Philo and Miller, 1997).

The rise of the global market produces key changes to relationships in society. The market is far more than simply the mechanism through which demands are met. It is itself a system of values and relationships. At an interpersonal level these are manifest as the competitive struggle between individuals.

In a market society individual status is conferred by the ability to buy, to demand service, and thus to control others. The key commodity in such a society is human labour. People compete to sell and market themselves and the individual struggle for success can undermine collectivist and social responses. Personal success is measured by individual market-value. The outward expression of the new dominance of the market is consumption. The ability to consume allows the assertion of individual rights and social relations of power (Philo and Miller, 1997). These values are not new but are offered in a more developed and legitimised form in contemporary western society. The new prominence of these values is contested by social alternatives from the left and by moralism from the right. Against these, the values of the market celebrate a social and material world which is for sale and which is reduced to a mass of commodities. The common exchange relationship is one based on purchase power. The social response to charitable giving has been caught in this frame so that assessments of deservedness are at the forefront of many people's minds. Perceptions of who receives charity and who should receive charity are clearly linked to the willingness of people to support charities. Concepts of need, neediness and desert strongly influence responses. In the focus groups confusion and suspicion

was voiced concerning what is deemed to be a deserving cause and the apparent arbitrary allocation of charity assistance. For example one group of respondents discussed the unfairness of people in need, such as the elderly or mothers with severely disabled children, who they felt deserved to be helped but didn't receive charity:

She (the mother of a severely disabled man) didn't seem to get any help directly from charities, so I would like to know where the money actually goes, you know, who they actually do help directly. (Social security claimant)

A similar response was voiced concerning the constant requirement of charitable provision, the logic being that the need was not catered for if the problem remained. So, a lack of trust is expressed towards the *raison d'être* of many voluntary organisations. But more than this, the recipients of charity themselves are often viewed with nothing more than contempt, malign distrust or corrosive pity (Golding and Middleton, 1982). A society so firmly entrenched in an ethic of competition and reward finds it difficult to escape the values it espouses.

I think a lot of people today have got their priorities wrong, so consequently if they are unemployed or down on their luck as some people would say, you have got to budget your money. I mean, I run a house on my dole money and I manage ... but you'll get a lot of people that say, oh I've got to go out for a pint ... or we've got to go out here or there, so therefore they make themselves more needy, if you know what I mean, so I don't think they deserve it. (Social Security Claimant)

However, public attitudes have not obediently followed the wholesale promotion of the market. Indeed, our research shows that the ability of voluntary organisations to represent something other than the market is vital. Respect for what charities do is high - 91% of respondents in the quantitative survey agreed that 'I respect what charities are trying to do', and 70% agreed that 'one of the most important things about charities is the values they

hold'. These values and the ends they serve must be distinct from business and the state:

The problem is the overlap between what the state should actually take responsibility for. We're raising money for computers for my kids' school. I think that's outrageous, but it's more and more accepted. And I think there'll be more and more of an overlap where charities are coping and the state is leaving off. (Non-volunteer)

This can be explained by reference to the particular history of the welfare state in the Britain: The Conservative ethos of consumption and citizen participation (often referred to as individual citizenship) was built on a prior history of participatory democracy and social citizenship. As Taylor and Lansley (1992) point out, both involve a shift away from paternalism, whether of the ruling elite or the 'nanny state' and towards a greater choice of services whether on an individual or communal basis. 'The consumerist individual whose personal choices create aggregate demand for market pluralism may thus overlap with the citizen, who is drawn into the collective action of welfare pluralism' (Taylor and Lansley, 1992: 172). The consumerist individual has their sights on the market, the citizen has their sights on moral/social rights.

Furedi (1997), describes this as a process of individuation as opposed to the promotion of individualism and one that is directly related to the erosion of relations of trust. It has become fashionable to describe society today as one which is uniquely individual but this denies significant anti-individual strands that dominate society e.g., it has become fashionable to criticise those on high salaries and those who indulge in conspicuous consumption. Many such criticisms are directed towards voluntary organisations. The salaries of directors are questioned for being too competitive; fundraising is deemed to be too professional and thus too expensive.

The amount of money that is spent by large charities in competing for money is increasing in terms of advertising and campaigning and

all the rest of it...eventually my guess is that it's going to implode, it's going to collapse. Because I think there is a limit to what people will give (Non-giver).

It seems to me that a lot of what they are doing is for the benefit of the people that are running them or working for them, rather than anybody receiving anything at the bottom end (Social security claimant).

Furedi (1997) argues that such themes are sustained by the philosophy of caution and scepticism which criticises those who go too far and thereby put others at risk - the viciousness of modernity is recognised but any alternative is not. The public acknowledge that market madness does need to be kept in check. Such scepticism however, is not a liberating reaction in Furedi's argument, rather it increases individualism and the weakening of solidarity. Individuation operates in a culture of distrust, cynicism and fear. This highlights the difficulty of translating the concept of citizenship to one of social rights. 'Groups and individuals, their demands and needs cannot be reduced to a simple formula' (Cochrane, 1998:262).

Our research reveals that charity is seen as both helping those in difficulties and providing a mechanism through which caring impulses can be channeled. The charitable and civic spirit was felt to exist and require an outlet. On the other hand clear scepticism is expressed about the reasons for the continued existence of so many charities operating in a competitive market place. This is an expression of a particular history of individual and social citizenship. Social capital previously accumulated is not easily dissolved and may be reinvoked but it does so in an environment dominated by the market and individuation - vicious modernity.

The local and the global

The weakening of community structures was a consequence of political policies which promoted the free market. The uneven development of the capitalist market plus its tendency to rapid expansion and contraction has historically put pressure on local

community structures and forced the movement or displacement of labour. Seabrook (1997) writes of the decline of his own community following the collapse of the boot and shoe industry in Northampton. He describes the emergence of the underclass:

Like an exhumation of the remains of the working class, the skeleton left behind when all those who could leave have gone, abandoning those who might have been perceived as the undeserving and the helpless, but who were also sheltered within the old working class...The people we had called Auntie and Uncle were transformed, little by little, into strangers and malevolent strangers at that (quoted in Miller and Philo, 1997:15).

The growth of the market changes both individual relationships and corporate priorities. There are many different social responses to this. Some are traditional and collective such as the contemporary growth in trade union membership in the US. In Britain the impact of the new insecurity, stress at work and fear of unemployment has produced a situation in which approximately 5 million people who are currently non-unionised are now 'keen' to join a trade union (NOP Poll, *The Guardian* 15 March 1997). There has also been a growth of local struggles over road-building, animal rights, ethnic or cultural identities which indicate the development of new forms of cultural resistance. The focus group research revealed that there was general support for the involvement of charities in lobbying and campaigning. But more emphatically expressed was a preference for local charities. This preference related to the opportunity to see the results of the organisation's action, because it helps the individual's local community and because it usually implies scale initiative that is more readily accountable.

If you get a big anonymous organisation, you don't really understand what's going on at the other side of the world, then there's no reason to trust them in the slightest. (Givers)

The affinity with local charities or national ones which have local programmes, is related to the supporter's sense of connection

and control. Once distance and all the mediating mechanisms between handing over one's donation and its arrival as food in the mouth of a starving child were considered, there was greater confidence that a local or domestic donation would be more likely to be of real benefit to its intended recipient (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997). The suspicion is that sheer size might work against effectiveness. A larger organisation is felt likely to contain too much bureaucracy and have too many administrators (i.e. be too like the state); or be too professionalised and mimic the techniques of business deemed unsuitable for the voluntary sector:

With local charities you feel you've got some access to what money is being spent but with national charities, as an individual you have very little control over what happens and I think that may be why charities should actually represent what is needed within the communities as far as possible. For people to feel that they have, you know, they can benefit from it or at least they can have the buzz of having seen something happen in their community as a result. (Professional)

However, there is a downside to the localisation of political struggle which while pitching communities directly against global corporations may also distance local alliances and organisations from central co-ordination. This was evident in the respondents very limited understanding of what charities are actually doing coupled with confusion about the size and scope of the sector. Similarly awareness of the 'contract culture'³ was very low as was that of the Charity Commission whose role it is to register and monitor the work of charitable organisations. The profusion of the voluntary sector was also a cause for concern. Without central co-ordination the growth in charities was perceived as increased competition between organisations working for the same or similar causes. The respondents were uncomfortable with the existence of values-based organisations within an increasingly blatant market place, a further illustration of individuation:

I think my problem is that charities who are similarly minded, pulling their work together and, for example, there are so many differ-

ent cancer charities...It makes me wonder if they'd all work together they'd actually be a lot better off. I do feel perhaps if they worked together...whether people would be more willing to give money, but of course there would be more money coming in because it wouldn't be so fragmented. You could then get rid of some of the costs because it's one organisation and, you know, you could then get more things done.(Religious)

Localisation of political struggle is paralleled by a fragmentation of political culture in which party allegiances and class alliances give way to more fluid and informal networks of action. The networks are often staunchly anti-bureaucratic and anti-centralist, suspicious of large organised formal institutional politics. In turn the fragmentation of political culture is fuelled by the rise of identity politics in which modern logics of incorporation and representation are challenged on the bases of their rigidity and exclusiveness. This parallels respondents' desire for charity that is close at hand. The most trusted sources of information on charities was quoted as being friends and family which conforms to other research in the area of risk (Langford *et.al.*, 1997). Gaskin and Fenton (1997) point out that in the Langford study non-governmental campaign organisations had a high trust rating because many people believed such campaigns were conducted in the public interest and targeted against institutions that cannot be relied upon. The image of charities is embedded in a wider judgment of trust over the other institutional settings in which work similar to that carried out by charities is undertaken. People want charities to retain a distinctiveness from other sectors yet recognise they are part of a global system. Globalisation has made people aware of certain aspects of voluntary organisations' work but also made them more sceptical of the outcome. In this context, how accountability is practised and understood is central to levels of confidence in the voluntary sector. Johnson *et.al.* (1998) argue that trust is an essential element of quality assurance in the voluntary sector. But trust relies on taking charities on their word; accountability requires a process of standards, measurement and

audit that can systematically encourage confidence through information provision.

The ability of the voluntary sector to inform the public about their work has been dramatically affected by instantaneous communications technologies. Together with patterns of mass migration and world trade these increase awareness of and dependence between localities far away from each other. This can be seen as positive insofar as it can raise awareness of the politics of consumption - as Giddens notes (1990) the choices and actions of consumers in one locality can have an impact on the international division of labour and planetary ecology. Large international voluntary organisations can and do inform the public of the impact of a global economy. But it is a function that often precludes participation and often negates any degree of control on behalf of the giver. Such groups may have large memberships but the members rarely, if ever, see one another. People may be committed givers but the giving is organised at a distance, the act of participation is at arms length.

It has also been suggested that global broadcasting reduces perceptions of individual responsibility. Tester (1994) argues that the media, and especially television, are an important source of moral knowledge, yet they also function to inculcate audience passivity in the face of serious moral problems. The media can alert us to the horrors of famine, war and poverty yet actually stir the audience to do very little about it. Live Aid is the exception to the rule. It was however a short term fund-raising event.

Devereux (1996) argues that the television audience has come to accept that there is very little one can do about inequality and poverty. Motivation for giving may now rely on the media prompt more than ever before. In providing popular and continuous imagery about the links between charitable giving and the works of charities the media also provide vehicles for discrimination between types and varieties of charitable acts and beneficiaries. Moreover, the image of voluntarism and charity can set the agenda

for the extent to which the voluntary sector is both a desirable and feasible solution to the problems of poverty and inequality. In doing so it can perpetuate several myths - that something is being done; that it is impossible to do anything; that it is the job of charities to solve the problems of world poverty; that there are those who are deserving of charity and those who are undeserving. By media coverage defining who the 'really needy' are, the remaining poor are not only ignored but also further demonised and excluded (Golding and Middleton, 1982). In our research the homeless were subject to particular retribution - a group which have been frequently presented as the individual's who have brought destitution upon themselves, the scroungers and takers of the world:

When I see a young man or a young woman begging on the street, my first instinct is I look them up and down and think, he looks as though he's got both his legs and both his arms. Why can't he work?...He doesn't look sick, so if he's got the ability to beg, surely he can go out and find a little job.

Global communications are themselves the subject of cynicism and distrust. As Fenton *et.al.*, (1997) have illustrated, living in a modern media age has not resulted in individuals accepting glibly the media fodder they are given. Rather, people are wary and critical of much of the information they receive via the airwaves and show a sophisticated awareness of the processes of information dissemination. However, for many the mass media may be the only route to information about particular voluntary organisations and their endeavours. It is also the place where charity scandals will come into the public domain in all their media glory. In a globalised market place with a weakening of community structures, trust in voluntary organisations may well depend on the media images they are able to forge.

Conclusion

The reinvigoration of charity by the Left and the Right in the UK has been ideologically and politically opportune. The belief in its

new role has been promulgated without explicating individual rights and entitlements to various services and the possibility of generating more unequal access to welfare services, without defining the concept of 'voluntary' or 'needy', without considering possible conflicts between professional and non-professional personnel, and without due consideration of the advocacy and monitoring work that is the *raison d'être* of many. Ideological concepts of citizenship, consumerism and participation exist side by side in contradictory and confused relationships and have become part and parcel of people's understandings of charity.

Trust is bound up with production, consumption, regulation and representation. It is a personal response to a social dilemma that characterises contemporary British society - the dilemma of the consumer and the citizen, of the individual and society, of the local and the global. As Sztompka (1998:25) argues, 'any existing measure of trust is path-dependent; its meaning, strength, durability, the direction of future evolution depend to a large extent on its origins'. This article has argued that we exist in a time of 'vicious modernity' where the market constitutes a system of values that is linked to the development of social beliefs in the form of trust and potentially to action in the form of donations of time/money and civic engagement. The system of values has not developed in an ordered or logical fashion. The market is not all encompassing and it is constantly in a state of flux and instability. The market consistently fails its consumers. The voluntary sector is seen to operate within a market economy - voluntary organisations are deemed to be competitive and to employ techniques of business; while also being distinct from it by virtue of the non-market values they hold. As such they invoke complex responses that cannot be addressed by recourse to pre-established foundations of trust. Trust in traditional society demanded a reduction of complexity - the creation of social cohesion based on faith in the community (Bidault *et.al.*, 1997); societies with high levels of confidence where predictability was high and variability low (Seligman, 1997). Trust in modern society was based on the

pursuit of the rational ideal through social reform and planning and the augmentation of social capital. This trust has been challenged by the growth of uncertainty most notably in ecology, finance and the economy. The art of trusting has become a complex process. The vision held by the public of the voluntary sector is a blurred one. Trust is difficult to establish, easy to block and is constantly under threat. It is also an essential condition for co-operation (Misztal, 1996). If voluntary organisations are to thrive and encourage the art of association they must recognise the tension between accepting the rules of the powerful to ensure that resources are made available for services and activities which fit the aims of the voluntary organisation, and losing touch with the members or supporters of those organisations when participation is no more than pseudo and their distinction from other sectors ceases to be apparent. Only then will the voluntary sector build and nurture a trust that can cope with the felt postmodern complexity of vicious modernity.

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Endnotes

1. This has also been called a 'syndrome of distrust' (Sztompka, 1996, 1998) or a 'culture of cynicism' (Stivers, 1994).
2. The relationship between citizen and government has become ever more ambiguous as 'stakeholders' have multiplied to consist of quangos, public sector agencies, businesses, hybrid public-private organisations, voluntary organisations etc. as well as individuals. It is claimed that it is no longer clear who does what or who is accountable to whom for what (Cochrane, 1998).
3. The term 'contract culture' refers to the shift from provision of personal social services by local authorities to the provision of goods and services by a voluntary organisation under contract to a local authority. This has involved a move away from grants to

closely specified contracts requiring competition between voluntary, statutory and for-profit organisations. The effects of contracting have been variously debated as introducing increased financial uncertainty for voluntary organisations, the costs and risks associated with being part of the market including increasing professionalism and lack of autonomy; increasing regulation and bureaucracy and the thwarting of charitable missions through the desire to secure a contract.

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on the tension between individual and collective welfare: the collectively optimal outcome of co-ordinating everybody's actions might override some people's individual preferences. Proponents of civil society often describe this problem in detail: how economic institutions and political arrangements (often intentionally) curtail individuals' potential for agency (see Seligman, 1992). Trust, conceived as a precondition of social existence, sidesteps this tension by offering a different starting point. Instead of attempting to construct socially integrated collectivities out of individuals freely choosing courses of action according to preferences under their sole authority, it maintains that people are social *ab initio*. However, although we are all moral beings in this sense, the content of our morality, the empirical nature of our social relations and of our collectivity, is contingent on the historical and social circumstances within which we find ourselves. There can be no *a priori* assumption that trust, in the sense of probability estimates, will be verified or be generalizable, that charity will be part of our moral armoury, or that civil society will perform the functions that the left or right or third way protagonists have hoped it will.

8 Critical Perspectives on Trust and Civil Society

Natalie Fenton

Introduction

Notions of 'trust' have come to play a central role within debates regarding civic renewal, democratic reform and economic wellbeing (Gambetta, 1988; Putnam, 1993a; 1993b; 1995a; Fukuyama, 1996). While these may all be desirable ends, it is not clear that the meaning of 'trust', or the kinds of social relations the term is meant to describe, remain the same in each case. The contributions to this volume have sought to examine concepts of trust in a more specific way; exploring how these play out in particular contexts within civil society. At the same time the contributors have aimed to shed critical light on a larger conception of civil society using trust as an analytic tool. Perspectives on civil society proliferate (see Keane, 1988a; 1988b; 1998; Tester, 1992; Gellner, 1994), and it is arguable that the term functions most powerfully as an *idea* (Seligman, 1992) – a means of thinking about the limits of authority and freedom, or the nature of association. Recently, however, the concept of civil society has been taken up in a more prescriptive and programmatic way. The regularity of this term's appearance in contemporary policy literature (see Landry and Mulgan, 1995; Giddens, 1998; Blair, 1998), appears to support an argument that in much current political discourse, 'a *strong civil society* is seen as the answer to many of our problems of crime, disorder and social fragmentation' (Knight and Stokes, 1996: p. 6, emphasis in original). The nature and conditions of a 'strong civil society', and quite how it might provide an 'answer' to these very material problems, is not, however, self-evident or straightforward.

Seligman argues – in his contribution here, and elsewhere – that trust represents a relation between private individuals; one formed outside of legal or contractual frameworks, and beyond the ties of familism (Seligman, 1997). Civil society can be understood as that sphere where individuals come freely into association; where considerations of private interest encounter larger notions of altruism or common good (Seligman, 1992). From this perspective both trust and civil society involve a conception of the individual as essentially private, with moral agency and autonomy. Recent debates over public trust, and the prospects for civil society, tend to draw on a language of civic ‘decline’ and ‘renewal’ (see, for example, Putnam, 1995a; 1995b); and often link forms of civic or social renewal to the ‘renewal’ of a liberal or social democratic political project (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998; Szreter, 1998). In these contexts, perspectives on trust and civil society can be viewed as part of a rethinking and regrouping on the left in response to a social and political landscape radically altered by neo-liberal polities since the 1980s. It becomes critically important, therefore, to think about how theories of trust and civil society might be seen as displacing alternative ways of thinking on the left – especially in relation to notions of social solidarity. How far can a set of ideas associated with the emergence of modern social relations (Seligman, 1992; 1997; Gellner, 1994) provide an understanding of late modern social and economic conditions? If Seligman is right in arguing that liberal ideas of trust and civil society rest on certain precepts of individual autonomy and interest, how does the recent concern with these ideas fit with *neo-liberal* forms of individualization and marketization?

The discussion that follows begins to consolidate some of the thinking on trust and civil society that has been developed over previous chapters. It draws upon these ideas – as well as other perspectives on relations between civil society, the state, markets and individuals – to consider how the theorizing of trust might be critically extended. It develops an argument that, without social solidarity, the concepts of trust and civil society serve individualist or ‘privatist’ ends, and in essence represent no more than the ‘human face’ of capital to the detriment of collective interest. This thesis is examined in relation to two features of late modernity: individualization and marketization. The chapter has a particular

concern with voluntary or charitable organizations, which occupy an especially complex position in relation to these issues: as incubators of civic virtue; as a model of activity promoted by neo-liberal ‘reforms’ to the welfare state; and as sites where non-market rationalities remain possible. However, these forms of voluntary association – while bearing much of the emphasis in both theoretical debates regarding trust and civil society, and in a range of recent political strategies – are not simply or necessarily conducive to inclusion or democracy.

Trust, confidence and risk

Trust is described in different ways from several theoretical perspectives. As with related perspectives on ‘confidence’ and ‘risk’, approaches to trust are bound up with issues of uncertainty in social, economic and political life (see Giddens, 1994). Trust, however, can be a rather fragile way of responding to uncertainty. The debates on civil society alluded to in this volume suggest that, in a contemporary context, relations of trust are in danger of being overtaken by measures of confidence. This distinction between trust and confidence provides a first crucial step in understanding why analysis of the concept of trust can offer insights into different kinds of relations within civil society.

Zucker (1986) refers to three different kinds of trust: *characteristic-based trust*, that is tied to a person’s social or cultural background; *process-based trust*, that is tied to past or present exchanges, as in reputation or gift exchanges; and *institutionally-based trust*, tied to forms of certification or legal constraints. Similarly, Anheier and Kendall (1998, p. 8) claim that in modern societies there has been a shift from ‘particularist trust based on individual characteristic to trust based on process and experience, and then to more generalized institutional trust’. In this volume, Passey and Tonkiss argue that these kinds of shifts can be analysed as a move from trust relations to those of confidence (cf. Seligman, 1997). In the context of voluntary organizations, they interpret this as the difference between doing good (inspiring trust) and doing well (inspiring confidence). The civic value of trust is translated into the market value of confidence.

The distinction between trust and confidence and the different emphasis given to each at any one time are crucial markers in the

shifting nature of relations in contemporary society. More narrow economic perspectives, in contrast, tend to conflate confidence with trust, and thus lose many of the defining factors that allow us to use these analytic concepts as indicators of social change. In a number of economic accounts (Anheier and Ben-Ner, 1997; Salamon and Anheier, 1998; Weisbrod, 1988; Hansmann, 1980) trust is related directly to market transactions and is deemed an act of rational choice that is necessary for an efficient system of economic exchange. Here, trust becomes a rational means of negotiating economic risk, based on the assumption that another actor will undertake an action that is not detrimental and may be beneficial to the agent in question. Collapsing trust and confidence in this way, however, can obscure the difference between economic and non-economic relationships within civil society, and the different ways in which people respond to the dominance of market values (particularly in areas felt to be somehow morally superior to the cut and thrust of the market – for example, the voluntary sector).

There is a wealth of literature seeking to explain what has been called 'risk society' (Beck, 1992; Lash *et al.*, 1996; Furedi, 1997; Franklin, 1998). This body of work rests on the basic premise that individual and public perceptions of uncertainty have increased in a late modern context – ecological, financial and economic risks seem greater or more random (see Macnaghten in this volume for a discussion of trust and risk in relation to the environment). A 'risk society' implies that we require greater confidence in those people and institutions that manage risk for us. The sheer volume of information being produced means that we need experts to interpret it for us. The growth of information is paralleled by the increasing numbers of people charged with communicating it, translating it, and making it useable. Public trust in them may be directly related to the amount of information they deliver (Bidault *et al.*, 1997). In Beck's influential account, the risk society thesis implies that individuals are more and more dependent 'upon institutions and actors who may well be – and arguably are increasingly – alien, obscure and inaccessible' (Beck, 1992: p. 4). Many voluntary organizations generate trust by virtue of being external to the market (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997). However where business, public and voluntary sectors coexist – as in the provision of social services

in a range of advanced capitalist democracies – the more professionalized and regulated the voluntary sector becomes. This closeness to other sectors, and the difficulty of distinguishing between various suppliers, results in a need for confidence indicators such as formal accountability procedures. If trust facilitates philanthropic behaviour, then risk encourages the replacement of such action by market considerations (Anheier and Kendall, 1998), resulting in the displacement of trust by confidence.

In a society obsessed with risk one can exercise caution but not choice. Choice is not possible because free and effective agency is constrained – by lack of information, by limited control and by potentially serious costs. A society where individuals are free to make rational decisions to fulfil their personal interests would not need trust to mediate forms of uncertainty and risk. But if individuals do not have the freedom to choose, if information received is incomplete or impenetrable, they are left with only the ability to exercise caution. With caution the concept of trust comes into the frame but what happens is not a re-establishment of trust based on traditional social cohesion, but a separation of trust and confidence where confidence becomes the overriding desire.

Risk requires external evidence that any potential danger of the transaction failing will be minimized. Accountability is a precursor for confidence. Confidence is the state you enter into when you assume your expectations will be met. If you are unsure about your expectations and are unable to predict your future needs you must enter into a relationship of trust. Some theorists use the term 'active trust' (trust which cannot be taken for granted on the basis of institutional relationships, but has to be actively produced and negotiated) as a defining characteristic of post-traditional society in which individuals are increasingly dependent on experts and increasingly aware of the shortcomings of guarantees such as those provided by the membership of a profession (Giddens, 1994: p. 93).

Civil society and the 'crisis' of trust

Both Halfpenny and Herbert in this volume go to some lengths to explain normative principles of trust and charity in relation to particular socio-economic structures. If trust is reliant on varying normative principles then we should be able to trace how it has

changed in relation to the changing nature of Western capitalist society. Putnam (1995a), talking about US society, argues that there has been a widespread loss of the sense of community that Tocqueville (1969) believed was central to American culture. Put simply, people do not trust each other as much as they used to – this is linked to a recoil from civic life and social ties. People belong to fewer organizations than they used to, vote less often, volunteer less and give proportionally less money to charity. At the same time, it is claimed that people who have retained a sense of trust are more likely to participate in almost all of these activities, establishing a link between a decline of trust and the fall in civic engagement (Putnam, 1995a; Putnam, 1995b; Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Uslaner, 1997).

Trusting involves making judgements about people or organizations that are strange to you. As civic engagement declines so social capital is lost. Social capital is a concept that embraces the trust, norms and networks that facilitate co-ordinated action. A number of commentators suggest that the 'skill' of trusting is developed in part through citizens associating in voluntary organizations, self-help groups, and mutual aid societies. Putnam (1995a) for example, has argued that a decline in participation erodes the kind of intermediary institution that Tocqueville saw as essential to the structure of civil society.

Putnam argues that forms of voluntary association are distinctive in their capacity to function as repositories for all sources of social capital – obligations and expectations, information potential and norms and sanctions (Putnam, 1993a: p. 89). As such they are characterized as incubators of civic virtue. He contends that democratic, non-exclusionary voluntary associations characterized by a high level of face-to-face interaction are involved in a virtuous circle in terms of trust, because they instil habits of co-operation, solidarity and public spiritedness; develop skills required for political activity; and prevent factionalism through inclusive membership. It is problematic, however, simply to assume that voluntary associations will be democratic and non-exclusionary – as Putnam and others have noted (Putnam, 1995a: p. 76; Portes and Landolt, 1996; Woolcock, 1998). Many commentators on the organized voluntary sector would debate whether it is quite so virtuous (see Passey and Tonkiss, this volume). A misplaced nostalgia for the civic life of the 1950s, as

Putnam cautions – let alone for Tocqueville's America of the 1830s – ignores the factors that shape and constrain association in an era of advanced modernity. Conceiving of trust as merely the way in which people relate to each other without an understanding of trust as a normative principle located in social, political and cultural frameworks, falls short of a critical analytical approach that could shed light on the development of contemporary society, in particular processes of marketization, individualization and globalization. As Putnam would have it, it seems reasonable to suppose that 'meeting in an electronic forum is not the equivalent of meeting in a bowling alley' (Putnam, 1995a: p. 76; 1995b). The very least we can say, in this context, is that the role of voluntary associations in the establishment, sustenance and demise of trust is problematic and should not be taken for granted.

Solidarity and civil society

Miztal (1996) proposes that interest in the link between the concept of trust and that of civil society has emerged as a result of evidence suggesting that legal formulas of citizenship do not of themselves secure solidarity, participation and the expansion of the public sphere. With many symptoms of the decline of solidarity (the decrease in popularity of solidaristic parties, the decline in class solidarity, the collapse of communism as a viable alternative to capitalism), the renewal of civic institutions and the emergence of new social movements have been put forward as ways of constructing new identities and social bonds, and teaching new responsibilities and obligations. At the same time, Miztal points to the growing evidence of privatism, marketization and a politics based on rights rather than duties, as evidence of a shrinking public sphere. The task of protecting and promoting solidarity falls to the institutions of civil society which might offset the formalism, proceduralism and commodification of the state and market spheres.

Such an account places a distinctive emphasis on a politics and ethics of solidarity within civil society. Within more conventional theories of civil society, the concept of solidarity is frequently missing or side-lined. Wolfe for example, sees the role of civil society as maintaining a social fabric that tempers the operation of

the market and the state and anchors them in a normative framework by creating 'realms of intimacy, trust, caring and autonomy that are different from the larger world of politics and economics' (Wolfe, 1989: p. 38). But solidarity is not mentioned. Indeed, the notion that politics and economics represent a 'larger world', together with a normative emphasis on values of 'intimacy, trust and caring' within civil society, appears to reinstate rather traditional distinctions between the public and private spheres. The civil realm is seen to exercise a *civilizing* influence on market and state, rather than providing a sphere where alternative forms of social solidarity and political agency might be articulated.

Habermas (1992), who developed the concept of the public sphere as a space where citizens freely and meaningfully could participate in public life, defines solidarity as

the ability of individuals to respond to and identify with one another on the basis of mutuality and reciprocity without calculating individual advantages and above all without compulsion. Solidarity involves a willingness to share the fate of the other, not as the exemplar of a category to which the self belongs but as a unique and different person. (Habermas, 1992: p. 47)

Thus solidarity implies both a private and a public sense of trust. To insist on the inclusion of solidarity resists the definition of civil society in simply individualistic or private terms. In what has become a very influential view, the positive potential of the public sphere as a site of solidarity and collective agency is realized by new social movements. These movements are held to engage in a kind of 'double politics'; aiming both to influence policy in a formal sense, and to construct new kinds of solidarity and collective identity through informal political association – a bringing together of public and private responses.

The issue of solidarity can also be linked to debates around risk society. Lash and Urry (1994) suggest that the breakdown of trust in expert systems helps a critical reflexivity to develop. Giddens (1994: p. 6) talks about the 'expansion of social reflexivity' brought about by the wider availability of information which empowers individuals, enabling them to be far more critical of received wisdoms. However, this ignores the loss of collectivity in the move from trust

to confidence. Individuals on their own are far more likely to be overwhelmed by a feeling of insecurity than to have the confidence to develop critical thought. Social movements provide a collective context for the formation of a critical politics. In this manner solidarity can be seen as central to an understanding of civil society which avoids assumptions of individualism.

The importance of trust in these civil contexts is heightened because of concern over the rapid decrease of trust in government and formal institutions. The British Social Attitudes Survey, for example, has indicated that the public has experienced a profound loss of faith in the institutions of the state. Its efficiency and morality have been questioned. Similar evidence has emerged from longitudinal research undertaken by The Henley Centre (Henley Centre, 1997). These claims are not restricted to Britain. A large-scale comparative analysis based on national surveys points to declining public trust in politicians in a range of 'mature' democracies, with the exception of The Netherlands (Putnam *et al.*, 2000). Data from the World Values Survey suggest a similar pattern in terms of public confidence in political institutions, including armed forces, legal systems, police, parliaments and state bureaucracies (*ibid.*).

These kinds of disengagement are particularly acute among the young (Gaskin *et al.*, 1996). British studies speak of extensive alienation of young people from society's central institutions and warn of the long term dangers this may have (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995). Some reports on young people and citizen service claim that this lack of engagement with social values and activities has fostered a host of social problems including crime and drug abuse (Briscoe, 1995). With the state in retreat – not simply in the neo-liberal sense but more broadly in terms of public support – civil society becomes foregrounded as an alternative arena of public trust, information and representation (for example, Cohen and Rogers, 1995). The defining characteristics which mark out voluntary organizations and campaigning movements from the state and market sectors – non-profit, responding to localized need, oriented to certain values and so on – become paramount in building relations of trust with members and with the wider public. The relationship between organizational form (the encouragement of active participation, democracy and inclusivity) and the potential for trust to develop is crucial to contemporary society and its practices.

However, the possibility of a renewal of civil society through the expansion of civil associations, especially voluntary organizations, is problematic principally because such organizations do not necessarily increase democratic inclusion or operate in a manner that inculcates trust. Notions of trust and civil society may widely be seen as providing the foundations for general social solidarity and moral community. However, without an emphasis on forms of collective identity and an active and critical sense of solidarity, the concept of civil society remains centred on the individual and their interests, rather than on mutuality or reciprocity. Most importantly, it is not clear whether this thing called civil society simply builds on an association of interest that may have arisen out of the individualization of lifestyles organized around consumption in the market-place, or whether it is based on something more than enlightened self-interest. This is a point that is developed below.

Why does trust have particular relevance to contemporary society?

Individualization

Neo-liberalism, based on an ideology of economically centred individualism, consumerism and citizenship, held sway in a range of liberal capitalist governments throughout the 1980s and 1990s – most notably in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the UK, Thatcherism was described as the only ‘political and moral force that has been in the business of eating away at the cement of social reciprocity’ (Hall, 1993: p. 14). Neo-liberal policies have been blamed widely for undermining the welfare state and eroding social solidarity, including the responsibility that people may feel for one another. As the consequences of pushing market principles to the limit became apparent political support was mobilized by recourse to such popular themes as crime, family breakdown and social disintegration, allowing a nostalgia for community and social cohesion to fill the void.

The concept of active citizenship or citizen participation also resonates with a very different ideology that emerged from the 1960s and 1970s in the UK of participatory democracy in service planning and delivery. There is a huge gulf between these two ideologies that the introduction of the concept of communitarianism tried to

bridge. Communitarianism relies on the values and frameworks put in place by forms of voluntary association (Etzioni, 1993). In a formal sense, civil society is frequently claimed to be built on the health of non-governmental, non-market organizations – this notion of the third sector is a cornerstone of the vision of the New Labour government in the United Kingdom (the so-called ‘third way’). Voluntarism is central to Labour’s neo-liberal policies. If the third sector cannot be carried to new levels of social innovation and provision for unmet social need, then Blair’s third way is unlikely to become a reality.

However, despite the recent compact on relations between government and the voluntary and community sector (HMISO, 1998) that declares the independence of non-governmental organizations from government, the need for consistent funding policies, the right to consultation on future policy documents and the need for improved accountability procedures, charitable giving and volunteering are not generally increasing. This would seem to point to the fact that charitable giving and a spirit of voluntarism are motivated by more than just sympathetic social policy; rather, they are shaped by a particular socio-economic history that has promoted certain ideologies that do not disappear on demand.

The growth of individualism and the breakdown of community in the UK have been linked to the Conservative government’s long term in power and also used to explain the decline of trust. Commentators have remarked that the rise of individualism, especially in the 1980s, has been at the expense of sociability and civic-mindedness. Such arguments are based on the assumption that if individual self-interest is allowed to develop unhindered, conflicts of interests will override relations of trust. These ideas are not exactly new. Durkheim (1957; 1968) argued that a society composed of isolated individuals pursuing their own narrow objectives was untenable. According to Durkheim, calculating individuals pursuing their own self interest undermined social solidarity. To overcome this danger society required a morality of co-operation and a network of secondary institutions which bound people together – these would help to mediate the pursuit of self interest by creating social bonds (Furedi, 1997).

The 1980s saw the New Right attempt to remove limitations on the accumulation and power of capital in the market-place. Their

project was to roll back the priorities of the social democratic state with its commitment to welfare, full employment and 'high' taxation to fund these. The role of the state would instead be to remove restrictions on the free market in labour (unions, wages policies and so on), to deregulate and allow larger units of capital to form (to increase profitability) and to reward the wealth-makers. To do this governments reduced direct taxation to allow the market to develop in an unfettered and global fashion (Philo and Miller, 1997).

Policy analysts (such as Le Grand, 1997; Taylor-Gooby, 1999) have argued that these shifts from social democracy to neo-liberalism, and the policies accompanying them, are underpinned by particular assumptions regarding human motivation (Le Grand, 1997). Le Grand distinguishes three 'types' of social actor, each delimited in terms of their motivations. A social democratic model of 'knights' and 'pawns', as he has it, has been increasingly displaced by 'knavish' motivations. In the former model, those who financed and operated state welfare systems were predominantly public-spirited or altruistic in motivation (knights), and users of welfare services were essentially passive or unresponsive recipients of state largesse (pawns). However, this model has been supplanted by more 'knavish' motivations, wherein individuals are essentially motivated by self-interest. The reported unwillingness of citizens to pay more tax, ongoing scares over 'dole-cheats', and 'workfare' initiatives (especially in the US and the UK) are examples of how this model of motivation might shape various policy arenas.

Taylor-Gooby (1999), similarly, considers the motivations behind particular courses of action. The assumption is that an understanding of the motives behind peoples' actions can aid a wider understanding of society, how stability is reached, and processes of social change. Rationality is forwarded as one explanation typical of economic models of human behaviour. Many sociologists, however, argue that political ideologies and cultural frameworks create particular conditions that are conducive to certain ways of thinking – normative principles that transcend simple rationality. The problem of sustaining trust in a market system falls prey to both arguments. As Taylor-Gooby puts it: '[t]he risk is that over-reliance on a rational choice account of motivation in welfare markets may lead to over-emphasis on self-interest which will eventually deplete the normative legacy of welfare citizenship' (1999: p. 99). If we allow

the concept of social good to develop on the basis of a rational choice model we effectively hand it over to the principles of the market.

The emergence of global markets produces key changes to relationships in society (Waters, 1995; Featherstone, 1990). The market is far more than simply the mechanism through which demands are met. It is itself a system of values and relationships. At an interpersonal level these are manifest, at least in part, as competitive struggle between individuals.

Marketization

In a market society individual status is conferred by the ability to buy, to demand service and thus to control others. The key commodity in such a society is human labour. People compete to sell and market themselves and the individual struggle for success can undermine collectivist and social responses. Personal success is measured by individual market-value. The outward expression of new forms of market dominance can be seen in practices of consumption. The ability to consume becomes a marker of individual rights and social relations of power (Philo and Miller, 1997). These values are not new, but are offered in a more developed and legitimized form in contemporary Western societies. The new prominence of these values has been contested by social alternatives from the left, and by moralism from the right. Against these currents, the values of the market celebrate a social and material world which is for sale and is thereby reduced to a mass of commodities. The common exchange relationship is predicated on purchasing power. Making a purchase involves a legal contract whereby the consumer can exercise their rights to acceptable consumption. Such is the power of the market that individual rights overwhelm social rights based on a notion of collective good that may or may not be to the advantage of the individual.

In turn, relations between individuals are increasingly governed by economic forces. Public support for charities, for example, often assumed to be an altruistic act, has not escaped the individualization of the market. The social response to charitable giving relies frequently on assessments of deservedness of the beneficiary. Perceptions of who receives charity and who should receive charity are linked to the willingness of people to support charities (Fenton

et al., 1993). Public attitudes on the seeming excess of voluntary and charitable organizations operating in the same field and the high administrative costs such organizations incur are common (Fenton *et al.*, 1995). But more than this, the recipients of charity themselves are often viewed with nothing more than contempt, malign distrust or corrosive pity (Golding and Middleton, 1982). A society so firmly entrenched in an ethic of competition and reward finds it difficult to escape the values it espouses.

However, public attitudes do not always obediently follow the wholesale promotion of the market. Individualism and consumerism have not gone unquestioned by the public. Other attitudes prevail that mark civil society as different in character from both the state and the world of business. For example, voluntary organizations are perceived as offering an opportunity to somehow defy the market and act on principles other than profit and power. In the UK, research has shown that the ability of voluntary organizations to represent something other than the market is vital to their future well-being (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997).

The contradictory responses that the voluntary sector provokes can be explained by reference to the particular history of the welfare state in Britain: the Conservative ethos of consumption and citizen participation (often referred to as individual citizenship) was built on a prior history of participatory democracy and social citizenship. As Taylor and Lansley (1992) point out, both involve a shift away from paternalism, whether of the ruling elite or the 'nanny state' and towards a greater choice of services whether on an individual or communal basis. They suggest that the 'consumerist individual whose personal choices create aggregate demand for market pluralism may thus overlap with the citizen, who is drawn into the collective action of welfare pluralism' (Taylor and Lansley, 1992: p. 172). The consumerist individual has their sights on the market, the citizen has their sights on moral and social rights.

Furedi (1997) takes individualism one step further, linking marketization of society to a process of 'individuation' – as opposed to the promotion of individualism – that is directly related to the erosion of relations of trust. It has become fashionable to describe society today as one which is uniquely 'individual' but this denies significant anti-individual strands that are prevalent in a range of social contexts. For example, it has become common to criticize those on

high salaries and those who indulge in conspicuous consumption. These criticisms are particularly salient when directed towards voluntary organizations. The salaries of directors are questioned for being too competitive; fundraising is deemed to be too professional and thus too expensive.

Furedi (1997) argues that such themes are sustained by a philosophy of caution and scepticism which criticizes those who go too far and thereby put others at risk – the viciousness of modernity is recognized but any alternative is not. Where scepticism towards the market is expressed by way of hostility to certain actors within it, this is not – in Furedi's argument – a liberating reaction; rather it increases individualism and the weakening of solidarity. Individuation operates in a culture of distrust, cynicism and fear. This highlights the difficulty of translating the concept of individual citizenship to one of social rights: '[g]roups and individuals, their demands and needs cannot be reduced to a simple formula' (Cochrane, 1998: p. 262). To recognize the perils of the market and attempt to keep it within limits ensures that the market is managed and individualism is never fully challenged.

These arguments have particular implications for charities and other forms of voluntary organization. Charity is seen as both helping those in difficulties and providing a mechanism through which caring impulses can be channelled and forms of 'social connectedness' (Putnam, 1995b) established. The charitable and civic spirit has therefore both individual and social elements that can be exercised by way of voluntary organizations. On the other hand clear scepticism is expressed about the reasons for the continued existence of so many charities operating in a competitive market place (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997). This is an expression of a particular history of individual and social citizenship. Social capital previously accumulated is not easily dissolved and may be re-invoked but it does so in an environment dominated by the market and individuation – what is referred to above as 'vicious modernity'. If we are to accept that traditional conceptions of trust and civil society have relevance in a contemporary context, then we must first and foremost accept that the lived experience of 'trust' or 'citizenship' emanates from particular social histories. It may be that the global market place has been resoundingly successful in propagating ideologies of individualism and consumerism where they

have the conditions and freedom to flourish (most noticeably in the Western developed world), but they do so among histories that are also drenched in other ideologies, more commonly associated with solidarity, that potentially conflict with market values.

Individualization foregrounds choice as the ultimate act of freedom and sign of democracy. However, choice is a fluid, complex and socially conditioned process. Any act of decision-making is influenced by circumstances. Individuals can not be assumed to have access to a stable and consistent set of preferences to refer to in making decisions. Herbert and Halfpenny (this volume) illustrate how trust is fundamentally tied to particular socio-economic structures. While large-scale processes of marketization and individualization may be seen as transforming the basis of trust and the meaning of citizenship on a broad scale, it is important to also consider more local factors that may exert a powerful influence on how such notions are understood.

Local politics in global structures

If the free market policies of neo-liberal governments promoted forms of competitive individualism, they may also be seen to have weakened community structures. The uneven development of the capitalist market plus its tendency to rapid expansion and contraction has historically put pressure on local community structures, particularly by forcing the movement or displacement of labour. The expansion of the market tends to change both individual relationships and corporate priorities. There are many different social responses to this. Some of these are based on traditional forms of collectivism, as evident in a recent growth in trade unionism in the United States. There has also been a growth of local struggles over road-building, animal rights, ethnic or cultural identities which indicate the development of new forms of cultural resistance. Research in the UK has revealed that there is general support for the involvement of charities in lobbying and campaigning – the product of a social democratic history. But more emphatically expressed is a preference for *local* charities. This preference relates to the opportunity to see the results of the voluntary organization's action, and its impact on the individual's local community and also because it usually implies a small-scale initiative that is more readily accountable (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997). The demand for

accountability can be seen as the product of a market system that requires confidence in the exchange relationship it relies upon.

The affinity with local charities, or national charities which have local programmes, is related to the supporter's sense of connection and control (see Macnaghten, this volume). Once distance, and all the mediating mechanisms between handing over one's donation and its arrival as food in the mouth of a starving child are considered, greater confidence is expressed that a local or domestic donation is more likely to be of real benefit to its intended recipient (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997). There is general suspicion that sheer size might work against effectiveness. A large organization is seen as more likely to contain excessive bureaucracy and have too many administrators (that is, be too like the state); or be too professionalized (mimicking techniques of business that are deemed unsuitable for the voluntary sector). Voluntarism, whether through the giving of time or money, depends heavily on a sense of trust which reflects a basic sense of optimism and control. On a local level, people's proximity to the activities of the organization, as well as concepts of community, belonging and duty, combine to make trust an active ingredient of voluntarism. The distance of these organizations from market imperatives of profit also make trust relations more viable.

James (1987) argues that certain voluntary organizations that act on a religious, political or ideological basis, or are oriented to specific client groups, create 'captive audiences'. In guiding these audiences through part of their social life, voluntary organizations contribute to the development of values and beliefs. In this manner voluntary organizations provide more or less implicit information on whom to trust and whom not to trust. While the localization of political struggle which forges communities and often pitches them against larger or more distant corporations can operate contrary to a global market logic, it also falls prey to the same criticisms. A lack of central co-ordination between organizations may be perceived negatively by the public, resulting in confusion about the size and scope of the sector (Gaskin and Fenton, 1997). Without central co-ordination the growth in charities is perceived as increased competition between organizations working for the same or similar causes. Thereby voluntary organizations fall foul of the criticisms of the market on two contradictory accounts: for being too localized

or individual in their response; and for competing against potential allies and being too global, out of touch, inefficient and wasteful.

There is a further problem for voluntary organizations that are drawn into the world of local politics through the provision of social services once provided by the state. These organizations tread a difficult path between satisfying the demand of those who issue the contracts (local or central government authorities) and the demands of their members or those they seek to represent. There is a tension between accepting the rules of the more powerful partner, to ensure that resources are made available for activities that are befitting of the aims of the voluntary organization, and losing touch with the members or supporters of those organizations. This is particularly the case when levels of participation begin to dwindle as the work of organizations becomes routinized and professionalized (Cochrane, 1986). In these cases solidarity is more difficult to uphold as the organization is seen to mimic the techniques and practices of the private or statutory sectors, relations of confidence step in and accountability procedures take over. The spirit of voluntarism, or what was earlier referred to as mutuality and reciprocity, is lost.

Localization of political struggle is paralleled by a fragmentation of political culture in which party allegiances and class alliances give way to more fluid and informal networks of action. Such networks are often staunchly anti-bureaucratic and anti-centralist, suspicious of large organized, formal and institutional politics. In turn, the fragmentation of political culture is fuelled by the rise of identity politics in which modern logics of incorporation and representation are challenged on the bases of their rigidity and exclusiveness. In contrast, the recognition of local diversity allows for differentiated notions of citizenship in alternative public spheres. Any workable notion of civil society depends on the possibility of a continuing process of renewal, in which there is always access to emerging organizations or new ones that can be created and recognized relatively easily.

Trust is engendered most readily through proximity, not only geographically but also personally. The most trusted sources of information on charities are friends and family. This personal trust in the private sphere overlaps with social trust in the public sphere. Gaskin and Fenton (1997) point out that in the Langford and

McDonald (1997) study non-governmental, campaign-driven organizations had a high trust rating because many people believed such campaigns were conducted in the public interest and targeted against institutions that cannot be relied upon. In this context, how accountability is practised and understood is central to levels of trust and confidence in the voluntary sector. Johnson *et al.* (1998) argue that trust is an essential element of quality assurance in the voluntary sector. But trust relies on taking charities on their word; accountability requires a process of standards, measurement and audit that can systematically encourage confidence through information provision – the translation of civic values into market values.

The ability of voluntary organizations to inform the public about their work has been dramatically affected by instantaneous communications technologies. Together with patterns of mass migration and world trade new technologies increase awareness of, and dependence between, localities far away from each other. This can be seen as positive in so far as it can raise awareness of the politics of consumption – as Giddens (1990) notes the choices and actions of consumers in one locality can have an impact on the international division of labour and planetary ecology. Large international voluntary organizations can and do inform the public of the impact of a global economy. But it is a function that often precludes participation and negates any degree of control on behalf of the giver. Such groups may have large memberships but the members rarely, if ever, see one another. People may be committed givers but the giving is organized at a distance, the act of participation is at arm's length. Solidarity is qualified. Altruism is relegated to a financial relationship. Neither trust nor confidence can easily flourish.

Conclusion

Contemporary Western societies are characterized by processes of marketization, individualization and globalization. These developments have grown out of social histories that are not always consistent and sometimes directly at odds with the values of a market society. At the same time, relations of trust, where and if they existed before, appear to have been eroded or at least to have been invaded by complexity and cynicism. Trust itself may still be

seen as an admirable aim – a desired state of being – but the means of attaining it are muddled by the values of a system that pitches against it. If we believe that trust is somehow a fundamental precursor for social capital, and that civil society is the pre-eminent site for the development of trust, then a neo-liberal agenda that prioritizes the narrow interests of capital and foregrounds the importance of markets that undercut trust, threatens the nurturing of civil society itself.

Individualism is linked directly to a free market economy which is based on the social contract that states – I pay you for a service that you will deliver. The exchange relationship is based on the principles of market exchange and need never involve person to person relations at all, as the development of the internet bears testament. Trust is most easily gained in interactions that are person to person. The social contract replaces social contact, resulting in the displacement of trust by confidence. The market equivalent of a trusting relationship is accountability in a spirit of civility. Markets rely on confidence provided through regulation. Accountability replaces responsibility. The only thing for which you are responsible is your part of the social contract.

Civil society is now widely accepted as a concept that will inform and uphold democracy. Although, exactly how and by what mechanisms civil society is to be invoked is often unclear. What I have tried to suggest in this chapter is that without solidarity, trust and civil society are individualistic concepts and represent no more than the human face of capitalism. On the left new solidaristic ideas recognize the need for democratization of the state and the public realm while accepting the demand for choice and individual rights established within advanced capitalism. Tony Blair's attempts to redefine the British Labour Party by stressing community, responsibility and trust, or Bill Clinton's call for a 'spirit of community' and a politics of the common good, are both examples of democratic communitarianism now popular on the left. However, the possibility of a renewal of solidarity through an increase in civil and voluntary organizations is problematic because, as argued above, such organizations do not necessarily increase democratic inclusion or operate in a manner that inculcates trust. Instances where voluntary organizations are perceived by the public to act in a manner more suited to the business and statutory sector are, in the main,

cases where they have taken over the role of social services previously the domain of the state. In a communitarian society it is these very roles of voluntary organizations that would be developed.

The relationship between citizen and government has become increasingly opaque in a world of multiple stakeholders, including businesses, hybrid public-private organizations, public sector agencies and individuals. It is often unclear who is accountable to whom for what, and even less clear what the relationship is between citizen and agency on many issues. As Cochrane (1998) states, particular agencies' degree of responsibility is often unclear when there are overlapping sources of subsidy, financial support and membership. This confusion and complexity works against relations of trust – and often serves to undermine levels of confidence.

A further reason why the concepts of trust and civil society should not forego the concept of solidarity is their need to embrace both the public and the private, thereby going beyond conventional models of civil society. It may be possible that trust can be generated through secondary associations which mediate between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the state (cf. Fukuyama, 1996: p. 62). However, as noted above, the question of whether civil society simply builds on associations of interest that may have arisen out of the individualization of lifestyles organized around consumption in the market place, or whether it is based on something more than enlightened self-interest, is crucial to further theorizing in this field. Is a 'strong civil society' something that will enhance and deepen democracy through increased participation in the public sphere, or is it rather a neo-liberal attempt at reconciling the demands of individual choice with the need for social cohesion? Hirst (1994) offers a vision of the future in which there is a substantial devolution of power down from the centralized state to a system of voluntary self-governing associations. But he also states that 'the core ethical claim of associationism ... is justified on essentially individualistic terms' (Hirst, 1994: p. 50). As Powell (this volume) argues 'trust, empathy and compassion are the common elements that transcend utilitarian individualism'. If solidarity is central to relations of trust then the continued pursuit of an individualistic response to questions of welfare is problematic. The project of re-establishing trust for the benefit of an enhanced democracy must recast the concept of civil society in this frame.

In the UK the belief in the new role of the voluntary sector as the crucible of a strong civil society has been promulgated without an explication of individual rights and entitlements to various services, without defining the concept of 'voluntary' or 'needy', without considering possible conflicts between professional and non-professional personnel, and without due consideration to the advocacy, campaigning and monitoring work that is the *raison d'être* of many organizations within this sphere. Ideological concepts of citizenship, consumerism and participation exist side by side in contradictory and confused relationships and have become part of people's various understandings of the meaning and purpose of 'charity' (see Gaskin and Fenton, 1997, for example, for a discussion of hardening public attitudes towards homelessness).

The concept of trust is bound up with complex questions of consumption, regulation and representation. It is a personal response to a social dilemma that characterizes contemporary Western society – the dilemma of the consumer and the citizen, of the individual and society, of the local and the global. As Sztompka (1998b: p. 25) argues, 'any existing measure of trust is path-dependent; its meaning, strength, durability, the direction of future evolution depend to a large extent on its origins'. The argument in this chapter suggests that we exist in an era of modernity where the market constitutes a system of values that is closely linked to the development not only of public attitudes, but also to people's willingness to make donations of time or money, and their propensity for civic engagement. In this context, the development of trust relations within forms of civil and voluntary association is problematic. Recourse to classical models of trust, based on interactions between free, rational and private individuals, is insufficient to late modern social conditions. In a society characterized by individualization and marketization, increasing uncertainty and perceptions of risk, the art of trusting has become a complex process.

As Woldring (1998: p. 371) notes, Tocqueville, as an early contributor to debates over civil society, recognized that new social policies 'can not succeed till certain changes in the conditions, customs and mental habits of men have prepared a way for their reception' (Tocqueville, 1988: p. 11). Without such a foundation as a basis for support, a democratic government is not able legitimately to pursue

its policy of intervention. Social structures condition and change patterns of thought, customs and values. The concept of civil society and the concept of trust are a result of both the social, political and economic frameworks from which they have arisen, and the contingent and complex ways in which they operate today. Recent strategies, on both the left and the right, to mark out civil society as an extended sphere of welfare provision and social regulation – and to invoke an ill-defined notion of 'trust' as a basis for wider social cohesion – come into conflict with alternative visions of civil society as a site for critical and diverse forms of solidarity. If conventional distinctions between civil society and the state have been discredited of late, this is in part due to the manner in which actors and organizations within the 'civil' sphere have been integrated into neo-liberal strategies of government (see Rose, 1996). Normative models of civil society, then, are not only objects of theoretical speculation, but underpin the instrumental version of civil society that animates current policy discourses and welfare reforms. The chapters in this volume suggest that we should proceed with caution and trust not.

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**Young people's attitudes
to the voluntary sector**

*A Report for the Commission on the
Future of the Voluntary Sector*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report synthesises findings on young people's attitudes to the voluntary sector from the literature and recent surveys (Part I) and focus groups of young people aged 11-16 and 17-24 held in June 1996 (Part II).

Key findings

- Young people readily identify voluntary organisations as helping people rather than making a profit. They are aware of the wide range of voluntary services, from local to international levels, and generally have very positive views of the sector's role in society.
- Young people see voluntary organisations as a possible route to social and political action which is accessible to ordinary people like themselves. They would choose this in preference to involvement in mainstream politics and statutory authorities, from which they feel a strong sense of alienation.
- The young are willing to volunteer and see voluntary work as the mark of a caring society. They feel people should volunteer in order to give something back to society and expand their horizons, not just to make friends and enjoy themselves.
- There appears to be considerable potential for engaging young people in society through voluntary work. However, they would like more publicity about what is available, the removal of barriers to their involvement and opportunities for them to take responsibility and gain skills and qualifications.
- The young find it difficult to imagine a future without voluntary organisations. The ideal situation for them is that voluntary organisations maintain and expand their caring, campaigning and information-giving roles, supported by state funding and complementing the provision of core services by the government.
- There is a considerable degree of consensus in basic views of the voluntary sector among all types of young people, although there are some differences of perspective between the younger and older ones, and by gender and socio-economic status.

Part I Reviewing the evidence

Recent speculation on the disconnection of young people from society has thrown the spotlight on British youth. There is evidence of young people's failure to participate in society's traditional institutions and a '*potentially explosive alienation*' among young people. Various studies have highlighted a change in cultural values affecting younger generations. One of the key issues this report will address is whether the alienation from mainstream political institutions has generated new routes for political action through the voluntary sector. (1.1-1.4)

The view is widespread that young people are underrepresented in voluntary activity. However, large numbers of young people have volunteered and there is evidence of an increase in voluntary work by young people between 1981 and 1991. However, young volunteers volunteer less frequently than other age groups. (2.1-2.3)

Young people engage in a variety of activities and fields. They are more active than the rest of the population in education and other work with children and youth, and also in social services involving personal care. They are less involved in committee and office work and may do less fundraising and sports and youth activities. (2.4-2.5)

Most young people get involved in voluntary activity through word of mouth. They are also drawn in through school connections and through seeing leaflets and posters. They are more responsive to publicity than all other age groups. More than half took the initiative when they started volunteering by applying or offering to help, while the majority of older people began volunteering because they were asked. (2.6)

A large number of those who *don't* volunteer say they would be prepared to do so if they were asked. However, there is concern that young volunteering tends to reflect the socio-economic bias which pertains in all volunteering in Britain, with the better off and high achievers more likely to do voluntary work than their less advantaged peers. Young men, members of ethnic minorities

and disabled youngsters are also underrepresented in voluntary work. (3.1-3.3)

Young people demonstrate an overwhelmingly positive view of voluntary work as a labour of love and the mark of a caring society. A majority feels that voluntary workers offer something different that could never be provided by the state or paid professionals and in general they are much less impressed by professionalism than the rest of the population. (4.1-4.3)

Some evidence suggests that young people have a negative view of volunteers, but this is possibly out-dated as the image seems to be changing. Young people place great importance on giving something back to society and a majority supports the view that engaging in voluntary activity helps people to take an active role in a democratic society. They see social and personal enjoyment as less important reasons for volunteering than their older counterparts and think there are few excuses for *not* volunteering. (5.1-5.4)

The young have a mixture of altruistic, personal and instrumental motives for becoming volunteers. Self-interest and self-development are more important to the young than to older groups. They are particularly interested in learning new skills and gaining work-related experience. They feel volunteering broadens their experience of life but it also satisfies their desire to do some good. (6.1-6.4)

Taking part in voluntary activities and community service appears to improve young people's social, interpersonal and organisational skills, as well as their employability. A widespread gain is boosting self-confidence and self-esteem, often with marked behavioural improvements. (7.1-7.2)

The 1990s has seen a rash of proposals for voluntary service by young people, to respond to the twin imperatives of youth alienation and societal need. Community service is claimed to foster participation and active citizenship. Young people's views have not been thoroughly explored, but there are debates about the limits of such potential, particularly in relation to the most excluded and alienated youngsters. (7.3-7.6)

Young people's attitudes to the voluntary sector and voluntary activity are affected by perceived and experienced barriers and disadvantages. They

feel there is a shortage of information about opportunities and problems with gaining access to voluntary work, partly because of organisations' prejudices. Organisations tend to undervalue what young volunteers can do and young people report dissatisfaction with their volunteering experiences more than any other age group. (8.1-8.7)

Young people are well aware that voluntary organisations and charities rely heavily on fundraising from the general public. They are particularly keen on sponsored activities, media advertising and appeals. They themselves are discerning givers, less likely than older people to donate under pressure and happy to give money to charities which are involved in politics. (9.1-9.2)

Young people are consistently the most supportive and inclusive of all the age groups when considering appropriate causes and client groups for voluntary organisations. They endorse services for people overseas and marginalised groups at home. Campaigning for human rights, and helping homeless people, drug and alcohol users are all supported by a majority of young people. It appears that the younger generations are progressively rejecting the old ideas of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients of charity. They feel that many services now provided by voluntary organisations should be supplied by the government. (10.1-10.5)

Part II Listening to young people

Young people show immediate recognition of the word 'voluntary' as meaning unpaid and helping others. They identify the key distinguishing factor of voluntary organisations as not being out to make money or profit but to help people. They are aware of the wide range of activities which count as voluntary and are familiar with the names of many larger organisations, as well as local and community projects. (1.1-1.4)

Their impressions of voluntary organisations are generally very positive. They like them for three main reasons: their helping qualities, the opportunities they provide to gain skills and experience, and their role in providing information to the public. Aspects not so well liked by some in their twenties are the commercialisation of charities, telethons and the potential overdependence on or exploitation of volunteers. (1.5-1.8)

Young people are aware of the wide range of services which are provided by voluntary organisations and approve of this breadth of provision. But they do think there are limits to what voluntary organisations should provide, mainly to prevent them from becoming over-extended. There was a clear perception that voluntary organisations should not be burdened with all the responsibility for helping people in need. Government should provide core services and give money and support to voluntary organisations. (2.1-2.4)

Young people show a distinct alienation from mainstream politics and most see voluntary organisations as a route to social and political action. The younger ones generally think of themselves as not 'political' and see government as a distant and elitist system which has nothing to do with them. People in their late teens and twenties are more politically aware and conscious that social issues are political. Some are not convinced that the voluntary sector has much power to achieve change. Voluntary organisations in general are perceived as committed and trustworthy and at ordinary people's level. (2.5-2.8)

Quite a number of group members had been involved in volunteering, including sponsored events and regular social services work. A number of the older group members are involved in local groups on a regular basis, though students commented on the lack of time for voluntary work. Many of the participants have family members who volunteer and members of religious or ethnic communities are familiar with a culture of helping others and communal support. 'Informal' volunteering is widespread among all types of young people. (3.1-3.3)

There are a great many ways that people can get involved with voluntary organisations. A personal or family experience is often crucial. Younger people also like publicity materials and leaflets and complain that there is not more information available. They are keenly aware of barriers put up against them by voluntary organisations. It is clear that many young people doing unpaid work do not see what they do as 'volunteering'. (3.4-3.6)

The images young people have of volunteers are generally very positive. Only a small minority, including some of the excluded young people,

think they are do-gooders. Older group members see a political element in that people who go in for voluntary work are making a statement about having to provide services. The main reason young people feel people volunteer or donate money is to help. (3.7-3.9)

Young people would be encouraged to get involved with a voluntary organisation by better information and publicity on TV and radio about what is available, by being asked by someone they like, by easier access and by good opportunities to learn skills and gain qualifications. They were somewhat divided on the question of whether a high profile public figure would induce them to volunteer. (3.10)

Young people show good recognition of the range of people and causes that are helped by voluntary organisations: not only the more obvious client groups, but also marginalised groups such as homeless or unemployed people and those with alcohol and drug problems. By a large majority, they do not make the old distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients. Their levels of tolerance and understanding suggest they differ from the older population in their awareness of social problems and their causes. (4.1-4.2)

Visions of what would happen if there were no voluntary organisations are bleak. Young people have difficulty imagining such a future and foresee a lot of suffering and social problems. Another serious consequence, acknowledging organisations' key role as information-providers, is that people wouldn't be informed about social and environmental issues. Voluntary organisations should continue with their work, preferably expanding their helping and information-giving role. They may need to combine their efforts and become better organised. Organisations should put priority on dismantling the barriers to young people and developing systems of training and accreditation. (5.1-5.4)

However, it is recognised that expansion of the voluntary sector cannot happen without support. Young people feel that voluntary organisations should receive more support and money from the government to enable them to reach more people and provide fuller services. Without additional backing, some feel that voluntary organisations are in danger of over-extending themselves, with

consequent risks. The ideal situation, by consensus, is a major role for voluntary organisations in caring, campaigning and information-giving, supported by state funding, and complementing the provision of core services by the government. (5.5)

Overall, the views of young people give cause for optimism. They are compassionate towards disadvantaged groups and committed to helping people. They are refreshingly free of most of the stereotypes about charity and voluntary work and have grown up with a voluntary sector that is acknowledged as a force for fairness and social justice. Cynicism tends to be directed at tired old institutions and not at voluntary organisations. Young people appear to have confidence in the political efficacy of the voluntary sector, with greater trust being invested in non-government organisations. (5.6)

There is a strong degree of consensus among young people on basic attitudes and perceptions. There are indications of differences between older and younger members of the 11-24 age group, by gender and by socio-economic status. The most excluded young people, in particular, are less convinced of the ability of voluntary organisations to change society, but have perhaps more faith in them as potential routes to qualifications, jobs and social inclusion. (6.1-6.8)

INTRODUCTION

In May 1996 the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations commissioned Loughborough University to carry out a short piece of research to inform their Final Report. The work was carried out by Kathy Gaskin, Mel Vlaeminke and Natalie Fenton.

Young people's attitudes to the voluntary sector remain an underresearched area. This report synthesises findings from four main sources:

1. re-analysis by age of a survey of public attitudes to charities and volunteering, conducted between 1991 and 1993 (Fenton and Monk, 1996; Fenton, Golding and Radley, 1993)
2. a literature review provisionally entitled *Young People and Volunteering* prepared by The

Volunteer Centre UK in April 1996 and made available to the Commission in draft form in advance of publication later this year (Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming)

3. a survey of volunteering and attitudes to voluntary organisations conducted in March 1994 in the United Kingdom as part of the EUROVOL Pan-European Study (EUROVOL, 1994; Gaskin and Davis Smith, 1995)
4. eight focus group discussions of young people, aged 11-16 and 17-24 representing a range of characteristics, held in June 1996 in Leicestershire (see Appendix A)

In addition, the report incorporates work in progress from the Home Office (now Department of National Heritage) *Make a Difference* Challenge Projects Evaluation (1995-1997) and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded project *Barriers to Volunteering* (1995-1996) being conducted by The Volunteer Centre UK (Niyazi, forthcoming). Both have a particular focus on youth volunteering.

This report is presented in two parts. In **Part I Reviewing the Evidence** we present a review of the evidence from sources 1-3 and supporting materials. **Part II Listening to Young People** summarises young people's responses to a series of questions used as the topic guide in the focus group discussions.

PART I REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE

I A disconnected generation? Current perspectives on young people

1.1 Recent speculation on the disconnection of young people from society has thrown the spotlight on the nine million individuals in Britain who fall between the ages of 16 and 25. Images in the media stress a lack of social responsibility and the consequent threat to social stability, a view influential among some politicians and policy makers. There is evidence of young people's failure to participate in society's traditional institutions - the church, party politics and elections. Indeed a recent Demos report speaks of '*a deep seated rejection of society's central institutions*', '*an historic political disconnecton*' and a '*potentially explosive alienation*' among young people (Wilkinson and

Mulgan, 1996). Alarm bells have sounded in recent reports on young people and citizen service: the lack of engagement in social values and activities have created problems of *'privatism and social withdrawal, crime, drug abuse, incivility and other public vices'* (Briscoe, 1995).

1.2 Various studies have highlighted a change in cultural values affecting younger generations on an international scale:

'a gradual shift from "Materialist" Values (emphasising economic and physical security above all) towards "Postmaterialist" priorities (emphasising self-expression and the quality of life)' (Inglehard, 1990)

The European Values Study notes that the young *'appear to inhabit a different moral and cultural universe than the old ... as the younger generations replace their elders, the population average exhibits a more secular trend, greater permissivity on moral issues, an emphasis on personal autonomy and greater attention to human rights, social justice and environmental issues.'* (Barker, 1993)

1.3 Moreover, *'dissatisfaction with the political process and diminishing confidence in institutions coupled with a desire for self-expression'* has created a greater willingness to engage in protest action (Barker, 1993). Reports have highlighted young people's issue-based activism, apparently at odds with the image of *'a wholly apathetic generation'* (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1996). While young people are said to *'exhibit less civic responsibility than their elders'*, they are more tolerant and inclusive in their support for marginalised groups than older generations (Barker, 1993; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1996).

1.4 One of the key issues this report will address is whether the alienation from mainstream political institutions has generated new routes for political action through the voluntary sector. Few texts address this, but it is an important question discussed in the focus groups.

2 Young people's participation in the voluntary sector

2.1 Voluntary activity offers one route for participation in society and community. In the

absence of substantial evidence about young people's attitudes, much can be construed from their actual participation in voluntary organisations' activities.

2.2 The view is widespread that young people are underrepresented in voluntary activity. However, large numbers of young people have volunteered and there is evidence of an increase in voluntary work by young people between 1981 and 1991 (Lynn and Davis Smith, 1991). The level of voluntary involvement by young people in Britain in 1994 is 50 per cent higher than the average of nine European countries (Gaskin and Davis Smith, 1995). The estimated financial value of young volunteers' work is £3.4 billion (number of hours x average hourly wage) (Volunteer Centre UK, 1994).

2.3 Different surveys put the levels at above one half of all young Britons (Lynn and Davis Smith, 1991) or four out of every ten (Gaskin and Davis Smith, 1995) who had volunteered in the past year. The EUROVOL study showed that young Britons volunteer at higher rates than most of the population; only the 35-44 age group has a higher rate than those under 25. However, young volunteers volunteer less frequently than other age groups, with just a third volunteering at least once a month.

2.4 The incidence of less regular volunteering is not, perhaps surprisingly, due solely to the involvement of young people in occasional fundraising action. In fact, they engage in fundraising at a significantly lower level than the rest of the population, according to the EUROVOL study, although earlier studies have found this to be a leading activity of young people (Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming). Young people are less involved in 'backroom' voluntary activities, such as committee and office work. They are more active than the rest of the population in education and other work with children and youth, and also in personal care services (EUROVOL, 1994).

2.5 Young volunteers engage in a variety of fields. The VCUK 1991 survey found particular concentrations in sports and youth activities, and to a lesser extent in education and caring activities. The EUROVOL survey, however, found that young people were involved in sports only at the same level as the rest of the population (20 per cent). Larger numbers of young people were

active in educational activities and in social services work, for example helping elderly or disabled people. Young people also figured quite prominently in health-related activities, and a smaller but sizeable number were active in animal welfare. Young volunteers were also found in significant numbers in other fields such as culture and arts work, religion, community development, environment and conservation. When only the more regular volunteers are examined, we find a major concentration in educational activities and social services work (EUROVOL, 1994).

2.6 Most young people get involved in voluntary activity through word of mouth, ie through knowing someone involved or being asked to join in. They are also drawn in through school connections and through seeing publicity material issued by organisations, such as leaflets and posters. They are more responsive to publicity than all other age groups. Much less involvement is due to membership of an organisation; and in general, young people have lower rates of joining organisations than others (EUROVOL, 1994). More than half started volunteering proactively, ie by applying or offering to help. This is much higher than any other age group except for those 65+. In contrast the majority of those aged 25-64 began volunteering because they were asked to help, rather than taking the initiative themselves (ibid).

3 Attitudes of non-volunteers

3.1 Further evidence may be deduced from the attitudes of young people who *don't* volunteer. A large number say they would be prepared to do so if they were asked and only one in five said they would not (EUROVOL, 1994). The reasons of non-volunteers for not volunteering show very little active resistance to the idea; most say they have never thought about it or have no special reason. However, quite large numbers say they have no time to spare or have never been asked. One in ten (more than any other age group) state that they don't volunteer because they can't afford to (ibid).

3.2 A note of caution must be sounded about the apparently good news implied by levels of participation and willingness to consider involvement. Young volunteering tends to reflect the socio-economic bias which pertains in all volunteering in Britain. In other words, it is the better off and high achievers who are more likely

to do voluntary activity than their less advantaged peers (Lynn and Davis Smith, 1991). It should be noted, however, that rates of 'informal' volunteering - which takes place outside voluntary organisations - show no correlation between socio-economic variables and levels of caring activities (Briscoe, 1995; Gaskin and Davis Smith, 1995).

3.3 There is some evidence that young men, members of ethnic minorities and disabled youngsters are underrepresented in voluntary activities (Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming) - though probably for different reasons. Young unskilled men in disadvantaged communities show little inclination to do unpaid, or poorly remunerated, work and play no part in the sort of voluntary organisations which maintain the fabric of community life (Wight, 1993; Campbell, 1993). The predominance of personal contacts as a route into volunteering reinforces the relative exclusion of certain groups of young people. And there is evidence of bias and barriers within organisations which work against young people's involvement. These have been shown to operate particularly against members of ethnic groups, disabled youngsters and those labelled 'problem youth' (Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming; Jennings, 1996). These barriers will be discussed more fully in Section 8.

4 The images and attitudes of young people to voluntary organisations and voluntary activity

4.1 Young people demonstrate an overwhelmingly positive view of the role of volunteering and voluntary organisations in society. Over 80 per cent agree that a society with volunteers is a caring society (Lynn and Davis Smith, 1991). A majority feels that voluntary workers offer something different that could never be provided by the state or paid professionals (ibid; EUROVOL, 1994). In fact, young people are much less impressed by professionalism than the rest of the population. There is overwhelming rejection of the notion that volunteers are less efficient than paid professional workers and of the image of volunteer-involving organisations as run by 'disorganised amateurs' or as 'amateurish and unprofessional' (ibid). Less than half of young people feel that charities need paid professionals in order to function effectively, compared to more

than two thirds of the rest of the population (Fenton and Monk, 1996).

4.2 The young in general show greater trust of charitable organisations when compared to older age groups. Of all the age groups, fewer young people agree that charities have plush offices and shops. They also do not share the perception that there are too many charities doing similar things (Fenton and Monk, 1996).

4.3 Young people feel strongly that people who work for charities should do it as a labour of love, and not for the money (Fenton and Monk, 1996). However, they are somewhat resistant to the idea that volunteering is a moral responsibility incumbent upon everyone, although more than one third endorse this view (similar to the rest of the population under the age of 65) (EUROVOL, 1994).

5 Images of volunteering and volunteers

5.1 Research indicates that the positive perception of the role of volunteering in society does not extend to those who actually do the volunteering (Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming). While among adult volunteers a favourable image is maintained, within the younger generation both volunteers *and* non-volunteers appear to hold a negative image of volunteers (ibid). Young people are reported to be suspicious of the kinds of people and their motivations: '*self-righteous*' people and the classic stereotype - '*middle-aged housewives with nothing better to do*' (Richardson, 1990; Meisel, 1988). However, we suggest a more positive view is emerging among new generations, as indicated by the most recent survey and also the focus group participants, which will be discussed later.

5.2 In the 1993 survey by Fenton, Golding and Radley, people were asked to rate the importance of reasons for volunteering. Young people, along with others, placed great importance on 'giving something back to society'. The more social reason of 'meeting people and making friends', though important, was rated less highly by younger people than older ones, particularly those over 45. And 'finding it enjoyable' was also less highly rated by younger people than their older counterparts (Fenton and Monk, 1996).

5.3 This suggests that young people, perhaps more than the rest of the population, see voluntary activity as a serious business. We suggest that this is linked to the more politicised view of voluntary organisations which is emerging within the younger generation. On a general level, young people support the view that engaging in voluntary activity helps people to take an active role in a democratic society. Two thirds of the young support the connection between volunteering and democratic participation (EUROVOL, 1994) - slightly lower than rates of agreement in older age groups, but still high for a purportedly 'lost generation'!

5.4 The 1993 survey also asked about reasons for *not* volunteering. The findings are striking in that young people have no truck with a variety of reasons which are more strongly supported by older age groups. The idea of not volunteering because such services should be provided by government or by trained, paid professionals is seen as a poor excuse by young people, whereas older ages tend to be more supportive. Similarly, the notion that 'volunteering is something that older people do' is rejected by the young. The same applies to the idea of not volunteering because 'they feel they wouldn't be of use to anyone'. Young people dismiss this as a bad reason, while it is increasingly judged favourably up the age range. Similarly, 'not being asked' is seen as an easy opt-out by young people to a greater extent than older ages.

6 The experience of volunteering - motivations and benefits

6.1 There is a body of evidence from surveys which ask volunteers about their own motivations for doing voluntary work and the benefits they receive from it. As with all volunteers, the young have a mixture of altruistic, personal and instrumental reasons. But self-interest and self-development are more important to the young (Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming). The EUROVOL survey reveals that young people give personal reasons ('it's connected to my own needs and those of people I know') and altruistic reasons ('there was a need in the community') must less frequently than older age groups, although one in ten volunteer because of their 'social and political principles'. They cite wanting to meet people, having time to spare and being

good at the activity about on a par with the population average.

6.2 The one area in which young people outstrip the rest of the population is the instrumental one of 'learning new skills or training for an occupation' (EUROVOL, 1994). The value of gaining practical experience - and an entry on their curriculum vitae - in a depressingly competitive job market is, not unexpectedly, very salient. Voluntary organisations are seen as a route (one of the few available) to establishing their credibility as reliable and effective workers.

6.3 Analysis of the benefits which young people gain from their volunteering bears out the findings on their motives. They rate as of lower importance than older volunteers the benefits of enjoying it (though still more than half cite it), the satisfaction of seeing the results, meeting people and making friends. Much more highly rated are broadening their experience of life and the chance to learn new skills. Similar proportions to the population average (about one in five) feel volunteering upholds or defends their moral, religious or political principles and also helps them to stay active and in good health (EUROVOL, 1994).

6.4 Comparison of motivations and benefits reveal that higher proportions of young people derive altruistic satisfaction and community benefits from actually doing voluntary work than give these as reasons for getting involved in the first place. Even if they do not acknowledge, or admit to, selfless motives, we should not underestimate the altruistic satisfaction emerging during voluntary work. For many young people the experience of doing some good, and getting returns from it, is an unbeatable combination. Anecdotal evidence shows, too, that the experience of volunteering often opens up new horizons to young people through raising their awareness of the kinds of jobs that exist in certain fields, for example the caring professions or environmental action (Gaskin and Shaw, 1993; Gaskin, 1996).

7 Observed benefits and community service proposals

7.1 Studies of youngsters who have taken part in voluntary activities and community service record improvements in their generic social, interpersonal and organisational skills and their

employability (Mohan, 1994; Prince's Trust Volunteers, 1995; NYA, 1994; Briscoe, 1994). Employers agree that voluntary work improves young people's work process skills, such as getting along with other people, working in teams and decision-making (Radio 4, PM, 4 June 1996).

7.2 A widespread gain of voluntary work is improving young people's self-confidence and self-esteem, particularly in terms of their ability to feel an instrumental actor in society, rather than a passive consumer - an outcome dear to the advocates of community service as a means of reducing the alienation of the young (Gaskin and Shaw, 1993; Briscoe, 1994; McCormick, 1994). While young people themselves may not articulate so clearly the social inclusion benefits, they are strongly maintained by researchers and policy makers and are no doubt felt at some level by the young themselves. Work with school students and other young people at risk finds quite dramatic improvements in their overall self-esteem, motivation and participation, which impact significantly on other behaviour (Sauer, 1991; Gaskin, 1996).

7.3 The 1990s has seen a rash of proposals for voluntary service by young people to respond to the twin imperatives of youth alienation and societal need. The rationale advanced has been summarised as:

'high youth unemployment (one million young adults aged 16-25 not in work, training or education); youth disadvantage in the skills and competence markets; the experience of "exclusion and alienation" widespread amongst teenagers and young adults, sometimes manifesting as anti-social behaviour, crime and mental health problems; low confidence in the economic system and in themselves as achievers; disinterest and cynicism with regards to the political process and a feeling of political impotence; narrow perspectives and division and scapegoating of minority groups; little feeling of citizenship and civic responsibility' (Gaskin, 1995)

7.4 Initiatives include: in the USA, Americorps, Campus Compact, COOL and state programmes; in Europe, the Youth for Europe III programme; and in Britain, McCormick in the Report of the Commission on Social Justice, the Henley Centre Report, The Prince's Trust Volunteers, the National Youth Agency, CSV Nationwide Citizens' Service

pilots and Demos's CONNECT proposals, Changemakers, Barclays New Futures, Peer Aid. All have explored issues or developed programmes relating to young people, citizenship and community and voluntary service. David Blunkett captures the essence of the concern with his description of the *'disconnected generation'* as *'an enormous ticking time bomb'* (quoted in Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming).

7.5 The debate which vaunts voluntary service as fostering *'solidarity, participation and active citizenship'* (Action Committee for Peace, 1993) and reducing *'the democratic deficit'* (McCormick, 1994) has, noticeably, failed to draw in young people's opinions. Reviews of the literature on the subject have little to present on their views of using voluntary organisations and voluntary activity as a means of socialising them into responsible citizenship. One survey commissioned by CSV found that two thirds of 16-24 year olds support a voluntary community service scheme for young people (CSV, 1994).

However, there is little enthusiasm among young people for using volunteering as an alternative to employment and training opportunities (Volunteering Partnership, 1996).

7.6 What is clear is that any such policy moves will need to be part of a broader challenge to the barriers that currently prevent young people from feeling purposeful and valued in society. Community service programmes will need to emphasise flexible pluralistic opportunities that respond to their needs and views, and to find ways - within a wholly voluntary scheme - of engaging the most excluded and alienated youngsters who *de facto* are least likely to be interested in getting involved (Briscoe, 1995; Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming). The British Youth Council has emphasised that such schemes should have *'no element of compulsion'* nor *'be tied to the withdrawal of the already low level of benefits which young people receive'*. Young people and relevant agencies should be involved in both planning and running any scheme and, above all, *'citizens' service is no substitute for good training, education or employment opportunities'* (Moore, 1996).

8 Barriers and disadvantages

8.1 Young people's attitudes to the voluntary sector and voluntary activity are affected by perceived and experienced barriers and disadvantages. This relates particularly to the accessibility of opportunities for them to get involved, and their actual experience as volunteers. Niyazi (forthcoming) writes of the need for organisations to *'dismantle the many obstacles - to do with public perceptions as much as practicalities - that they currently put in the way of young people volunteering'*.

8.2 Young people themselves are aware of difficulties of access to voluntary activities. Obstacles include a lack of information and of leaders and organisers to engage and support them, lack of transport in rural areas, minimum age limits and the interpretation of benefits legislation at local level (Volunteering Partnership, 1996). Perhaps the greatest obstacle is the negative attitude to young people as volunteers: many organisations continue to see young people as problematic and not capable of playing a significant role in their activities (ibid; Popowski, 1985). This may apply particularly to those who are seen as 'problem' youngsters, but may become a blanket stereotype. Discussions in 1996 with Challenge Projects which are attempting to promote youngsters volunteering and set up voluntary placements reveal negative policies in voluntary bodies towards involving young people, including minimum age limits. It is often seen as not worth the risk and necessitating levels of support and supervision which the organisations are unwilling or unable to provide (Gaskin, 1996).

8.3 The focus group discussions confirmed that youngsters, particularly those in their teens, are conscious of this labelling and of consequent reluctance by organisations to engage their enthusiasm and energy. The younger focus group members complained that there is a lack of information about the range of opportunities that are available in voluntary work, and that lengthy application procedures had put them off - and, they suspected, may be designed for that very purpose.

8.4 Organisations tend to undervalue what young volunteers can do. Their skills and talents are not fully utilised and only rarely are they given tasks of responsibility. Consequently, young people

tend to report dissatisfaction with their volunteering experiences (more so than any other age group) (Foster and Fernandes, forthcoming). The 1991 VCUK survey found that almost three quarters felt that things could be better organised and that two thirds report being bored with the work they are asked to do. Percentages reporting the same drawbacks in the EUROVOL survey are much lower (around one in five) but this is still not a negligible number.

8.5 Significant numbers in both surveys feel that their efforts aren't always appreciated and also that they find themselves out of pocket as a consequence of their voluntary involvement. The EUROVOL study showed that four out of every five young volunteers were not offered reimbursement of expenses - higher than any other age group. This is a major concern for many youngsters with limited funds and a practice likely to bias involvement towards the better off (Gaskin and Davis Smith, 1995).

8.6 Further negative attitudes arise from young people's feelings that they don't have the time for voluntary activities - with perhaps an underlying perception that they may be exploited and feel unable to negotiate their optimal time commitment (Richardson, 1990; Fagan, 1992; Meisel, 1988). However, a constraint on more active participation is not only lack of time but what is perceived to be '*the complexity of the issues*' (Richardson, 1990). Lack of remuneration matters to some young people, who would rather use spare time to boost their often meagre incomes (Popowski, 1985). A further negative influence, particularly among teenagers, is perceived or actual lack of support from key people - negative peer pressure (most salient for boys) and lack of encouragement from parents and teachers (Popowski, 1985; Richardson, 1990). Some experience parental opposition based on the perception that voluntary activity is not 'proper' work and is a way of avoiding responsibilities.

8.7 Thus, while young people seem to recognise and value the input of voluntary workers in society, they often feel there are personal and social constraints on their own involvement. Moreover, many feel that voluntary organisations don't really want them involved, and actual volunteering experience may prove disappointing. These perceptions have led to strategic proposals

on youth volunteering by the Volunteering Partnership (1996) and advocacy, by those in the youth action field, of self-organising youth volunteering. Certainly, a number of initiatives including the National Youth Agency's Youth Action Projects and *Make a Difference* Challenge Projects are concentrating on self-run groups in which young people are empowered in planning and organising their own projects, with impressive results (Gaskin, 1996).

9 Attitudes to charitable giving and fundraising

9.1 Young people are well aware that voluntary organisations and charities rely heavily on donations from the general public. Significant numbers have taken part in fundraising, particularly sponsored activities for particular appeals. When asked to rate different techniques of fundraising used by organisations, sponsoring activities are almost unanimously liked by the young, although they are pretty popular among all age groups (Fenton and Monk, 1996).

Advertising in the media (television, radio, posters and cinema) is also a favourite of young people, while its popularity declines across the age range. The same is true of appeals, particularly small ones on television, and also those on radio. The youngest age group (up to 24) also like large television appeals, such as Telethon, Children in Need and Comic Relief, but these were slightly more popular among those aged 25-34, with popularity declining into the older age groups. The only method not widely liked is leaflets inserted in newspapers and magazines. Only one third of younger people liked them, with similar percentages across the age range with the exception of the 25-34 year olds, of whom about a half gave a positive response (Fenton and Monk, 1996).

9.2 In common with people aged 25-44, young people give to charity as a way of being thankful for their own situation. More than half who have given to charity say it makes them feel good about themselves. Young people are discerning givers - compared to other age groups, fewer give to charity because they feel it is easier to give than to refuse. They also distinguish among charities to which they give donations: the young are more likely than most to feel that a small charity will put their money to good use, and they are also happy to donate to charities which are

involved in politics. Half the young people rejected the idea of *not* giving to charities with political involvement, more than any other age group and twice the percentage of those in the 65-74 age group (Fenton and Monk, 1996).

10 The services and role of voluntary organisations

10.1 The suggestion in the previous section that young people are more open to a 'political' role for the voluntary sector is substantiated by their attitudes to the services and role of charities (Fenton and Monk, 1996). Questioned about appropriate causes and client groups, both at home and abroad, young people are consistently the most supportive and inclusive of all the age groups. Almost unanimously they feel charities should help children in need and elderly people in the UK. Support for these causes is also strong in the rest of the population, although no other age group supports help for elderly people as highly as those under 25.

10.2 At the international level, more young people than any other age group agree that charities should provide aid to people overseas. Helping children in need and third world disaster victims is supported by around three quarters of the young. They are also more in favour than the rest of the population of providing long-term projects for third world countries and aiding international affairs.

10.3 However, it is on the more 'controversial' groups at home that young people show their wider embrace of neediness and their acceptance of the role of the voluntary sector as providers. Helping homeless people, single parents and unemployed people, and campaigning for human rights are all supported as roles for charities by two thirds or more of young people. Only helping the homeless attracted high levels of support from the rest of the age range. Nearly half of all young people also agree that charities should help ethnic minorities in the UK, again higher than all the older age groups.

10.4 Similarly, young people come out as more compassionate and less judgemental than their older counterparts in seeing 'outsider' groups as deserving of help from voluntary organisations. Two thirds deem alcohol abusers as suitable recipients of help and more than half feel the

same about drug users - around twice the level of those aged 45+. Lower percentages of young people - but still nearly four out of ten - agree that prisoners and gays and lesbians should be helped. Most of the population supports help for prisoners at around this level, but support for gays and lesbians is much lower. When questioned further about the 'worthiness' of the main client groups to receive help, more young people than any other age group consistently judge them worthy. Usually, the age group immediately above them shows the next most liberal attitudes, with support tailing off as age increases in a strikingly consistent pattern. It thus appears that the younger generations are progressively rejecting the old ideas of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients of charity. This also emerged strongly from the focus group discussions, where young people argued emphatically that drug and alcohol abuse should be understood as due to personal and economic pressures, rather than blamed on individuals.

10.5 Finally, two survey questions probed attitudes about overlap between government and voluntary provision. Half of young people agree that if the government fulfilled all of its responsibilities there should be no need for voluntary work (EUROVOL, 1994), while three quarters maintain that voluntary services should be provided by the government (Fenton and Monk, 1996). These views seem to suggest an awareness that a range of services should be provided by government, but because they are not, voluntary organisations and activities are necessary to meet needs in society.

PART II LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE

These findings come from eight focus group discussions held in June 1996. The groups were divided into young people aged 11-16 and 17-24, and were chosen to capture a range of backgrounds and characteristics (see Appendix A).

1 Identification and Impressions

1.1 Young people show immediate recognition of the word 'voluntary'. 'Unpaid ... for free ... what you choose to do ... you don't expect returns ... helping others ... you do it because you enjoy it, not because you get paid for it ... you do it from the heart'.

1.2 They are aware of the wide range of activities which count as voluntary: *'charities ... youth clubs ... playschemes ... charity events ... telethons ... sponsored events ... charity shops ... conservation ... campaigning ... neighbourhood watch ... community projects'*. The independent school students forcefully added *'our school'* to the list of voluntary activities, noting how much parents had to pay for school fees, activities and facilities. Larger voluntary organisations readily named included: Dr Barnardos, Greenpeace, Red Cross, World Wildlife Fund, Childline, Samaritans, English Heritage, WRVS, Oxfam, St John's Ambulance, Sunshine Variety, Women's Aid, Age Concern, Meals on Wheels, Amnesty, YMCA, the Royal National Lifeboat Association, Mountain Rescue, RNIB, Shelter, Crisis at Christmas, Comic Relief, Children in Need, Macmillan Fund, RSPCA, Hunt Saboteurs, Scouts and Guides. More local projects were also identified: LOROS (Leicestershire Organisation for the Relief of Suffering - the local hospice organisation), hospital visitors, reading for the blind, and community and neighbourhood projects.

1.3 It was evident that realisation dawned for many during the discussions (quite rapidly, however) that all of these diverse elements came under the broad umbrella of 'voluntary'. The group members, particularly younger ones, thought of individual examples, but recognition of the 'voluntary sector' was relatively new to them. In this sense, the group discussions were themselves educational for participants, and some of them articulated this.

1.4 There was keen awareness of what was different about voluntary groups compared to other organisations, like businesses, shops or government bodies. The key distinguishing factor was immediately identified as: *'they don't make a profit, they're out to help people ... they're doing it for others, not to make money ... it's to do with their aims - social not profit-maximising ... doing it for pleasure, not profit or because they have to ... they're not there to see a gain out of it, they do it so someone else gets the pleasure'*. Among more excluded young people (those who were homeless, unemployed or both), there was concern about the commercialisation of voluntary organisations (see 1.6).

1.5 The impressions of voluntary organisations were generally very positive. Young people like

voluntary organisations for three main reasons: their helping qualities, the opportunities they offer young people, and their information role. The helping role was pre-eminent: *'they help others ... people working there have got morals ... they've gone that one step further to help people ... they're good people ... in this world with all the fighting, we need to know people care'*. They also like the work experience aspect: *'it can be a learning experience ... at the end of the day, you learn a lot of valuable skills, which is of benefit to society as a whole ... you can get experience which helps with jobs ... you can check out different professional areas by trying it on a voluntary basis ... you learn to organise things ... employers love it - yes there is that - individual advancement ... young people can do a lot and they're not usually given the opportunity, it helps prove what you can do'*. The more excluded young people placed particularly strong emphasis on the opportunity to learn skills and gain qualifications through voluntary work. Finally, young people approved the role of voluntary organisations in raising public awareness: *'the environmental campaigns let people know what's happening ... a charity like the one for the deaf tells people what it's like to be deaf, so that makes them care more and understand'*.

1.6 The negative associations to voluntarism were often related to individual organisations and forms of fundraising. One or two older participants singled out animal action groups as objects of dislike. Vigilantes and anti-abortion groups were also mentioned. Some of the older participants were concerned about the 'commercialisation' of charities and felt they had *'lost direction'*. They recognised this was because *'charities are not getting the money they need from the government'*. The profusion of charity shops and door to door collections, bombardment by appeal leaflets, product link-ups and scratch cards were disliked for *'invading people's privacy ... I'd rather give directly than feel pressured to buy a certain product because 1p goes to charity'*. Some of the older groups disliked the big charity appeals, particularly telethons: *'all those bloody awful things that go on TV all night and the awful pictures - guilt, guilt, guilt!'* But younger people liked them: *'I love Comic Relief and Children in Need, they make it fun ... I really liked Anneka Rice's challenges - they showed what people can do helping others'*. The voluntary youth workers noted that their young members felt really

involved in the big appeals: *'Band Aid was great, that Run the World thing - they felt like they were joining in with people all over the country, the world even - a real sense of community'* and *'everyone recognises red noses and Pudsey Bear'*.

1.7 There were occasional negative views expressed about the high salaries of charity bosses and the lack of payment of volunteers. Some participants were suspicious that donated money did not reach the intended recipients; others saw voluntary organisations as potentially exploitative of volunteers: *'the bosses are getting top salaries on the backs of volunteers ... I like to be paid for work, actually ... I don't mind doing it for one day a week - which I really enjoy - but I'd rather be paid ... charities should be giving to others not themselves ... some organisations use you like slaves ... they make you do things that they wouldn't make normal workers do, like cleaning and making the tea'*. There was also some concern among older people that volunteers are used for work for which they are not qualified: working with really disabled people, giving medicines, dealing with confidential materials. This was placed in the context that volunteers are increasingly needed to carry out tasks which should be provided by paid workers.

1.8 There were also some views expressed by older groups that took in a political dimension: *'a lot of people are opposed to voluntary organisations because they are stopping social change - that's what they do, they shore things up'* and *'when people come collecting round the pub, I tend to be hard about it - I think this is a service that should be provided by the state, people pay their taxes...'*. The more excluded older people were less optimistic than others that voluntary organisations could really change things in society.

2 The services and role of voluntary organisations

2.1 As indicated in 1.2, young people showed good recognition of the services voluntary organisations provide: helping elderly, disabled and disadvantaged people, carers, women, children, alcoholics, drug addicts and people with AIDS; taking care of people at home, taking them for day trips, doing shopping, supplying beds and furniture for 'underprivileged' people, providing advice and information, medical advice, medical

care at football matches, providing therapy, rescuing people, outdoor pursuits, youth clubs, local action to improve community facilities such as parks, campaigning about issues, action for the environment.

2.2 There was general approval of this wide range of activities and services. It was something so taken for granted that they hardly had 'an opinion' about it. But they did think there were limits to what voluntary organisations should provide. One of the main reasons was that organisations should not be over-extended: *'if they have too many people to see, they can't give them the help and care they need ... they'll have to rush them through too quickly ... if they do too much, they'll have to use people who don't have the right skills'*.

2.3 There was a clear perception that voluntary organisations should not be burdened with all the responsibility for helping people in need. Groups, even the younger ones, spontaneously mentioned that government should provide core services and also that government should provide money and support for voluntary organisations to enable them to provide services: *'government has the responsibility ... government leaves too much to volunteers ... it's a real shame that voluntary organisations have to do things like provide equipment for hospitals, the government should do that ... people working with children and young adolescents should be government-trained people ... if a disabled person needs a wheelchair, the government should provide it, it shouldn't be left to voluntary organisations ... the government should provide more for kids to do, to keep them off the streets - they're always moaning about us'*.

2.4 On the subject of government support for organisations, young people were emphatic: organisations can't do a good job if the government doesn't support them ... their work, especially things like medical research, should be funded from taxes - instead they rely on "indirect taxes" from the public who donate to charity ... the government says they've got no money, but they should take it from somewhere else, some of the fat profits ... government benefits from the work voluntary organisations do, yeah, they don't have to pay for it so they're making more money'. One member of a more advantaged group felt that 'government is sort of a big charity, because it gives people so many benefits'. Some other

groups commented that the Lottery and the Heritage Trust should give more money to charities.

2.5 Young people showed a distinct alienation from mainstream politics. They appeared to be straining to see what relevance it had for them; the very strong impression, especially among younger people, was of a distant and elitist system which had nothing to do with them. Comments about the current government were totally dismissive and some are not quotable! One or two felt that a change of government might restore their faith in government. The voluntary youth workers commented that the youngsters had only known one type of government in their lifetimes and had no experience of alternative governments. They also felt that *'kids aren't into politics'* and that 'political' awareness tends to come when young people go to college and experience, for example, the election of student officers.

2.6 The older groups were more politically aware, conscious that social issues are 'political' and of the complexity of political action: *'it is political because you're saying that society is failing to provide these services ... voluntary organisations are political - they're often very politically aware and active, more than the average person on the street ... people who go in for voluntary work are making a statement, that society is not providing these services so they have to'*. On the other hand, from a volunteer with a local group: *'but it's not all about social change, I was having a good time not trying to change the world!'* Others picked up on this: *'you can talk about all the ideological reasons, but basically I go and have a bloody good time ... there's no denying it gives you a good feeling about yourself - it's collectivism as opposed to individualism ... people get involved because they want to, they're not necessarily political'*. A younger contributor put it more simply: *'it puts a smile on your face'*.

2.7 Among more excluded and disenfranchised young people, there was less faith in voluntary organisations as potential agents of real political and social change. The very telling comment was made that *'politics uses charities more than charities use politics'*. Those with power in society *'don't give a toss'* about young people and their problems and voluntary organisations could do little to change this. These young people had

experienced the sharp end of social and political indifference and stereotyping; in their view the 'selfish eighties' had not given way to the 'caring nineties'.

2.8 Among most young people, the consensus emerged that if they wanted to change anything or do any good in society, they would generally choose to do it through voluntary organisations: *'I'd choose voluntary organisations any day, they make you feel everyone is equal, that they're on your level'*. This theme was picked up by other groups: *'the government looks down on people, they make you feel lower than them ... you don't have to look up to voluntary organisations ... voluntary organisations treat you with more respect ... voluntary organisations are more to do with community than with the authorities'*. They felt that because voluntary organisations' primary motives are to help people, they are more committed and trustworthy and will value ordinary people's commitment. This perception by many young people that voluntary organisations offer a route to social and political action, distinct from and vastly preferred to mainstream politics, suggests new perspectives on political efficacy among the younger generation.

3 Involvement and volunteering

3.1 Quite a number of group members had been involved in volunteering. Many of the younger ones had participated in sponsored events; for international appeals - a 24 hour fast for Ethiopia, or for Comic Relief; for national appeals, like Blue Peter; and for local campaigns, such as a sponsored silence (by a very chatty boy!) or a canoe race for a garden in a rundown park in a deprived area. A few of the younger ones did more regular volunteering, visiting an old people's home and working with smaller children. The members of a denominational church youth club themselves did little in the way of voluntary work, though they recognised its value. Some of the youngsters did voluntary work as part of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme.

3.2 A number of the older group members were involved in local groups on a regular basis, for example taking disabled children camping. Some of the students commented on the lack of time for voluntary work and the tendency to give it up when they left university: *'you can't live off volunteering'*. The members of the excluded

groups had done as much if not more volunteering than others, often because it was the *only* activity open to them. One worked in animal rescue, another had helped homeless people, a third used his writings to promote and publicise voluntary organisations' causes and showed an immaculate portfolio of press cuttings and letters of thanks from the great and good. Another was just completing two years full-time voluntary work and as a direct result had been accepted on a social work degree course.

3.3 Many of the participants knew people who volunteered. Mothers helped out with children, elderly people or prisoners and a couple of fathers did sports. One had a sister who was a hunt saboteur. Others knew a lot about, say, Cancer Relief or the RNID because of a family connection. Members of religious or ethnic communities (Muslim, Hindu and Catholic) were very familiar with a culture of helping others and recounted a lot of communal support. Some group members tentatively mentioned what is termed 'informal' volunteering by themselves or family members, thinking it wouldn't 'count'. It then emerged that virtually all the young people involved in the discussion groups did some local helping in their neighbourhoods, like getting shopping for an old lady who had trouble getting out. One teenage boy, heavily into body piercing, spoke glowingly of his grandmother who helped everyone in her area and had to return gifts of money from grateful neighbours; his response to the question 'how would you like things to be in the future' was a quiet *'I want to be like my gran'*.

3.4 In terms of routes into volunteering, group members felt that there were a great many ways that people could get involved with voluntary organisations. It was frequently because of a personal experience; *'it's often if something happens, like a friend of mine had a bad accident, it made me realise what could be done ... I'd been homeless myself so I knew what it was like'*. Younger people also liked publicity materials and leaflets which gave them ideas on what they could do. The point emerged, and was articulated by the youth leaders, that many young people do not see what they do as 'volunteering': *'they go along because they're interested and just get involved, they don't see it as choosing to volunteer ... personal interest comes into it - I don't have this image of someone wanting to volunteer sort of browsing through the choices ...*

my youth club members, some of them have asked about training to be voluntary youth leaders - it just grows on them because they enjoy it'.

3.5 However, a widespread complaint was about the lack of information about opportunities available within the voluntary sector. The youth groups were assertive about the need for more information on *'what's out there'*: *'there should be more adverts on TV and radio, showing what people can do. When you see it, it touches you ... lots of little bits would get the message home, it would sink in that there are a lot of things you can do'*. They saw this as a definite barrier to their greater involvement with voluntary organisations. A small number were put off by the idea of working with some of the client groups - negative remarks were made about old people and people with learning difficulties. In one group whose members lived on a deprived estate, some of the boys commented that negative peer pressure put them off volunteering.

3.6 Young people were acutely aware of prejudice about what young people can do and the image that they are not trustworthy. This was particularly strong among the excluded groups, who spoke of stereotyping and the *'stigma'* of being unemployed or giving your address as a hostel. If voluntary organisations began to respect what young people had to offer *'it would make a massive difference'*. Some young people who had applied to volunteer complained of lengthy procedures: *'it puts you off, you have to wait around so long and you wonder if they want you at all'*.

3.7 The images young people had of volunteers were generally very positive. In answer to a question about the sorts of people who volunteer, their responses were rapid: *'good people ... nice people ... friendly ... kind ... people with morals ... people with a conscience ... people with time to spare'*. One said *'I shouldn't say this, but it's usually women, isn't it?'* and another speculated that changing employment patterns for women and men would have an influence on the numbers and sex of volunteers. Older group members noted the political element: *'people who go in for voluntary work are making a statement ... it's also about empowering yourself'*.

3.8 The groups of excluded young people were more negative initially: *'lonely people, without a social life ... middle class, middle aged women ...*

patronising do-gooders'. After discussion - and the revelation that a number of them did voluntary work - they acknowledged more variation among the types of people who volunteer. But they said that the fact that the Royal Family were often heads of charities gave voluntary work a certain class image. They also, like other groups, noted that working class communities and poorer people do a lot of mutual helping, but *'they don't want thanks or recognition, it's because they know what it's like to be poor ... it's the middle and upper classes who are the visible face of voluntary work'*. One or two participants thought some volunteers were in it too much for their own advancement. More generally, though, *'when you hear someone does voluntary work, you feel quite positive to them ... you work with people for ages and then you discover by accident that they've got something they're involved in and care about and it makes you appreciate them more'*.

3.9 The main reason young people felt people volunteer or donate money is to help. They thought people gave money because *'the organisations need it and the people they help need it ... if you're a bit better off, or you don't have someone in your family who's really ill, you feel it's the least you can do'*. The young man who did a sponsored silence said *'people gave me money because they wanted to see if I could keep quiet for that long! and because it was going to a good cause'*. One comment by a girl who had collected for charity was: *'you explain what it's for and when people understand, they are happy to give something'*. A more cynical comment was that people donate to charities *'to get people off your back or because you feel guilty'*. Excluded youngsters said they always try and give something because they know what it's like to have nothing. Independent school students reported that their families had to pay so much in school fees and compulsory school-related expenses that they *'got fed up being asked for more money'*.

3.10 The sorts of things that would encourage young people to get involved with a voluntary organisation reflect some of the points already made: better information and publicity on TV and radio about what is available for them and who they would be helping, easier access, good opportunities to learn skills and gain accreditation. Some mentioned that the easing of restrictions on benefit recipients would encourage them to get

involved in voluntary work. In response to the question, the young men in one group said *'women!'*, and the group as a whole agreed that if people they liked or admired asked them, they would be likely to get involved. Young people were somewhat divided on the question of whether a high profile role model would induce them to volunteer; *'it would depend on the person ... it's too simplistic ... I don't think it would because volunteering has to come from the heart not from someone else'*. But quite a few, especially of the 11-16 year olds, thought it would make a real impression on them if a popular sports person or musician supported volunteering, and they cited the impact of Band Aid and Comic Relief. A charity whose heart-shaped badge had become a fashion accessory was commended by a group of teenage girls!

4 Beneficiaries of voluntary organisations

4.1 Young people showed a good recognition of the range of people and causes that are helped by voluntary organisations, consistent with their ability to identify a wide range of services and organisations. Not only did they list the more obvious client groups, but also more marginalised groups such as homeless or unemployed people and those with alcohol and drug problems. An older group felt that it was not just desperately needy people who should be helped, but that a whole range of services enhanced people's lives and gave them enjoyment.

4.2 The vast majority of participants confirmed the findings of the literature review that young people do not differentiate between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients. An older member had *'a real problem with the way animals benefit more than people do'* and in two groups there was a forceful minority view that Britain should sort out its own social problems before funding aid overseas. The comment was also made that *'there are always people who'll scam the system'* ie take advantage of free services. But only one group identified 'undeserving' people. Rather savagely, a denominational church youth group would not help *'people who are cabbages - bring back euthanasia, it saves money ... like Rainbows, what's the point if they're going to die?'*, although there were those in the group who protested *'but it's about love'*. On the whole, regardless of their backgrounds, the young people embraced all those who had needs as deserving of help,

including people overseas. A group of Asian youngsters unanimously defended the rights of people with drink and drug problems, recognising that their problems were due to personal and economic difficulties in their lives. The levels of tolerance and understanding imply a real difference between young people and the older population in awareness of social problems and their causes.

5 The future

5.1 Visions of what would happen if there were no voluntary organisations were bleak. Responses were immediate: 'people would die ... people would be stranded without charities ... there'd be too many problems ... lives would be spoilt ... people really need the support ... who would take care of the aged? ... everything now is being done by volunteers - if you've got money, you get everything - if you haven't, you really need the help ... I wouldn't like to think, I can't imagine it ... it doesn't bear thinking about'. One or two felt it was so unimaginable that voluntary organisations would soon regenerate: 'even if you wiped them all out, people would still help others, they'd start up organisations again, you can't stop people caring'. Another dire consequence, acknowledging voluntary organisations' key role as information-providers, was that 'people wouldn't be informed about the problems in society, about the environmental disasters ... maybe people would start to care less because they wouldn't be told what it's like to suffer things like being deaf or blind ... we wouldn't be able to help people in other countries in famines and wars.'

5.2 The role of voluntary organisations in the future is to 'keep doing what they're doing ... do more, I suppose - it's a case of having to, isn't it? ... expand and involve more volunteers so more people get help ... involve the community more'. Some participants felt that services are patchy geographically, and organisations should extend their range. An important future role for voluntary organisations should be to provide more information, publicity and campaigning: 'the messages should be all around, people can be very ignorant, they won't see it unless it stares them in the face'.

5.3 A few problems were foreseen for the future. One young woman perceptively speculated on

whether the supply of volunteers would shrink because of changing employment patterns among both women and men, and whether men would be as acceptable in some areas of voluntary work. A few participants noted that smaller organisations were struggling and could fade away, while the big charities would survive and flourish. One group was emphatic that there were too many overlapping charities, which would operate more effectively if they combined or grouped themselves, at least for administrative, publicity and mailing purposes. A few made the general comment that some charities needed to be better organised in the future.

5.4 The groups of excluded young people thought that voluntary organisations would play a more important role in the future. But they wanted to see change; a vital priority for organisations was the dismantling of barriers to young people and especially the development and standardisation of systems of work experience and accreditation: 'no-one's willing to invest in young people ... voluntary and commercial organisations should take the time to train and support them ... they should bring older and young people together to break down the barriers and learn from each other ... they're denying access to the very people who are going to make the future ... so many young people want to do something, but are not allowed to give ... an enormous amount of talent is being wasted ... change has to come from the top down'. Imaginative schemes were outlined: 'let the young people run a shop or project for a probationary period - show what they can do ... all it needs is for someone with a bit of business acumen to work with the City Council to arrange for more and more young people to do full-time voluntary work and provide them with a package of fringe benefits and you'd be away. Like arrange for a laundrette to allow them free use one afternoon. The city would run more smoothly and it wouldn't cost a lot from the city budget'.

5.5 It was recognised by all types of young people that expansion of the voluntary sector could not happen without support. Voluntary organisations should receive more support and money from the government to enable them to reach more people and provide fuller services. One group observed that companies too should help out from their profits. An older group felt that, without additional backing, voluntary organisations were in danger of over-extending

themselves: *'the more the state devolves responsibility, the more people you'll have who aren't expert at what they do - there'll be accidents and problems and the state will clamp down on it'*. The ideal situation, by consensus, is a major role for voluntary organisations in caring, campaigning and information-giving, supported by state funding and complementing the provision of core services by the government.

5.6 Overall, the views of young people give cause for optimism. They are reassuringly compassionate towards disadvantaged groups and committed to helping people. They are refreshingly free of most of the stereotypes about charity and voluntary work and have grown up with a voluntary sector that is acknowledged as a leading force for fairness and social justice. Any cynicism tends to be directed at tired old institutions, not the good works of voluntary organisations. Young people appear to have a different perspective on political efficacy, with trust being invested in non-government organisations. In light of disenchantment with the traditional political institutions of the state, voluntary organisations are viewed as a more viable and accessible route to political involvement and social change.

6 Differences among young people

6.1 This report has recorded a strong degree of consensus among young people on basic attitudes and perceptions. But some differences emerged between young people with different characteristics or in different situations. These findings and their implications are obviously somewhat speculative, since a limited number of groups were involved, but nevertheless they are interesting and tend to confirm findings from the literature.

6.2 The 11-16 year olds had lots of enthusiasm and perhaps more faith in voluntary organisations than the 17-24 year olds. The older ones were more sophisticated in their view of voluntary organisations, some seeing limitations to their capacity for political impact and some with reservations about the 'modernisation' (commercialisation) of organisations and new fundraising styles.

6.3 The people in the focus groups were a mixture of young women and young men. In

some groups, the young men may have been atypical, because they were self-selected participants in clubs and associations. In general, the female participants tended to emphasise the caring aspect, while the male ones were somewhat more instrumental in their view of voluntary organisations. Among the boys from more deprived backgrounds, there was a tendency to view voluntary work as 'soft' and for negative peer pressure to operate against it.

6.4 The groups contained a mixture of ethnicities. Because of Leicester's multi-ethnic nature, a number of participants were Asian and a few were African-Caribbean. Their cultures and communities emphasise mutual help and caring for those in need, both through religious tradition and necessity. 'Informal' volunteering is part of daily life. The younger people from ethnic minority groups tended to be even more active in and enthusiastic about voluntary work, and generous in their view of 'deserving' recipients of charity, than their white counterparts. The older participants tended to be more sceptical, articulating the view that social and economic conditions are determined more by the power structure in society than by individual and voluntary efforts.

6.5 Members of youth groups did not show significantly higher levels of awareness and activity than young people who didn't belong to groups. Indeed, the members of a denominational church youth club, despite being very familiar with the religious obligation of caring for others, were least inclined to do any voluntary work themselves and were most harsh in their judgements of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients of charity.

6.6 Socio-economic factors had an influence on young people's attitudes. In particular, the 'excluded' young people - homeless, unemployed or both - had a different view of what voluntary organisations could achieve. Most of them had relied on voluntary organisations at one time or another and appreciated their support for people in trouble, their moral emphasis and the way they treated volunteers and users. However, it was from their experiences of being at the receiving end of charity that they described a lot of volunteers as middle class, middle aged and patronising. They themselves had done and were doing a range of voluntary work.

6.7 The discussions among excluded and disenfranchised young people were the most politically sophisticated. They saw the social and economic forces and political ideologies which had so affected their own lives as being stronger than the good intentions of the voluntary sector. They also placed the barriers against young people within the context of dominant social, economic and political prejudices aimed at the younger generation. However, they felt that voluntary organisations should take responsibility for dismantling their own barriers. This was especially in light of the training role they could play. The excluded young people were desperate for opportunities to contribute to society and be responsible for their own economic welfare. They, above all groups, discussed at length how training opportunities and systems of qualifications could be developed by voluntary organisations. Perhaps, then, they did see another kind of political role for the voluntary sector, in terms of being a significant actor in economic policy and the inclusion of young people in society.

6.8 Bearing in mind these variations among young people - and clearly they beg further investigation - there was considerable consensus on key attitudes to the voluntary sector, including:

- identification and distinguishing factors
- the caring role and moral emphasis
- the wide scope of the sector
- positive views of voluntary organisations and volunteering
- the opportunities for training and experience
- the barriers against their involvement
- a high level of demand for voluntary opportunities among young people
- almost no sense of 'undeserving' recipients
- opportunities to contribute to social and political change
- the need for government support for the voluntary sector

APPENDIX A

THE FOCUS GROUPS

Eight focus groups were organised in Leicestershire in June 1996. Their composition was:

11-16 year olds	17-24 year olds
State school students	Higher education students
Independent school students	Non-professional workers
Association members (two groups held)	Church youth group
	Unemployed people
	Homeless people

There was an additional focus group of three voluntary youth workers, aged 17-28, as well as informal interviews with youth workers and teachers who acted as contacts in organising the groups. In total, just over 90 young people took part in the focus groups.

Confidentiality was guaranteed to group participants. The discussions were tape-recorded and their content analysed for major themes and verbatim comments which are included in the report. It should be noted that findings cannot be guaranteed to be representative of all young people, and that participation in the groups was generally voluntary.

The researchers are grateful to all the contact people who helped set up the groups and to the young participants whose discussions were lively and thoughtful.

Each group was facilitated by a researcher using the following topic guide, although discussions were free-ranging and encouraged participants to raise issues of their own. The frequent inclusion in the topic guide of the term 'charities' was in case young people identified these more readily than 'voluntary organisations', but such a prompt was in fact rarely necessary.

THE TOPIC GUIDE

1 Voluntary organisations - identification

When you hear the word 'voluntary', what springs to mind? (*Probe: things you might do at school, with your family, with a local club*)

(If not included in response) What about groups that call themselves voluntary organisations - can you think of any? (*Probe: what about charities?*)

Is there anything different about voluntary groups (charities) compared to other organisations, like businesses, shops or health centres?

What do you think of voluntary organisations (charities)? What do you like about them? What sorts of things put you off them?

2 Kinds of services/political role

What services do voluntary organisations (charities) provide?

How do you feel about that? (*Probe: do you think there are any limits to what voluntary organisations/charities should provide?*)

What about the government's responsibilities - is there any overlap with voluntary organisations/charities? How do you feel about this?

Do you see voluntary organisations as part of the whole political scene, like government and politicians? Or are they different? (*Probe: young people are said to be alienated from politics - do you think voluntary organisations offer a different way to get involved in society and trying to change it for the better?*)

3 Involvement and volunteering

Can you think of any ways that you can get involved with voluntary groups?

What sorts of things might volunteers do?

What sort of people volunteer?

Why do you think people volunteer?

Why do you think people give money to voluntary organisations?

Could you ever see yourself as a volunteer? ... why? ... why not? (*Probe: Do any of you volunteer? Does anyone you know volunteer? Do you (or anyone you know) volunteer through being a member of a club or society, eg guides, scouts, youth club etc.?*)

What sorts of things might make you think about getting involved with a voluntary organisation? (*Probe: Would you think about it if someone famous that you liked was involved or encouraged people to get involved? What else?*)

4 Beneficiaries of voluntary organisations (those who receive services, users, clients)

Who or what benefits/receives services from voluntary organisations (charities)?

Who or what do you think of as 'needy'? (*Probe: is this the same as those who benefit from voluntary organisations/charities?*)

Are there some groups who are more deserving of voluntary services/charity than others?

Are there any that are undeserving?

5 The future

What do you think would happen if there were no voluntary organisations (charities)?

What do you see as the role of voluntary organisations (charities) in the future?

What do you think the ideal situation would be?

Any other points you want to raise about voluntary organisations or voluntary work?

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The Media, Resistance and Civil Society

Section 3: Dissenting in the Margins

Main:

Fenton, N. and Downey, J. (2003) 'Counter Public Spheres and Global Modernity', *Javnost – The Public*, (X) 1: 15-33.

Supplementary:

Downey, J. and Fenton, N. (2003) 'Constructing a Counter-Public Sphere', *New Media and Society* (5)2:185-202.

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COUNTER PUBLIC SPHERES AND GLOBAL MODERNITY

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of counter public spheres and their relationship to the dominant public sphere. We argue that counter public spheres are increasingly relevant due to particular social and political configurations that mark out a distinct stage of modernity. We suggest that this stage is characterised in particular by the intensification of globalisation, the rise of neo-liberalism and a decline of trust and social democracy resulting in instability in the dominant public sphere. This, along with the ability to forge solidarity between disparate groups and the technological potential to link geographical distances, political causes and to organise translocal protests opens up the possibility of symbolic contest in the dominant public sphere, increased participation in civil society and as a consequence, the extension of democracy. However, this depends on two main factors : (1) the nature of participation – does it simply build on associations of interest that may have arisen out of the individualisation of lifestyles organised around consumption in the market place or is it based on something more than enlightened self-interest? (2) The relative power and ability of counter publicity to break through the increasingly privatised dominant public sphere monopolised by transnational corporations.

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Introduction

In the last thirty years capitalism has undergone a major restructuring that has seen the intensification of globalisation, the rise of neo-liberalism and the New Right, the decline of trust and of social democracy, a process of de-traditionalisation, rapid development of information and communication technologies and the rise of new social movements. These changes have profound implications for the nature and functioning of the public sphere (Habermas 1989). We argue that the public sphere has been shaken and this has opened up increasing possibilities for counter public spheres to become established and flourish. We trace Habermas' development of the concept of the public sphere after 1989 that includes crucial and often ignored revisions to the original thesis. We argue that counter public spheres become established in periods of instability in the dominant public sphere and serve to destabilise further the dominant sphere. While several factors are indicative of this instability and dynamic process, in this essay we focus in particular on the demise of trust in advanced capitalist societies. Decreasing levels of trust have been commonly associated with declining levels of social participation and are seen to signal the ill health of civil society. In contrast, however, we suggest that decreasing levels of trust in established institutions and parties has been accompanied by increasing levels of trust in groups engaging in counter-publicity.

Civil society is widely accepted as a concept that will inform and uphold democracy. Although exactly how and by what mechanisms civil society is to be invoked is often unclear. The concept of civil society itself is double edged: one that can be and has been conceived of as an individualistic concept representing no more than the human face of capitalism serving ultimately to support the dominant public sphere or as a space that allows a critical intervention in the public sphere that has the potential to result in progressive social change. We argue that counter-public spheres offer the best prospects for encouraging democratisation at local, national and international level. To make sense of this assertion we draw on the work of Manuel Castells (1996; 1997; 1998) and Ulrich Beck (2000) to contend that the crisis of the public sphere and the rise of counter-publicity should be understood as elements in the emergence of a new stage of modernity.

The Public Sphere in Flux

At the conference to mark the English translation of Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989, Craig Calhoun argued against Habermas' Adornian-inspired pessimistic position of the early 1960s, maintaining that the consequences of mass media were not "uniformly negative" and that there is a certain amount of room for manoeuvre for "alternative democratic media strategies" (1992, 33). Calhoun (1992, 37) is referring here to the possibility of groups in civil society exerting influence upon the mass media, on the one hand, and of establishing discursively connected counter public spheres, on the other. Habermas has himself revised his public sphere thesis in the last ten years to take account of such phenomena.

We wish to chart the transformation in Habermas' own work over the past decade, partly as a result of the critique of his original thesis and partly as a result of Habermas' own reflections on the contemporary relationship between media and

politics. As such, our account differs from the standard that first lays out Habermas' original thesis and then summarises critiques of the thesis, emphasising the exclusions of the male bourgeois public sphere. One of the keys to understanding the contemporary world is to grasp the dynamic relationship between dominant and counter public spheres.

Habermas' focus in his *Habilitationschrift* was on the bourgeois public sphere. His intention was to show the rise and fall of the public sphere, the rise of a critical public and its decay. He argues that the increasing complexity and rationalisation of societies over the course of the twentieth century together with the growth of the mass media have transformed the public sphere: "the public sphere becomes the court before which public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which critical debate is carried on" (Habermas 1989, 201). In other words, horizontal communication between citizens is increasingly replaced by vertical communication between mass media, greatly influenced by both the state and capital, and consumers. The space for participatory communication is severely constricted. This interpretation of the trajectory of the public sphere owed a great deal to Adorno and Horkheimer's (1973) work on the culture industries and the prognosis of a move towards an increasingly administered society. However, Habermas' intention was not only critical but also redemptive. He wished to rescue the rational kernel from the ideological concept. The ethical impulse lying behind the creation of the public sphere, of inventing a space where citizens may meet and discuss as equals, needs to be separated out from the exclusions that characterised the actual bourgeois male public sphere. The rational kernel needs to be preserved and then built upon in order to establish the conditions for living in a truly democratic society. While the dominant public sphere retains some traces of democratic discourse, we suggest that the impulse for greater democratisation comes not from within the dominant public sphere but from the formation of counter publics.

Habermas has recently introduced refinements to his original concept of the public sphere both in response to the vigorous debate in the Anglophone world after the translation of his public sphere work in 1989 and perceived changes in the relationship between the public sphere and social change. These refinements relate in particular to instances of intentional political mobilisation that seek to make an intervention in the mass media public sphere or develop a counter-public sphere. Habermas' sole attention on the bourgeois public sphere aroused considerable criticism both at the time of the student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s and at the time of translation (Negt and Kluge 1972; Calhoun 1992). Habermas saw proletarian public spheres, for example, as derivative of the bourgeois public sphere and as not worthy of too much attention. In stark contrast, Negt and Kluge (1972) believed in the productive possibilities of counter publics. For Negt and Kluge alternative media practice was contemporaneous with and a response to dominant capitalist communications. They saw the formation of counter publics as offering forms of solidarity and reciprocity grounded in a collective experience of marginalisation and expropriation. To enable changes in relations of production they argued that counter publics must form alliances and make connections with other publics and other types of publicity. Once this is achieved they can then take advantage of the uneven organisational structures of dominant publicity which contain potential for instability, accidental collisions and opportuni-

ties in which alternative formations and collective interests can gain a momentum of their own.

In his response to the conference in 1989 Habermas recognises the exclusion of counter public spheres as a problem with the book. He admits that

only after reading Mikhail Bakhtin's great book Rabelais and his World have my eyes become really opened to the inner dynamics of a plebeian culture. The culture of the common people apparently was by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counter project to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines (Habermas 1992, 427).

Here Habermas recognises not only the existence of counter public spheres but also their capacity for challenging domination. While Habermas maintains that his analysis of the infrastructure of the public sphere still pertains with the mass media largely subordinate to the interests of capital, on the one hand, and the state, on the other, he has in the meantime revised his pessimistic opinion of the public. Rather than see the public as cultural dupes in the manner of Adorno and Horkheimer he now emphasises the "pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public" (Habermas 1992, 438) that are able to resist mass mediated representations of society and create their own political interventions.

What this points to is a revision of the public sphere thesis in the light of the "revolutions" in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and the developments in civil society through the emergence of new social movements in advanced capitalist societies (for example, the green movement in Germany). In addition, in recent years there have also been many attempts with modest degrees of success to decentralise the media and make them more accessible and responsive to citizens. Many countries have experienced a growth in non-mass, localised forms of media such as community radio, television and newspapers (for example, the use of Restricted Service Licenses (RSLs) for cable television and community radio in the UK). There has also been a considerable growth in NGOs (the number of registered charities in the UK is now in excess of 185,000) most of which, seek to use mass and/or small media as part of their work. A central question for Habermas is whether these groups in civil society can intervene in the mass media public sphere and change the agenda through setting off a critical process of communication. This can be exceedingly difficult to do in a market-led, mass mediated system enveloped in its own professional ideologies about what is and what is not newsworthy, about who is a credible source of opinion and information and who is not. It is important neither to romanticise the ability of alternative forms of communication to encourage progressive social change in the context of global, multi-media conglomerates nor to dismiss the growth of counter-publicity and the socio-economic context of its emergence.

Dahlgren (1994) manages to steer between these positions by making an explicit analytic distinction between the common domain of the public sphere and the advocacy domain. In this functional differentiation, the common domain is the arena that strives for universalism by appealing to a general public. It is here that we find for the most part the dominant media, which ideally provide information, debate and opinion for all members of society. This is done through a variety of

media, formats and representational modes, taking into account the socio-cultural segmentation of society. The advocacy domain consists partly of time and space made available by the dominant media and partly of a plurality of smaller civic media from political parties, interest groups, movements, organisations and networks. This distinction allows us to consider not only the official public sphere of the dominating, but also the counter public sphere of the dominated. While there are similarities between Dahlgren's approach and our own, there is a key difference in emphasis. We stress the competitive relationship between dominant and counter public spheres. Whereas the common and advocacy domains may exist side-by-side in a liberal polity and contribute to the resolution of competing interests, counter publicity should be thought of as *challenging* the legitimacy of the dominant public sphere, as presenting an alternative way of ordering society as recognised in the work of Negt and Kluge (1972). This competitive relationship can only be understood in the context of broader socio-economic change and the crisis of the dominant public sphere.

Habermas pursues a complementary line of thinking in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996). Here, Habermas has moved away considerably from the *Structural Transformation* work and wishes to maintain that counter public spheres can acquire influence in the mass media public sphere under certain circumstances. Habermas' earlier position outlined in *The Structural Transformation* saw the public sphere at rest rather than in flux. When one looks at the public sphere at rest one tends to note the mixed economy of capitalist owned and state regulated public sphere that is exclusive. However, when one introduces the notion that the public sphere, in a manner consistent with the rest of society, is subject to periodic crises then one can observe gaps opening up in the public sphere: "in periods of mobilisation, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate. The balance of power between civil society and the political systems then shifts" (Habermas 1996, 379). The presentation of the issue is important, for Habermas, as "only through their controversial presentation in the media do such topics reach the larger public and subsequently gain a place on the 'public agenda'" (1996, 381). However, counter publics may only be permitted access to the institutions of the dominant public sphere at times of economic, political or ideological crisis. A crisis situation, according to Habermas, both reveals the inadequacy of previous ways of thinking and raises questions concerning the normative foundations of society. Here the endogenous mobilisation in civil society can exploit the "latent dependency" and "normative self-understanding" (1996, 382) of the mass media public sphere in order to make its voice heard. The self-understanding of the mass media in liberal democracies as servants of the people means that the advent of crises heralds the possibility of counter publicity penetrating the mass media. This resonates with the thinking of Negt and Kluge (1972) and puts the notion of counter publics firmly in an historical, social and economic context, but makes it none the easier to identify the moments when the contradictions of capitalism can be exploited. We argue that the dominant public spheres in advanced capitalist societies are undergoing a period of crisis and this presents opportunities for the formation of counter public spheres that serve to destabilise further the dominant public sphere. But what do we mean by "the public sphere in crisis"?

Crisis? What Crisis? Trust and Social Participation

Putnam (1995), writing about US society, argues that there has been a widespread loss of the sense of community that Tocqueville (1946) believed was central to American culture. Put simply, according to Putnam, people do not trust each other as much as they used to – this is linked to a recoil from civic life and social ties. In the UK, similarly, people belong to fewer organisations than they used to, vote less often, volunteer less and give less money to charity (Knight and Stokes 1996; Passey and Hems 1998). At the same time, it is claimed that people who have retained a sense of trust are more likely to participate in almost all of these activities, establishing a link between a decline of trust and the fall in civic engagement (Putnam 1995; Brehm and Rahn 1997). In contrast to Putnam, we contend that as trust declines in the dominant public sphere, new social bonds emerge in the formation of counter-publics. We do not wish to deny that a process of individualisation is occurring in advanced capitalist societies and that this may lead in the majority of cases to the breakdown of social bonds (“to bowling alone” to use Putnam’s phrase). This breakdown, however, is also occurring because of a crisis of legitimacy, a loss of faith in the established institutions of the public sphere. Such a crisis may be expressed by the growth of apathy and cynicism but also by a growth of grassroots activism that situates itself as counter to the dominant public sphere.

A number of commentators suggest that the “skill” of trusting is developed in part through citizens associating in voluntary organisations, self-help groups, and mutual aid societies. Putnam (1995) for example, has argued that a decline in participation erodes the kind of intermediary institution that Tocqueville saw as essential to the structure of civil society. In this instance civil society is construed in general terms and does not distinguish between the likes of a common domain and an advocacy domain (Dahlgren 1994). A conflation of the various organisational forms of civil society does not allow for differing public responses to very different and often divergent sections of civil society. Trust may be flouted in some and transferred to others, as Putnam has noted elsewhere (Putnam 1995a). The importance of trust in these civil contexts is heightened because of concern over the rapid decrease of trust in government and formal institutions constitutive of the dominant public sphere. The British Social Attitudes Survey 1996, for example, indicated that the public had experienced a profound loss of faith in the institutions of the state. Its efficiency and morality have been questioned. This claim is not restricted to Britain. A large-scale comparative analysis based on national surveys points to declining public trust in politicians in a range of “mature” democracies, with the exception of The Netherlands (Putnam and Pharr 2000). A similar pattern emerges in terms of public confidence in political institutions, including the armed forces, legal systems, police, parliaments and state bureaucracies.

These kinds of disengagement are particularly acute amongst the young (Gaskin, Vlaeminke and Fenton 1996). British studies speak of extensive alienation of young people from society’s central institutions and warn of the long-term dangers this may have (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995). More than one third of people between the ages of 18 and 25 did not vote in the General Election in 1992 or 1997. Some reports on young people and citizen service claim that this lack of engagement with social values and activities has created a host of social problems including

crime and drug abuse (Briscoe 1995). With the state in retreat – not simply in the neo-liberal sense but more broadly in terms of public support – civil society, or certain parts of it, become foregrounded as alternative arenas of public trust, information and representation. Young people in Britain appear to be both disaffected from the party political process and attracted by alternative forms of political activism that work at the margins of the dominant public sphere.

The defining characteristics which mark out some voluntary organisations and campaigning movements from the state and market sectors – non-profit, responding to localised need, oriented to certain values and so on – become paramount in building relations of trust with members and with the wider public. The relationship between organisational form, in particular the encouragement of active participation, democracy and inclusivity and the potential for trust to develop is crucial to contemporary society and its practices. When the dominant public sphere is felt to betray or is no longer capable of allowing for critical rational engagement then trust is diminished allowing counter public spheres the opportunity to flourish. One example of this is the revival of certain forms of grassroots collectivism. In the UK there has been a recent growth in local struggles over road building, animal rights, ethnic or cultural identities that suggest the development of new forms of cultural resistance. While much of this activity is parochial the localisation of political struggle is paralleled by a fragmentation of political culture. Party allegiances and class alliances increasingly give way to more fluid and informal networks of action that are based in but spread beyond localities. Such networks are often staunchly anti-bureaucratic and anti-centralist, suspicious of large organised, formal and institutional politics. In turn, the fragmentation of political culture is fuelled by the rise of identity politics in which modern logics of incorporation and representation are challenged on the bases of their rigidity and exclusiveness. In contrast, the recognition of local diversity allows for differentiated notions of citizenship among diverse counter public spheres.

A decline in trust has been linked to the increase in non-traditional collective protest often described as Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA). As *Criminalising Diversity and Dissent*, a report by the civil rights pressure group Liberty, puts it:

Public support for Non-Violent Direct Action continues to grow. A Gallup poll reported in the Daily Telegraph showed that 68 percent of people believe there are times when protestors are justified in breaking the law, suggesting that there is a growing disillusionment with the response of politicians and governments to public opinion. ... [T]he belief that it is sometimes right to break the law as a protest has spread from the traditionally more anarchic classes – to embrace all sections of opinion including those who used to know better (cited in Brass and Koziell 1997, 14).

In the UK NVDA became popular in the 1990s as part of a new type of eco-politics outside of traditional party political structures. The protests were diverse – ranging from campaigns to stop the live export of sheep and veal calves, road protestors and anti-capitalism marches to the right to hold raves. All were bound by a common basis in what has been termed DIY (Do It Yourself) Culture (Mackay 1998; Brass and Koziell 1997).

The whole business of DIY culture is that you get together and say "This is an issue that affects us, the people in this room, and we want to do something about it".... We are not MPs, we are not elected representatives – the popular mandate is ourselves (George Monbiot, one of the founders of the Land is Ours land rights movement and a researcher at the Centre for Environmental Policy and understanding at Green College, Oxford, cited in Brass and Koziell 1997, 8).

DIY culture is youth-centred and converges around green radicalism, direct action politics and new musical sounds and experiences. The notion of DIY culture being located in single-issue politics does not take account of the diverse range of interests, projects and people involved – from ramblers to travellers, trade unionists to squatters. Although it is built on a long heritage of grassroots protest what marks DIY culture out as different to what has gone before is its attention to issues of consumption rather than production. It is about people wanting to take responsibility for their own lifestyles and realising that how they live is a political action. Although, as noted above, many of the struggles are localised there is constant acknowledgement of the links to globalisation and many protestors move freely between resistance to the building of a local road and marches against global capitalism:

The more that corporations globalize and lose touch with the concerns of ordinary people, the more that the seeds of grass-roots revolt are sown; equally, the more that governments hand responsibility to remote supranational powers the more they lose their democratic legitimacy and alienate people (Vidal cited in Brass and Koziell 1997, 277).

Counter public spheres may provide vital sources of information and experience that are contrary to, or at least in addition to, the dominant public sphere thereby offering a vital impulse to democracy. Because of the disparate and often underground nature the extent of this practice is unknown, its role in a democracy unexplored (Atton 2002). However, it is our contention that the activity of counter public spheres has indeed increased in recent years largely in response to a dominant public sphere that is coming under increasing strain. One key indicator of particular significance is the vast increase in international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) paving the way for transnational activist networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998): in 1953 there were 102 international NGOs; in 1993 there were 569, in 2002 there are more than 5,000 international NGOs. In this period environmental groups have increased 45 fold; development groups 10 fold; groups concerned with human rights, the environment and women's rights together comprise more than 50% of all international NGOs. Many of these groups use information and communication technologies as tools of advocacy and organisation. In the UK the more established (for example, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Oxfam) are experiencing increased legitimacy with the "liberal" press and broadcasting.

In making a distinction between key aspects of the public sphere, whether we term them dominant and counter or common and advocacy, that shrink or swell according to particular circumstances, we must also disaggregate the various components of civil society. The possibility of a renewal of civil society through the expansion of civil associations, especially voluntary organisations (which in the

broadest sense would include DIY culture), is problematic principally because such organisations do not necessarily increase democratic inclusion. Taken as a homogeneous concept civil society can be seen as providing the foundations for general social solidarity and moral community. When this occurs it is not clear whether this thing called civil society simply builds on an association of interest that may have arisen out of the individualisation of lifestyles organised around consumption in the market-place, or whether it is based on something more than enlightened self-interest. This is important because civil society that operates as no more than an outlet for neo-liberal sensibilities and remains centred on the individual and their interests rather than on mutuality or reciprocity, is likely to uphold the status quo rather than actively challenge it through collective identity and critical solidarity.

Self-Interested Individualism or Collective Progressive Politics?

Neo-liberalism, based on an ideology of economically centred individualism, consumerism and citizenship, held sway in a range of advanced capitalist societies throughout the 1980s and 1990s - most notably in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the UK, Thatcherism was described as the only "political and moral force that has been in the business of eating away at the cement of social reciprocity" (Hall 1993, 14). Commentators have remarked that the rise of individualism, especially in the 1980s, has been at the expense of sociability and civic-mindedness. Such arguments are based on the assumption that if individual self-interest is allowed to develop unhindered, conflicts of interests will override relations of trust. These ideas are not exactly new. Durkheim (1957; 1964) argued that a society composed of isolated individuals pursuing their own narrow objectives was untenable. According to Durkheim, calculating individuals pursuing their own self-interest undermined social solidarity. To overcome this danger society required a morality of co-operation and a network of secondary institutions which bound people together – these would help to mediate the pursuit of self interest by creating social bonds (Furedi 1997).

Relations between individuals are increasingly governed by economic forces. Public support for charities, for example, often assumed to be an altruistic act, has not escaped the individualisation of the market. The social response to charitable giving relies frequently on assessments of deservedness of the beneficiary. Perceptions of who receives charity and who should receive charity are linked to the willingness of people to support charities through time and money. Public attitudes on the seeming excess of voluntary and charitable organisations operating in the same field and the high administrative costs such organisations incur are common. But more than this, the recipients of charity are often viewed with nothing more than contempt, malign distrust or corrosive pity (Golding and Middleton 1982). Thomas Harding argues that the new level of local, DIY activism is based on an individualisation of protest and the privatisation of activism (Harding 1997). DIY privileges the notion of self-empowerment. It is worthwhile noting that many of the new protest groups do not see class as an issue and are led largely by the young generation of the middle classes (Mackay 1998). A society so firmly entrenched in an ethic of competition and reward finds it difficult to escape the values it espouses.

However, public attitudes do not always obediently follow the wholesale promotion of the market. The public are aware of the dangers of individualism and consumerism even if warnings have mostly gone unheeded. For example, voluntary organisations are perceived as offering an opportunity to somehow defy the market and act on principles other than profit and power. They are felt to offer an alternative to the dominant public sphere. In the UK, research has shown that the ability of voluntary organisations to represent something other than the market is vital to their future public support (Gaskin and Fenton 1997).

Putnam argues that forms of voluntary association are distinctive in their capacity to function as repositories for all sources of social capital – obligations and expectations, information potential and norms and sanctions (Putnam 1993, 89). As such they are characterised as incubators of civic virtue. He contends that democratic, non-exclusionary voluntary associations characterised by a high level of face-to-face interaction are involved in a virtuous circle in terms of trust, because they instill habits of co-operation, solidarity and public spiritedness; develop skills required for political activity; and prevent factionalism through inclusive membership. It is problematic, however, simply to assume that voluntary associations will be democratic and non-exclusionary – as Putnam has noted (Putnam 1995a). Many commentators on the organised voluntary sector would debate whether it is quite so virtuous. A misplaced nostalgia for the civic life of the 1950s, as Putnam cautions – let alone for Tocqueville's America of the 1830s – ignores the factors that shape and constrain association in an era of advanced modernity.

Misztal (1996) suggests that interest in the link between the concept of trust and that of civil society has emerged as a result of evidence suggesting that legal formulas of citizenship do not of themselves secure solidarity, participation and the expansion of the public sphere. With many symptoms of the decline of solidarity (the decrease in popularity of solidaristic parties, the decline in class solidarity, the collapse of communism as a viable alternative to capitalism), the renewal of civic institutions and the emergence of new social movements have been put forward as ways of constructing new identities and social bonds, and teaching new responsibilities and obligations. We would argue that this is evidence of an increase in counter public spheres and that this process is better understood not in terms of civil society supporting the crumbling institutions of the dominant public sphere as in the relationship between common and advocacy domains but in terms of their attempt to reconstitute society or at least their piece of it. Misztal points to the growing evidence of privatism, marketisation and a politics based on rights rather than duties, as evidence of a shrinking dominant public sphere. The task of protecting and promoting solidarity falls to the institutions of civil society which might offset the formalism, proceduralism and commodification of the state and market spheres.

Such an account places a distinctive emphasis on a politics and ethics of solidarity within civil society. Within more conventional theories of civil society, the concept of solidarity is frequently missing or sidelined. Wolfe (1989), for example, sees the role of civil society as maintaining a social fabric that tempers the operation of the market and the state and anchors them in a normative framework by creating "realms of intimacy, trust, caring and autonomy that are different from the larger world of politics and economics" (Wolfe 1989, 38). But solidarity is not mentioned.

Indeed, the notion that politics and economics represent a “larger world,” together with a normative emphasis on values of “intimacy, trust and caring” within civil society, appears to reinstate rather traditional distinctions between the public and private spheres. The civil realm is seen to exercise a civilising influence on market and state, rather than providing a sphere where alternative forms of social solidarity and political agency might be articulated. Solidarity, it appears, is a critical characteristic in differentiating between self-interested individualism and a collective counter politics.

Habermas (1992) defines solidarity as

the ability of individuals to respond to and identify with one another on the basis of mutuality and reciprocity without calculating individual advantages and above all without compulsion. Solidarity involves a willingness to share the fate of the other, not as the exemplar of a category to which the self belongs but as a unique and different person (Habermas 1992, 47).

Thus solidarity infers both a private and a public sense of trust. To insist on solidarity as a crucial element in the likely success of counter-public spheres to influence rational-critical discourse resists the definition of civil society in simply individualistic or private terms. The potential of counter public-spheres as sites of solidarity and collective agency is realised by new social movements. These movements are held to engage in a kind of “double politics”; aiming both to influence policy in a formal sense, and to construct new kinds of solidarity and collective identity through informal political association – a bringing together of public and private responses. The dissolution of the public/private dichotomy in the operation of contemporary counter public spheres also avoids the feminist concerns with Habermas’ concept of the public sphere that through focusing on public life denies women’s actual and potential contribution to civil society (Fraser 1992).

The concept of solidarity also helps to explain the connection of the local, often individualised issue to the frequently simplified but nonetheless global economics and politics, central to many of the new protest groups. Mackay (1998) argues that this is why direct action campaigns have focused on export and overseas trade allowing a degree of unity and ambition of scale for otherwise disparate actions. For example, in the UK in 1995 animal rights activists protested at a range of sea-ports on the live export of animals; Reclaim the Streets activists organised a party and a protest action in collaboration with Liverpool dockers to show solidarity with trade unionists in 1996; ecotunnelers protested at the development of the second runway at Manchester airport in 1997. Solidarity in these instances is rather more than the human face of capitalism. However, solidarity alone does not make a political project. Organising for resistance across boundaries may be a move towards a new cultural politics but it is not a political project in itself.

The ability of voluntary organisations to make global connections and to inform the public about their work has been dramatically affected by instantaneous communications technologies. Together with patterns of mass migration and world trade new technologies increase awareness of, and dependence between, localities far away from each other. This can be seen as positive insofar as it can raise awareness of the politics of consumption – as Giddens notes (1990) the choices and actions of consumers in one locality can have an impact on the international division

of labour and planetary ecology. Large international voluntary organisations can and do inform the public of the impact of a global economy. But it is a function that often precludes participation and negates any degree of control on behalf of the giver. Such groups (for example, Greenpeace, Oxfam, and Red Cross) may have large memberships but the members rarely, if ever, see one another. People may be committed givers but the giving is organised at a distance, the act of participation is at arm's length. Solidarity is not required. Altruism is relegated to an act of consumption - a financial relationship. However, other groups such as those that organise around anti-globalisation and the World Trade Organisation are predicated on participation and public demonstration with a real, if rather confused sense, of popular idealism. Solidarity in these instances could be seen as rather more than the human face of capitalism. Whether it is a new critical political force is another question.

Counter Publics in the Network Society

Up to this point, we have adopted a revised Habermasian framework to argue that the growth of counter public spheres should be understood in terms of a dynamic relationship with the dominant public sphere. A crisis in the dominant sphere encourages the growth of counter publics and this serves to destabilise further the dominant public sphere. We have illustrated this general argument through examining the changing contours of trust in advanced capitalist societies. Now we wish to place the growth of counter public spheres in the context of broader social change and to see the growth of counter publicity as part of an emerging new stage of modernity. To achieve this we will enlist the theoretical support of Manuel Castells and Ulrich Beck.

Manuel Castells argues that we are now experiencing a different kind of society, a network society, as a result of three factors: an information technology revolution in the early 1970s; a restructuring of capitalism that has heralded the creation of a post-Fordist global economy; and the rise of new social movements (for example, feminism, and ecology). The network society is characterised by: increasing levels of economic and social polarisation locally, nationally, internationally; the globalisation of finance and industrial capital; a relative decline in the power of nation-states vis-à-vis international capital; and the increasing importance of media in all aspects of contemporary life.

In the face of the increased mobility of capital, encouraged by developments in information and communication technologies, states have lost some of their power to determine their own destinies and this leads, Castells argues, to a crisis of democracy as citizens are less and less in control of their societies (1997, 243-353). To a certain extent in response to the rise of the network enterprise, states have grouped together as network states in an attempt to reassert their control over capital. The European Union is the best example of a network state (1998, 330-354) but there are also many other examples of more loosely networked states (United Nations, North American Free Trade Association, G8). However, such international co-operation is made less effective because of inter-state competition as sites of production, the so-called "beauty contest" for capital. This competition encourages state policies of low-wage and low corporate taxation, "the race to the bottom," that have implications for income inequality and the redistributive powers of the state.

The inter-state competition is also fuelled by the widespread acceptance of an ideology of consumer capitalism that, in turn, has implications for the ability of nation-states or even network states to address global environmental problems.

This logic has led to the adoption of a neo-liberal agenda in OECD states. Many states have seen a rightward shift in the policies of social democratic parties. While such a shift is often presented as an inevitable response to the globalisation of the economy it is unable to address inequality at either local or global level and environmental problems. The adoption of a neo-liberal agenda by social democratic parties and the acceptance of a de facto loss of sovereignty have led to a crisis in the public sphere. Traditional forms of politics are perceived as ineffectual. Consequently, we have witnessed the rise of new social movements (human rights, greens, and development) that are united in their resistance to neo-liberal globalisation but are disparate in terms of aims and beliefs. In a highly mediated society, a key strategy of new social movements is to generate counter-publicity with the intention of influencing a volatile public whose faith in parties and states is declining. Castells places much hope at the feet of these new social movements to work on an international level using information and communication technology to put pressure on states to address co-operatively questions of inequality and the environment. This is a politics of symbolic contestation fought out primarily in the mediatised public sphere:

The reconstruction of society's institutions by cultural social movements, bringing technology under the control of people's needs and desires, seems to require a long march from the communes built around resistant identity to the height of new project identities.... Examples of such processes, as observed in contemporary social movements and politics, are the construction of new, egalitarian families; the widespread acceptance of the concept of sustainable development; and the universal mobilisation in defense of human rights wherever the defense has to be taken up. For the transition to be undertaken, from resistance identity to project identity, a new politics will have to emerge. This will be a cultural politics that starts from the premise that informational politics is predominantly enacted in the space of the media, and fights with symbols, yet connects to values and issues that spring from people's life experience in the information age (Castells 1998, 372-3).

We are in agreement with Castells concerning the importance of symbolic contestation, or in our terms counter-publicity, of the dominant public sphere by new social movements. However, one important point of disagreement is the division that he draws between the new politics of social movements and the old, redundant politics of class.

Rather surprisingly given Castells' use of a Marxist sounding vocabulary and his emphasis on growing economic inequality, he consigns class struggle to the dustbin of history because the individualisation of work in the network society precludes the development of class consciousness. This seems somewhat premature bearing in mind the possibility of class politics being conducted inside the workplace (for example, against the relocation of a factory to a lower wage economy), outside the workplace (for example, struggles over housing) and the development of a global economy that is encouraging the development of an industrial working class and union growth in newly industrialising economies.

There is a good deal of agreement between Castells and Beck. Beck's development of the concept of "second modernity" in the late 1990s is supposed to emphasise a break, an epochal shift. "Second modernity" is meant to distinguish his conception of the present from that of postmodernists who see societal fragmentation, from that of evolutionary theorists who see no evidence of an epochal shift, and from his own earlier formulation of the concept of "reflexive modernisation" which has led to misunderstandings concerning the scale and scope of transitions in modernity: "Reference to a second age of modernity is intended to make it clear that there is a structural epochal break – a paradigm shift" (Beck 2000, 81).

Second modernity, according to Beck, may be characterised by a pervasive interconnectedness of the economic, the cultural and political. Globalisation is often conceived primarily in economic terms. The development of global capitalism, aided and abetted by technological advance, restricts the ability of nation-states to determine their own destinies. This precipitates a loss of faith in the political institutions of the nation-state and encourages the growth of citizens' initiatives. Beck is very supportive of such groups and holds out the hope that the development of transnational citizens' groups may lead to a reassertion of democratic control over capital in response to the de facto loss of sovereignty on the part of nation-states.

Beck argues that economic changes are accompanied by cultural and political changes that he wishes to signify through developing the concept of "cosmopolitanisation." Cosmopolitanisation provides a resource for the development of a transnational politics of citizens:

As more processes show less regard for state boundaries – people shop internationally, work internationally, love internationally, marry internationally, research internationally, grow up and are educated internationally (that is, multi-lingually), live and think transnationally, that is, combine multiple loyalties and identities in their lives – the paradigm of societies organised within the framework of the nation-state inevitably loses contact with reality (Beck 2000, 80).

Beck's development of the concept of cosmopolitanisation owes much to the work of David Held (1995) in bringing together political theory and international relations. For Held, however, although he can discern cosmopolitan trends in the contemporary world, the concept of "cosmopolitan democracy" is, first and foremost, a normative concept, an ideal that is to be worked towards rather than a currently existing reality. Held suggests (1995, 125), and we would agree, that Falk's notion of an emerging global civil society, for example, "seems somewhat premature."

For Beck (2000, 24), the work of groups in civil society and the public sphere needs to be fostered, as an answer to unemployment and the creation of what he terms a "neo-feudal service economy" and the crisis and decay of democratic institutions. In order to sustain "creative disobedience," the state should pay citizens to do precisely that. While this may be in principal an excellent idea it is hard to find trends in OECD societies that indicate the imminent realisation of this idea (Beck 2000, 46). While people are being encouraged to undertake voluntary work and to donate to support the work of voluntary groups by states, the unemployed in the UK, for example, are increasingly forced into seeking traditional forms of employment in order to reduce the state's social security bill. In other words, for Beck's

idea to be realised that would have to be a shift away from neo-liberal economic policy and there are few signs of this. In addition, it seems that states are becoming increasingly draconian in their response to acts of civil disobedience. If it is optimistic to suggest the advent of transnational citizens' movements, it is doubly optimistic to expect nation-states to fund them. However, the increasing mobility of capital and the consequent diminution of the power of nation-states does indeed require a new political subject. Beck's call to arms is both optimistic and yet perhaps represents the best prospects for the democratisation of world society: "translocal social movements and national-culturally rooted parties of world citizens. One hundred and fifty years after the *Communist Manifesto* it is time for the World Citizen Manifesto: world citizens of all countries unite!" (Beck 1998, 19).

Conclusion

We have attempted to bring together some of the key sociological thinkers of our time to help explain and identify what we believe is an increase in counter publicity activity brought about through a combination of social and political configurations that mark out the current stage of modernity as distinct. In particular, we have drawn attention to the intensification of globalisation, the rise of neo-liberalism, the decline of trust and social democracy in the dominant public sphere, a forging of solidarity between disparate identities along with the technological potential to link geographical distances, political causes and organise translocal protests. The crisis of dominant public spheres and the rise of counter publicity are best understood as both a consequence of and a response to the globalisation of modernity.

There seems much agreement between Castells and Beck in the hope they place in the role of new social movements and their ability to contest mediatised public spheres as progenitors of a global or cosmopolitan citizenship. In considering the nature of such counter publicity, the question of whether civil society simply builds on associations of interest that may have arisen out of the individualisation of lifestyles organised around consumption in the market place, or whether it is based on something more than enlightened self-interest, is crucial to answer in order to understand the extent of their democratic potential. Is a "strong civil society" something that will enhance and deepen democracy through increased participation in a revitalised public sphere, or is it rather a neo-liberal attempt at reconciling the demands of individual choice with the need for social cohesion? Hirst (1994) offers a vision of the future in which there is a substantial devolution of power down from the centralised state to a system of voluntary self-governing associations. But he also states that "the core ethical claim of associationism ... is justified on essentially individualistic terms" (Hirst 1994, 50).

The increased potential for counter publicity to contest symbolically the public sphere is one by-product of the current inability of traditional nation-state political parties to address worsening global problems such as inequality and the environment. It may indeed be that new social movements are the best hope we have to extend democracy at both local and global level and yet when one considers the vastly unequal resources that are at the disposal of NGOs and transnational corporations and the increasingly privatised character of dominant public spheres in advanced capitalist societies it is wise to remain sanguine about their prospects.

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New media, counter publicity and the public sphere

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Abstract

New media have been widely used by radical groups of both Left and Right to advance their political projects. The aim of this article to provide a theoretical framework, through developing the concepts of public sphere and counter-public sphere, which allows us to understand the growing importance of alternative media in society and to indicate how this framework might generate questions for empirical research.

Key words

alternative media • civil society • counter-public sphere
• public sphere • radical media

INTRODUCTION

Non-mass media, sometimes referred to as small, alternative, non-mainstream, radical, grassroots or community media, represent a vast and varied cultural realm of production that is often based on citizen participation (O'Sullivan et al., 1994). It is a burgeoning area of production that, in recent times, has received an enormous boost through the use of the internet. However, it is an area that is under-researched and undertheorized. The accounts of these media that do exist operate usually at the level of description (what exists, where and how it functions) and become frequently overwhelmed by issues of definition. The aim of this article is to

develop a theoretical framework that may allow us to understand the growing importance of alternative media in society, and to indicate how this framework might generate questions for empirical research.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN FLUX

At the conference to mark the English translation of Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 (Habermas, 1989), Craig Calhoun argued against Habermas's Adornian-inspired pessimistic position of the early 1960s, maintaining that the consequences of mass media were not 'uniformly negative' and that there is a certain amount of room for manoeuvre for 'alternative democratic media strategies' (Calhoun, 1992: 33). He is referring here, on the one hand, to the possibility of groups in civil society exerting influence upon the mass media, and on the other, of establishing alternative, discursively-connected public spheres (1992: 37). Habermas has himself revised his public sphere thesis in the last ten years to take account of such phenomena.

We wish to chart the transformation in Habermas's own work over the past decade, partly as a result of the critique of his original thesis and partly as a result of his own reflections on the contemporary relationship between media and politics. As such, our account differs from the standard that first lays out Habermas's original thesis and then summarizes critiques of the thesis, emphasizing the exclusions of the male bourgeois public sphere. Our aim here is to chart the development of the concept of the public sphere post-1989.

Habermas's focus in his *Habilitationschrift* was on the bourgeois public sphere. His intention was to show the rise and fall of the public sphere, the rise of a critical public and its decay. He argues that the increasing complexity and rationalization of societies over the course of the 20th century, together with the growth of the mass media, have transformed the public sphere: 'the public sphere becomes the court before which public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which critical debate is carried on' (Habermas, 1989: 201). In other words, horizontal communication between citizens is increasingly replaced by vertical communication between mass media, greatly influenced by both the state and capital, and consumers. The space for participatory communication is severely constricted. This interpretation of the trajectory of the public sphere owed a great deal to Adorno and Horkheimer's (1973) work on the culture industries and the prognosis of a move towards an increasingly administered society. However, Habermas's intention was not only critical but also redemptive. He wished to rescue the rational kernel from the ideological concept. The ethical impulse lying behind the creation of the public sphere, of inventing a space where citizens may meet and discuss as equals, needs to be separated out from the exclusions that characterized the actual bourgeois male public

sphere. The rational kernel needs to be preserved and then built upon in order to establish the conditions for living in a truly democratic society.

While Habermas maintains that most of his earlier diagnosis of the character of the public sphere in the 20th century is correct, he does want to introduce certain revisions and elaborations. These relate in particular to instances of intentional political mobilization that seek to intervene in the mass media public sphere or to develop a counter-public sphere.

Habermas's sole attention to the bourgeois public sphere aroused considerable criticism, both at the time of the student movement in the late 1960s/early 1970s, and at the time of English translation (Negt and Kluge, 1972; Calhoun, 1992: 38–9). Habermas saw proletarian public spheres, for example, as derivative of the bourgeois public sphere and as unworthy of much attention. In his response to the conference in 1989, Habermas recognizes this as a problem with the book. He admits that

only after reading Mikhail Bakhtin's great book *Rabelais and His World* have my eyes become really opened to the inner dynamics of a plebeian culture. The culture of the common people apparently was by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counterproject to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines. (Habermas, 1992: 427)

Thus, Habermas recognizes not only the existence of alternative public spheres but also their capacity for challenging domination. While he maintains that his analysis of the public sphere infrastructure still pertains to a mass media largely subordinate to the interests of capital on the one hand, and the state on the other, he has in the meantime revised his pessimistic opinion of the public. Rather than seeing the public as cultural dupes in the manner of Adorno and Horkheimer, he now emphasizes the 'pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public' (1992: 438) that is able to resist mass-mediated representations of society and create its own political interventions.

What this points to is a revision of the public sphere thesis in light of the 'revolutions' in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, and developments in civil society through the emergence of new social movements in advanced capitalist societies (for example, the Green movement in Germany). In addition, there have also been many attempts (with modest degrees of success) in recent years to decentralize the media and make them more accessible and responsive to citizens. Many countries have experienced a growth in non-mass, localized forms of media such as community radio, television and newspapers (for example, the use of Restricted Service Licences (RSLs) for cable television and community radio in the UK). There has also been considerable growth in non-governmental organizations (NGOs – the number of registered charities in the UK is now in excess of

185,000), most of which seek to use mass and/or small media as part of their work. A central question for Habermas is whether these groups in civil society can intervene in the mass media public sphere and change the agenda through bringing about a critical process of communication. This can be exceedingly difficult to do in a market-led, mass-mediated system enveloped in its own professional ideologies about what is and is not newsworthy, about who is a credible source of opinion and information and who is not (Fenton et al., 1998). Furthermore, the ability of alternative forms of communication to encourage progressive social change must be set in the context of the global dominance of multi-media conglomerates, such as News Corp and AOL/Time Warner.

Dahlgren (1994) tackles this by making an explicit analytic distinction between the common domain of the public sphere and the advocacy domain. In this functional differentiation, the common domain is the arena that strives for universalism by appealing to a general public. It is here that we find, for the most part, the dominant media, which ideally provide information, debate and opinion for all members of society. This is done through a variety of media, formats and representational modes, taking into account the sociocultural segmentation of society. The advocacy domain consists partly of time and space made available by the dominant media and partly of a plurality of smaller civic media from political parties, interest groups, movements, organizations and networks. This distinction allows us to consider not only the official public sphere of the dominators, but also the public sphere of the dominated. As Verstraeten (1995: 9) says: 'Every dominant public sphere almost inevitably calls up an anti-publicness.'

Habermas (1996) pursues a complementary line of thinking. Can autonomous public spheres bring conflicts from the periphery to the centre of public life via the mass media in order to generate critical debate amongst a wider public? Here, Habermas has moved away considerably from structural transformation work and wishes to maintain that autonomous public spheres can acquire influence in the mass media public sphere under certain circumstances.

Habermas's earlier position saw the public sphere at rest rather than in flux (Habermas, 1989). When one looks at the public sphere at rest, one tends to note the mixed economy of capitalist-owned and state-regulated public sphere that is exclusive. However, when one introduces the notion that the public sphere, in a manner consistent with the rest of society, is subject to periodic crises then one can observe gaps opening up within it: '[I]n periods of mobilization, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate. The balance of power between civil society and the political systems then shifts' (Habermas, 1996: 379). The presentation of the issue is important: '[O]nly through their controversial presentation in the media do such topics reach the larger

public and subsequently gain a place on the “public agenda” (1996: 381). A crisis situation, according to Habermas, raises the question of the normative foundations of society. Endogenous mobilization in civil society can exploit the ‘latent dependency’ and ‘normative self-understanding’ (1996: 382) of the mass-media public sphere in order to make its voice heard.

While the mass-media public sphere may be subject to periodic crises that may be exploited by groups in civil society, new information and communication technologies such as the world wide web may contribute to the fragmentation of civil society, as well as political mobilization and participation. Habermas registers his ambivalence towards new information and communication technologies as a potential source of equal and inclusive communication:

Whereas the growth of systems and networks multiplies possible contacts and exchanges of information, it does not lead per se to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world and to the discursive interweaving of conceptions of relevance, themes, and contradictions from which political public spheres arise. The consciousness of planning, communicating and acting subjects seems to have simultaneously expanded and fragmented. The publics produced by the Internet remain closed off from one another like global villages. For the present it remains unclear whether an expanding public consciousness, though centered in the lifeworld, nevertheless has the ability to span systematically differentiated contexts, or whether the systemic processes, having become independent, have long since severed their ties with all contexts produced by political communication. (Habermas, 1998: 120–1)

Such networks obviously then become extremely problematic from the standpoint of discourse ethics. Greater pluralism may be regarded as a risk for deliberative democracy rather than its saviour. Such a concern is echoed by Sunstein, who argues that the internet has spawned large numbers of radical websites and discussion groups allowing the public to bypass more moderate and balanced expressions of opinion in the mass media (which are also, he argues, subject to fragmentation for essentially technological reasons). Moreover, these sites tend to link only to sites that have similar views (Sunstein, 2001: 59). Such findings are supported by other empirical work, such as Hill and Hughes (1998). Sunstein argues that a consequence of this is that we witness group polarization (2001: 65) and this is likely to become more extreme with time. As such, Sunstein contends that two preconditions for a well-functioning, deliberative democracy are threatened by the growth of the internet and the advent of multi-channel broadcasting. First, people should be exposed to materials that they have not chosen in advance. This results in a reconsideration of the issues and often a recognition of the partial validity of opposing points of view. Second, people should have a range of common experiences, in order that they may come to an understanding with respect to particular issues. In complex

modern societies such common experiences or 'social glue' are often produced by mass media representations. However, Sunstein's position shares Habermas's ambivalence. On the one hand, the production of enclaves may threaten deliberative democracy; on the other, Sunstein recognizes that 'group polarization helped fuel many movements of great value – including, for example, the civil rights movement, the antislavery movement, and the movement for sex equality' (2001: 75). One could argue that the internet may foster the growth of transnational enclaves of great value (for example, the environmental movement), but their value depends ultimately on how influential these enclaves become in the context of the mass media public sphere and formation of public opinion beyond the radical ghetto.

In other words, the possibility for political public spheres to emerge is likely to rest in part on the ability of autonomous public spheres to create alliances and organize solidarity, but the new forms of solidarity that networks may help to engender may also mean a greater fragmentation of civil society with adverse consequences for democratic deliberation. However, even before we can begin to discuss the potential for horizontal networks imbued with political meaning, we need to understand more fully what is meant by 'autonomous public spheres'. To do this requires an exploration of the notion of civil society.

CIVIL SOCIETY, ADVOCACY AND POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION

Civil society and public sphere are not interchangeable concepts. Economic conditions affect the public sphere and help to shape civil society, but they are not synonymous. When the terms 'civil society' and 'public sphere' are taken up for theoretical use it is crucial to keep them distinct and analyse the relationship between social institutions and discourse. Collapsing one into the other not only makes both vague, it blocks attention to certain issues.

Exponents of civil society present it as a mediating space between the private and public spheres in a pluralist democracy. A place where individuals and groups are free to form organizations that function independently and that can mediate between citizens and the state – the place where autonomous public spheres reside. The modern idea of civil society emerged in the late 18th century as a means of overcoming the newly-perceived tension between public and private realms (Seligman, 1997). In fact, what stood at the core of all attempts to articulate a notion of civil society in that period, and since, has been the problematic relation between the private and the public, the individual and the social, of public ethics and individual passions, and public concerns. The same social and theoretical dilemmas have also fed into the debate on the concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Civil society is not shorthand for a political arena, yet its democratization is a political project. It is neither derived from, nor expresses, any natural 'authentic humanity' and can certainly function in many repressive ways. It may well hinder the conditions for political reflection and participation, as well as enhance them.

The concept of the public sphere goes beyond general appeals to the nature of civil society in attempts to explain the social foundations of democracy, and to introduce a discussion of the specific organization of social and cultural bases within civil society for the development of an effective rational-critical discourse. Calhoun (1993) reminds us that what is at issue is the relationship between patterns of social organization and a certain kind of discourse and political participation, a public sphere in which rational-critical arguments are decisive, rather than the status of actors. It is not helpful to collapse discourse or politics into social organization as if neither culture nor the wills of actors mattered. Neither is it helpful to forget how much democratic life depends on specific kinds of social organization, even though they do not necessarily and deterministically produce it. Separating civil society from the public sphere allows us to identify those types of social organization within a counter-public sphere that may work against democratic gain – they may be autonomous but anti-democratic in process and purpose. Cohen and Arato (1992) see civil society in the West as a domain of social interaction situated between market and state and composed chiefly of the intimate sphere (especially the family); the sphere of associations (in particular voluntary associations); social movements and the many forms of public communication. However, this does not translate into a simple equation between public communication of civil society and the public sphere. Public communications are part of the process of realising the public sphere, allowing us to analyse how shared democratic values and identification as democratic citizens are achieved and maintained; how political/civic cultures are generated – essentially, to imagine how civil society can organize democratically for politically progressive ends. Public communication is not a descriptive element of civil society, but taking the two concepts together and treating them as analytically distinct categories allows a more detailed critical appraisal of what counts as, or defines, a political community, and what knits society together or provides for social integration (Calhoun, 1993). We might argue, following Habermas, that a political public sphere is successful when it provides for a discourse about shared societal concerns that is both rational-critical and influential (Calhoun, 1993). When the ethical framework of a political public sphere is undermined or deliberately overturned it is likely that a counter-public sphere will cease to be rational and/or critical and become anti-democratic. A political public sphere

depends on a favourable organization of civil society. It is not enough that there simply be civil society.

Advocacy groups in civil society exist at international, national and at local community level, in myriad forms both large and small. Some are traditional and paternalistic. Others are transparently democratic, controlled and operated by participants. Many voluntary organizations have close partnership relationships with the state, often depending on statutory funding for survival. Yet others challenge the state through vigorous social movements (for example, environmental, peace, gay/lesbian, feminist, anti-racist and so forth) that some see as 'a people's opposition'. This leads to the definition of civil society as:

The idea of institutional and ideological pluralism, which prevents the establishment of a monopoly of power and truth, and counterbalances those central institutions which, though necessary, might otherwise acquire such monopoly. (Gellner, 1996: 4)

But there is no essential link between civil society and civilized society. It is worth remembering that civil society has had a chequered political history. The Nazi Party undermined the Weimar Republic in Germany by infiltrating local organizations. Both the Mafia and the Ku Klux Klan are intermediate organizations advocating a particular political project. In a climate of increasing ethnic conflict, manifested in Europe by communal hostility towards asylum seekers and political refugees, intermediate organizations can be anything but civil and may act contrary to the ideals of a public sphere.

The presence of diverse civil society organizations, including political advocacy groups, does not seem to be a sufficient condition even for democratic transition. State socialist East Germany possessed a large variety of such organizations quite in line with the north European norm and ahead of southern Europe, and yet was one of the more oppressive East European regimes (Therborn, 1996). Indeed it may be argued that the proliferation of such organizations facilitated the state's surveillance operations, without compromising their functional autonomy. Although citizens groups did spark off the protests in East Germany in 1989 there is clearly more to democratization than a good range of organizations intermediate between state and family. If communal leaders do not have to justify often highly unequal power structures and traditions, the position of those subordinated within the community is left untouched. This runs the risk of condemning one form of oppression – that represented by the modern bureaucratic state – while immunizing those occurring within particular communities from scrutiny.

When considering the potential for increased political democracy via the activity of groups in the advocacy domain, it is important not to fall prey to

a Left cultural romanticism that sees all forms of grassroots cultural expression as 'resistance'. Exactly what they are resisting is often more difficult to articulate. Furthermore, even if we wanted to recognize that this was activity operating contrary to the status quo, it does not avoid the problem that both the forms and the potential success of resistance can be determined by the system being resisted (Garnham, 1992). Those social groups identified as potential agents in this shifting coalition largely exist in terms of group identities created via the forms and institutions of mediated communications, or via consumer-taste publics that themselves use their badges of identity, symbols created and circulated in the sphere of advertising. Crucially, identity formation is not external to politics and public discourse.

To avoid romanticizing the political capabilities of alternative identities we can return to Negt and Kluge's (1972) notion of *anti-publicness*. Distinctly Marxist in approach, its basic tenet is that social wealth is created, and can therefore be reappropriated, by producing subjects. In this regard, Negt and Kluge differ from certain tendencies in cultural studies that focus on activities of consumption at the expense of a critique of production, and tend to celebrate 'the popular' as a site of resistance. Negt and Kluge's notion of the production of life-contexts crucially includes practices of consumption, of mass cultural reception and interpretation – however, the point is to change relations of production. The possibility that production could be organized differently, in the interest of the producing/experiencing subjects rather than profit, provides a standard of critique for prevailing products and practices. This critique, in Negt and Kluge's view, most effectively takes the form of counter-productions, of an alternative media practice that intervenes in the contemporary dominant public sphere.

Negt and Kluge recognize that no local counter-public can emerge today outside, or independently of, existing industrial-commercial public spheres, especially electronic publicity. The latter is quite evidently deterritorialized, comprising transnational networks of distribution and consumption such as pop music and video, food and fashion industries, communications and information technologies. These deterritorialized forms of publicity are increasingly transacted in private, through networks of individual consumption. Since the local and global have become irreversibly entwined in people's experience, the category of the local itself needs to be reconceptualized beyond a nostalgic restoration of urban space, if it is to have any significance for an alternative or counter-public sphere. For these reasons we prefer the term 'counter-public sphere' to 'autonomous public sphere', with the former suggestive of a politics that seeks to challenge the dominant public sphere rather than simply be independent from it. In fact a degree of interaction with the mainstream media may be one of the criteria for successful political intervention. Similarly a co-dependent relationship

with the state may increase the potential for advocacy of certain types of NGO.

Inasmuch as Negt and Kluge's notion of a counter-public sphere is grounded in multiple and mediated contexts of production and consumption, it also differs from reinscriptions of the local with meanings surrounding the notion of 'community'. This distinction is particularly important in light of recent efforts to resuscitate the category of the community as a site of resistance, whether as a suppressed narrative for postcolonial politics or as a framing agenda for identity politics (Hansen, 1993).

The ideal of community refers to a model of association patterned on family and kinship relations, on an affective language of love and loyalty, on assumptions of authenticity, homogeneity and continuity, of inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness. The notion of a counter-public, by contrast, refers to a specifically modern phenomenon, contemporaneous with, and responding to, dominant capitalist communications. It offers forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation, but these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated, no longer rooted in face-to-face relations, and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation. No doubt the language of community provides a powerful matrix of identification and thus may function as a mobilizing force for transformative politics. However, counter-public status and the effectiveness of such language depends upon two factors: first, the extent to which it knows itself as rhetoric, reinventing the promise of community through discourse; second, the extent to which it admits difference and differentiation within its own borders, is capable of accepting multiply-determined identities and identification. The admission of discursive struggle into the process of subordinate groups is the condition of the possibility for different counter-publics to overlap and form alliances (Hansen, 1993).

Once the public sphere is defined as a horizon for the organization of social experience, it follows that there are multiple and competing counter-publics, each marked by specific terms of exclusion (for example, those of class, race, gender) in relation to dominant communications, yet each understanding itself as a nucleus for an alternative organization of society. But the 'proliferation of subaltern counter publics' (Fraser, 1992: 69–70) does not necessarily lead to a multiplication of forces. Unless powerful efforts at alliances are made – and such efforts have been made successfully, especially in the area of the environment, globalization and ecology – the oppositional energy of individual groups and subcultures is more often neutralized in the marketplace of multicultural pluralism, or polarized in a reductive competition of victimizations. Apart from the hegemonic interest

in preventing counter-public alliances, the structural problem that arises with the proliferation of counter-publics is one of translation, of communicating across a wider arena of discursive contestation. Discussing possible relations among multiple competing publics in a hypothetical egalitarian, multicultural society, Fraser speaks of the need for 'an additional, more comprehensive arena in which members of different, more limited publics talk across lines of cultural diversity' (1992: 117). Thus it may not be that individuals participate in more than one public; there may be many different publics, including at least one public in which participants can deliberate as peers across lines of difference about policy that concerns them all.

For Negt and Kluge, the question of what constitutes a counter-public cannot be answered in any singular, foundational manner but is a matter of relationality, conjunctural shifts and alliances, making connections with other publics and other types of publicity. Negt and Kluge assert that it is the task of theory to identify points of contiguity, of overlap, among diverse and disparate counter-public projects. The possibility of change relies on uneven organizational structures of dominant publicity which contain potential for instability, accidental collisions and opportunities, unpredictable conjunctures – conditions under which alternative formations and collective interests may gain a momentum of their own. One source of instability is the dependence of industrial-commercial public spheres on other forms of public life; on the disintegrating institutions of the dominant public sphere for purposes of legitimation; on popular traditions or subaltern memory for experiential substance that reveal the contradictions of advanced capitalism.

The seams and overlays between different types of public communication provide a context from which counter-publics can and do emerge, created conditions under which industrially-mediated experience can be reclaimed for the articulation of concrete needs and contradictions, for discursive struggles over subjectivity, meaning and representation. Whether the margin of unpredictability, disjunction and improvisation has increased with the 1980s turn to post-Fordist economy of cultural diversification, or whether it is rendered irrelevant by the concomitant move towards ever-greater privatization, remains a crucial and open question. However, one thing remains clear: a cultural politics of counter-publicity can be founded neither on abstract ideals of universality nor on essentialist notions of community. Rather, it has to begin by understanding the complex dynamics of existing public spheres and counter-public spheres, their embeddedness in global and local contexts, their unstable make-up, the configuration of civil society and the particular ways of (dis)organizing social and collective experience – gaps and overlaps that can be used for agency and solidarity. And then, importantly, any counter-publicity must be evaluated against the constant power of cultural and economic capital and accumulation.

COUNTER PUBLICITY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: A RESEARCH AGENDA

Alternative media has been widely derided in the field of media, communication and cultural studies. As Pimlott notes, 'alternative media have had a spectacular lack of success in reaching out beyond the radical ghetto' (Curran, 2000: 193) and suffer generally from a lack of audience, professionalism and finance. Recently, however, the internet has been hailed as the saviour of alternative or radical media and indeed politics, perfectly matched for the widely-dispersed resistance of culture jammers and radical political protesters by both theorists and activists. For example, Naomi Klein (2000) argues that the internet facilitates international communication between NGOs, thus allowing protesters to respond on an international level to local and global events while requiring minimal resources and bureaucracy. Klein goes so far as to claim an elective affinity between the 'anti-globalization' protests and the decentralized, non-hierarchical character of the internet. There are even 'how-to' guides for activists published in book form, for example, Walch (1999). While it is important to be wary of overblown claims for the radical political potential of the internet, there are good reasons to begin to take alternative media more seriously. We expect the relationship between radical political protest and internet communication to emerge as an important area of empirical research over the coming years.

The *cause celebre* of internet political activism is the Zapatista's use of the internet, beginning in 1994 in support of their partially successful struggle against the Mexican government and the North American Free Trade Association (Downing, 2001). The Zapatista's counter-publicity had an impact on both the public sphere in Mexico, where the demands of the peasants were reported on government-controlled television (2001: 218), and on the transnational public sphere as the Zapatista's struggle drew support from journalists, academics and human rights groups around the world (2001: 227). The Zapatista's tactics of offline protest and online counter-publicity has become the inspiration for resource-poor activists around the world.

The McSpotlight website is another David and Goliath story that has received some academic and journalistic attention (Atton, 2002). It was established in early 1996 in order to support two activists charged with libel by McDonalds, and has continued long beyond the lifetime of the trial, claiming to have 1.5 million hits per month by June 2000 (2002: 147). The site contains in the region of 21,000 files and is the work of volunteers from 22 countries spanning four continents. The website has also attracted free publicity from mass media who shy away from making the claims to be found on the McSpotlight site (see <http://www.mcspotlight.org>).

The Independent Media Centre (IMC) was established by a handful of local media activists in Seattle in the weeks leading up to the Third

Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999. The aim was to provide a source of news and analysis of the WTO, counter to what IMC viewed as corporate-controlled media. IMC was inspired by a web-stream that documented the J18 (18 June 1999) Carnival Against Capitalism in the City of London. IMC bought the web server but relied upon free software for the operating system, web server and databases, thus benefiting from the shareware history of the internet (for a discussion of the importance of the hacker ethic, see Himanen (2001)) A small computer service company, encoding.com, donated web space and bandwidth. Additional funding came from donations and selling videos. The budget for the N30 coverage was in the region of \$75,000. IMC provided two locations, video-editing facilities, networked computers, faxes and telephones for around 400 volunteers. The website received 1.5 million hits from individual users during the week of the conference, largely as a consequence of the site being linked to the front page of Yahoo news and OneWorld. Video from the demonstrations was also used by Reuters, CNN and the BBC. The success of the Seattle site spawned a movement, and Indymedia has continued to grow in strength and visibility. For example, the Italian Indymedia website recorded 5 million page impressions during the 2001 G8 Summit in Genoa, and links to Indymedia sites can be found on a plethora of activist sites. Indymedia itself became a mass media story during the summit when riot police raided its headquarters. There are now over 50 Indymedia sites internationally. While mostly in the US and Canada, there are now also sites in Europe and Australia, in Brazil, Colombia, Congo, India, Israel, Mexico and Palestine.

The second 'Al Aqsa' Intifada in Israel/Palestine has witnessed extensive use of the internet by media activists in order to support the Palestinian struggle for human rights (use of the internet before the second Intifada was already substantial). Here the intention is to provide publicity to counter what many activists see as a Zionist version of history and politics that is produced (either intentionally or unwittingly) by the vast majority of mass media in Europe and North America. For example, the Electronic Intifada (<http://electronicintifada.net>) is a website started by four activist-academics based in Palestine and in North America aimed at both the general audience and specifically at journalists and editors, in an attempt to educate journalists concerning the history of the conflict and the media myths that are regularly repeated concerning Israel-Palestine.

So far we have pointed to examples of the construction of 'left-wing' virtual counter-public spheres, but it would be clearly a mistake to ignore the construction of right-wing counter-publics: Hill and Hughes conclude that 'conservative websites are larger, flashier, and more visible on the World Wide Web than are either liberal or left-wing sites' (1998: 153), and that while conservatives form a minority of internet users, 'they dominate the

Usenet political newsgroups and AOL's political chat rooms' (1998: 174). A cursory investigation of the contents of the web reveals thousands of radical right-wing sites constructed by individuals and groups who see themselves as being excluded from the mass-media public sphere and as engaging in counter-publicity. The extensive use of the internet by extreme right-wing groups has attracted most concern in Germany, where the expression of certain opinions are illegal (for example, denial of the existence of the Shoah), and where there has been a clear increase in the amount of extreme Right activity. The number of extreme right-wing websites has increased from 32 in 1996 to around 1300 in 2002 (<http://www.verfassungsschutz.de>). The Constitutional Court has taken steps to outlaw the most extreme sites but this has seen a transfer of activities to the US, where extreme right-wing opinions are protected by the First Amendment and where neo-Nazis have been keen to support their friends in Germany by producing mirror sites (for example, when Deutsche Telekom took steps to prevent access to extreme right-wing sites for German users in 1996, this led to the production of many mirror sites in the US: <http://www.idgr.de>). Many German internet service providers (ISPs) now block access to extreme Right websites, but extreme Right groups and parties have responded by setting themselves up as ISPs. Many sites also provide details of how blocks can be bypassed by using proxy servers. The Constitutional Court notes that there are now 134 extreme right-wing groups in Germany and they have a register of 51,400 active supporters, of whom they estimate that 9000 are ready to commit acts of violence. This 'clearly increasing tendency' to commit acts of violence coincides with the rapid growth of the use of the internet and there is a genuine fear that, particularly amongst young people in the new German states, there is a growing acceptance of extreme right-wing views. While there are as yet no detailed empirical studies of this phenomenon, clearly there is a case for exploring a possible relationship between internet use by young people, use by extreme Right groups, the apparent success of neo-Nazi ideology, and the growth of violence against ethnic minority groups.

It is clear that the internet permits radical groups from both Left and Right (the definition of 'radical' obviously depends on the particular sociopolitical context) to construct inexpensive virtual counter-public spheres to accompany their other forms of organization and protest. The opinions of these groups have traditionally been excluded or marginalized in the mass-media public sphere. The internet offers them a way not only of communicating with supporters, but also the potential to reach out beyond the 'radical ghetto' both directly (disintermediation) and indirectly, through influencing the mass media. The study of groups' new media use may be rewarding. Central issues here are: the variety of uses of the internet (such as organization, propaganda and types of online political activity); the

relationship between websites and the offline political activities of such groups (for example, the role of websites in organizing street protest or acts of violence); the role of websites in generating a greater sense of solidarity or group identity amongst the adherents of such groups and of generating extremism, also in generating increased support for the opinions of radical groups beyond the 'ghetto'; and whether the construction of a virtual counter-public sphere leads to radical groups gaining greater publicity in the mass-media public sphere (one could make the case that highly negative reporting in the mass-media public sphere can lead to greater support for radical groups).

Here, Habermas's revision of his ideas on the public sphere can be supplemented by our focus on counter-public spheres, to provide a model that can be used in empirical analysis for the way in which destabilization of the public sphere and society may occur. Put simply, the hypothesis is that the mass-media public sphere will become more open to radical opinion as a result of the coincidence of societal crises and the growth of virtual counter-public spheres. This should be understood as a self-reinforcing process that will lead, in turn, to greater counter-public sphere activity. This may further lead to an examination of the relationship between shifts in counter-public spheres, the mass-media public sphere and societal change. In the early 1990s, Habermas tended to foreground the 'positive' aspects of this process (for example, the impact of environmental groups on critical-rational debate in the public sphere), but it is now abundantly clear that the instability of the public sphere can also be exploited by the extreme Right.

The benefits of networks can also be grasped by radical groups, who can use hyperlinks to direct visitors to one website to the resources of others. Among the central questions here are: do links lead to a greater sense of solidarity between similar but distinct radical groups? Does the internet lead to greater international collaboration between such groups? The key issues here may be encapsulated by the concepts of social solidarity and fragmentation. Are new forms of internet-facilitated social solidarity emerging locally and transnationally? Are new forms of fragmentation emerging locally and transnationally, encouraged by internet use? We suspect that internet use is contributing simultaneously to new forms of social solidarity and fragmentation. Habermas's concern is that greater pluralism in terms of contacts and exchanges between networks may not lead to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world, but rather to a greater fragmentation of civil society. Similarly, shared networks may offer a *sense* of solidarity at the click of a mouse but actual critical solidarity is by-passed. Obviously then, such networks become extremely problematic from the standpoint of discourse ethics and democratic culture. Greater pluralism may be regarded as a risk for deliberative democracy rather than its saviour. The relationship between new media, counter-public spheres and the public

sphere may become central to questions of democracy and legitimacy in the coming years.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that reviewing and developing Habermas's recent work on the concept of public sphere and counter-public sphere may help us to better understand the increasingly important role of alternative media in society. We argue that the task of analysing counter-public spheres is of particular relevance today if, as we propose above, the role of formal and informal NGOs and other citizen groups, both of the radical Left and Right, is of increasing importance. However, it is vital not to view counter-publicity in isolation from the public sphere more generally. Indeed, it may be that understanding the interactions between the two will further advance our understanding of the relationship between media representation and social change. The two spheres do of course overlap, a point made by Dahlgren (1994) in his discussion of the common domain and the advocacy domain. There are some opportunities in the public sphere (common domain) for citizens to perform an advocacy role. However, these opportunities are likely to be framed by the requirements of the mass medium. What is most interesting are the moments when counter-publicity breaks through into the common domain in its own right (rather than as decreed by corporately-controlled mass communications), providing the opportunity for ideological claims to be displaced, ruptured or contested. To understand fully the potential for counter-publicity to reach the common domain, we must first understand how it operates in the advocacy domain. To do this requires an understanding of the nature of civil society, where groups in the advocacy domain reside. Too often the public sphere is seen as interchangeable with civil society. Public communication can define a political community, but it does not in itself provide the conditions for social integration and may lead to greater fragmentation rather than greater intersubjectivity. While new media are clearly not solely responsible for the generation of counter-publicspheres, through contributing to the destabilization of the public sphere and the generation of new forms of fragmentation and solidarity, they are central to this process that presents both opportunities and dangers to the theory and practice of democracy.

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The Media, Resistance and Civil Society

Section 4: Understanding Mediation and the Concept of Resistance

Main:

Fenton, N., Bryman, A., Deacon, D. with Peter Birmingham (1998)
'Understanding Social Science' (pp.118-143) in N. Fenton, A. Bryman, D.
Deacon with P. Birmingham, *Mediating Social Science*, London: Sage.

Supplementary:

Deacon, D., Fenton, N. and Bryman, A. (1999) 'The Natural History of a
News Item', *Media, Culture and Society* 21(1):9-34.

Author's contribution: 33%

Corner, J. Richardson, K. and Fenton, N. (1990a), *Nuclear Reactions: Form
and Response in Public Issue Television*. John Libbey, London.

Author's contribution: 33%

Mediating Social Science

Natalie Fenton, Alan Bryman
and David Deacon
with Peter Birmingham



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Understanding Social Science

Issues of Audience Reception

This chapter examines the way media discourses on social science in newspapers, magazines, television and radio are interpreted. Although the emphasis is on audience understanding this is in no way taken as being external to the means by which news information is located within the political perspectives that are promoted and contested in the development of social ideologies. Rather, we contend that an analysis of audience understanding is incomplete if the media content is treated as a discrete unit irrespective of the processes by which news is generated (Philo, 1990). Media content is the result of specific processes of inscription. Likewise, we hold that an analysis of production and content is meaningless without consideration of how that content is received by those who consume it.

In Chapter 2 we have shown how the popular presentation of social scientific information may result in the transformation rather than the conveyance of social scientific knowledge. This comes down to a selective use of concepts and a neglect of theoretical integration in favour of discrete facts or points. In Chapter 5 we discussed how the perceptions and practices of journalists and editors involved in news production are intrinsic to the character of media coverage itself. And in Chapters 3 and 4 we explored how the publicity strategies and resources of social scientists, their institutions and funding bodies can and do affect this process. What does this mean to those who consume this information? If we start from the point that most people get most of their information on public issues from the mass media, the question is a very serious one, and one that has been asked repeatedly by many theorists over many years. However, the way it has been asked and then investigated often differs substantially from one researcher to the next.

As stated in Chapter 1, the analysis of the cultural construction of meaning has been subject to differing analytical perspectives. Each perspective tackles in its own way the tension between social agents' (the audience's) constructive capabilities and the constraining potential of culture and ideology (expressed through the mass media). This is discussed in more depth in the earlier chapter; suffice to say here, for the sake of simplicity, that two intertwined strands may be analytically distinguished. At the risk of repeating ourselves, it is worth pausing momentarily to revisit these strands, which provide crucial theoretical context to the empirical

substance of this chapter. The first strand emphasizes above all the capacity of texts to position readers, thus ensuring that the parameters within which they respond are those provided by the texts themselves. Readers are thus 'held in ideology' (Tudor, 1995) by their textual placement. This audience positioning has led to texts being described as having 'inscribed readers'. The main thrust of this analysis was to see texts as instruments of ideology primarily in their capacity to situate the reading subject. This was widely criticized as 'textual determinism' which robbed readers of their social context and critical agency, leaving no room for interpretative manoeuvre. In the extreme this position situated the audience as cultural dupes, blank slates waiting to be written on.

As an antidote to a life condemned to ideological slavery came the second analytic strand – the active audience. Active audience theorists, largely from the field of cultural studies, have stressed the polysemic potential of texts (e.g. Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985; Paterson and Drummond, 1985; Jensen, 1986). Textual determinism was rejected and ambiguity and interpretative freedom were heralded as intrinsic to signficatory systems. Taken to the other extreme this translated into an interpretative free-for-all in which the 'active' audience possesses an unlimited potential to read any meaning at will from a given text. There are many problems with studies that adopt this approach. By drawing attention away from the media and texts generally as instruments of power, they have been accused of a lack of appreciation of wider political factors and hence of political quietism (Corner, 1991) and of ideological desertion. The very notion of 'active' has been equated with 'powerful'. This has caused several critics (most notably Jensen, 1990, and more recently the founders of the concept of the active audience have joined in, e.g. Ang, 1996) to question the extent to which audiences genuinely exert power over the text. Likewise, Morley has criticized the neglect in most active audience research of 'the economic, political and ideological forces acting on the construction of texts' (1993: 15).

It has also been suggested that many studies within the active audience tradition have entailed misinterpretations of the research evidence. Condit (1989), for example, argued that the common finding that audiences derive their own pleasures from texts should not be taken to imply that they are in fact making their own interpretation and thereby undermining the inscribed messages of those texts. She shows that while audiences are active in their consumption of texts they are not necessarily critical of texts' denotation; nor do they necessarily derive alternative views of them. A further criticism is that the active audience approach fails to give adequate recognition to the fact that authors of texts are able to *frame* issues and messages. They do this through what is actually present in the text and through what is absent – the silences in texts are just as significant as the messages within the texts themselves in relation to the capacity of audiences to derive alternative interpretations (Bryman, 1995).

How we think about the audience depends on our theoretical framework. As a result of a growing awareness of the framing power of texts and an

understanding that the text must be viewed in relation to hegemonic culture, more circumscribed accounts of audience activity have emerged. These tend to recognize that differently located audiences may derive particular interpretations of texts, but that the text itself is rarely subverted. In other words, the essential power of authors to frame audience reception is accepted; audiences do engage in interpretation but that interpretation is marginal to the denotative structuring of the text. In this manner ideology remains a crucial reference point but not in the form favoured in purely structuralist analyses. So, attempts to combine the best elements of the structuralist and culturalist paradigms have come to the fore. Examples of research which reveals this orientation, though with probably slightly differing views of the balance between text and audience, include Kitzinger's (1993) research on AIDS in the media, Corner et al.'s (1990) study of the representation of the nuclear energy industry, and Miller's (1994) investigation of the depiction of the Northern Ireland troubles in the media. In these analyses the reader can resist the 'preferred reading' up to a point, and to that end is an active agent.¹ Yet agency is limited by structure. As Tudor (1995: 104) says: 'the remarkable capacity of human beings to construct diverse meanings and take a variety of pleasures from texts is matched only by the equally remarkable degree to which those meanings and pleasures are common to large numbers of people.' It is within this emerging paradigm that this chapter is located.

As our research resides in the popular presentation of social science it has at its core a concern with the construction of public knowledge and the interplay of commonality and diversity. Such a project makes little sense without taking account of information management activities and their relative success or failure in shaping public belief and facilitating the exercise of power in one direction or another (see Chapters 3 and 4). And this makes little sense without a consideration of the media text as a meaningful construction. The media text cannot be understood as a social practice without considering the sense-making activities of both the participants (i.e. the media sources) and those who consume it. This chapter aims to provide an insight into audiences' practical capacity to negotiate variable language systems; to access the often unarticulated knowledge-ability of social beings in their routine consumption of the media in relation to the tacit understanding of conventions that structure it (Tudor, 1995). By adopting this approach we hope to keep afloat the concepts of both structure and agency.

Research Design

To explore audiences' understanding and perception of social science and the presentation of social science research in the media, focus group interviews were undertaken. The focus groups enabled us to explore if and how readers' differential social positionings and cultural experiences

influence their perceptions of social science and the processes that people go through in the decoding of social scientific news. It also enabled an examination of public perceptions and understanding of social science in relation to journalistic styles and assumptions.

For this reception study 14 focus group interviews were undertaken. Each group consisted of between four and six people, with a total of 70 people taking part. We covered the variables of gender, education (up to GCSE, up to A Level, and higher education)² and employment (based on a private sector/public sector divide). Although naturally occurring groups were preferred (i.e. the group members were ready-formed interest or work groups used to conversing with each other), this was not always achievable. Each focus group met for approximately one and a half hours. The sessions themselves took place in non-naturalistic settings in so far as having a group meet for research purposes will always denaturalize a setting. However, wherever possible the setting was one that was familiar.

The interview began with talk on media consumption and understandings of the term 'social science'. The groups were then asked to read a newspaper article and discuss their responses to it. A total of six newspaper articles were read and discussed. The same procedure was followed for a radio feature item and a television news report. Each media item was chosen for being in some way typical of the spectrum of reporting of social science research. The print reports were drawn from tabloid and broadsheet, daily and Sunday newspapers, a men's monthly magazine and a women's weekly magazine. The following is a brief summary of the form and content of these items:

- 1 'Report queries "lock-up" policy', which appeared in the broadsheet newspaper, the *Guardian* (18 March 1994), on page 6 in the 'Home News' section, was written by their home affairs editor. The report relates to social policy on persistent juvenile offenders. The reason for the report is the launch of the results of a Home Office funded study undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute (a well-respected, independent, research institute). This item is an example of the reporting of high-status research by virtue of its official sanctioning. In the item the findings of the research are reported as challenging official thinking on crime prevention for juveniles. The research thus questions conventional wisdom on the 'locking-up' of persistent offenders.
- 2 'Trouble in store for ethnic businesses' appeared in the tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Express* (28 March 1994) on page 42 in the 'Enterprise' section. It was written by a named journalist. The report is a hard news item in the area of business and management. It refers to a new publication, *Labour Intensive Practices in the Ethnic Minority Firm* by researchers at Liverpool's John Moores University. The survey research is said to challenge the 'conventional image of Asian shops being gold mines'. A photograph of an Asian family in a shop accompanies the report which includes a personal case study.

3 'Psychologists guarded on "false memory" of abuse' also appeared in the *Guardian* (13 January 1995) on page 8, and was written by their medical correspondent. The report relates to the discipline of psychology in the area of recovered memories which had been the subject of a research project undertaken by the British Psychological Society (BPS). The report was written after a news conference held by the BPS to launch their findings. Within the report two competing views are contrasted: one from the BPS and one from the British False Memory Society (BFMS). The item was selected because of the equivocation of debate and as an example of a report that manages to present an either/or scenario: i.e. the concept of false memories may be wrong but in some cases it may be right. It is also a hard news item.

4 'Once a victim always a victim?' appeared in the weekly women's magazine, *Bella* (28 September 1994), in the features section, 'Talking Point', and was written by a named journalist. The report draws on research from Warwick University but relies heavily on the responses of victims of crime. The four accompanying pictures show (a) what we assume to be a burglar, breaking the glass in a door with a hammer. Through the frosted glass we can see that the burglar is dressed in black, wearing black leather gloves and male; (b) a ransacked bedroom; (c) and (d) the head and shoulders of two female victims of crime. The report juxtaposes the fears of victimization with the idea of there being such a thing as a 'victim personality'. The research is referred to only briefly and the report includes other 'expert' commentary aside from that of the researchers themselves.

5 'Health: little Hitlers' appeared in the men's monthly magazine, *GQ* (October 1994) in a section called 'Body and Soul' by a named journalist. It is a soft news item with the sub-heading 'Short tempers' and relates (broadly) to the area of criminology. It reports on research by a professor of criminology at Cambridge University that apparently 'confirms the widespread prejudice that the vertically challenged have an inappropriately aggressive drive'. It draws on the comments of psychiatrists and doctors, has a satirical tone and is accompanied by coloured graphics of a stereotypical image of a (short) football hooligan.

6 'Sex from every angle from the sociologists' appeared in the broadsheet Sunday paper, the *Sunday Times* (27 March 1994) on page 3, as a soft news item, written by a named journalist. The report is based on an annual conference of the British Sociological Association on the theme of sexuality. The item was chosen as an example of a report that mocks social science, in this case sociology. Sarcasm and irony pervade the piece, which is accompanied by a cartoon of a man and woman in bed, with the woman saying, 'I love it when you talk sociology!' The report ends with the remark: 'which planet, the layman may gently enquire, are the sociologists living on?'

7 'The books children read' was a six-minute feature item on BBC Radio 4's current affairs programme, *You and Yours* (3 August 1994),

presented by a named journalist. The report presents an ongoing research project by a researcher in the Department of Education at the Roehampton Institute (of higher education). It deals with the amount of reading children do (the popular view that this has decreased is dismissed by the research findings); the type of reading they do and the equal attraction of girls and boys to horror stories (the notion of gender-appropriate fiction is brought into question); the amount of sex and drugs in children's books; and the balance between reading, watching television and playing computer games. Throughout, the report is punctuated with comments from children and concludes with the comment of an English teacher. This item was chosen because of its extended use of research, and combined lay and expert witnesses.

8 The television news item (3 August 1994) begins, 'Many social service departments throughout the country have admitted they have little idea what happens to children once they've left their care'. It is introduced by the newsreader and then cuts to a pre-recorded news item to describe the 'new survey' of local authorities and their post-care service. There are three lay witnesses - young people who have recently left care (one who has suffered from lack of post-care service, and two who have benefited from good post-care service). There are also comments from the editor of *Community Care* magazine, which launched the research (although it is not clear who actually carried it out); a junior health minister and the manager of a care centre. This item was included as an example of a news report which has new research as its news hook but relies heavily on personalized accounts juxtaposed with expert witnesses.

The decision to consider the media items one after another within the focus groups was made in full recognition that it might provoke greater attention to the comparison of media forms than if each item had been considered alone.

The relative advantages of group-based and individual-based respondent sessions has been debated in the literature (e.g. Dahlgren, 1988, Hoijer, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994). For our purposes, the advantage of the group-based approach was the opportunity it offered for participants to negotiate with one another their responses to the items. It also took the pressure off individual group members (and the researcher), who might otherwise have felt uncomfortable when reading and responding to set items. It was a crucial test of the researchers' skills to ensure that the reading matter in particular was in no way construed as a 'test' of group members' information-processing capabilities. As noted in previous studies (e.g. Corner et al., 1990), we were sensitive to the possibility that in certain cases this may work to produce more consensus than might otherwise be the case. At the point of analysis we were particularly vigilant on several accounts: to attempt to characterize the interpretative positions of the groups as a whole; to attend to the ways in which readings are collectively produced, involving the negotiation of meanings amongst group members;

and also to note where individuals explicitly rejected the group consensus. In this manner we have sought to avoid potential mistakes in interpretation of the data. We have been cautious about taking the remarks of a single respondent to stand for the group as a whole and have only done so when other evidence supported that judgement (as a result only one variable was found to be relevant). We have taken account of the potential for a consensus effect whereby individuals may be drawn into a group consensus for reasons to do with group dynamics, so that aspects of their responses which do not agree with the consensus are marginalized by the ongoing talk. However, there is no way of knowing what any one person would have said were the situation different. Any research of this kind has to face this dilemma.

There is the added dilemma of a method that appears to deal with short-term effects rather than the 'more important' long-term social effects. We take the view that when people read, watch or listen to a media item they bring with them an array of collected experiences and knowledge, including the results of other media consumption. It is within the frames of reference of general media consumption that any media item will be interpreted and understood. Any theory of long-term effects thus has to take short-term effects into account (Hojjer, 1990). By using focus groups we are also bringing to the fore social interaction as a context for interpretation that may not usually be an instant product of media consumption but may be a microcosm of what normally occurs over time. We have no way of checking this. In order to progress we assumed that respondents were unlikely to abandon their principal responses because of the difference in setting and consumption.

It would be naive to expect that a single study could grasp the dynamics and the complexity of the reception of all mass media products. This is true particularly when the theoretical premise of the researchers rests on a holistic approach to reception that takes full account of processes of production, analysis of content and reception located within national and localized socio-economic realities. In the following we attempt to draw out some principal findings of media and public discourses around social scientific research and then relate these to theories of meaning-making by breaking down layers of meaning into understanding and response; taking account of key social definers (namely, formal education) and the importance of media form discussed in terms of genre.

Considering Audience Interpretation

In our analysis of groups' responses we make particular use of a distinction drawn by Corner, Richardson and Fenton (1990) between understanding a text (i.e. what the text is seen to be saying) and responding to it (i.e. what the audience member makes of that message). As they explain, how people interpret information and how they evaluate it are not

necessarily the same thing (but this point has been lost in some reception analysis research).

Although cultural studies scholars recognize the importance of shared meanings, understanding the formation of those meanings remains secondary to their oppositional content. Such an emphasis has bypassed the fact that the most startling finding about media interpretations is the extent of similarity expressed in understanding. The texts used in this study reveal a considerable degree of determinacy. This determinacy is often a result of their using, among other things, systems of signification based on widespread social/national acceptance and having relatively low levels of ambiguity (Corner, 1991). This study is concerned as much with this textual closure as with variation in response.

Understanding

Understanding operates largely at the denotative level and refers to the ability of respondents to comprehend the information contained within the text. Our reception study shows that there was a great deal of consistency between the groups in their interpretations of the texts. For example:

[Women, public sector with higher education, talking about report 1]

Interviewer: What is the general gist of this piece?

R1: That by locking up a minority of persistent offenders they're not going to considerably decrease the crime rate.

R2: It's just saying basically young people who persistently reoffend, locking up isn't going to solve their problems.

[Men, public sector up to A Level, talking about report 1]

R1: It says no matter what you do under the present constraints, locking people away won't solve the problem.

[Women, public sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 1]

R1: It seems to say that the crimes are occurring for a certain amount of time and they seem to cease. They're saying it's only a matter of time and as they get older they're sort of straight, aren't they?³

Once the denotative meaning has been absorbed (through the various processes of production) aberrant decodings are unlikely and are often due to miscomprehension as a result of impaired reading. A classic example was the intuitively paradoxical idea of false memory in report 3 (summarized above):

[Woman, private sector, A level]

R2: But you see the title is 'False memory', you're saying it's coming back but then it's false so why is it there in the first place?

[Men, public sector, GCSE]

R1: How can you have a memory if it's false?

Interpretative variance thus occurs at the level of comprehension due to the conceptual demands and textual incongruities of the news report.

Response

Once the text has been interpreted for meaning, at which point several parameters have already been set as to the delimitation of that meaning, people may respond to the text itself in different ways. Response requires a degree of evaluation and operates largely at the connotative level – what the text invokes in a particular reader will guide the direction of their responses. Gamson (1992) argues that people form their views and their conversational approach to social issues through several layers of analysis, weaving media discourse together with experiential knowledge and ‘popular wisdom’. Moreover they navigate these sources of knowledge in part through ‘cultural resonances’: symbols that draw on larger cultural themes (Gamson, 1992: 135). These layers of analysis have elsewhere been called ‘discourses of relevance’ (Cohen, 1991: 452), ‘channels of access’ (Lewis, 1985: 88) or pre-existing ‘frames of reference’ (Corner et al., 1990: 50). In terms of the representation of social science research these frames can be grouped into four main categories: popular myth, personal experience and lay discourse, expert discourse, and other media discourses.

Framing Understanding: Popular Myth

The term myth is adapted from Barthes (1972) who, in accounting for the symbolically powerful quality of images, distinguished them from ideology *per se*. In identifying myth as a ‘second order signifying system’, Barthes uncovers the reproduction of deeply rooted cultural meanings, where the mere presence of images seems to outweigh their rational appropriation as having meaning in time. One way in which the physical sciences are popularized is through myth. Here the scientist is constructed as a hero on a quest for knowledge and truth against all the odds (Silverstone, 1985). The physical sciences are premised on a folklore of ‘gee whiz’ invention and scientific breakthroughs. Perhaps more than this, the interpretation of the physical sciences also has recourse to science fiction, which is characterized by the ability to change and effect difference in society. The audience is drawn into this mythic drama and along the way tends to accept that there are such things as facts which can be sought through scientific exploration (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994).

Social science exists within a quite different mythology. In this study the image of the social sciences and the social scientist shows remarkable consistency. Contrary to the physical sciences, which are seen to be operating in the realm of facts and scientific ‘proof’, the social sciences are deemed to be operating at the level of opinion. Social science research is seen as no more than soft science – an investigative endeavour it may be, but one that draws readily on political interpretation and personal subjectivities and is not subject to the methodological rigour and scientific validation that is felt to exist in the physical sciences. Social science research is felt to rest on preconceived ideas of how society should or should not operate; the research process is seen to be seeking to validate

those preconceptions rather than attempting to discover the ‘truth’. This rationale can quickly lead to an assessment of social science as a waste of money and time.

[Men, private sector with higher education, talking generally about the differences between the natural and social sciences]

R1: Essentially with the pure sciences I get an end result. Whereas with the social sciences it's pretty vague because it's very, very subjective.

R2: I suppose for me the pure sciences seem to have more control of what they are looking at because they keep control of more. Because with social sciences there are many different aspects that could have an impact and you can't necessarily control them. So it seems more difficult to pin down and therefore to some extent controversial.

R3: Pure science is more credible because you've got control test environments, you've got an ability to test and record factually the outcome and then establish relationships between different agents or whatever. I think in social science it's always subject to interpretation. . . . I think if you want to create yourself an easy life and be unaccountable to anybody, to obtain funding and spend your time in a stress-free way then one of the best things to do is to work in funded research and one of the best areas to do it in is in social science.

The social scientist is also subject to popular mythologizing. In such cases there are similarities with the ‘mad professor’ of the physical sciences. The ivory tower image pertains and those who dwell in it are regularly referred to as ‘not of this world, out of touch with reality and boffins’.

[Women, private sector, up to GCSE, talking generally at the end of the discussion]

R1: I think you've got to experience it [any social issue] to know about it. I think you know more about it if you've experienced it yourself. You can have all the initials and whatever after your name but unless you've actually been through it. I would take far more notice of somebody that's actually gone through it.

R2: I think it's frightening, the minds of these people [experts]. And these are supposed to cure you or give you advice.

Framing Understanding: Personal Experience and Lay Discourse

The subject of study of the social sciences – everyday life – means that the general public often has an understanding of the area under scrutiny and readily use their own experiences or anecdotal evidence to assess the legitimacy of the research findings. Such personal experience can be related to the subject and/or the research process itself. The experiential is felt to demonstrate relevance over and beyond any expert evaluation from social scientific investigation.

Once the science itself has been invalidated, personal experience becomes the bearer of all knowledge. The respondent's own evidence, whether it is hearsay or even apocryphal, becomes the ultimate yardstick. The experiential overrides any expert opinion and is extremely difficult to counter. A discourse of personal experience imparts a scepticism about expertise. On certain occasions anecdotal evidence or even projections of personal experience were pitched against authorized knowledge in the text:

[Women, private sector, up to A Level, talking about report 1]

R1: I was questioning things as I was going through it . . . I think it's because I actually work with young people and it's here about they only last for a few months, no longer than a few months [periods of crime by juveniles]. To me, my experience of working with young people, I actually disagree with that and I found that I was questioning the report as I was going along

Similarly expert definitions are subordinated to the individual's direct experience:

[Women, public sector, up to A Level, talking about report 2]

R1: I've read this and none of it is particularly true. Like X said, . . . in an ordinary shop you work hard. I'm self-employed and I work a lot harder than those people and a lot longer hours.

[Women, private sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 2]

R1: But they wouldn't put their money into it for nothing. I still don't believe they're not making piles of money.

R2: When you see them driving round in their BMWs . . . there's a hell of a lot of white shopkeepers that do work long hours as well

Experts who have personal experience of the issue being discussed were given credence over those who did not:

[Women, public sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 4]

R1: I take notice of the fact that he's an inspector because I think being in the police, it's all part of the job so he must have a good knowledge of things that are happening. So I think I would take notice of someone like that because he must know what he's talking about

R2: I would tend to believe more a person who was actually doing the job day after day and knowing what's happening to people. Then I would listen to somebody like that. Because I would know, he knows what he's talking about. But like a university or a psychologist, they look at a load of figures and say this is what it is. I think experience counts for a lot rather than just looking at statistics.

Lay accounts are valid because they are grounded in experience. Case studies enabled respondents to revisit their own experiences more readily or project an imaginary experience:

[Women, private sector, up to A Level, talking about report 4]

Interviewer: So were you convinced by the research?

R1: Yes, what got me, it was the pictures and they were actually talking about two people that were in the pictures so you could relate to them. They don't particularly look, oh yes, let's attack them or burgle their house, they're like normal people here. I could relate to all that because years ago we were broken into when I was a child and it was awful.

Respondents liked personal accounts and case studies because they could identify with them and check their own experience against them. This conformed to journalists' preferences for personalized illustrations of issues (discussed in Chapter 4) and would seem to align with their perception of the audience:

[Women, private sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 4]

R1: That was easy and interesting.

Interviewer: Why interesting? Why easy?

R2: Because it affects all of us.

R1: It was actually reading about what had happened to people. It wasn't all facts and figures. I know it was, but it had in the first sentence, where it says 'I turned the key and experienced a sinking feeling'. You can relate to that straight away. It's how you'd feel.

R3: She's in a flat and she hears noises - it's something that everyone does. Being on their own and they hear a noise.

Although the discourse of personal experience was evident in all groups, there is indication of a distinction between groups with different levels of formal education. Those with less formal education foreground the experiential and delve more deeply into it as adequate substantiation of their response. Those with more formal education discuss the issues initially with personal distance, using abstract general principles in support of their response. In these cases personal experience is invoked as the final justification for their response:

[Men, private sector with higher education, talking about report 8]

R1: All the evidence suggests that the way to do it is by learning at home. It's so expensive, there's no evidence to back up the lock-up mentality.

R2: I would agree with most of what you say. Unfortunately I think there is evidence to say that some people are evil and that they may or may not have had the benefit of all these different sorts of things. The difficulty is, and what I think is the key point, when family life has broken down so much that the socialization process has been so dysfunctional during the person's early life that it takes a significant amount of healing if you like, of putting right. I don't mean reprogramming because I believe there is evidence, although I can't quote it to you, that there's evidence in my own life if you like of observing others, that where a person is unloved or uncared for then they neither love nor care for others.

These patterns reveal differences in styles of discussion that have been noted by others (Press, 1991) but in no way discount the fact that personal experience was a primary feature of all respondents' accounts.

Framing Understanding: Expert Discourse

Discourses of expertise were evident on two levels: that of the individual respondent who may have expert knowledge of the issue or process of social science research, and assessments of the expertise of the accredited expert in the media item. Those who relied on the media as a source of information about a particular topic to the exclusion of other sources were much more likely to accept the preferred reading of the text than were respondents who drew upon other sources of experience either professionally or personally. This has been shown to be the case in other studies (e.g. Miller, 1994).

Knowledge of the research process was far more widespread than journalists assume. Contrary to journalists' assumptions about audiences'

interests and competences, respondents across all educational groups had an understanding of survey research such that they would question methodological details like the size of the sample. Frequently there were requests for more information on how the research was undertaken and on the funding of the research, revealing recognition both of the politics and the pragmatics of survey research:

[Men, private sector with higher education, talking about report 3]

R3: Well lo and behold the British Psychological Society reporting on an issue which is potentially damning to some of its members finds in its evidence that there is little evidence to support the fact that there is abuse by British psychologists during counselling in relation to creating memories. Lack of independence always calls into question the strength of the evidence, I would say.

[Women, public sector, with degree, talking about report 2]

R1: I think these statistics as well are totally misleading: 34.5 per cent of those who work more than 80 hours a week are dissatisfied. It's like eight out of ten owners said their cats preferred it. So what? And the title of the research put me off 'Labour Intensive Practices in the Ethnic Minority'. It's a bit Mickey Mouse, isn't it? . . . You think what the hell is the point of this. What is the report going to inform, who has commissioned it, who will use it?

Importantly, social science research was defined mostly as large-scale quantitative survey research, that is, research that can lay claim to representativeness, offer statistical data and thus be construed as scientifically valid.

Disputes between those situated in the text as experts often undermined their credibility. Social scientists then became no more than people indulging in language games. The expert view could be construed as alienated, superficial and empty of meaning; as opposed to the lay interpretation which was perceived to be authentic, grounded in experience and meaningful. Experts are known to be fallible, for as Giddens (1991) notes, social science findings have filtered into everyday knowledge of, among other things, expertise:

[Men, public sector, up to GCSE, talking generally]

R1: To come back to talking about experts, the world is full of experts, isn't it . . . they're not in touch with reality. Just like how I think that my gaffers aren't sometimes. Are they all filled with crap as we think they are or is it senility creeping in?

Qualifications alone may not make the expert, contrary to the argument that status and credibility are all that matter. This calls into question expertise bestowed upon a social scientist by a journalist. An expert is not an expert just because the journalist tells us so:

[Men, private sector with higher education, talking about report 4]

R1: The reason this is laughable and it discredits the research if you like is this - people are just very unlucky if crime happens to them repeatedly, says Ann Carpenter, a psychologist from Glasgow Douglas Inch Centre which specializes in forensic psychiatry. But you know that comment that was just made that, oh

they're just unlucky, just doesn't, you know, as if her title and all that, and all she comes out with, this comment that 'oh you're just unlucky'. It just seems to rubbish the need to have her.

R2: You could equally say Sid from the chip shop said they were unlucky, couldn't you.

In this way respondents reveal themselves to be knowing participants in the media game:

[Men, private sector, with higher education, talking about report 4]

R3: This is what I'm saying about the research, they use experts to try and fit it into what they want to say. They've decided what they want to say and then they'll find someone to say it for them.

Framing Response: Other Media Discourses

A slightly more obvious point, but one that is frequently overlooked by audience studies, is the extent to which people constantly draw their reference point from other forms of mass media consumption. Once viewed, read or listened to there is a sense in which this then forms part of their own personal experience - they noticed it, remembered it and it has since played a part in their understanding of other issues. Such intertextuality encourages a consensus to be built around the importance of the issue or subject:

[Women, private sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 3]

R1: I think it happens [recovered memory of childhood sexual abuse], it's been on the news, on the television and a few programmes that accuse parents. It is an interesting subject. It could happen to anybody.

[Women, public sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 3]

R1: I believe it. Especially being on one of those soaps quite recently as well. *Home and Away*, one of the young girls, she fantasized in her head, you weren't quite sure what it was. And then all of a sudden you could see it in her mind who it was that was doing it to her. . . . And there have been reports, a lot of reports. People have come up with these experiences.

This has been referred to as 'the elusiveness of mediated communication in everyday life' (Lindlof and Grodin, 1990: 13). If media audiences function in some manner as interpretative communities, then the emergence of meanings depends on the talk that takes place. A media text goes into use when a person defines an appropriate context. That use then becomes the basis for interpreting media content on other occasions of reception. In this manner other media discourses can be drawn on as 'evidence' in much the same way as personal experience is used as the ultimate evidence: 'it must be true because I saw it on the telly'. Where an issue might become newsworthy and be reported across all media the slant given to that issue often differs between media. In this sense our reception study reinforces the concept of agenda setting - whereby the elevation of an issue to media status tells us not what to think but what to think about. However the concern has to be that when perspectives are different only by degree and

not by nature (i.e. none offers a radical reinterpretation of the issue because all reporters attend the same press conference and use similar news sources) such 'competitive closure' of the journalistic endeavour produces a self-referentiality on the part of the audience that is limited and limiting.

Moreover, mass-media-derived communication permits a shared experience for interpretation – 'an imagined community'. This relates to the arrival of what has been termed 'postmodern culture', in which popular texts reflexively index only knowledge of other texts, further validating an approach that seeks to reveal the structures of relevance (what we are calling frames of reference) that imbue moments of mediated communication with meaning.

These four framings are not the only reference points for the items discussed but they are the dominant ones common to all groups. They are invoked repeatedly; they are occasionally distinct but more often exist as a multi-layering of frames; and they are always interconnected. Within the framing of understanding, the way respondents choose to regard their first-stage interpretations is subject to variance. We use the concept of first-stage interpretation purposefully, because, put crudely and no doubt imperfectly, the process of meaning-making does appear to go through two stages. The first stage, decoding, is deciphering the denotative content – making sense of the manifest, literal 'meaning'. The second stage, interpretation, involves a decoding not only of the primary decoding – a consideration of the latent or hidden 'meaning'; but also of one's own social, political and cultural knowledge in relation to the media item. Of course, these stages never exist as a type of linear progression and frequently jump to and fro. However, once the second stage of interpretation has been accommodated there is a clear progression of thought that allows respondents to make decisions about how they wish to handle the information. This is what we refer to as response.

Framing Response

The reception study shows a great deal of consistency in the interpretations of the media text. Where differences do occur they are mostly at the evaluative level – that is, how valid people feel the item and the research may be. These dissonances have direct links with the frames of reference mentioned above. Audiences tend to agree on how to understand an item but disagree in their responses to it.

Approached in this way the notion of the active audience takes on a more defined role. Activity exists for the most part at the level of response once the defining variables of the debate have been set. This activity in turn relies on interpretative resources and cultural competence available to the individual/group. As Jensen (1990) rightly points out, an oppositional reading is not necessarily a political act in itself. But even to have recourse to a critical response requires access to resources that exist external to the

text. These frames of reference are themselves informed by broader cultural resonances.

One of the key issues for audience research is how and when such 'activity' comes into being. For the sake of analytical economy respondents' reactions to the media items can be categorized as positive, negative and ambivalent. Once again these categories must be qualified by the academic caveat that nothing is ever as straightforward as it may seem. These categories are simplifications used for purposes of clarity with the hope of avoiding all that is simplistic.

The Positive Response

A positive response could be one that assesses the report as interesting, worthy of inclusion, relevant, and so on. It is an indication that the respondent accepts the news report as significant.

Individuals' perceptions of the salience of the topic for media coverage often drew on personal experience. Even if the respondents did not have any first-hand knowledge with which to appraise the coverage there was often considerable personal identification with the issue. For example in the article on false memory, respondents often projected their imagined anxieties onto the piece – 'What would I do if it was me who was being falsely accused of sexual abuse?' Proximity to the issue (real or imagined) is important not least because it is often used by respondents to validate interest and inclusion:

[Men, public sector, up to A Level, talking about report 3]

R1: I think it was worrying, the report, because if what it is saying is true that people can remember things that didn't happen and particularly when it's mentioned things like child abuse and it got through court, that if someone was falsely accused of doing something on the evidence of somebody who gave inaccurate information, it's like everybody's nightmare, isn't it? So I think it's thought-provoking, really.

R2: Well it's interesting in so much as it's everybody's nightmare. You read about it, you hear about it on television and obviously it's a worry, that it could happen.

Case histories using real people were recognized on the one hand, to be slightly misleading – journalists can choose any case study to show whatever they want – while on the other hand they were seen as making the report more relevant and interesting. Case histories were felt to rouse sympathy, the personal experience again seen to represent fact – it actually happened. This response often related to the more emotive writing that encouraged a response based more on feelings than reason:

[Women, public sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 4]

R1: I think you feel for yourself, don't you. Why it should happen to you or if you were in that situation how terrible it must be. That first paragraph mentioned, you know, they think it's happening to you, the way it's written.

[Men, public sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 4]

Interviewer: This report has got case histories, personal responses from people in it, does that make a difference to the actual report?

R1: Yes, you can relate to it . . . you believe in it . . . you know how they feel. That it is true.

Positive evaluations of the authority of the main news source were usually based on professional knowledge of the organization and on political judgements about the perceived fairness of reporting of the newspaper from which the article was drawn.

[Men, private sector, higher education, talking about report 1]

R4: I think the reporting is fairly objective. They are saying this is what the Policy Studies Institute has reported and this is how it compares against what the government has said. I don't think it has actually gone on to pass much comment on it . . . I would prefer to see it like that.

R1: I would agree with that. I think it's very factual. Essentially it's leading you through to make a decision.

In this manner a positive evaluation was made when the reporting conformed to acceptable definitions of fairness; this included the reporting of both sides of the argument in an apparently equal fashion and also when individuals felt that it reinforced their personal experience, thereby validating their own judgement.

The news stories that generated the most interest were those that held some shock value, that went against conventional wisdom: for example Asian shops do not make lots of money, there is such a thing as a victim personality. Positive responses to both of these items were enhanced by people's familiarity with the subject areas. Asian shops and burglary were things they could relate to but they were surprised by the research findings. This would tend to support the journalists' criterion of newsworthiness that rejects all research that is felt to state the obvious in preference for that which reveals the unexpected.

The Negative Response

A negative response was one that was largely critical of the report and the reporting. This revealed a disdain for certain subjects felt unworthy of consideration (because they were not relevant personally) and for the possible hidden motives of the news sources.

A sense of the dubious authority of the social scientist was often evident and was precipitated by a popular mythology of 'experts' who, as mentioned above, by dint of their specialism are out of touch with reality. This historical problem of the legitimization of social scientists, which is shared by journalists, was enhanced by the connotations arising from the stereotype of a professor as an eccentric, off-the-wall boffin. For example, psychologists were described by respondents as hypnotists and mind-benders. The unwillingness to take on board the views of those positioned as experts is explained partly by these interpretative schemata that the respondents bring

to the text but is founded on the lack of identification who of these experts are within the text itself. Respondents felt unable to accept expert opinion because the text did not tell them how qualified the expert was to talk on that subject, refuting the claim that to call someone an expert is enough to establish the reason for their inclusion:

[Men, private sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 3]

Interviewer: Does it make any difference that you've got Professor John Morton talking at the end?

R1: No, because half of them are round the bend. To be a professor they're probably halfway there.

R2: We don't know what the False Memory Society is: they may have more credibility than this John Morton.

This scepticism about expertise is also applied to the journalist – the imagined interlocutor on behalf of the audience. On the one hand this is associated with the distrust of journalists who it is felt will simply search out the expert who fits in with what they want to say; and on the other it is a more general feeling that those who call themselves experts (i.e. specialist correspondents) are 'tarded by the same brush' and by definition out of touch with reality.

Although we made the point earlier that many respondents shared journalists' preferences for numbers over qualitative evidence (while still preferring personalized accounts for increased identification and validation) the manner in which statistics were presented could engender negativity. Statistics were felt to be more or less meaningless in the form in which they appeared. They lacked context, and were considered to lack the methodological detail that would make them worthy of consideration.

[Women, public sector, higher education, talking about report 1]

R1: I wonder how much the Policy Studies Institute spent on that. And I think the sample is pathetic, 531 youngsters, it's too small to be valuable.

[Men, private sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 1]

R1: This chap who says here, they've just taken what they think, some of the figures, 10 per cent of young offenders or 17-year-olds, the study identified 531 reoffenders under 17. Now that means nothing. 531 of what? So it's just badly taken out of context as far as I'm concerned.

The Ambivalent Response

Ambivalence is translated as disengagement or distance from the issue. Again proximity to the issue was a major factor in evaluating its significance. The subject of the report was viewed by some to be irrelevant to their life. This lack of interest was informed by their personal and professional experience:

[Women, private sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 3]

R1: If it's not related to you or someone that you know you just pass it over. But I think if you knew somebody that had been sexually abused or you'd been sexually abused yourself then you would want this.

R2: Again it's personal.

R3: It's not relevant to us. It's a difficult subject, we don't really want to read about.
 R4: I admit I don't understand it. I can read it and take it all in but it's too in-depth. It's a field that building society clerks don't really get into.

News text that was in itself written from a particular and specialist perspective and intended to be read with irony (such as report 6) was often dismissed as worthless because it contained little that was actual news:

[Women, private sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 6]

R1: It tells you what they're reporting on but it doesn't give you any ideas of what they're going to say. You've not learned anything from it.

[Women, public sector, up to A Level, talking about report 6]

R1: I didn't think a lot of that at all.

R2: It's boring.

R3: It keeps going from one thing to another and there's no identification. I might have read the first few lines and that would have been it.

R2: I don't know what good that would do.

As hinted at in the last section, ambivalence was further engendered by statistics that were placed out of context and devoid of human interest. One respondent commented, 'make it all into a soap and we might stand a chance'. But uninterest was also increased by reports that were felt to be raising issues but lacking in solutions:

[Women, public sector, up to GCSE, talking about report 1]

R1: But the trouble with that is then you do tend to switch off because the facts are all numbers and it's not really holding your attention.

R2: It makes you wonder, does this research mean anything? We know it's all happening, these figures, they don't really mean anything. They take their time to find out percentages for this, that and the other, what you need to know is what they're going to do about it. And I don't feel it really tells you.

Although respondents professed a dislike of overt subjectivity on behalf of the social scientists and the journalists, neither did they like overt equivocation, which many felt left them no better informed about the issue being reported on. This often leads to disengagement and comes close to the journalists' cry of 'so what?' when assessing which news to report on. It would seem that even though the journalist has discovered why the research is relevant, this is not always conveyed to the audience.

Educational Variance

Formal educational level of achievement was the only social variable to affect both access to understanding and forms of response. Interestingly, in Elliott and Rosenberg's study of media exposure and science beliefs in relation to natural science they also found that 'of the social locator variables, the individual's level of education was most important' (1987: 185).

The work of Bourdieu is relevant here. Bourdieu has reconceptualized the relation between social structure in general and cultural expressions in particular, introducing the idea of 'cultural competence' (Bourdieu, 1986). He has traced ways in which people's economic and social position, gained via the educational system, gives them access to certain knowledge and discourses about the world. This creates 'hierarchies of cultural competence'. That social science research is often deemed to be dealing in jargon, vague associations and complex concepts rather than in people's experiences makes it appear unintelligible or irrelevant to those without the cultural competence to digest social scientific discourse.

The majority of our respondents were limited in their ability to identify with the discourse of the social scientist because it was alien: it became familiar to them only at moments of ideological or discursive resonance. Access to such resonances was apparent through professional or personal experience which was related predominantly to educational levels. This is hardly surprising when the discourse itself often originated from the academy. To be able to give a critique of the reports on social science research the respondents needed an understanding that went beyond the range of discourses that the media delivered. This enabled them to evaluate the media items and, importantly, to decipher what was missing from the reports.

As Lembo and Tucker (1990) state, many proponents of a cultural studies perspective to audience reception share the working assumption that society is divided into dominant and subordinate groups that have different access to social power; that dominant groups assert their power in cultural as well as political and economic domains; that cultural meanings are linked to the social structure and to power relations and such meanings can be understood only if the history of the social structure and power relations is made explicit; that the creation of cultural meanings by media users is relatively independent of the institutional production of media objects and this relative independence can act as a basis for oppositional politics. Given these assumptions, the strength of the cultural studies approach is understood to lie in deepening our understanding of how dominant ideologies attempt to privilege some interpretations of texts over others, and, equally important, how oppositional interpretations prevent the preferred encoding from achieving total dominance in social life (Fiske, 1987). Morley (1983) and others who study television argue that people interpret the text of programming in various ways because differing locations in the social structure give rise to distinct material interests, resulting in different strategies of interpretation. So-called oppositional interpretations depend on people's subordinate status. These then become sources of cultural resistance and bases for political empowerment. Proponents of cultural studies assert a clear correlation between social location, cultural resistance and political perspective.

This study points to something quite different. Comprehension of media items on social scientific research relies on educational capital, with

conceptual difficulties proving more problematic for those with less formal education. Seen in this way, dissent from the preferred reading is not 'active' and is most certainly not a strategy of resistance: a reinterpretation of the issue is not forthcoming. Rather, and more politically telling, we would argue that such understanding can act as a mechanism of exclusion. Miscomprehension is a hindrance to engagement with debate and potentially limits a person's ability to participate in the public sphere.

So far, it would appear that much of the response to the news text relies on what the audience brings to it. There are, however, other factors that the audience has no control over and that depend on the narrative structure of the texts themselves.

Genre

The importance of taking genre conventions into consideration has been noted by many, including Jensen (1986), Lindlof (1988) and Corner, Richardson and Fenton (1990). Janice Radway's seminal work on women and romance reading, often cited as a major player in active audience theory, also commented on how readers 'comprehend the very act of picking up a book in the first place' (1984: 8). The act itself is anchored in meaning by the genre the media text is located in. People take up different subject positions in relation to different types of media material.

The relationship between audience and media text has been described as contractual (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994) in that the construction of meaning is not only negotiated at the point of consumption, but is also determined in advance by a set of conventions, frameworks and expectations which each party holds of the other, formulated on the basis of past experience. Different genres establish specific epistemologies, or forms of knowing. The documentary can visit the scientific laboratory to observe the evidence which grounds a claim. The classic debate can pursue a complex argument without interruption, pitting opposing sides against each other, giving each equal space to speak, demanding answers and uncovering the apparent logic of an argument. The newspaper report may come in different guises (for example a feature, hard news, soft news) each limited by the conventions and constraints of current practice and of the particular news organization's culture. A hard news item simplifies a debate into a few discrete facts or points reinforced by expert commentary from opposing sides often with the purpose of providing conclusive evidence. At a base level the content is actual and coverage prompted by an event that has happened or is happening, not by a concept or idea. The tone is serious. However, a news item in a magazine may follow a more dramatic narrative, gradually unfolding an issue by drawing the reader into a semi-fictional account of what life could be like, or inviting an imaginary leap into the life-world of others. The content is still factual but it is allowed to

dip into the fictional, to combine the serious with the frivolous. We understand what we are reading differently according both to the genre and intra-genre conventions (i.e. whether it is an editorial, a feature or a letter).

As previously explained, our focus groups responded to a variety of newspaper reports, two magazine articles, a radio feature report and a television news item. Each genre seemed to prompt a different approach to reading. When the items transgressed the accepted parameters of genre, confusion arose. Journalists constantly state the need to be entertaining as well as informative due to the pressures to be commercially successful. This results in a rationale for news selection based on what the audience wants to know rather than what they ought to know to be good citizens. However, audiences clearly differentiate, approaching distinct genres with different interpretative expectations. What is more, they do not appreciate generic mismatching. News is interpreted as primarily informative and not as entertainment.

The narrative conventions of magazine articles include a narrative that resembles that of fictional storytelling: both are informative and entertaining. The information they contain is approached with different expectations on behalf of the reader. A non-news piece was generally accepted as easier to read, as more enjoyable, because it is deemed to be less serious regardless of the issue portrayed:

[Woman, public sector with higher education, talking about report 4]

R1: You see this is funny, because it's not in a newspaper I don't read it the same critically. This is in *Bella* and I just read that and thoroughly enjoy it . . . because it's in *Bella* it's just there as a good read and something to interest you like you'd read your stars. So I wouldn't actually be as critical with that as I would with a newspaper article.

A newspaper article however was felt to be primarily informative. When a news article flouted these expectations and attempted to be sarcastic or ironic the readers often did either not understand it, or could not see the reason for it and generally viewed it as a waste of space.

[Women, public sector with higher education, talking about report 6]

R1: What's the point of it? I really struggled to read this and every so often I just found myself saying, 'what?' And its final conclusion, what, why? . . . I think Stuart wanted to write something that is very long winded and tries to make it as funny as he can. I suppose in some cases he has succeeded, but why is it there?

R2: There's nothing to learn, you don't learn anything about it.

Judgements of argument quality depend on the perceived genre of the item. Genre places the item in a social context that frames understanding. Different argument forms presume different criteria for their validity claims – critical appraisal of how well the rules for procedural debate are followed compared with assessment of the involvement and expression of diverse voices. The possible social effects of discourse operate within the boundaries of genre.

If genre generated differing approaches to a media text, there are also intra-genre differences within the broad category of news, in particular between printed and broadcast news. Television was felt to be the ultimate persuader because it had the advantage of relaying 'real' events in apparent real time, seducing the viewer into a rationale of 'seeing is believing'.

[Women, private sector up to GCSE, talking generally]

R1: On the telly you can see it, you can watch it, you don't have to do anything.

R2: If it's on telly I just watch it. Whereas if the paper gets a bit boring you just put it down, it's more trouble to read it.

R3: Or, 'Oh I can't be bothered to read that now.'

R2: But with the telly, you're sat down and that's it usually.

In this way the televisual image provides evidence that is more difficult to reject than that on the printed page. Interestingly, there was very little misunderstanding of the propositional elements of the televisual text whereas there was much misunderstanding with the printed texts. These findings run contrary to accepted theories about the efficacy of print and television forms to communicate messages, whereby television is often invested with the potential for endless interpretative possibilities by virtue of its polysemy. In this research, without exception the televisual debate prompted accord with and acceptance of the preferred reading.

The examples used within the television news item provided the on-screen 'evidence' that was lacking in some of the newspaper articles. Case studies of real people were not refuted by any respondent. It appears that one of the reasons that the televisual representation was accepted more readily was because it displayed lay discourses more readily, inviting identification. Here, the world of the child in care was made instantly perceptible through examples. This gives the issue itself increased significance and ties it to a personal significance. This is what Nelson (1989) calls the 'relation of vision to tele (distance) and telos (to bring close)'. In relation to the television item no questions were raised about the methodology of the study or the qualifications of the people who undertook the research. The nature of the response was qualitatively different.

The Problematics of Public Knowledge: Understanding Social Science News

This chapter has covered many aspects pertaining to the understanding of mediated social science. There are three key factors that offer a contribution to theoretical development in this area.

Understanding and Response

Whereas understandings of the text were relatively uniform and operated within clearly accepted parameters, responses to the text – that is, evaluations of the issues and concerns presented – revealed the most dissonance and 'activity' on the part of the audience. Re-negotiation of meaning

occurred at the level of response – the evaluative level – that is, what people made of the validity of the item and the research. For example, readers may respond, as they often did, by rejecting the accreditation of expertise offered in the text. Those who gave the most dissonant evaluations were those with the most detailed knowledge in the area. This would suggest that critical purchase is rooted in personal and professional experience. In this instance, for most of our respondents, such experience was absent or remote. When these pre-existing frames of reference are negligible or non-existent the definitional power of the text is seen to increase.

The neglect of organizational origin of media texts helps to mask the power of media institutions and the power of the source of information (in this case, usually the social scientist). Furthermore such neglect ignores the centralization of signifying practices in the media. Individuals do negotiate the meanings of the media texts they consume, but their definitional abilities do not match the discursive power of centralized storytelling institutions (Carragee, 1990). Neither do they match the tactical power of the story's source. The relationship between the audience and the text is dialectical. Media texts confine but do not confirm audience interpretations. Audiences create meaning but not on the basis of texts of their own making (Silverstone, 1994).

Entertainment and Information

In tackling the different levels of response a distinction between strictly informational and entertainment-based texts needs to be acknowledged. The kinds of text-processing which respondents performed in the two cases were quite distinct. The characteristic properties of text-audience relations in most non-fiction texts are to do with kinds of knowledge. The phenomenon of news is conceptualized within a framework which emphasizes the relay of information, of manifest factual content. For fictional texts the primary characteristic property is imaginative pleasure. None the less, the two forms do not exist in isolation. Audiences seek factual information from news at the same time as desiring personal identification.

On the basis of this study we would agree with Dahlgren (1988) that from the researcher's point of view it is more instructive to view news as a form of cultural discourse rather than as information. As such the daily recurrence and readily recognisable features of the news items serve to link the audience and their daily lives to the larger world in a manner which is ritualistic, symbolic and mythic, rather than informational.

The Logic of Lay Discourse

Our research would seem to reinforce Murdock's comment:

What people know depends on what they are told and by whom. What people believe depends on who they trust. In the contest for minds and hearts under modernity, the claims of expertise have been continually pitched against the testimony of experience. This is particularly evident in certain forms of news and

documentary expression, where the ethos of radical populism, with its deep-rooted distrust of officialdom in all its forms, has been anchored by the celebration of eye-witness accounts and grounded experience. (Murdock, 1993: 236)

As in other studies (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Press and Cole, 1995), personal narratives are used as factual case history evidence supporting a particular argument. Lay discourse thereby takes on its own logic. Our respondents repeatedly checked statements by experts against their own experiences and knowledge and were critical when the grounds were inadequate to substantiate the truth of the claims. Whereas some have construed this as having radical democratic potential by undermining elite hierarchies (such as Livingstone and Lunt, 1994), we would suggest otherwise. By recourse to a reflexive sociology we are forced to theorize agency within the constraints exercised by structuring forces and the limits of representations (which are indeed ideological) and fed to us in abundance by the mass media. By taking an example of one news item and tracing its natural history from inception to reception, Chapter 7 will attempt to fit together the jigsaw bits and pieces of journalist, source, institution, mediated image and audience interpretation to illustrate how these limitations are manifest and the complex interrelations of power and control that are worked out daily in the mass mediation of social science.

Notes

1 The notion of the 'preferred reading' comes from Morley (1980). It refers to the ability of the producers of the media item to encourage the audience to prefer certain meanings. This 'preferring' is a bid for power rather than a guarantee of it. The message is thus a 'structured polysemy . . . structured in dominance, although its meaning can never be totally fixed or closed' (Morley, 1980: 10).

2 These categories reflect levels of formal educational achievement in England. GCSE exams (General Certificate of Secondary Education) are usually taken by students at the age of 16; A Levels (advanced level) are usually taken by students at the age of 18; higher education refers to any formal education over and above these levels.

3 Throughout this chapter 'R1', 'R2', etc., are used to indicate respondents' voices in the focus groups.

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From inception to reception: the natural history of a news item

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Encoding and decoding: 'linked but distinctive moments'

The development of mass communication research has been neither linear nor incremental. Rather, it is marked by moments of sudden transition and transformation. In most historical accounts of the field these moments are linked to the publication of key-texts which are seen to have either instigated or encapsulated new currents of intellectual activity. Stuart Hall's article 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse', which was first presented in the early 1970s, can make a stronger claim than most to such seminal status, providing the impetus for the development of what we generically label here as the 'active audience paradigm'.

The influence of Hall's article can be located to two aspects. The first is the developed theoretical framework it provides for applying semiotic concepts outside of the text. Most central to this is his insistence that more attention should be paid to the 'practice of *interpretative* work' in the decoding of televisual signs by audiences, and in particular, to how that reception frequently involved the 'active transformation' of meaning (Hall, 1993: 94).

The second related reason for the article's impact was its challenge to conventional models of mass communication which are criticized for their inability to develop 'a structured conception' of the relationship between messages, their sources and their receivers. Hall proposes that the mass communication process should be thought of as:

... a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of *linked but distinctive moments* – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a ‘complex structure in dominance’, sustained through *the articulation of connected practices*, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence. (Hall, 1993: 91)

The emphases in this quotation are our own, and we highlight them here because they reveal an important facet of Hall’s model which has often been neglected. Although it stresses the relative autonomy of the moments of production and reception, it also retains a clear view of their inter-relationship. Certainly, in no way is its expressed interest in the distinctiveness of decoding intended to exclude social, political and economic questions about message production from the research agenda.

This article seeks to develop the key theme of linkage between encoding and decoding. Our reasons for doing so are rooted in a belief that these important connections have too often been neglected in reception analysis research since the 1980s. Furthermore, although, as we discuss below, there are clear signs that many active audience theorists are adopting more modest appraisals of the power of the audience to renegotiate inscribed meaning in texts, we believe much would be gained by extending the analysis beyond the text itself, and attending more closely to the dynamics of its inception and creation.

In this article we investigate the ‘natural history’ of the production and reception of a specific example of press reporting. Although this is in many respects a modest empirical exercise, it does provide a useful illustration of the benefits that can accrue from a research focus that isn’t solely fixated with the *distinctiveness* of decoding, and which retains the holism of the original encoding/decoding formulation. As such, it is intended to contribute to a growing body of work which stresses the importance of studying the entirety of mass communication processes (e.g. Bondebjerg, 1988; Carragee, 1990).

Before we present the detail of our study, it is first necessary to consider current trends and parallels within reception- and production-orientated research.

Active audience research in the 1990s: a new sobriety?

The initial flurry of active audience research which developed out of the encoding/decoding formulation is typically presented as in opposition to textual analysis, such as that associated with *Screen* writers, because it queried the ability of any person to divine a singular interpretation of a text. In some cases, this opposition opened a gap between those writers who have suggested, on the one hand, that the mass media are mechanisms

for the dissemination of the ideology of the powerful or that they constrain the beliefs and values of the audiences and, on the other hand, those proponents of the active audience approach who suggest the audience can resist all manner of ideology by generating meanings entirely of their own making. In the process, an opposition was created between writers who emphasize political economy and production in relation to the media and those who emphasize audience reception analysis.

There is some evidence of a tempering of both these divides and of the active audience approach itself. First, the approach has been subjected in recent times to a number of criticisms. By drawing attention away from the media and texts generally as instruments of power, it has been accused of a lack of an appreciation of wider political factors and hence of political quietism (Corner, 1991). It has also been suggested that many studies within the active audience tradition have entailed misinterpretations of the research evidence. Condit (1989), for example, argued that the common finding that audiences derive their own pleasures from texts should not be taken to imply that they are in fact deriving their own interpretation and therefore undermining the inscribed messages of those texts. She shows through an examination of points made by two people about an episode of *Cagney and Lacey* that 'they shared a basic construction of the denotations of the text' (1989: 107), in spite of holding very different views about the central focus of the episode (abortion). Thus, while audiences are active in their consumption of texts they are not necessarily critical of its denotation; nor do they derive alternative views about it. A further criticism is that the active audience approach fails to give adequate recognition to the fact that authors of texts are able to *frame* issues and messages. They do this through what is actually present in the text and through what is absent – the silences in texts are just as significant as the messages within the texts themselves in terms of the capacity of audiences to derive alternative interpretations (Bryman, 1995).

Second, as a result of a growing awareness of the framing power of texts, more circumscribed accounts of audience activity are emerging. These tend to recognize that differently located audiences may derive particular interpretations of texts, but that the text itself is rarely subverted. In other words, the essential power of authors to frame audience reception is not challenged; audiences engage in marginal interpretation (see for example, Kitzinger, 1993; Corner et al., 1990; Miller, 1994).

Third, some of the more prominent exponents of the active audience approach have begun to distance themselves from certain aspects of it. Ien Ang, whose *Watching Dallas* (1985) is often treated as an exemplar of active audience research, has commented that the notion of 'active' should not be equated with 'powerful' and that the extent to which audiences genuinely exert power over the text is limited (Ang, 1995). Likewise, David Morley has criticized the neglect in most active audience research of

'the economic, political and ideological forces acting on the construction of texts' (1993: 15).

These various reflections and developments point to a re-evaluation of the active audience approach that is currently in progress. At the very least, this re-evaluation needs to return to the original encoding/decoding model with its emphasis upon *both* the text and audience reception. On the face of it, John Fiske, who is most frequently presented as the most extreme proponent of audience autonomy, displayed this orientation when he wrote in an often-quoted remark: 'Cultural analysis reaches a satisfactory conclusion when the ethnographic studies of the historically and socially located meanings that *are* made are related to the semiotic analysis of the text' (1989: 98). However, it is not simply the confrontation between textual meaning and audience reception that is at stake here. As Kellner (1995) argues, a formulation such as Fiske's omits crucial mediations, such as the *ways* texts are produced and the wider political economy of that production. The recent movement toward 'holistic' approaches to media analysis, then, needs to be one in which consideration of the production and framing of texts plays a major part.

Active production: new trends and obvious parallels

Significantly, there are many developments within media-production research which offer clear opportunities for linkage with theoretical developments in active audience research. These almost solely relate to the production of actuality genres, particularly news and current affairs, reflecting a historical imbalance in production research.

For many years the study of news and current affairs production has been dominated by two approaches. The first explores how political and economic forces, in particular patterns of ownership in media industries and state regulation, structurally circumscribe news creation (e.g. Golding and Murdock, 1991; Garnham, 1979). The second focuses on media organizations, and the impact of the professional practices and cultural values of journalists (e.g. Tuchman, 1978). Of course, these two approaches are not necessarily antithetical, and there are many examples of interchange between them. Even so, there are undeniable tensions between these traditions, mainly concerning whether internal or external factors constitute the principal determinants of news production. At the core of this debate are questions about the limits to journalists' professional autonomy (Curran, 1990).

Recently, a third approach to the study of news production can be discerned, which, according to McNair (1994), offers an opportunity for a reconciliation between both paradigms. He labels this the 'culturalist approach', although it also bears a resemblance to work on agenda building

(e.g. Lang and Lang, 1981). Whatever its title, the distinctiveness of this position lies in its insistence that the production of news 'is not simply a function of ownership, nor of journalistic practices and rituals, but of the interaction between news organisations, the sources of their output, and other social institutions' (McNair, 1994: 48). In other words, news creation is portrayed as a form of 'cultural argumentation . . . an unending battle between a multitude of *differentially powerful* parties over the definition of reality' (Turow, 1989: 206; emphasis added).

One important and inevitable consequence of this new emphasis is that it brings news sources to the forefront of the research equation. Although many earlier organizational studies identified the importance of external institutions and individuals in the structuring of news (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979), they were generally studied by proxy, from the vantage point of the news-makers. Over a decade ago, Gandy (1982) noted the paucity of primary research into news sources and it is only recently that, following his lead, work has begun to redress this neglect (e.g. Ericson et al., 1989; Anderson, 1991; Manning, 1996; Deacon, 1996).

This less media-centric emphasis has fostered more interest in the specific dynamics of news creation in particular instances. This has in turn created a growing dissatisfaction with many earlier accounts of news production, which are criticized for being too deterministic, and for overestimating the power of social and political elites to exercise hegemonic power via the mass media (e.g. Meyer, 1992).

Within this new research framework, the power of 'primary definition' is not seen as an axiomatic expression of the social structure, but rather 'an achievement' (Schlesinger, 1990) gained through successful strategic action. Although agencies of the state and other powerful political and economic elites obviously enjoy considerable advantages in getting their messages across, their definitional control is neither absolute nor pre-determined. Tensions within political systems, journalistic acuteness, internal state disputes, and successful political interventions by non-official sources who have established their credibility with the media, can all combine to 'open up' media debate on certain issues, on certain occasions (Hallin, 1986; Miller, 1994; Deacon and Golding, 1994).

What is striking about this new body of media research is how closely many of its basic aims and concerns parallel those within active audience theory. Both paradigms reject reproductionist accounts of ideology, whether in terms of production or effect. Both have effectively subverted, whether intentionally or not, the 'grand narratives' of Marxism and Pluralism that had previously bifurcated the field of mass communication research in Britain. Both recognize the importance of social action and agency in cultural reproduction. Both challenge the view that the media are just a passive conduit by which the powerful instruct the powerless what to think and feel. However, at the same time, most proponents from both

positions are sensitive to the dangers of overstating the diversity and plurality that this resistance is capable of creating. Their interest in the autonomy of the moments of production and reception is counterbalanced by their concern with establishing the limits to this freedom. For all these reasons, the time is ripe for developing more direct conceptual and empirical links between these two paradigms, and for retying once more the strands of production and reception.

The case study

Our aim in this article is to present the 'natural history' of one newspaper report, tracing its gestation in the interaction between several individual and institutional sources and news professionals, through to details of its production, and then to its decoding by individuals from a diverse range of social groups. This analysis will be centrally concerned with the issue of definitional power, exploring the different ways in which competing institutional sources, media professionals and audience members seek to define the meaning in this particular instance.

The empirical basis of this case study is taken from a far more extensive research project undertaken by the authors investigating media representation of the social sciences (Fenton et al., 1998).¹ The particular aspect of the research programme reported in this article involved detailed interviews with the cited news sources and the journalist involved in the production of the news story, plus 14 focus group interviews. The focus groups were selected according to variables of gender, education (up to GCSE, up to A-level and higher education)² and employment (private sector/public sector).

The news article under scrutiny appeared in the broadsheet newspaper, the *Guardian*, on 13 January 1995, page 8, under the heading 'Psychologists Guarded on "False Memory" of Abuse' (see Appendix). It was written by a journalist designated as the paper's medical correspondent. We deal with the substance of this article later in our discussion, and need only mention at this juncture that it deals with the question of so-called 'False Memories', and contrasts two competing views on the issue — those of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the British False Memory Society (BFMS).

The issue of whether it is possible to 'recover' traumatic memories, particularly of a sexual nature, has been the source of considerable controversy over recent years. The basis of this dispute is whether these memories are real recollections of actual events, or whether they are false — implanted in the minds of vulnerable individuals by therapists who employ dubious therapeutic practices (in particular related to hypnotic regression and suggestion) and who are professionally obsessed with the issue of child abuse and its prevalence.

To understand and evaluate properly the representation of the issue in this article and the two competing news sources, it is necessary to pay attention to details of its inception and production. This involves two aspects: appraising the political and strategic actions of these two competing news sources in seeking to influence the frame of media coverage of the report; and considering the mediating role of the news-professional in translating these competing agendas into the final article.

Inception: source motivations and communicative strategies

Initiation: the British Psychological Society

The event that sparked the *Guardian's* interest in the false/recovered memory debate on this occasion was a news conference held by the British Psychological Society on 12 January 1995 to launch the report of its Working Party on 'recovered memories'. The British Psychological Society is a professional body that promotes the advancement and diffusion of a knowledge of psychology. The observance of strict rules of professional conduct is a condition of membership and it maintains a register of chartered psychologists.

The BPS investigation into recovered memories was set up in 1993 and was motivated as much by professional concern as it was by intellectual interest. As the principal representative of the psychological profession in Britain, the BPS was understandably concerned about the possibility that recovered memories might be manufactured by certain psychotherapeutic practices. The fact that 'much of the debate [had] taken part in the public arena' (Andrews et al., 1995: 209) — in particular the media — increased the pressure on the Society to respond to what the Chair of the Working Party later described as 'a highly politicized situation' (Morton, 1995: 103). There were also concerns that alarmist and unsubstantiated debate about the prevalence of 'False Memory Syndrome' was detracting media and public attention from the wider issue of child abuse.

The final conclusions of the Working Party's report (BPS, 1995) were equivocal. An 'executive summary' stressed five points:

- that complete or partial memory loss is a frequently reported consequence of experiencing certain types of psychological trauma, including sexual abuse;
- that memories may be recovered within or independently of therapy;
- that the clarity and detail of event memories depend on a number of factors, including the age at which the event occurred;
- that sustained pressure or persuasion by an authority figure could lead to the retrieval or elaboration of 'memories' of events that never actually

happened, although there is no reliable evidence that this is a widespread phenomenon in the UK;

- that the possible existence of therapy induced false beliefs *and* recovery of memory from total amnesia is now accepted. Therefore, the key issue concerns the prevalence of each.

The report provided a set of guidelines for therapists but avoided recommending any changes in existing methods of regression therapy.

The Society was acutely conscious that the nuances of this message — which kept the intellectual issue open, while cooling debate about widespread professional malpractice — might prove difficult to convey to the media. As one member of the Society's press committee commented after the news conference: 'You could almost smell the journalists' anguish. What was the line? What was the angle?' (Tysoe, 1995: 103). There were also particular concerns that this ambiguity might undermine media perceptions of the authoritativeness of the report's findings.

Consequently, the BPS paid careful attention to the public dissemination of the research. While seeking maximum media exposure for the conclusions, the Society sought to guard against misrepresentation and misinterpretation. It was hoped the physical presence of the Working Party at the news conference would help to reinforce and clarify the message and that the conference would be the first opportunity the media could have to report the study's conclusions. This exclusivity was intended both to enhance the news-value of the report and to wrong-foot opponents to its message. Before the launch, the circulation of preliminary drafts of the report within the BPS was strictly limited, and those who were permitted access were supposed to treat the details as confidential. Furthermore, although a news release was distributed in advance of the news conference to enable the media to preschedule their attendance, the material was embargoed until the day of the conference. In all, the Society expended considerable effort and expense to ensure the report only 'went public' on its own terms and in its own time.

In the event, these efforts met with mixed success. Leaving aside the question of media representation which we deal with later, the conference was successful in attracting considerable media attendance and comment. However, the information embargo was broken 12 days before the conference by *The Sunday Times*, who used a leaked draft of the report to argue that the BPS was endorsing inappropriate therapeutic practices ('Psychologists Endorse "Sex Memory" Therapy. Britain's psychologists have overwhelmingly endorsed a controversial technique of recovering "lost" memories of childhood sexual abuse, even though more than 500 families have been torn apart by false claims made by adult sons and daughters', 1 January 1995: 8). This premature breach caused considerable chagrin in the BPS. To explain the failure of this aspect of the BPS PR

strategy we need to consider the actions of the British False Memory Society.

Response: the British False Memory Society

The British False Memory Society (BFMS) was founded in April 1993 as a campaign organization for parents who had been accused of childhood sexual abuse by adult children after therapy. The stance of the organization is clear and unequivocal: that 'recovered' memories are false and are inculcated during psychotherapy. Since its creation it has been an influential issue entrepreneur on this topic, and has sought to align itself with a body of professional opinion within psychology that False Memory Syndrome can and does occur.³

Initially the BFMS supported the BPS Working Party, and co-operated with it. Its stance changed when it obtained a leaked copy of a draft of the BPS report in November 1994, and it realized that the BPS would not support its position. However, this advance warning did give the organization valuable time to prepare a public relations counter-response.

Two days before the BPS news conference the organization distributed two news releases detailing its objections to the report. The first, headed 'Psychologists Admit Using Questionable Therapy to Elicit "Memories" of Childhood Sexual Abuse', contained a lengthy quotation from Professor L. Weiskrantz, Emeritus Professor of Psychology, University of Oxford, in which he claimed 'The Report of the Working Party is deeply disappointing and, at its most crucial junctures, is badly flawed'. The second news release, headed 'Patients at Risk as Psychologists Endorse Pseudo-Science', ran to four densely-typed pages and criticized the report both in general and in detail, providing corroborative references from a range of governmental and scientific sources. It concluded that the BPS's stance endorsed a modern equivalent of 'spectral evidence' ('unsubstantiated allegations which fuelled the 17th century witchhunts') and called on members of the BPS to 'demand an enquiry into the methodology and assumptions of the report.'

A further PR response of the organization to the BPS launch occurred a few days earlier and was covert in nature. Although some at the BPS assumed that the British False Memory Society had been alerted to the substance of the report's findings as a result of *The Sunday Times*' preemptive article, this is a mistaken view. In point of fact, it was the BFMS that engineered the breaking of the BPS information embargo by passing on their leaked version of the Working Party's report to *The Sunday Times* journalist, accompanied with a lengthy briefing from the BFMS director.

Key issues

There are several key points from this review of source activity that are salient to our broader discussion about the encoding and decoding of this news item. First, both sources were in open contest over the meaning of the BPS report and the recovered/false memory issue in general. Therefore, there were two interpretative frameworks immediately available for journalists to take. Second, both sources identified the media as the key battleground for winning the public debate on these matters, and they expended considerable energy in trying to set the media agenda. Third, these competing sources employed a range of strategies intended to gain definitional advantage in media terms. As the author of the report under debate, the BPS combined an initial strategy of 'enclosure' designed to inhibit media comment, with a grand, performative moment of 'disclosure' (Ericson et al., 1989). As critics of the BPS report, the BFMS derided its conclusions openly through a detailed press briefing timed to coincide with the BPS news conference, and privately by breaking down the BPS information embargo by leaking a draft of the report to a prestigious media contact. The organization also tried to focus media attention on the scientific validity of its arguments by giving prominence to the views of a member of its 'scientific and advisory panel' and quoting other expert and official sources. Fourth, the failure of the BPS to sustain its information embargo confirms Manning's observation that 'To exploit the mechanism of exclusivity, a news source must enjoy extensive control over the flow of information in order to both time and direct the release of information and direct its communication' (1996: 250). In this example, the 'porosity' of the BPS provided its competitor with an unintended opportunity to challenge its preferred message.

These observations inevitably raise the issue of mediation. How did journalists respond to this competitive struggle for their attention, and what impact did their own professional codes and practices have in shaping the 'preferred reading' of the subject in coverage itself? Our analysis on the mediation of the *Guardian* article are derived from two sources: the testimony of the journalist himself and an analysis of the text. We begin with the comments of the journalist.

Mediation

The journalist's perspective

The main reason expressed by the journalist for his interest in the BPS news conference on recovered memories was that the issue was already firmly established on the news agenda. The first national press articles on

'False Memory Syndrome' in Britain appeared in early 1993, and the issue had been flaring up recurrently since then.⁴ During that period, the topic had proved a particularly interesting and controversial area for the *Guardian* to report, given its liberal orientation.⁵

Beyond this general assessment of the salience of the topic, the institutional status of the British Psychological Society also increased the journalist's perception of the news value of the event. As a specialist medical correspondent for the *Guardian*, the journalist has had considerable previous contact with the BPS and cultivated a respect for its authoritative-ness:

The BPS is a reputable body that has a history of doing worthwhile research into psychology. They were issuing a formal report into False Memory Syndrome. False Memory Syndrome is a controversial area and I judged that their input to this would be worth reporting. (Interview with authors)

The journalist also appreciated the professionalism and proactiveness of the BPS's press office in organizing the launch, as it afforded him ample opportunity to pre-schedule the event into his news gathering activities:

They don't usually call press conferences for the sake of it ... They tend to know how to present themselves well to the media and this is a 'sexy' subject ... They do give us time for us to do our homework. I would have had [the BPS news release] for at least a week and possibly longer. (Interview with authors)

On the negative side, the agnosticism of the Working Party's message – that false memories might exist, but that they were unlikely to be widespread – did create an element of frustration:

The medical correspondent from the *Times* asked a very pertinent question, at least in journalistic terms. He asked the chairman of the press conference, would you like tomorrow's headlines to say false memory is true or that false memory is false? We all came away understanding how the real world works, but journalistically thinking, 'oh sod it, they've given comfort to both sides'. (Interview with authors)

Ironically, the hostile public response of the British False Memory Society helped to counterbalance this potentially inhibiting factor — adding to the news value of the event, by providing a discordant counterpoint:

Even before the press conference [the BFMS] were saying it was all rubbish and attacking the report, and that in a sense whetted our appetites. (Interview with authors)

However, although this intervention provided a useful spin on the BPS conference, the journalist construed the BFMS in a very different way from

the BPS. Whereas he saw the BPS as an 'arbiter' on the issue — dispassionate, professional, expert — he treated the BFMS as an 'advocate' (Deacon and Golding, 1994), whose intervention was grounded in vested, rather than independent, motives. Although this partisanship enhanced the organization's news value in some respects, it compromised its perceived authoritativeness. Certainly, the journalist paid little attention to the 'scientific' support to the BFMS's arguments, which the Society had so strenuously emphasized in its news releases:

[The BFMS] have a powerful story to tell, but they are a self-selecting group of individuals and it's nowhere clear how representative they are of all the parents in this situation. I mean they are self-selected spokespeople and they do have less scientific credence So in terms of who we would trust and who we would believe it is more likely to be an objective learned society than a group of parents with a very vested interest in pushing a particular line.'

There was also a qualitative difference in the access the two sources had to the journalist. Whereas the journalist spoke to the BPS sources in person and attended the launch, his contact with the BFMS was solely based on their news release. At no stage did he talk to a representative from the organization directly.

These factors clearly suggest the journalist employed a hierarchy of credibility in appraising the contributions of the two organizations. The key issue is whether these judgements influenced his construction of the news report. Interestingly, the journalist insisted they were essentially irrelevant considerations:

My views are totally irrelevant . . . I tried to report it as accurately as I could in the number of words that were available to me. It's not my job as the journalist in the front line to make value judgements about whether the speakers are right or wrong.

However, closer examination of the text of the article suggests that these credibility assessments did have an impact in several respects. In contradicting the journalist's account on this point we should stress that we are not accusing him of disingenuity or bias. Rather, we are suggesting his professional codes and judgements led him to privilege one stance over another.

The news text

The journalist's claims about the irrelevance of his own views and his 'mirroring' function are supported in one regard. There is an obvious authorial absence in the text, as at no stage does the writer openly convey

his own views, opinions or evaluations. All commentary in the piece is derived from the protagonistic sources mentioned. This is a well established discursive convention in news reporting.

However, this textual distance does not absolve the journalist of involvement in the 'meaning making' in this instance. By utilizing the news source material, we can see three ways in which 'discretionary power' (Semetko et al., 1991) was exercised.

First, the position of the authors of the BPS report is given far greater priority in the article, in terms of space, location and access. The arguments and evidence of the BPS occupy all but three of the 16 paragraphs in the text, with the objections of the BFMS only being mentioned in the fourth and fifth paragraphs. Furthermore, although the BPS conclusions are quoted and précised in detail, the arguments and evidence of the BFMS are given little or no attention — we are only told that the organization disagrees with the substance of the report.

Second, there is a discernible difference in the 'footing' given to the BPS and the BFMS in the article. 'Footing' is a concept derived from discourse analysis which explores how the content of a message is attributed to a source — e.g. as drawing on professional expertise, or personal experience, or on personal grievance etc. (Edwards and Potter, 1992). The attribution given to the BPS in the article clearly signals its expertise and authority to speak. In paragraph 8, the empirical basis of the report is detailed and in the last paragraph the professional credentials of the Working Party Chair are carefully listed ('Professor John Morton, head of psychology at University College, London and director of the Medical Research Council's cognitive development unit ...'). Significantly, the description of Morton as the 'head of psychology' is both inaccurate and an exaggeration of the authority of his position.

By comparison, the footing given to the BFMS in the article clearly signals the vested interest behind its position ('The False Memory Society, *set up with parents claiming they are being wrongly accused by their young adult children*, said the report was "deeply disappointing and badly flawed"' [emphasis added]). Not only does the journalist ignore the attempts of the BFMS in its news releases to underline the scientific basis for its criticisms, no indication is given that the only phrase quoted on its behalf ('deeply disappointing and badly flawed') was made by an Emeritus Professor of Psychology from the University of Oxford. Clearly, an opportunity for accreditation was omitted. Third, the interpretative framework of the article most closely corresponds to the communicative agenda of the BPS. The consistent theme emphasized throughout the piece is that although false memory syndrome could exist, there are no grounds for supposing that it is a widespread phenomenon. And, although the False Memory Society appears, its alternative interpretative schema — that the

report is riddled with philosophical and methodological errors, and effectively condones psychotherapeutic malpractice — is only hinted at in the single, decontextualized quote attributed to the society.

There is only one area where the mediation of the event in the text appears to depart from the BPS agenda. This is in the sub-headline: 'Researchers find recovered memories likely to be genuine', which is more categorical in tone than the BPS intended, and which jars with the concluding sentence of the article ('...the working party had deliberately chosen the middle ground because this was where the evidence pointed'). The reason for this contradiction lies in the job-delimitation that is part of all news production. The headline was written by a sub-editor, who also cropped the journalist's original article from 1000 words to 600. However, in the journalist's judgement, this sub-editing did not substantively alter the meaning of the piece, and the sub-heading represented a fair summation of the BPS position.

Key issues

The testimony of the journalist and the textual evidence reveal several additional points about the encoding of this article. First, the journalist's interest in this event was sparked by its consonance within a developing news framework, the status of one of the protagonists, and the general and particular conflict it encapsulated. Second, although both protagonists in the debate are presented in the piece, it is clear that the BPS has a discursive ascendancy, both in relation to the interpretative parameters of the text, and in terms of accreditation. The scientific support for the BFMS position, although strenuously emphasized, was ignored. Third, the outcome of the competition between these sources to define the media agenda was decided by the journalist's professional and social assessments about their motivations and credentials. Fourth, in this example the journalist is clearly a secondary definer. The 'preferred reading' of the article was not created by him, but taken from his most privileged news source. Although he may have been disappointed with the ambivalence of the BPS message, there is no evidence of a translatory effect whereby the message is reworked to fit more readily with professional codes of news presentation. Fifth, and as a partial qualification to the previous points, the presence of the BFMS in the article does represent a tactical coup of sorts. Although journalistic conventions of 'balancing' are well established when reporting on the activities of 'advocates', they are generally less strictly applied with 'arbiters' (Deacon and Golding, 1994: 171-4). It is not inconceivable that had the BFMS not moved to pre-empt the report's release, its views would have been ignored. Certainly, the journalist had not independently canvassed the organization's views prior to the BPS launch.

In summarizing these points, we are conscious that there is a wider dimension to the issue of mediation on this issue than is presented here. We have concentrated on just one example of media reportage, but there were many journalists at the BPS press conference, and there is a history of media interest in the false memory issue. Therefore, we need to be cautious about assuming a wider typicality for this particular example. For example, it does not necessarily follow that the BFMS is always subordinated in media representations. Indeed, there is substantial evidence to the contrary. Although the BPS was generally satisfied with the media reporting of the launch (Tysoe, 1995), it was dismayed at the line taken in a couple of national newspapers. The first was the embargo-busting *Sunday Times* article (1 January 1995), the second, a piece carried in the *Observer* the weekend after the conference ('Incest, Lies and Therapy. Families torn apart by their adult children's sudden allegations of abuse are fighting back, dismayed by the psychologists' green light for the technique that they say has caused their suffering', *Observer*, 15 January 1995: 23). In both of these examples, it is the BFMS that sets the interpretative agenda.

Therefore, we shouldn't assume that the superior accreditation given to the BPS by this journalist, which was a key factor in securing its definitional advantage, would pertain with all news professionals and in all media arenas. It must be remembered that this news report was written by a specialist journalist, working for an up-market broadsheet, who had a well established exchange-relationship with the BPS press office. In other media contexts there may well be a greater receptiveness to the categorical and alarmist message of the BFMS, and to its attack on the 'pseudoscientificity' of many areas of psychology. Certainly, although the 'expertise' of social scientists is often sought by journalists, it is also acutely vulnerable to their scepticism (Fenton et al., 1995).

Reception: from encoding to decoding

So far we have charted the precise factors that contributed to the encoding of a single news text. On the basis of this evidence, we have identified a preferred reading to the text and its primary definer. It is tempting to assume that this is where the story ends. But of course it is only the beginning. As Eco commented 'The unity of a text lies in its destination not its origins' (cited in O'Sullivan et al., 1994: 168). This then raises the question: was the preferred reading taken and was the accreditation inscribed into the text accepted? To address these questions we conducted a series of 14 focus group interviews during which participants were invited to consider a selection of news items and discuss their responses to them. The *Guardian* article was one of the texts selected.

In our analysis of these groups' responses we make particular use of a distinction drawn by Corner et al. (1990) between understanding a text (i.e., what the text is seen to be saying) and responding to it (i.e., what the audience member makes of that message). As they explain, how people interpret information and how they evaluate it are not necessarily the same thing.

Understanding

Our reception study shows that there was a great deal of consistency between the groups in their interpretations of the text. Almost every group understood the news item as an assessment of whether or not recovered memory was real or whether it could be false:

R1: They've chosen the middle ground because they're really not sure either way

R2: There's no reliable evidence at present is there?

Interviewer: What are the both sides?

R1: Well one that there's false memory and the other a true memory. But as they can't really prove it then its sort of gone in the middle. (Women, public sector, up to GCSE)

R1: It's debating that information can be put into their minds when nothing has actually happened and they believe it.

R2: There's no evidence.

R3: It leaves you to make up your own mind. It probably does say they are likely to be genuine then at the end he's saying there is actually no evidence. (Women, private sector, up to GCSE)

Although this basic denotative comprehension was similar for all groups, there were certain areas of confusion. This was partly a facet of the complexity of the concept of a false memory (how can a memory be false?) which seemed to flout rationality for many; partly because of the ambivalence of the message (the inconclusiveness of the BPS report); and partly because of the demands and contradictions of the text itself: a change of direction is recognized within the text — the subtitle begins by saying 'recovered memory is likely to be genuine' and the article ends by taking the middle ground:

R2: I couldn't follow the political flow of this article because the main headline, it says, 'psychologists are guarded on false memory of abuse'. Then there's a sub headline which says 'researchers find recovered memories likely to be genuine'. And it starts off saying people who remember during therapy are likely to be right. They remember something that did happen. And then it switches to no they aren't. You've got the British Psychological Society who don't really know. I mean right at the end the professor says they have chosen the middle ground. (Men, public sector, up to A Level)

However, despite this confusion, the preferred reading was largely taken:

R1: I mean there's always 'researchers find that recovered memories are likely to be genuine' it's almost as if they felt they had to put that in to explain what they thought the thrust of the article was.

R2: I would tend to believe that they are genuine, memories.

R3: Coming to the end of the article, I had completely forgotten the beginning ... I think I was really struck with what the Professor said ... and I think I was more swayed by what the report said. (Men, private sector with degree)

We have noted that in this instance the text privileged the BPS over the BFMS. In the audience group responses it was clear that this implicit accreditation in the text of the BPS as 'authorized knowers' was also recognized, even if — as we shall see — it wasn't uncritically accepted:

R1: And I must admit I could laugh at this False Memory Society, which I shouldn't do.

R2: ... the British Psychological Society has a named expert which always gives it more credence. Whereas the False Memory Society, they're almost set up to be sitting dollies really aren't they? (Women, public sector, degree)

Response

Whereas understandings of the text were relatively uniform and operated within clearly accepted parameters, responses to the text — i.e. evaluations of the issues and concerns presented — revealed the most dissonance and 'activity' on the part of the audience. Group participants reacted to the article positively, negatively and ambivalently. These responses seemed to draw on five alternative interpretative schemata to appraise the nature of the message and the article's implicit accreditation: personal experience, professional knowledge, political judgements, popular mythology and other media discourses.

The positive response

Individuals' perceptions of the salience of the topic for media coverage often drew on personal experience. Although none of the respondents had any first-hand knowledge with which to appraise the coverage there was considerable personal sensitivity to the issue — what would I do if I was the accuser/accused? Proximity to the issue (real or imagined) is important not least because it is often used to validate interest and inclusion:

R1: I think it was worrying the report because if what it is saying is true that people can remember things that didn't happen and particularly when it's

mentioned things like child abuse and it got through court, that if someone was falsely accused of doing something on the evidence of somebody who gave inaccurate information, it's like everybody's nightmare isn't it? So I think it's thought provoking really.

R2: Well it's interesting in so much as it's everybody's nightmare. You read about it, you hear about it on television and obviously it's a worry, that it could happen. (Men, public sector, A-level)

This last quote reveals how many interpretative schemata are informed by other media discourses. Respondents referred frequently to representations of related issues in other news and fictional accounts. Once this mass mediated knowledge had been accumulated it appeared to stimulate further interest.

Positive evaluations of the authority of the main news source — the BPS — were based on professional knowledge of the organization (e.g. from a group of public sector professionals with degrees) and also political judgements about the perceived fairness of reporting of the newspaper from which the article was drawn.

The negative response

Similarly, but with a different outcome, political judgements were made about the possible hidden motives of the news sources, in particular of the BFMS but also of the BPS:

R3: Well lo and behold the British Psychological Society reporting on an issue which is potentially damning to some of its members finds in its evidence that there is little evidence to support the fact that there is abuse by British psychologists during counselling in relation to creating memories. Lack of independence always calls into question the strength of the evidence, I would say. (Men, private sector with degree)

This sense of dubious authority was also precipitated by a popular mythology of 'the expert' who by definition of their specialism is out of touch with reality. This was enhanced further by the combined connotations of the stereotype of a professor as an eccentric boffin and that of the psychologist as a hypnotist and mind-bender. The unwillingness to take on board the views of those positioned as experts is explained partly by the interpretative schema that the respondents bring to the text but is founded on the lack of reference to the basis of expertise within the text itself. Respondents felt unable to accept expert opinion because the text did not tell them how qualified the expert was to talk on that subject:

Interviewer: Does it make any difference that you've got Professor John Morton talking at the end?

R1: No because half of them are round the bend. To be a professor they're probably half way there.

R2: We don't know what the False Memory Society is, they may have more credibility than this John Morton. (Men, private sector, GCSE)

As well as popular myth and political judgement, a discourse of personal experience can impart scepticism of expertise. On certain occasions anecdotal evidence or even projections of personal experience were pitched against authorized knowledge in the text. Of course interpretative frames do not come into play in the singular as an analysis such as this may suggest. People are always drawing on a variety of overlapping and interconnected means of making sense of texts. An example from this study is the intertwining of professional and personal codes:

R1: I actually work with sexually abused children . . . I think if it happens to you you never forget it. And little things will spark it off all the time. So I don't think you can go for many years and think oh, no, I never got slung across a chair and held down and things like that . . . awful things, people will go through shock and they'll blank things out but then it does generally come back. I don't think people can go for years and years and just totally block it. (Women, private sector, A level)

The ambivalent response

Again, proximity to the issue was a major factor in evaluating its significance. The area of false memory was viewed by some to be irrelevant to their life. This disinterest was informed by their personal and professional experience:

R1: If it's not related to you or somebody that you know you just pass it over. . . . It's not relevant to us, it's a difficult subject, we don't really want to read about.

R2: You go out and repeat something like this without really understanding what it's all about and upset somebody that it could have happened to. I admit I don't understand it. . . . It's a field that building society clerks don't really get into.

R3: . . . It doesn't affect us so we're not interested in it. (Women, private sector, up to GCSE)

Apart from the frames of reference referred to above there was one other variable that played a part in variation in understanding and response — that of formal education. This was evident at the level of understanding, with conceptual complexities proving problematic for the less formally educated and textual incongruencies readily recognized by the more formally educated as contributing to confusion. Formal education was also relevant at the level of response, particularly in assessments of expertise. The subject of psychology was distrusted by those less formally educated who, because of their lack of personal and/or professional experience of the subject, relied more on the popular association of psychology with images of mind-benders.

Key issues

The study of audience responses reveals a striking consonance in the understanding of the item that suggests the text can inhere meaning by defining the parameters of interpretation. The preferred reading that is encoded is accepted at the moment of decoding. Central to the preferred reading of this particular article is the accreditation of sources. This is recognized and applied by the respondents.

Interpretative variance occurs at the level of comprehension due to the conceptual demands and textual incongruencies of the article. This comprehension relied on educational capital, with conceptual difficulties proving more problematic for those with less formal education. Seen in this way, dissent from the preferred reading is not 'active' and is most certainly not a strategy of resistance. A reinterpretation of the issue was not forthcoming. Rather, and more politically telling, we would argue that such understanding acts as a mechanism of exclusion.

Where renegotiation of meaning does occur it is at the level of response — the evaluative level, i.e. what people make of the validity of the item and the research. Readers may respond by rejecting the accreditation of expertise offered in the text. For example, the BPS is seen by some as a professional image-monger protecting its members' self-interests, rather than as an arbiter. Those who gave the most dissonant evaluations were those with the most detailed knowledge in the area. This would suggest that critical purchase is rooted in personal and professional experience. In this instance, for most of our respondents, such experience was absent or remote. When these pre-existing frames of reference are negligible or non-existent the definitional power of the text is seen to increase.

Approached in this way the notion of the active audience takes on a more defined role. Activity exists for the most part at the level of response once the defining variables of the debate have been set. This activity in turn relies on interpretative resources and the cultural competence available to the individual/group. As Jensen (1990) points out, an oppositional reading is not necessarily a political act in itself. But even to have recourse to a critical response requires access to resources that exist external to the text. These personal, professional and political frames of reference are themselves frequently informed by popular mythology and other discourses from the mass media.

Conclusion

In this article we have traced the 'natural history' of a news item from production through to reception. Our analysis of the encoding of this article highlights the limitations of a media-centric view of news production. By

tracing the response of a news professional to the strategies and discrepant discursive frames of two competing news sources, we have shown how the 'preferred reading' of the text wasn't created by the journalist, but constituted by the source given most privileged access (i.e. the British Psychological Society). This is a point that is often lost in analyses of news that are entirely dependent upon textual analysis and which seem to imply that textual closure occurs at the moment of production (e.g. Fiske, 1987: 281–308). In this instance, the journalist's 'textualization' of the false memory issue essentially involved *selecting* material from an already tightly crafted message, and adding a brief and unelaborated counterpoint from a second critical source. Of course, this represents a critically important mediation in the encoding process, but it isn't a creative intervention. The journalist constricted rather than constructed the debate on this issue.

The British Psychological Society achieved this primary definition partly on the basis of its perceived social status. This would appear to confirm a rather static and deterministic view of the news production process, in which the powerful always prevail. But the detail of our study also shows how the accreditation of the BPS critically depended upon the adroitness of its news management, both in the short term (by carefully adapting the nature, timing and presentation of its message to fit with media logic) and in the long term (in cultivating an exchange-relationship with the journalist). Indeed, despite all this careful preplanning, the discursive control of the BPS was threatened by the responsive strategies of the British False Memory Society, who exploited internal tensions within the BPS to preempt its launch and repudiate the detail of its message. Although the BFMS was only marginally successful in this instance in changing the terms of the text, its mere presence was an achievement of sorts. Moreover, there is substantial circumstantial evidence to suggest that its agenda-building efforts met with more success in other reporting contexts.

If we need to avoid deterministic accounts of the relationship between the media and society-as-source, we should also be cautious about assuming, on the basis of this case study, that journalists always adopt the role of secondary definer. It should be remembered that while media interest in the false memory issue was well established prior to the BPS news conference, it remained a comparatively 'new' issue on the media map. Furthermore, it is an innately uncertain and immensely controversial topic. These are conditions where the need for 'arbiters' to help 'make things mean' is most keenly felt by journalists and are therefore most conducive to source dependency (Deacon and Golding, 1994: 184–7) — particularly when the mediator is a conscientious and experienced specialist correspondent motivated by informational, non-revenue, prestige goals rather than the slavish pursuit of a good news-angle. It is not difficult to think of other situations where this interpretative dependency will not be as

great and news professionals would play a more active role in constructing the 'preferred reading' of a text, whether deliberately, in seeking to push a particular political line, or unconsciously, in appraising source actions and opinions in terms of a well established set of cognitive assumptions about what the issue or event 'means' in a broader sense.

With regard to the decoding of this news text, our research adds further support to those who argue there are dangers in overstating the interpretative freedom of the audience from textual confines (e.g. Murdock, 1989). The details reveal a marked consistency between intended meaning at the point of production and audience understanding and interpretation of the text. This is not to say that audience members passively deferred to the text — on the contrary, we found substantial evidence of independent thought and scepticism. However, the 'distinctiveness of decoding' in this instance occurred at the *evaluative rather than interpretative level*. Resistance to the message did not lead to a renegotiation of it. It was interrogated but not expanded.

We would suggest there are two reasons for this interpretative closure. The first relates to the genre of the text being analysed. Hard news reporting is governed by a range of mechanistic, narrative conventions that are intended to generate a denotative transparency to inhibit potential readings. For example, it is a genre where prominence and frequency of appearance are reliable indications of significance *and* signification. Most news-consumers are conversant with the maxims of this presentational game, and construct their readings according to them. Of course, aberrant decodings can and do occur, but the undeniable fact that news is a peculiarly 'closed' form of actuality coverage inevitably means its polysemic potential is circumscribed. There is none of the *interpretative* room to manoeuvre that is such an evident and essential facet of other forms of fictional and factual genres. It is surely no accident that the most convincing demonstrations of audience creativity and autonomy appear in studies of popular narrative genres (such as soap operas), which are sought out for recreational rather than surveillance purposes, and which revolve around textual ambiguity and irresolution.

The second reason for this interpretative closure relates to the nature of the subject matter being reported. The selected news report is about a remote and esoteric issue which, although its broader implications resonate with the audience, remains beyond their direct personal and professional experiences. This is a situation most conducive to the acceptance of media definitions, if not uncritically, then at least interpretatively intact. This is a recurrent theme in many branches of audience research — including reception analysis, cultivation analysis, agenda-setting and uses and gratifications — which all highlight how peripheral engagement and involvement with issues increase acceptance of media versions of reality (Morley, 1980; Iyengar et al., 1982; Hietbrink, 1996).

It is our belief that the obvious parallels revealed in this case study between the text dependency of the audience and the source dependency of the journalist highlight the value of considering the linkages between encoding and decoding. In this example audience responses and journalistic mediation are similarly constrained by their negligible access to alternative repertoires of discourse and experience about the false memory issue. And although this doesn't render them completely passive, it does mean their activity operates in evaluative rather than interpretative terms. Obviously, these conditions do not always pertain. Other issues and topics are embedded in popular culture and media culture in far more extensive ways, and on these occasions the interpretative activity of the mediator and recipient is likely to be greater and the influence of news sources more likely to be subordinated to these established inferential frameworks.

This recognition of the contingent nature of audience, source and media activity suggests that more rigorous theorization is needed of the differing nature and contexts of communication events. Although we do not have space here to develop such a framework, we believe it should distinguish clearly between actuality and fictional forms, between popular culture and public knowledge contexts (Corner, 1991), and pay closer consideration to issues of genre, personal identification and proximity. In particular, it should insert a sense of chronology into analyses of reception and production, in which the dynamics of understanding and interpretation are recognized as historically located processes rather than synchronous events.

Appendix: The *Guardian* 13 January 1995

Psychologists guarded on 'false memory' of abuse

Researchers find recovered memories likely to be genuine

FALSE memory syndrome — where adults wrongly 'remember' during therapy that they were sexually abused as children — is possible but unlikely, the British Psychological Society said yesterday.

A report by the society says that recovered memories are likely to be genuine. But it is possible that authoritarian therapists could convince people to believe things which never happened.

The False Memory Society, set up with parents claiming they are being wrongly accused by their young adult children, said the report was 'deeply disappointing and badly flawed'.

It is claimed that doctrinaire therapists tell clients that forgotten abuse is the cause of their adult psychological distress, and help create 'false memories' of this happening when the people were young.

The opposing view is that most cases of child abuse are genuine and that in the course of therapy it is possible for suppressed memories to be recalled.

The British Psychological Society set up a working party last year to examine the issue, and its report published yesterday will give some comfort to both sides.

It examined existing theories and research, as well as obtaining the views of some 800 psychologists, many of whom treat survivors of child sexual abuse. The

researchers also examined the files of the British False Memory Society, looking in detail at 97 cases.

The report states: 'Complete or partial memory loss is a frequently reported consequence of experiencing certain kinds of psychological traumas, including childhood sexual abuse. These memories are sometimes fully or partially recovered after a gap of many years.'

It adds: 'Memories may be recovered within, or independent of, therapy. Memory recovery is reported by highly experienced and well qualified therapists who are well aware of the dangers of inappropriate suggestion and interpretation.'

The report says normal memories can be broadly accurate but contain significant errors. Recovered memories are likely to have the same properties.

It adds: 'Sustained pressure or persuasion by an authority figure could lead to the retrieval or elaboration of "memories" of events that never actually happened. The possibility of therapists creating in their clients false memories of having been sexually abused in childhood warrants careful consideration.'

'There is no reliable evidence at present that this is a widespread phenomenon in the UK.'

The report lays down guidelines for therapists, reminding them that they should be alert to the dangers of suggestion.

Professor John Morton, head of psychology at University College, London, and director of the Medical Research Council's cognitive development unit, said the working party had deliberately chosen the middle ground because this was where the evidence pointed.

Notes

1. The research has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant reference R000234795).

2. These categories reflect levels of formal educational achievement in England. GCSE exams (General Certificate of Secondary Education) are usually taken by students at age 16; A-Levels (advanced level) are usually taken by students at age 18; higher education refers to any formal education over and above these levels.

3. The organization now has charitable status and a 'scientific and professional advisory board' of 16 academic and professional members, eight of whom are Professors of Psychology.

4. Keyword searches of CDROM archives of the *Guardian* and *Daily/Sunday Telegraph* revealed no mention anywhere of 'false memory' (as used in this context) during the whole of 1992. In 1993 there was a string of articles.

5. In 1993, a freelance working for the paper tried to write '... a balanced article, explaining the views of the proponents of FMS, while leaving no one in any doubt that child abuse is endemic in society' (*Guardian*, 7 June 1993: 12). The article, 'Past Imperfect' (*Guardian*, 12 May 1993: 10), excited a storm of discussion from readers, with some accusing the author of conspiring with those who wish to silence women's anger about their abuse.

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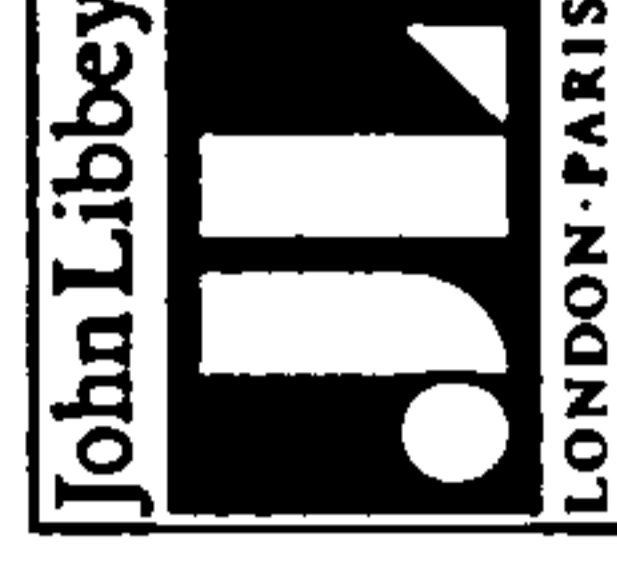
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NUCLEAR REACTIONS

**Form and Response in
'Public Issue' Television**

**John Corner, Kay Richardson and
Natalie Fenton**

Acamedia Research Monograph



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Introduction

This book is a report on an ESRC research project which sought to explore some of the ways in which television, and then viewers, 'made sense' of the nuclear energy issue during a period when public awareness of the topic had dramatically increased. The accident at Chernobyl in 1986 and its reported consequences were largely the cause of this increase, but heightened perceptions of the problems of nuclear waste disposal (reflected in vigorous local protests by communities in designated 'dump' areas) and continuing arguments from environmentalist groups about radioactive pollution (particularly at Sellafield, in Cumbria) also contributed. Our research was conducted during 1988/89 but we write this introduction in the Spring of 1990, when the debate on the issue has intensified further, following the economic costings surrounding the withdrawal of the industry from privatization plans in late 1989 and the new and dramatic research on childhood leukaemia in the Sellafield area published recently¹. Both factors have received intensive television scrutiny in the last few weeks and it is ironic that they have re-configured the debate at a time when the argument about the 'greenhouse effect' and the use of fossil fuels seemed to be giving new confidence to the nuclear lobby.

As media researchers interested in television's centrality to modern public knowledge and in the various expositional and aesthetic possibilities drawn on to address and inform the public, we wanted to examine some of the signficatory and interpretative work that was being put in to make 'nuclear energy' *mean* televisually.

We knew that the issue was receiving conflicting audio-visual treatments across the range of broadcast, promotional and 'independent' activities, reflecting con-

¹ A report by Martin Gardner of Southampton University, linking cases of leukaemia in children with their fathers' exposure to radiation as workers at Sellafield was extensively reported in the press and on TV and radio. See The Times 17 February 1990: 'Prospective fathers "need shielding"'; 19 February 1990: 'Nuclear power operators face huge leukaemia claims'; 23 February 1990 'Radiation damage "could last generations"'. A good contextualising summary of the report's findings was published in May 1990 - see The Times Higher Education Supplement 18 May 1990: 'Crushed by lightness of evidence'.

flicts of opinion in the broader public debate and in the scientific community itself. We were interested, too, in the way in which the debate was characterised by having at its centre a number of highly esoteric technological, scientific and medical questions, making public comprehension, let alone judgement, difficult and thereby giving mediation functions a particular salience.

So the research has a dual 'edge' - cutting equally into questions about TV as a form of public communication, grounded in particular institutional relations and conventions, and ones about the public meanings which had gathered around nuclear energy at the time. The selection of the energy issue is not, therefore, just an 'example' allowing us to extrapolate off into a general theory of public-issue television, nor is it a substantive focal point in relation to which questions of media discourse are secondary. Our view is that it would be no bad thing if such a duality were to be tried more often in the media research field.

Our project involved, first of all, the selection of sample programmes and tapes using different modes of address and exposition and engaging with the topic of nuclear energy from different perspectives. These were investigated comparatively and an attempt made to identify and discuss their overall rhetorical design, their local mechanisms of signification and the key themes which they appeared to project. Sample viewer groups from very different social and professional backgrounds were then used for respondent discussion sessions, involving taping and subsequently transcription.

Analytically, our study connects with two developing areas of media research, that concerned with non-fiction television discourse and that concerned with the study of 'reception' - with the study, that is, of the interpretative activities by which viewers comprehend and attach significance to what they see and hear. Response and, indeed, understood meaning itself may vary considerably as a consequence of audience members drawing upon different schemes of prior knowledge and predisposition. Many published studies have attempted both to plot and to account for such variation and our study includes an attempt to do this in respect of the chosen topic and material. Reception studies, focussed in the first instance not on 'influence' but on 'meaning', have become over the last decade an important element in television research. They have attracted a good deal of investigative effort and an even larger literature of theoretical commentary² and we discuss aspects of this in Chapter Four.

The second area of research which we wish to develop is the analysis of TV's expositional discourses. For just as programme analysis without a connection with viewer activity is severely limited in explanatory range, so is a reception

² A number of recent and useful surveys of the field, including critical commentary on concepts and methods, can be found in Ellen Seiter et al (eds) *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power* London, Routledge 1989.

study that is not connected back to a detailed engagement with the significant forms of particular programmes and generic conventions. In our study, we hoped to find out more about those modes of address, devices of visualization and of interaction (for instance, presenter speech-to-camera in a location setting, the uses of unobtrusively 'observational' sequences and of interview segments) which form the grammar of non-fiction television. Through either a misplaced quest for a general theory of television discourse or through the recent emphasis on the analysis of fictional forms, such practices seemed to us to be relatively under-researched.

The reader will find the research presented below in five chapters of varying length. Each of the main analytic chapters begins with a general commentary on our ideas and methods, developing in further detail the points outlined above.

In Chapter 1 we discuss how nuclear energy became a public issue in Britain and look at some of the principal conflicts of scientific and political opinion affecting its development. We also refer to the accidents at Three-mile Island in the United States and at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union which were to be given 'datum' significance by much subsequent commentary.

In Chapter 2 we examine four selected programmes in detail, focussing on their use of language and image to depict nuclear energy and to give access to, and frame, differing perspectives on its safety. We also indicate something of their production backgrounds.

In Chapter 3 we pursue aspects of the programmes further by identifying four principal themes articulated variously within them. We explore both the discursive organisation of these themes and their significance for the nuclear debate.

In Chapter 4 we turn to the viewers, and offer as full an account as space will allow of nine selected groups, with further reference to the full range of respondents studied. We hope that this form of presentation provides clarity in comprehending the relationships between programme elements and particular interpretations and in regarding the comments of respondents as *situated speech*.

In Chapter 5 there is an attempt to cross-connect interpretative schemes and to correlate variations in interpretative framing with the different agendas and social and political characteristics of the groups sampled. Key points of convergence as well as of variation are listed and discussed and there is a note on aspects of respondent speech. Finally, we offer a brief, concluding summary of our project, suggesting its value, its shortcomings and those aspects of its organisation and findings upon which we think future research might usefully build.

1 Nuclear energy in Britain: the formation of an issue

When we began planning this project in 1987 and picked nuclear energy as the public issue that we would concentrate upon, it was as a suitably controversial subject matter. In 1987 it was clear that the nuclear industry did not enjoy the general and complete confidence of the British public. It was also clear that the industry saw this lack of public confidence as a threat to its viability, and was making a considerable effort to counter its bad image with a public information/public relations campaign. This took such forms as a 'Visitor's Centre' at British Nuclear Fuels site at Sellafield in Cumbria, advertised on national television as a tourist attraction; public information packs and videos and touring exhibitions. These efforts on the industry's part are continuing; meanwhile its position has weakened considerably. The following account will incorporate references to developments which have taken place since the fieldwork stage of the research. But we can start by indicating some of the parameters of the public debate at the end of 1987/beginning of 1988, about 18 months to a year after the major disaster at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union.

At this time, there appeared to be four separate issues which constituted 'the nuclear energy debate': the question of health hazard (particularly leukaemia); the risk of a Chernobyl-scale disaster; the problem of waste disposal and the argument about the relative costs of nuclear and fossil fuel electricity. There was a related concern in some quarters about the links between civil and military nuclear operations.

Childhood leukaemia clusters had been found around the Sellafield plant and at other nuclear installations. Considerable controversy surrounded these findings, and medical experts are still looking for a *causal* explanation, despite the recent developments noted in the Introduction. The hypothesis that the illnesses were brought about by ionising radiation discharged at Sellafield is not the only explanation on offer. This issue broadened out into the more general one of health risks from regular radioactive discharges at nuclear establishments.

The 'Chernobyl factor' loomed large in 1987. This accident gave evidence of how widespread the consequences of such a disaster could be. A cloud of radioactive dust and gas was blown across Europe, including Britain, and the Government's actions in advising and protecting the population formed one subject of debate in the months following the accident. This may be incidental to the nuclear debate 'proper' but it did raise the question of contingency plans in the event of a comparable catastrophe in this country. Inevitably, the public became concerned about the risk of such an event. Citizens were reassured that the pressurised water reactor planned for Sizewell in Suffolk (the 4-year inquiry under Sir Frank Layfield was nearing completion at the time of the disaster) was of a reliable American design (by the Westinghouse company), wholly unlike the design used in the Soviet Union.

A third area of controversy at this time related to the continuing search for an inland site where disposal of low-level waste could be carried out. It was in 1987 that the idea of using shallow trenches was abandoned in favour of deep disposal. The Government agency Nirex had been commissioned to explore the possibility of the former at three sites in Britain, one of which would be selected if it proved suitable. But geological suitability was never discovered. Local protest – with health risk as its main concern – was sufficient to make the Government rethink the policy. Further consultation between Nirex and the local authorities followed. The result was to recommend geological explorations at Sellafield and at Dounreay in Scotland (the site of Britain's fast-breeder programme), with the intention of using one or other of these for deep disposal.

A fourth problem for the nuclear industry, albeit rather less prominent in general public debate than the above, concerned the economics of the industry and the challenge to the traditional case that nuclear electricity was or would be cheaper than fossil fuel electricity. At one level, the memory of 1950s hyperbolic claims about electricity 'too cheap to meter' haunted the debate, though the real test was the more modest one of comparability with traditional sources. The arguments are complex. The inclusion of building and decommissioning costs for nuclear plant are thought by the industry to give an *unfairly* inflated figure for nuclear electricity. The industry strengthens the comparison in favour of nuclear fuel by talking about the expense involved in limiting the emission of 'greenhouse gases' from coal-burning stations to make them more environment-friendly. This argument has been developed as the dangers of global warming have become more generally known and accepted for the purposes of policymaking. The industry has to convince the Government as well as the public of nuclear energy's value for money. The Conservative Government was wary enough of the economic case not to rely on that alone, but to stress also a diversity-of-fuel-supply argument as part of its policy of keeping a nuclear capacity in Britain.

Since completing the fieldwork on which this study is based there have been further developments which have pushed the industry into crisis, despite the best efforts of its public information/public relations machine. A moratorium upon the building of new nuclear plant (excepting Sizewell B) has come into effect and will be reviewed in 1994. Sizewell B may be the last nuclear reactor to be built in this country, whilst the process of decommissioning the oldest reactors has already begun. It is primarily the problem of costs, not the risk issues, which have brought about this crisis. The Government decided, at a late stage of the parliamentary proceedings, to exclude all nuclear plant, not just the oldest (Magnox) reactors as had been previously planned, from the provisions for privatising the electricity supply industry. Electricity production could, it seemed, only be made to look attractive to private investors if the expensive nuclear element remained in public hands. Thus, the Government was treating nuclear power as a costly but necessary liability, a stance which could only further weaken the standing of the industry. It was this decision which brought about the resignation of Lord Walter Marshall, chairman of the Central Electricity Generating Board, and chairman-designate of National Power, one of the two private companies formed to take over from the CEGB upon privatisation, and a strong supporter of the nuclear industry.

There have also been significant developments around the health risk issue. Parents of leukaemia sufferers in West Cumbria found a vigorous champion in a local solicitor, and court proceedings were commenced against British Nuclear Fuels Limited. The plaintiffs' hand was strengthened when, in February 1990, a medical report was published showing a strong *statistical* correlation between Sellafield leukaemia cases and the radioactive dose exposure of the fathers of these children, working at the plant.³ The correlation thus indicated a *possible* causal explanation – that the disease was brought about through the effects of radioactivity upon the genes in the male sperm.

It would be foolish to predict that nuclear energy is finished in Britain. Its advocates may yet win the day – public hostility may weaken, 'green' opinion may become more equivocal in comparing the environmental risks of the various fuel sources, the industry may convince a jury that Sellafield radiation was not the cause of the local leukaemias. But these are not easy tasks and it is just as likely that the next few years will give the anti-nuclear lobby a stronger hand, particularly if the court case produces a victory for the plaintiffs.

³ See Introduction, footnote 1.

2 The Programmes

Introduction

As we have outlined above, our intention in this study was not only to investigate viewer responses to a specific 'public issue' as depicted through television/video discourse, but also to look at different depictions of this issue and at different methods and devices of depiction. Thus, the research, rather than holding the idea of 'television' constant in order to explore response, would also explore variables both in the rhetorical intentions and discursive operation of sample programmes. In this respect, the precedent set by Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott in their study of the various generic frameworks within which ideas about 'terrorism' were articulated on television, was a useful one to have.⁴ Our study, given its primary commitment to conducting research with sample viewers, was less wide-ranging than theirs in generic analysis. We chose to focus on accounts structured within the conventions of the current-affairs documentary, the form in which most of television's contribution to public understanding of the nuclear energy issue has been organised. In the first phase of our research, we took the third and final programme in the series *Taming the Dragon*, transmitted in the BBC2 *Brass Tacks* slot in October 1987. This programme, entitled *Uncertain Legacy*, was a critical investigation of the health risks consequent upon the nuclear industry's day to day operations and its problems with waste disposal. It featured accounts both from the industry and its critics.

In some contrast to this, we also took *Energy - The Nuclear Option*, a promotional videotape produced by the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) in 1987 as part of its campaign to win back public opinion after the massive loss of confidence occasioned by the Chernobyl disaster. In much of its design, this video followed the model of broadcast current-affairs output. Using Brian Walden as its presenter/interviewer, it imitated several features of London Weekend Television's highly successful *Weekend World* series. The video, like the BBC programme, also included sustained address to the question of risk. Among other

⁴ Philip Schlesinger, *Graham Murdock and Philip Elliott Televising 'terrorism': political violence in popular culture.. London, Comedia 1983.*

things, it was the potential tension between its use of a model of impartial inquiry and its requirement to convey a promotional message which was of interest to us.

A third item was also taken from video distribution. This was an item from the innovative 'video journal' *Northern Newsreel*, produced regularly by Trade Films of Gateshead and distributed nationally to organisations within the Trade Union and Labour movement. *Northern Newsreel 9*, distributed in 1988, contained a short feature, entitled *From Our Own Correspondent*, about the dangers of nuclear energy. Using a dramatised-documentary method, the piece developed a scenario about a disaster at Hartlepool Nuclear Power Station, making imaginative and direct use of the Chernobyl precedent and coming to strongly negative conclusions about the industry.

These three programmes, connected comparatively and contrastively in terms of institutional origin, disposition towards the topic and discursive means, provided the basis for the first phase of our analysis. In a much briefer, second phase of study, we took an edition of the regular Sunday BBC current-affairs programme *Heart of the Matter* as a focus. During the course of our research in 1989, a programme from this series had looked at the question of the incidence of child leukaemia in the Sellafield area and at the starting of legal proceedings against British Nuclear Fuels Limited (BNFL) by a group of afflicted families. By its concentration upon one specific case-history, its direct address to questions of proof and probability – which were emerging as key factors in our analysis – and its up-dating of the terms of public debate, we found this programme a useful complement to the ones chosen earlier.

In thinking about how these programmes variously related both 'upwards', to the larger current debate about nuclear power in Britain, and 'downwards', to the specific forms of viewer understanding and response, we found the notion of 'textualisation' a helpful idea. This seemed to us to give proper emphasis to the processes of selective transformation at work as evidence, ideas, images and speakers from the world anterior to television were processed and assembled within different, self-contained rhetorical systems – the four programmes.⁵ We wanted to investigate some of the key variables of textualisation at the level of programme images and speech. However, it was the interaction of such different rhetorical systems with viewers' own knowledge and assessments that was of primary interest to us, and this constituted in a sense a 're-textualisation', as the localised interpretations and responses of various acts of viewing transformed

5 In a recent article we have given three of these programmes a more, detailed comparative analysis in respect of the 'risk' issue. See John Corner, Kay Richardson and Natalie Fenton, 'Textualising Risk: TV discourse and the issue of nuclear energy', *Media, Culture and Society*, v 12 n 1, 1990 pp 105-124.

the elements of programme signification back into the realm of public significance.

Thus our research, though it is concerned with the 'textualisation' of only one issue, connects with a number of much more general questions concerning the public communication of policy debate and the processes of informational television. That said, it might be worth noting here how distinctive the nuclear energy debate in Britain might be when compared with other 'public issues' treated by the media. For a start, the documented drop in public confidence in the industry, occasioned by the Chernobyl disaster, produced a situation in which journalistic attitudes towards 'official' positions were possibly more confident in their scepticism and interrogatory vigour than was the case in other areas of public policy. Increasingly, this has become true of the whole area of environmental decision-making. Secondly, the nuclear power debate hinged on questions of scientific judgement which put 'expert knowledge' in a position of centrality to most of the issues at stake, requiring at least as much *trust* as *agreement* from the majority of the population. It follows that viewers were likely to be more than usually dependent on the mediations offered by television – its processings of the debate – for meaningful access to the issue. Finally, television treatments of this topic clearly drew not only on established conventions for engaging with a public issue but on TV conventions for depicting Science – its use of hypotheses, its methods, its often awesome technological hardware and, perhaps above all, its ways of assessing evidence and proof.

The following analytic accounts of the four programmes further develop most of the above points. In them, we have attempted to identify and discuss aspects both of the communicative design and the thematic development of the four items which we used with our viewer groups. We have chosen to separate our accounts into sub-sections in order to get greater coherence into our discussion of 'form' and 'content' respectively, though we realise that this is a distinction which carries the risk of ignoring the interpenetration of the two in the actual production and interpretation of discourse. Our accounts are partly descriptive and partly analytical, and since it will not be easy for readers to see the programmes for themselves we have tried at all points to balance these two tasks. In developing these analyses, we used transcripts of programme speech and detailed shot-lists prepared from video copies of the material.

The accounts are organised under three headings: *communicative design, thematic development, and visualisation*. Under *communicative design* we discuss key features of each item's rhetorical organisation, with reference to the terms of its

6 See especially, Roger Silverstone *The right to speak: on a poetic for television documentary* Media, Culture and Society v 5 n 2 1983 pp 137-154; Roger Silverstone, *The agonistic narratives of television science* in John Corner (ed) *Documentary and the mass media London, Edward Arnold 1986 pp 81-106*.

address to the audience. Under *thematic development* we review the programmes from a more substantive perspective, indicating which aspects of the nuclear debate are foregrounded in each case, and how they are treated. In the case of *Uncertain Legacy* and *From Our Own Correspondent* we have also used the heading of *visualisation* to talk about the contribution of visual images to the programmes, since here visual material makes a notably strong contribution to the overall meanings.

Uncertain Legacy – ('Taming the Dragon' Part 3, BBC 2)

The three-part series from which this programme is taken was screened approximately eighteen months after the disaster at Chernobyl (Part 3, October 22nd 1987). The preceding parts dealt with the history of the nuclear industry in Britain, particularly its safety record, and with the economic case for nuclear energy, which it challenged. The connection between civil and military nuclear operations is also explored in the second part. All three parts are both written and narrated by the journalist David Taylor who, as a high-profile presenter (appearing on-camera as well as in voiceover), sets out on a *quest* for satisfactory answers to important questions which the public are, or should be, concerned about.

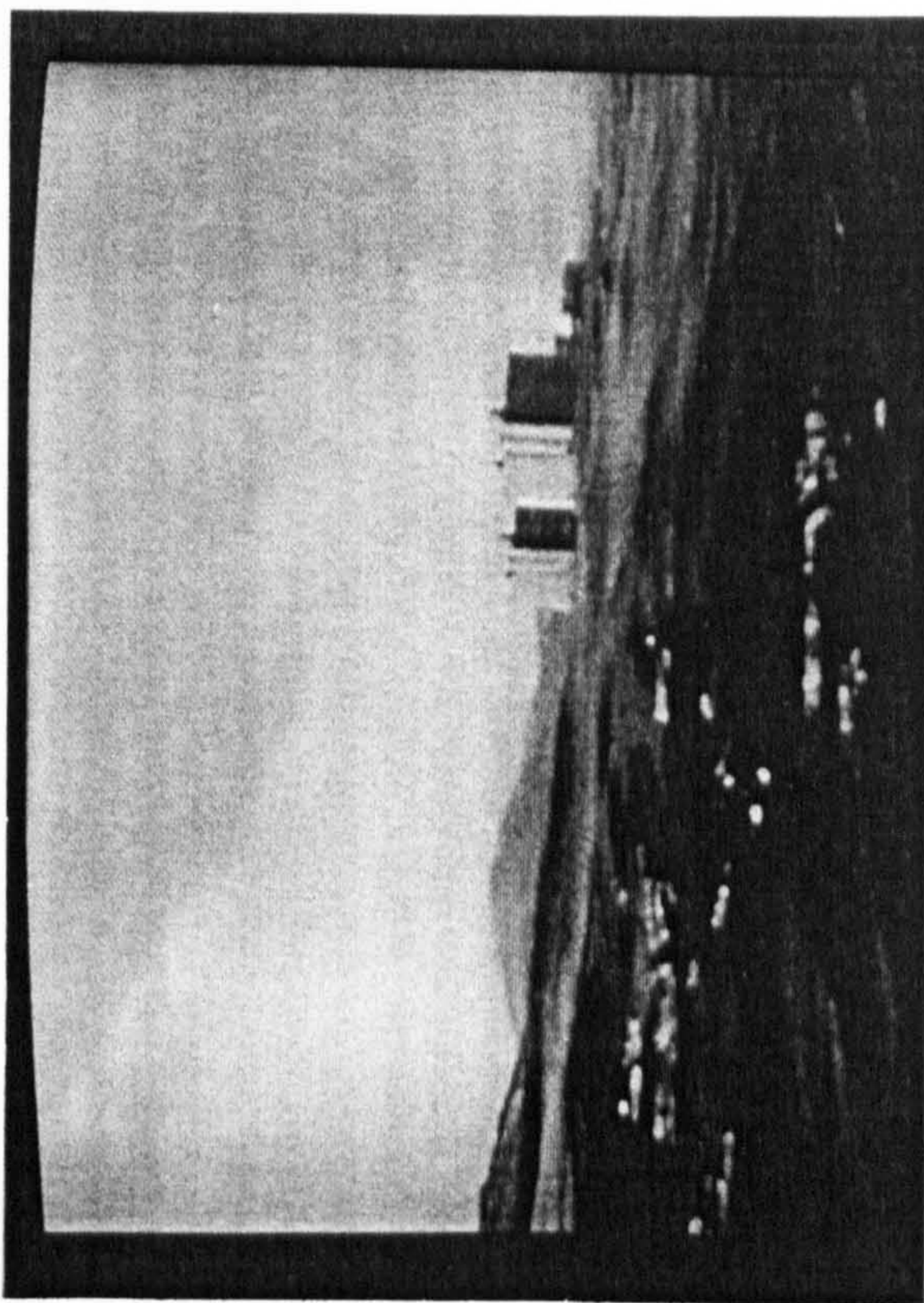
The journalist's quest is at the centre of *Uncertain Legacy's* communicative design. The formal 'mix' within the programme gives us voiceover film from the environs of various British nuclear locations including Sellafield, Hinkley Point in Somerset and Trawsfynydd in North Wales; expository sequences with David Taylor on location; archive footage relating to Hiroshima, Windscale and Three-mile Island; interviews with public figures (Cecil Parkinson, the then Energy Secretary in the Conservative government, Lord Marshall the then Chairman of the CEBG), scientists (John Goffman, a specialist on reprocessing technology, Marion Hill of the National Institute for Radiological Protection) and ordinary people.

The thematic development of *Uncertain Legacy* foregrounds the question of risk. It is a programme which, whilst recognising the ultimate inconclusiveness of the probabilistic, statistical reasoning upon which the risk argument hinges ('You can prove anything with statistics' Taylor says at one point) is nevertheless organised to bring out the coherence, credibility and resonance of fears that arise in contemplating the nuclear industry. It offers an account which operates on the propositional level by engaging with the arguments and evidence regarding discharges of ionizing radiation at nuclear plants and the possible effects of those discharges. There is in addition a strong affective dimension to the text operating through its visualisations, both with and without the reinforcement of commentary.



Fig. 1. *Uncertain Legacy*: Schoolchildren near Hinkley Point learn about nuclear power.

Fig. 2. *Uncertain Legacy*: The surface of the 'warmest lake in Britain', with Trawsfynydd nuclear power station at its edge.



1. Communicative design

Uncertain Legacy has a strong authorial line, delivered by its presenter. It is not a line which insists emphatically that the risks are real (as Walden in the CEGB tape insists that they are unreal – see below) but one which refuses to accept official reassurances and digs more deeply into the evidence. The programme's closing statement is actually a question:

The case for nuclear power rests upon a balance between benefit and risk. But how can we draw that balance when the risk is so uncertain?

Scepticism is also a feature in the questioning of official spokespersons and in the framing, prospective or retrospective, of interview sequences. Lord Marshall, for instance, is asked whether he would be prepared to live in the vicinity of a nuclear power plant or waste dump. He says he would – Taylor points out he doesn't. The interview ends with Marshall contrasting the minimal amounts of industry-produced radiation with the enormous amounts of natural background radiation. Radiation can't be bad for you, we are to infer, since 'God put it there' – into 'everyone's house' and 'everyone's garden'. But in cutting from the interview sequence to a shot of a mist-covered lake this argument is sceptically reframed by Taylor.

If there's radioactivity in this garden, there's a great deal more of it in this lake. And it's not God but the CEGB that put it there.

This introduces a sequence at Trawsfynnedd in North Wales, the only power station in Britain which does not discharge water out to sea. We are invited to witness the 'ghostly beauty' of Trawsfynnedd lake whilst being told that what we are seeing on its surface is not mist, but steam rising from the 'warmest lake in Britain.' It provides water for the plant's cooling system so it is hot water which is eventually returned to the lake. What Taylor actually says is that 'Its ghostly beauty is created by the discharge of thousands of gallons of radioactive effluent from Trawsfynnedd nuclear power station'. At the propositional level, therefore, the text is open to question but only from viewers sufficiently well informed to entertain the possible counter-argument that cooling-system water is the only significant 'effluent' and that this never comes into contact with radioactive materials (only one viewing group – of Heysham power station workers – argued from this claim).

2. Thematic development

The propositional discourse of *Uncertain Legacy* deals in explicit and direct terms with the theme of 'risk'. We give this discourse extended commentary in Chapter 3, under the heading of 'proof and probability'. A more implicit construction of threat is also apparent, particularly in the programme's favourite motif of discrepancy between normal appearance and abnormal reality. The danger, ionizing

radiation, is invisible and undetectable except with suitable scientific instruments – the geiger counter, the bodyscanner, both of which we are shown in the course of the programme. This motif is introduced in the opening sequence via a classroom scene, during a lesson on energy sources. The viewer is not long left to suppose that this is the normal classroom it appears to be. These are the children of Stogursey Primary, for whom the government has supplied potassium iodate tablets to be taken in the event of an accident at nearby Hinkley Point. Thyroid glands can be protected in this way from the worst effects of ionizing radiation. There is no doubt that 'threatened innocence' makes for a powerful *emotional* appeal: yet there is also a more 'propositional' reading of the episode which enhances (albeit indirectly) the risk argument. The government itself evidently believes there is something to fear, in the very fact that it makes special provision for the protection of Stogursey (we are also told that the village's population size has been officially restricted).

3. Visualisation

Whilst much of the footage of this production is straightforwardly denotative of the people and places to which the narration refers, the possible affective resonances of particular images cannot be overlooked. When the text is playing its strongest propositional card (it indicates that the data on Japanese A-bomb victims now suggests that the standard 'safe' radiation dose limits have been set too low) it gives us archive images of devastated Hiroshima and of victims receiving clinical care. Some respondents specifically objected to this footage as inappropriate in a programme about *civil* nuclear technology.

The visual imagery of the Trawsfynnedd lake sequence (see above) can also be seen as contributing significance over and above its value as photographic evidence – especially when the camera goes underwater and, over the murky screen image, we learn that 'Beneath its surface lies buried a whole spectrum of radionuclides – plutonium, cobalt, caesium, americium – some of which will last virtually for ever, polluting the lower depths'.

Imagery of *deformation/perversion* of the natural order is also an ingredient in the overall mix, specifically in footage from an American-made documentary on the effects of the Three-mile Island disaster. Here we see, and hear about, malformations and sickness of plant, animal and human life. Images of *excess* contribute to the programme's warning that the problem of nuclear waste is still unsolved: 'They can load it all on to a train but they cannot tell the train driver where to go'. One of the pictures in this sequence evokes the daunting scale of the disposal problem by panning across column after column of metal drums which entirely fill the screen. The boundaries of the stack are always out of frame, conveying perhaps the limitlessness of the waste problem itself.

Energy – The Nuclear Option (CEGB Film and Video Library)

The primary aim of this videotape is to address the increased public anxiety about nuclear energy following the Chernobyl disaster and to put the case for the economic necessity of nuclear power and for the acceptability of the levels of safety maintained by the industry in Britain.

The principal feature of the programme's communicative design is its imitation of certain aspects of broadcast television's established 'current affairs' discourses. By using Brian Walden as its presenter it is able to use the model of Thames Television's *Weekend World* (in which Walden first came to public attention as a TV personality) and to mediate its promotional appeals through the codes of impartial journalistic exposition.

The principal feature of the programme's thematic development is its extensive dependence on the recently published report of the public inquiry into the building of a Pressurised Water Reactor at Sizewell in Suffolk. This inquiry (chaired by Sir Frank Layfield and referred to in the programme by its short title 'The Layfield Report') produced findings which were generally positive about the efficiency and safety of the nuclear industry. Regular reference to these findings is made throughout the programme and the Report is used as independent corroborative support for many of the programme's own assessments.

1. Communicative Design

The programme starts in a brisk, 'newsy' style with Brian Walden noting the recent Government decision to proceed with a further stage of its nuclear energy plan, following the positive findings of the Sizewell Inquiry. By launching the programme from journalism-style headlines, this opening serves to displace the non-journalistic promotional motivations at work. Having greeted the viewer from his (familiar) studio setting, Walden can then proceed with an account framed in terms of independent current-affairs analysis developing naturally from the pre-constituted realm of the *topical*. The precise aim of this analysis is stated early on, in a manner which keeps close to the codes of impartiality by ventriloquizing the comments of those who 'harbour grave doubts' about nuclear power:

They ask 'Why do we need these new nuclear power stations when so many other energy sources are available? Even if nuclear power is in some ways preferable to the alternatives, do the benefits really outweigh the risks?' These are the questions we'll be trying to answer in this programme.

This mode of representing alternative or conflicting views by 'voicing' them rather than by accessing the spokespersons who could give them authentic expression is one which ensures that the promotional design subsumes, and therefore is never threatened by, all of the points emerging from the 'impartial

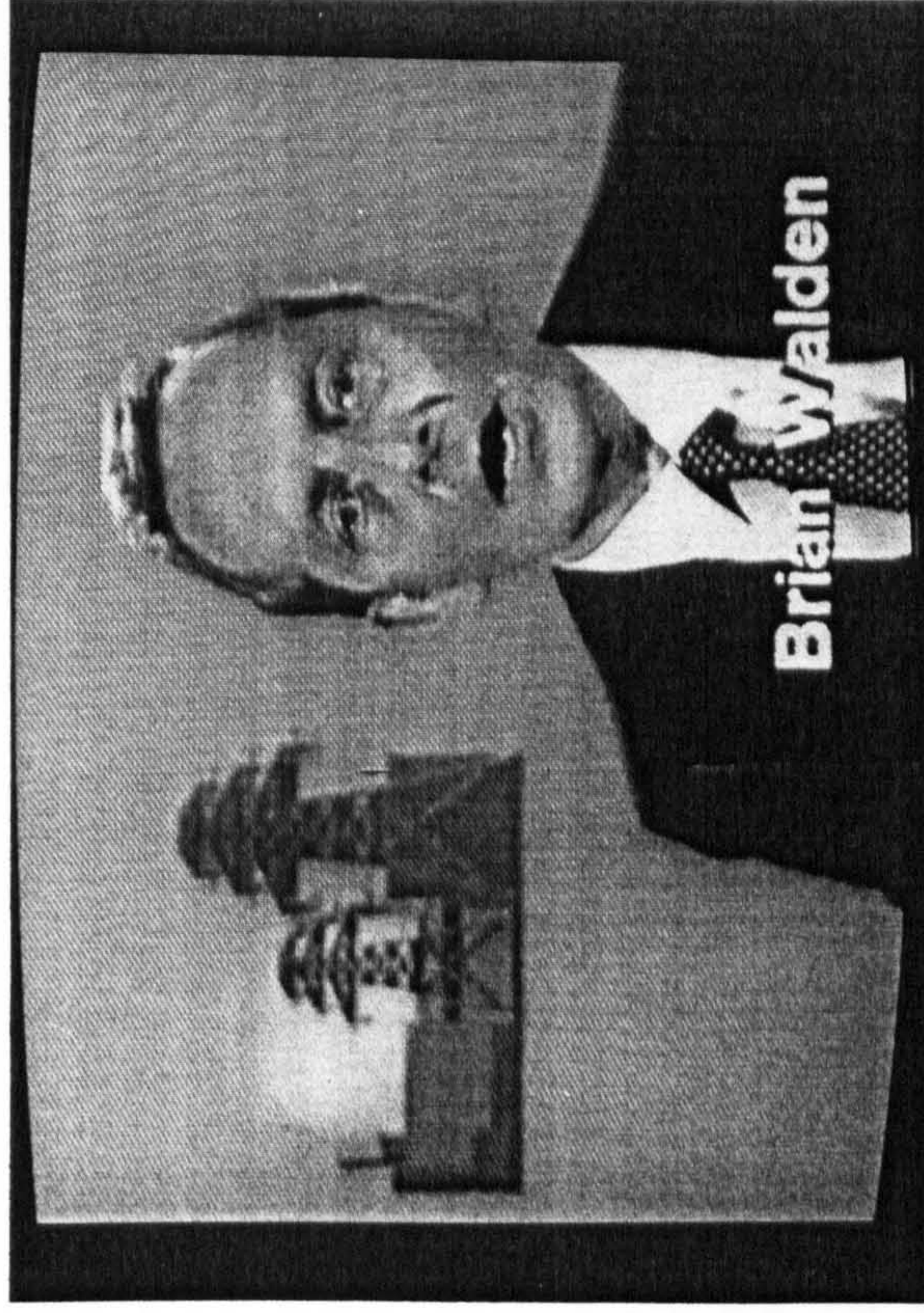


Fig. 3. Energy – The Nuclear Option: Broadcast current-affairs styles imitated.

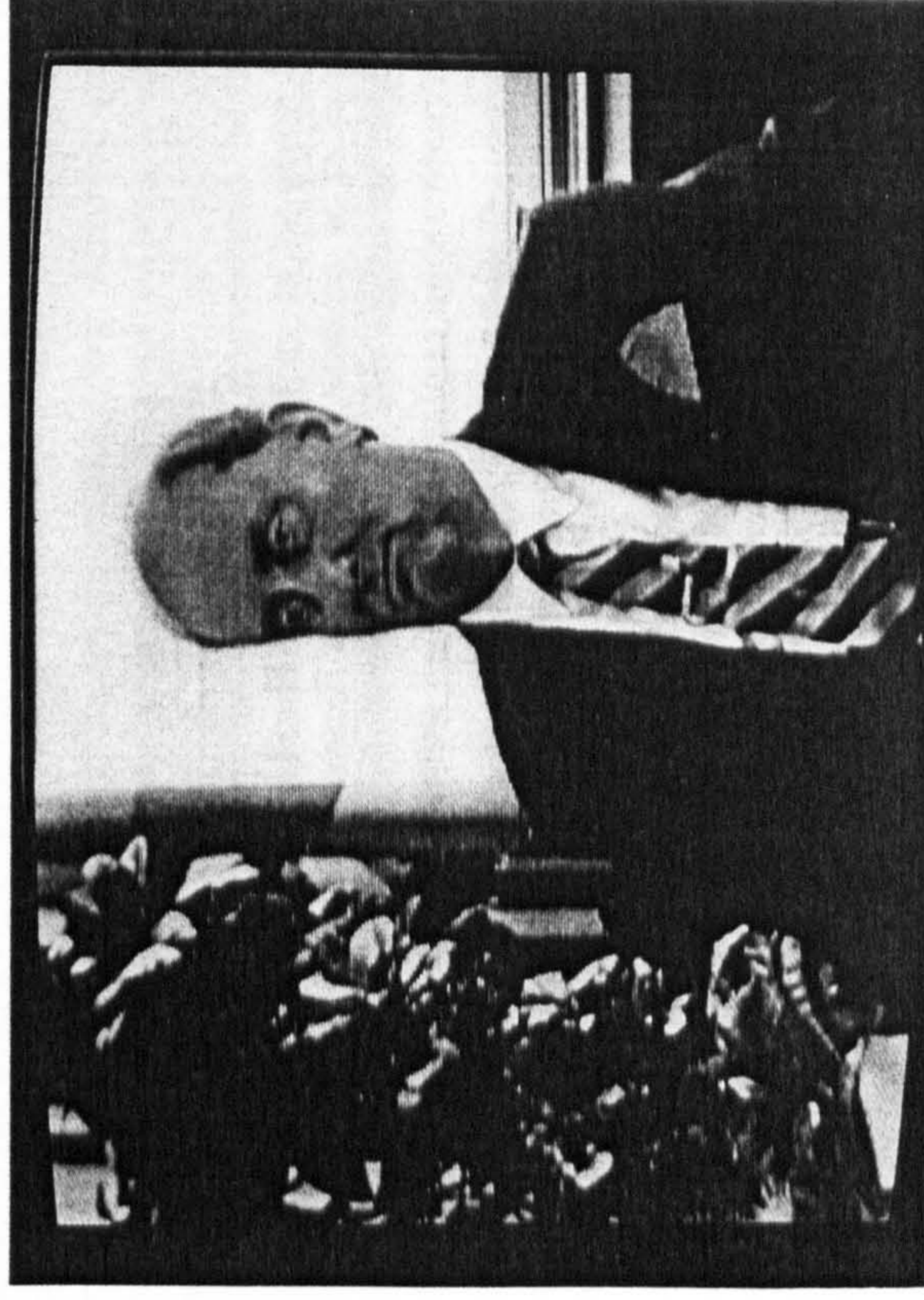


Fig. 4. Energy – The Nuclear Option: The Chairman under questioning.

inquiry'. The statement is also indicative of the highly explicit and often emphatic expositional spine given to the programme by Walden's comments, a further use of his established public persona as a presenter of unswerving commitment to clear and logical understanding.

The programme's subsequent development in trying to answer the central question of the relation of benefits to risks is one which is made up of shifts between commentary-over-film, graphics, 'single comment' interview snippets and a final question-and-answer interview sequence with Lord Marshall, Chairman of the CEGB. Throughout this, regular return is made to the mode of presenter direct-address from the studio, a mode which sustains a shadowing of current-affairs codes and which, through its very immediacy and directness, regulates the viewer's relationship to the terms of all other contributions.

In the final interview with Marshall, where Walden asks questions in shot, the relationship between promotional aims and journalistic forms moves to a further modality of co-existence. For the interview is essentially an exercise in persuasive theatricality, the close questioning of the interviewer being precisely designed to show the strengths of the interviewee's position. There are clearly risks attached to using this form of presentation and our later discussion of respondent comments brings these out. The questioning cannot afford to be perceived as 'too soft', otherwise both the integrity of the interviewer and the status of the responses will be greatly impaired. But nor can the questioning be 'too hard', since the risk is then of stimulating a critical alertness in the viewer against which the interviewee's task (here, of providing reassurance) is made more difficult. Unlike that use of 'ventriloquistic' speech to register doubt and counter-argument which we noted above, it is not a problem which has a readily available solution and we indicate in the following sub-section (and then in Chapter 4) how it troubles the coherence and meaning of this important, climactic sequence of the programme.

2. Thematic Development

Some of the key themes which the programme variously treats are:

- (a) Alternative sources of energy and their shortcomings.
- (b) The increasing need for electrical energy both in the developed and developing world (this together with an emphasis on the economic and political stability of nuclear energy sources).
- (c) The difference between current British technology and the technologies involved in the Chernobyl disaster and in the Three-Mile Island incident.
- (d) The very high levels of safety, both in engineered design and routine operation, maintained within the industry.

As well as film sequences, the programme is able to recruit to the development of these themes a variety of speakers (eg an academic physicist, senior management within the industry, a safety specialist, an engineer), testifying positively to the emerging conclusion of the account that the benefits exceed the risks. Walden's commentary indicates the phased move of the programme towards this verdict. Here are two examples of his 'signposting' statements, summarising phases:

There is no risk of a Chernobyl-type accident to set against the benefits.

All the evidence suggests that the benefits outweigh the risks. The benefits are great but the risks are small.

It is against this confidence that the programme poses the question which acts as an introduction to the Marshall interview - 'Why, then, has so much suspicion built up among the public?'. Marshall's answer is that the CEGB has been neglectful of public education and has not been as open with the public about the real (and safe) nature of nuclear processes as they should have been. This answer is followed by other reassuring comments, with the recognition that though nothing can be entirely guaranteed, nuclear energy is one of the safest sources of power available. A problem arises when Walden asks about possible public anxiety that a power station might explode like a nuclear bomb. Marshall rejects the naivety of this belief but, in describing Chernobyl as a worst possible case, develops a vividness of account regarding the initial damage which prompts Walden to ask whether Chernobyl wasn't, then, 'just a little bit like a bomb?'. This may appear a relatively trivial exchange, foregrounding Walden's ability to come back smartly on an answer without necessarily putting it into *substantial* question (and in any case, there is an important slippage of scale involved here, down from 'nuclear bomb' to 'bomb'). However, we shall show below how significant this exchange was within the interpretative accounts of respondents. Moreover, Marshall's reply to a final question, on the significance to be given to the occurrence of 'cancer clusters' around nuclear power stations, is, in its abrupt dismissiveness ('you find them wherever you look'), also registered negatively in a number of respondent accounts.

Nevertheless, in his final address from the studio, Walden feels the cumulative force of evidence sufficient to support a statement whose normative appeal brings the programme to an end:

It can't be guaranteed that nothing will ever go wrong, of course. Life's not like that. It can be reasonably argued that the nuclear power industry can be regarded in the same way as any other complex technology, and recognised as a normal and necessary part of our daily lives and not like some mysterious monster to fill us with irrational dread.

From Our Own Correspondent (Northern Newsreel Number 9, Trade Films).

The dramatic narrative which forms the basis of this item's communicative design, about an imaginary disaster at Hartlepool Power Station, seeks to involve the viewer very directly with the personal consequences of such a disaster for one, typical, family. Thematically, it touches upon such matters as plant safety, emergency planning, the health risks of radiation exposure, practical provision and compensation for victims. Emergency planning is the most salient of these themes. Both communicative design and thematic development take the Chernobyl disaster as a point of reference. The communicative strategy of the piece depends upon a ploy to make viewers initially 'misunderstand' that it is about the Russian disaster when in fact it is about Hartlepool in England as seen and interpreted on Soviet television. Thematically, the point of the exercise is the analogy with Chernobyl, projected with particular regard to the effects upon the local population.

1. Communicative design

Dramatisation is used in the piece not to re-present a past event, or typify a current situation, as in much mainstream drama-documentary, but to create an imaginary past and an imaginary present. The imaginary present is a Soviet news studio: from this reference point is constructed an account of the imaginary past – the Hartlepool disaster, worse than Chernobyl itself.

From Our Own Correspondent was made and distributed two years after the Soviet Union's real nuclear disaster. It reverses the 'them' and 'us' relations that would be involved in doing a Chernobyl story on British television in 1988. But it is of crucial significance that this fictive scenario is confirmed only *after* an initial sequence which is naturally interpreted as the introduction to a Chernobyl story. This interpretation is encouraged (a) by using footage from Chernobyl in the opening sequence, (b) by making Russia the primary frame, thereby implicating 'Russian affairs', (c) by referring to 'the world's most serious nuclear accident' – an unambiguous expression in the real world of 1988.

Even the communicative relations of the item – a Russian programme for Russian viewers – are constructed in the terms of the fiction. As the item begins we see shots of disaster accompanied by untranslated Russian voiceover. These are followed by a shot from a news studio. The male news reader's direct address is also in Russian. An English voiceover translation constructs British viewers as secondary recipients. Then there begins a film sequence from Britain, narrated by a female Russian reporter, notionally 'translated' into English (her Russian voice is faded out after a few seconds). It is she who controverts our confident interpretation of this as a Chernobyl story:

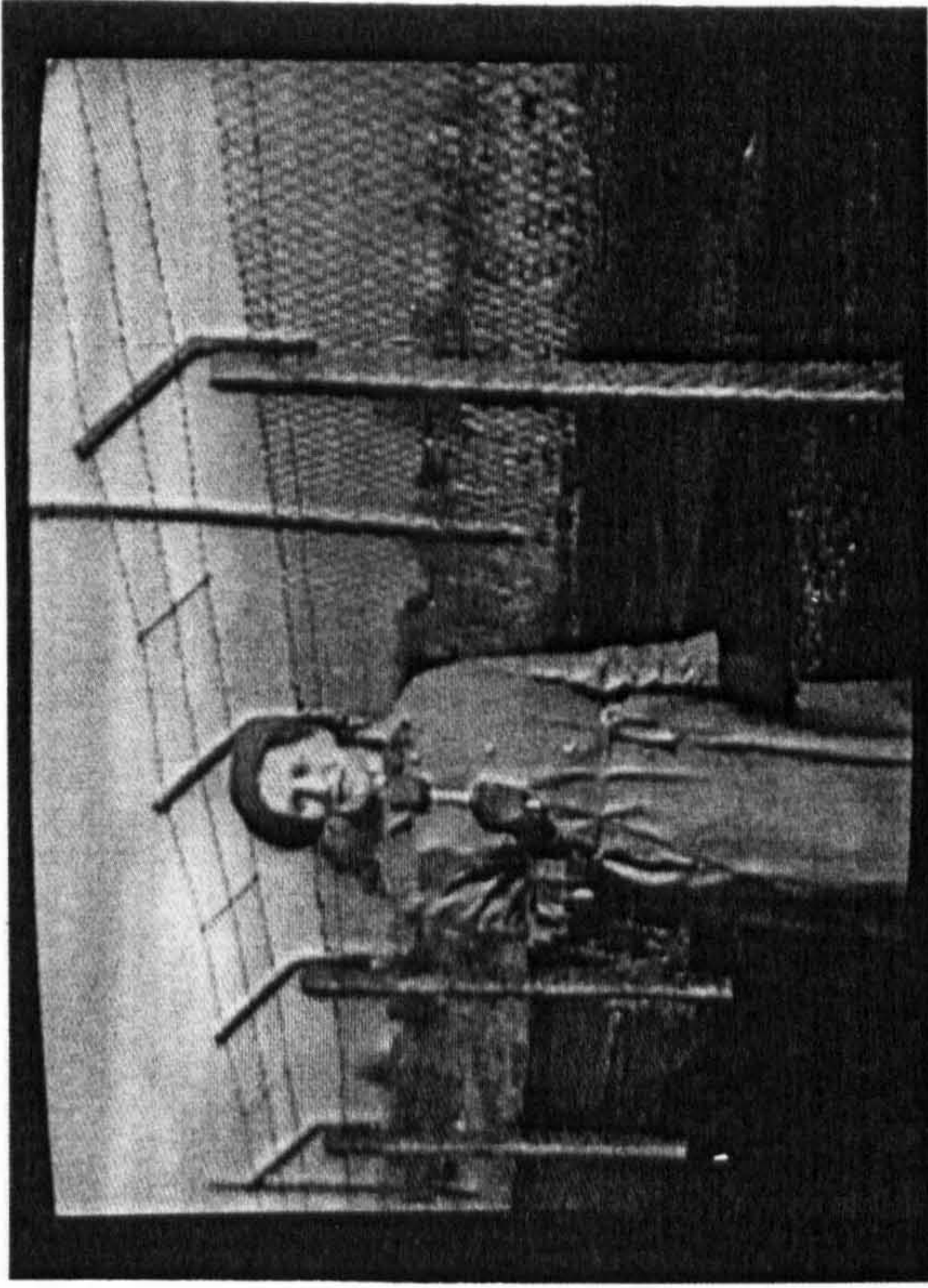
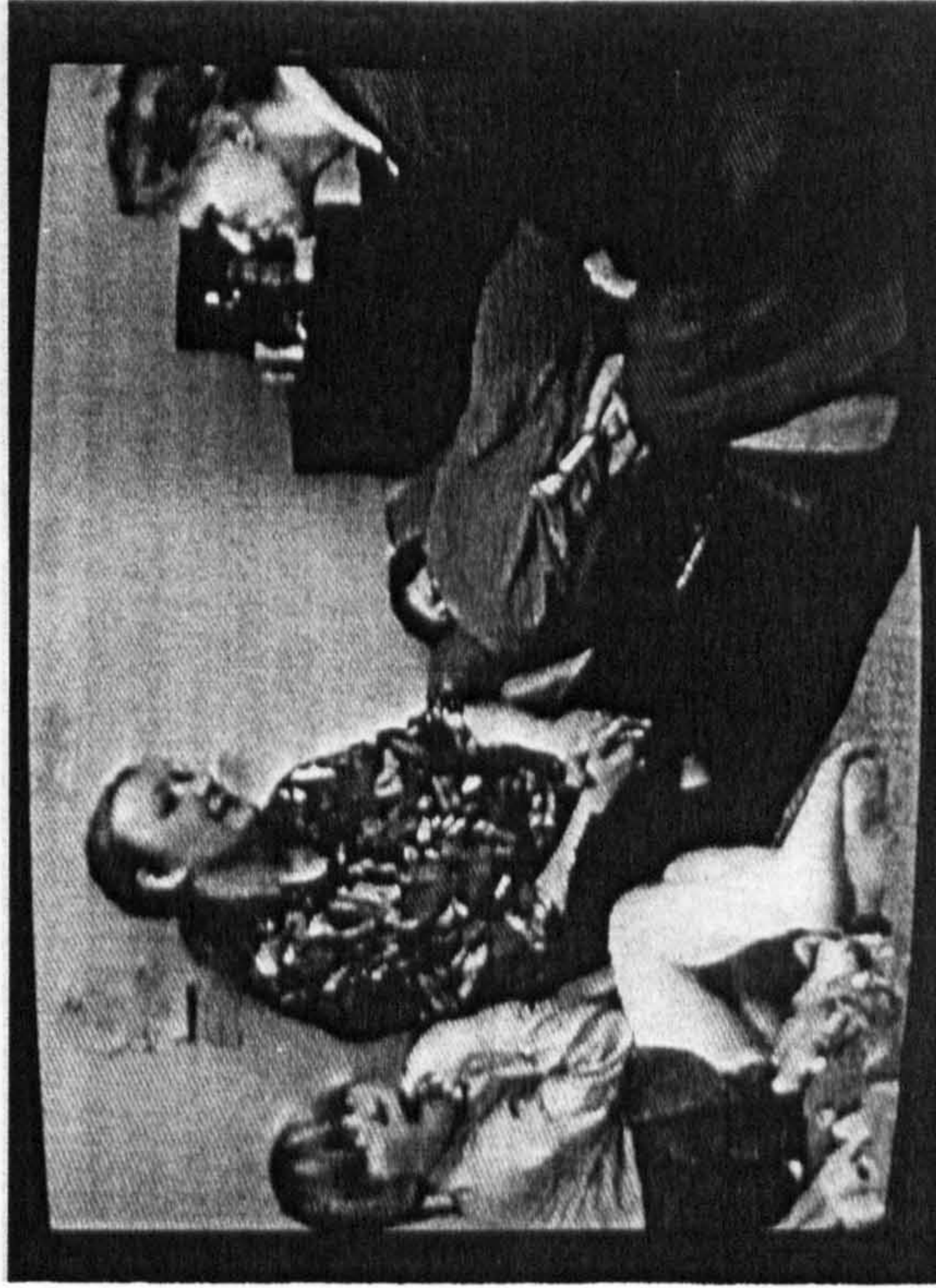


Fig. 5. *From Our Own Correspondent*: A Soviet journalist from the 'contaminated zone' around Hartlepool nuclear power station, two years after the 'world's most serious nuclear accident'.

Fig. 6. *From Our Own Correspondent*: The human face of nuclear catastrophe: interview with the mother of a sick child.



The scene here is calm, almost tranquil. It's hard to recall now the panic, the chaos and the tragedy of that day exactly two years ago when this peaceful countryside was shattered by an explosion less than fifteen kilometers from here in the nuclear power station at Hartlepool.

Another shift then takes us back to the time of the disaster, focussing on the evacuation and including the first of two interview sequences with 'Susan Duffy', an evacuee. This episode is linked with a subsequent one on 'Hartlepool now' – the bridge between the two is an on-screen piece to camera by the reporter.

Any facts about the British situation which emerge during this narration always do so within the fictional frame, which qualifies their 'facticity'. Only right at the end does the item adopt a 'reality' framing in which there has as yet been no major disaster at Hartlepool. The different status of this discourse is signalled formally – instead of voices we get captions over a frozen shot of Hartlepool power station. This sequence gives brief details of a recent accident there which caused a breakdown of the cooling mechanism, and compares Hartlepool's one kilometer evacuation zone with evacuation zones of up to 16 kilometers in other Western countries. Our experience with viewers suggests that the relations of address involved in this text present a considerable challenge to their interpretative abilities and that they are not invariably successful in negotiating its frame-shifts (See Chapter 5 for further discussion of this point).

2. Thematic development

There is no attempt to construct a propositional account in justification of the hypothesis which underlies the drama, that a Chernobyl-scale disaster is possible in Britain. The possibility of such a disaster is, of course, consistently denied by the industry, often citing Russian scientific opinion as support. The scenario is offered as plausible in this text by using the example of Chernobyl to suggest that official reassurance should itself be treated as grounds for suspicion – after all, the Russian authorities used to deny that there could be a major disaster in *their* country. This reasoning is implicit in the structure of the text, and made explicit in the closing captions:

According to the CEGB the events depicted in this film could never happen in Britain.

The Russians said the same before Chernobyl.

Critical conclusions about the industry are drawn as if from hindsight. Thus Susan Duffy and her family have to wait 48 hours before they are evacuated because no proper evacuation plans exist(ed) except for a tiny number of people within a one kilometre radius of the plant. Two years later, still in temporary accommodation, and with her son suffering from leukaemia, it transpires that no compensation has been paid to the family because the government and the industry are fighting over the question of responsibility. The news story frame-

work also allows the introduction of broader, non-experiential themes, as when the narrator refers to 'the controversial decision to allow some of these plants to be privately owned' as a contributory factor (a decision since reversed by the government).

3. Visualisation

The format of the item allows considerable scope for evoking mood through imagery. The disaster's initial chaos is depicted in the evacuation scene. We get a night-time sequence of the Duffy family and others rushing out of their homes and into coaches; dark shots of traffic jams, and an interview with Susan Duffy in the back of the coach, when the reporter finds out how little they know about what's going on. The tragic effects on people and communities are also conveyed through particular, single shots of, for instance, deserted beaches, an abandoned doll, and family photographs on the mantelpiece of an uninhabitable home.

When the reporter herself appears on screen, to bring viewers up to date two years after the event, her red beret and red microphone project her foreignness in almost stereotypical terms. She is depicted walking along by the intimidating wire fence which surrounds the danger zone around the plant itself, still hazardous after all this time. This fence, and a wasteland beyond, is all we are allowed to see. The images here symbolise rather than depict the plant and the disaster.

The fictionalisation and dramatization of disaster in terms of its human consequences uses these two kinds of affective imagery as part of its attempt to draw viewers into a directly emotional response. An involvement with personal circumstances is generated by the urgency of naturalistic news-style depiction, but other images have a deeper symbolic force, suggesting a tragedy, pathos, destruction and decay which go beyond the individual circumstances of the Duffy family to the whole community and landscape.

Heart of the Matter (BBC2)

Heart of the Matter is an established BBC series, scheduled for late-night Sunday transmission on BBC1. As its title suggests, the series seeks to establish the central points at issue in each 'matter' treated and to clarify them in the interests of wider public understanding. This it does by the use of a presenter/reporter, location filming and the testimony and comment of people directly involved in the issues as well as contributions from relevant official bodies and individual specialists. As its title also suggests, and as its Sunday scheduling might indicate too, it is particularly concerned to register the 'human' dimension of the problems and dilemmas it investigates.

The edition of the programme which we examined (broadcast on 18th June 1989) was entitled 'A Life Or A Living?' and concerned itself with the decision by a

number of parents living in the Sellafield area to sue BNFL for damages in respect of their children's leukaemia. The programme focuses on one such parent, Mrs Sue D'Arcy of Cleator Moor, who is proceeding with a case on behalf of her daughter Gemma, recently diagnosed as suffering from acute myeloid leukaemia. (Mr D'Arcy, an employee at the Sellafield plant, does not support this action and has refused to be filmed or interviewed).

1. Communicative Design

Around this family tragedy and its consequent, internal tensions the programme builds a more broadly-conceived account of the Sellafield-leukaemia connection, its history and the current factors in play, scientifically and legally. It does this principally by interviews with five main participants, who are returned to a number of times and whose comments and counter-comments provide the main programme content. These speakers are Mrs D'Arcy herself; her solicitor; the local GP; a radiation specialist and a representative of BNFL. In addition, there is a substantial and important contribution to the last half of the programme by Professor Sir Richard Doll, the research scientist who was a leading figure in the discovery of the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer. The programme's progression through the interviews is aided both by commentary and a number of pieces-to-camera from the presenter, Joan Bakewell, and by supportive film of family activities, the local landscape, key documents referred to and various features of the Sellafield plant.

Although, when compared to the other programmes we have analysed, this one is rhetorically quite restrained, both visually and verbally, it nevertheless opens with one of the most widely used tropes in televised depictions of Sellafield – the contrast between the beauty of the natural landscape and the highly un-natural threat potentially posed by the nuclear industry located within it. This contrast is also one between the world of appearance and the world of (possible) reality, as we discuss in Chapter 3. Over shots of a lake, sparkling under a clear, summer sky and set within a landscape of mountains, woods and fields, Bakewell launches the programme with this comment:

The beautiful countryside of the Lake District. What a wonderful place to live and bring up children. Most of us cherish an idyllic vision of the countryside and this comes as close to it as any. The natural life, the good life. Well, that's how it looks.

With the dynamics of doubt thus released into the programme through an ironic turn at its very beginning, the introduction then shifts tone to outline the details behind that marked note of reservation. Moving on from lakeside beauty to a more general shot of the landscape, and locating within this a distant view of the Sellafield site, the connection with jobs and industry is developed. The arrival of the nuclear energy research station in the late 1940s brought a radical improve-

ment in job prospects. But, the commentary tells us, it also brought something else – an increasingly unignorable threat of health damage following exposure to increased levels of radiation. This threat is most dramatically manifest in the high incidence (10 times the national average) of childhood leukaemia among those communities in the vicinity of the plant. Here, then, the programme finds its focus, together with the resulting dilemma it poses for individuals living and working in the area:

What lies at the heart of the matter is how to weigh the value of the industry to the community against their fears for the health of their children.

Having established a frame, the programme gives the viewer a preliminary glimpse of its main speakers and (through tightly edited interview 'snippets') a sense of the inter-related and conflicting positions they will develop later. The pace of the programme then eases from directly propositional address to offer a more sustained and experientially-grounded treatment of the D'Arcy case. This involves the interview testimony of Mrs D'Arcy and some 'relaxed' observational filming of mother and daughter at home, having tea with the presenter in their garden. That this level of 'the matter' and of attempts to resolve it has its own immediate and highly personal character is pointed-up by the commentary:

For them, it isn't simply a matter of cold, scientific facts. It's the outcome of continuing and bitter experience, of worry, outrage, of pain and the most appalling realisation any parent can come to.

The central and longest phase of the programme follows, pulling back from the immediately personal to a more general consideration of the case in its context, during which the five central participants develop the main themes at issue. This is done largely through a sequence of location interviews, sometimes intercut with more general informational shots. For instance, a shot of the beach at Seascale, the beach on which Gemma D'Arcy played, is accompanied by the voice of her mother reflecting on the dangers which 'each stone' might have carried for her daughter's health. The shot of the deserted expanse develops, in context, a disquieting symbolism in addition to its denotative function. The ties in with a challenge about the reasons for its being deserted, made by Bakewell to the BNFL spokesman in the course of an interview.

At the end of the sequence of contextualizing interviews, the programme pulls back even further to consider briefly some of the general statistical and ethical questions surrounding calculations of benefit and risk ('brutal equations') in industrial society. Finally, however, as we note below, it narrows sharply down again in order to connect with the particular and the experiential in articulating a conclusion.

2. Thematic Development

This occurs principally in the central section of the programme and might be itemised as having five main strands:

(a) The story of the legal initiative, including BNFL's representation to the Law Society that Legal Aid should not be claimable by litigants. The programme traces the origins of this initiative in the publication of a report by the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE). This committee surveyed the Sellafield area in 1986 and, two years later in remarks covering the whole of its findings, it noted that:

Evidence of abnormal incidence of leukaemia tends to support the hypothesis that some feature of the nuclear plants that we have examined leads to an increased risk of leukaemia in young people living in the vicinity.⁷

(b) The attitudes of the local community towards, on the one hand, the economic benefits of the Sellafield site and BNFL's continued support for local recreational and leisure facilities and, on the other, towards the perceived risks the operations have brought to the area. This dependency/risk relationship, identified early on, is developed as the central dilemma.

(c) The scientific factors involved in making the link between Sellafield, radiation and leukaemia. The matters of proof and of disproof involved and the current state of scientific opinion both on this and on the question of the acceptable exposure-levels used as guidelines in the industry are explored and debated.

(d) BNFL's perspective on the question, in terms of plant safety, monitoring procedures, public information and the recent use of high profile publicity through the activities of the Sellafield Visitor's Centre and related national advertising campaigns (from which the latest television commercial is shown). The history of the site as a place which has previously attracted a misplaced confidence in its safety is briefly but pointedly 'remembered' by the programme, particularly the 1957 Windscale fire, which is now calculated to have led to 33 deaths, though at the time no long-term health damage was thought to have occurred.

(e) The contrast between the scientific and legal criteria for establishing causality ('Science is one thing, Law is another' says the commentary). Even within the legal system there are important differences. Liability in a Civil Court requires only that a 'balance of probability' be found to exist, not (as in the case of criminal proceedings) that the case be proved 'beyond all reasonable doubt'.

The programme ends its treatments of the issues – personal, legal, scientific and industrial – by remarking on the two different levels of consequence which might

⁷ This quotation from the COMARE report was cited during the course of the programme.

follow from the impending court action which is 'about to make history'. There are the immediate consequences for the D'Arcy family and the other families seeking compensation, and then there are the broader consequences for the nuclear industry's own perspectives on 'risk levels', for its research priorities and processing methods and, most important of all, for public perceptions of the acceptable benefit/risk equations within which it can be allowed to operate. At the most general level reached by the programme, the acceptability of such equations is seen to be informed by a sense of the *inevitability* of a certain level of risk in all industrial processes. However, this level of formulation, referencing the ultimate parameters, does not have an *immediate* bearing on the coming court case and what might follow. The programme therefore concludes by tightening-up once more around its principal human focus – Gemma D'Arcy smiling in her paddling pool, first in action and then in freeze-frame:

Meanwhile Gemma D'Arcy waits for a possible bone marrow transplant, that could save her life and the search goes on for a way to avoid more leukaemias.

A Note On Production Backgrounds

In order to connect some of the points made in these commentaries with matters of producer intentions and production contexts, we briefly indicate below those significant aspects of production which we have been able to discover through documentation and interview concerning our three Phase One programmes.

1. Uncertain Legacy

In 1986, a decision to undertake a series of programmes on nuclear energy was initiated by the Features and Documentaries department at BBC Manchester. Although the recency of the Chernobyl disaster was undoubtedly a factor in this decision, the immediate and more central motivation for it was the feeling that the nuclear industry in Britain was at a turning point and that its future very much depended on the state of public opinion. This gave the team a guiding principle for the series 'Taming the Dragon', to examine the basis upon which the government at that time (with Peter Walker as the relevant minister) proposed to expand the nuclear industry and, specifically, to introduce pressurised water reactors into Britain. A speech by Peter Walker was used as the reference point – he had claimed that nuclear power was clean, cheap and safe compared with other means of producing electricity. The three part series which was eventually broadcast took each of these claims and subjected them to critical inquiry. Thus *Uncertain Legacy* was intended as a challenge by the team to the presumption of safety which the Government as well as the industry appeared to have made.

⁸ Information in this section is based upon an interview with the producer, Peter Dale.

This was a programme which, to be effective, required the co-operation of the industry for obtaining film footage and interviews with key personnel. Although this co-operation was readily obtained, presumably from the mixed motives of obligation and self-interest, the reaction to the finished product was unfavourable, and the director was attacked as dishonest. Two articles by David Taylor, based upon the series, were published in *The Listener*. They were followed by critical responses in the Letters pages. Correspondents included spokesmen for the Atomic Energy Authority, the CEGB and the Nuclear Energy Information Group.⁹

All three programmes attracted a very small audience – around one million – by the standards of the *Brass Tacks* slot into which they were placed as a 'special'. Nevertheless, they got a very high appreciation rating from the audience (74 per cent). The team were very much aware that they would be challenged on grounds of bias but were prepared to defend a 'civic' role in terms of the need for a public critique of propositions, for instance, those concerning safety, which had been accepted by the government in spite of their tendentiousness. Another justification was that they had introduced crucial new information into the public debate. In the case of *Uncertain Legacy*, the most relevant new information as the team perceived it was the medical research from Hiroshima. New cancers there suggested people were at risk at lower levels of exposure than had been previously thought.

The team were also conscious of setting up counter-images to those of the industry: if the latter was prepared to offer patronising and blandly uninformative analogies of minimal risk – exposure to radiation in Sellafield is like 'smoking one cigarette in your lifetime' – then the programme was prepared to present a number of disturbing visual images of maximal risk, as we discuss below.

2. Energy – The Nuclear Option

This half-hour video was made for the Central Electricity Generating Board by Software Productions Ltd. and distributed by the CEGB's film and video library for either hire or purchase from late 1987. A leaflet was mailed to 30,000 possibly interested individuals, institutions and groups (half of them named academics in U.K. Higher Education). This was finally judged to be more successful in circulat-

⁹ All of the following appeared in *The Listener*: David Taylor 'Cheaper energy from nuclear power was always a myth' 15 October 1987 pp 5-6; David Taylor 'Radiation risks: any limit may be too high' 22 October 1987 pp 12-13; David Lowry, 'Letters to the Editor' 29 November 1987 p 21; Peter Vey, Director of Information and Public Affairs, CEGB, 'Letters to the Editor' 12 November 1987 p 26; PAH Saunders, Head, Environmental Impact Assessments, United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, 'Letters to the Editor' 12 November 1987 p 26; TA Margerison, Director, Nuclear Electricity Information Group, 'Letters to the Editor' 19 November 1987 p 24; David Taylor 'Letters to the Editor', 26 November 1987 p 26; Marshall of Goring (Lord Walter Marshall) 'Letters to the Editor' 10 December 1987 p 21.

ing the video than the press advertising, which concentrated on the quality weeklies.

The Film and Video Branch of the CEGB was responsible for the making of a number of promotional videos during the 1980s but, as leaked documents clearly show,¹⁰ its role became of greatly heightened significance following the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. The attempt to win back public confidence in nuclear energy became at this time a priority within the CEGB and an intensified strategy of persuasion was initiated.

Energy – The Nuclear Option was regarded by the CEGB as a 'pro-active' piece of promotion, complementing some of the 'reactive' material quickly made and distributed following the Chernobyl events. It was made from a detailed script plan prepared by Software Productions and approved by the CEGB.¹¹ The CEGB subsequently dealt with the arrangements for shooting on various nuclear sites and were consulted throughout post-production. As in most other videos commissioned by the Board, there was some re-use of material from earlier projects. The decision to use the TV broadcaster and ex-Labour MP Brian Walden as the presenter/interviewer was grounded in a desire to give the video a more independent character and to allow for a degree of convincingly adversarial questioning within the expositional format. The success of his London Weekend Television series *Weekend World* in handling controversial topics with a distinctive, clarifying zeal and a tone of hard inquiry was influential here. The thrust of the video was to appear investigatory, as is clear from this extract from the advertising copy prepared for release in Autumn 1987:

In this new 29 minute programme, ex-politician and TV presenter Brian Walden asks the questions 'Why do we need nuclear power when there are so many other energy sources available?'. 'How safe are our nuclear power stations?' and 'Do the benefits of nuclear energy really outweigh the risks?'.

The decision to feature Lord Marshall, Chairman of the CEGB, as the main interviewee, was a simple consequence of the high-profile publicity role which he had already been performing, both in CEGB material and in broadcast and press coverage of the energy question. Although we note below some problems with viewer response both to the content and style of his contribution, percep-

¹⁰ Documents leaked to *The Guardian* in June 1989 revealed how, after, Chernobyl, the CEGB rapidly set about devising a strategy of response to public anxiety. See especially *The Guardian 'Chernobyl fallout sparked PR crisis'*, 1 June 1989 p 9.

¹¹ We are grateful for the helpful (and otherwise unobtainable), information about the tape's production background given to us during an interview in Spring 1989 by members of what was then the Film and Video Branch of the CEGB's Department of Information and Public Affairs. This included photocopies of the CEGB's own data on the distribution and effectiveness of the material.

tions within the Board at the time were that he was a successful communicator of the nuclear message, with a good projection of personal qualities.

CEGB statistics show that approximately 60% of the distribution was to colleges and schools. A sample study suggested that almost half of the viewers of the tape watched it in groups of over 20 people, with half of the total viewers being in the 16-18 age range.

3. *From Our Own Correspondent* (Northern Newsreel 9)

The possibility of doing this video item as a dramatised scenario, playing off established public images and knowledge of Chernobyl, came to the attention of the producer and editor (both of Trade Films of Gateshead) following an advertisement appealing for scriptwriters to contribute to Northern Newsreel.¹² A script was submitted by a writer who had written previously on nuclear issues. His idea of tackling the question of a regional issue (safety at Hartlepool Nuclear Power Station) by drawing on this international imagery was immediately seen as appropriate and manageable within Northern Newsreel's resources. Details of the 'safety' debate itself and, particularly, on the contingency planning zones around the Hartlepool plant, were based heavily on a programme in the BBC *Horizon* series transmitted in 1987. This had focussed on plant design and ongoing operating problems at Hartlepool and had begun by entertaining a 'could it happen here?' hypothesis, using film of a training exercise. As in *From Our Own Correspondent*, the dramatic impact is strengthened and the significance widened by flashbacks to Chernobyl at the time of the accident and afterwards – with images of deserted streets and houses. Unlike the BBC programme, however, the aims of the video makers were to make a direct intervention into the debate by giving the 'British disaster' hypothesis an intensive and uncritical projection.

The entire shoot was completed in three days in and around Hartlepool, using only two actresses. Production emphasis was on economy of time and money and the maximum of 'awareness-raising' in the finished text, necessarily only one item among others in the edition of the Newsreel for which it was planned. Dramatic simulation of a news type format was considered acceptable financially and was central to the principal idea of the treatment – a shock twist whereby viewers start off as 'us' looking at 'them' (Soviet television coverage of Chernobyl) only to find out that really 'they' (Soviet TV) are looking at 'us' (the imagined Hartlepool disaster). An imitation of Soviet TV style also allowed freedom for a number of overtly symbolic, impressionistic visual sequences accompanied by music specially commissioned for the piece (this too was influenced by the *Horizon* film). Music was considered important by both producer and editor for mood creation.

¹² Information in this section is based upon an interview with the production team at Trade Films.

Northern Newsreel see part of their role being the exploration of alternative styles, largely to avoid imitating broadcast television. The producer and director of *From Our Own Correspondent* sought primarily an *emotional* impact and response because such a response was seen by them to be the prerequisite to a rational debate: 'A rational discussion of nuclear energy demands emotional commitment'.

The jump from Chernobyl to Hartlepool (actually a jump only in where viewers *think* they are) was considered unproblematic by the programme-makers, who intended 'to string people along as far as possible'. They noted that if, with some viewers, such a strategy led to temporary ambiguity over whether the accident did or didn't happen, this would be all the better as it would add to the drama and increase involvement. However, the producer had reservations about the final sequence, which moves out from the fictional scenario to the real circumstances at Hartlepool at the time, using captions over a still frame. His anxieties, confirmed by our research as shown below and in Chapter 4, were that such a very late shift to an exposition of the real, current situation, involving a change in discursive methods, might either 'throw' viewers or simply go unregistered in the wake of the emotional force of the dramatisation.

3 Four key themes

In Chapter 2 we gave a descriptive account of the four texts used in this study. The present chapter complements those accounts by looking at the programmes from a more comparative perspective. Four themes seemed to us worthy of discussion across the selected texts. Under the heading *Proof and probability* we consider how the programmes connect with scientific discussions of causation in the nuclear debate. *Experts and ordinary people* looks at the types and degrees of credibility accorded to different accessed voices. *The imagery of threat* emphasises the visual imagery of the texts with particular reference to associational meanings. Finally, *Lessons from the past* discusses the thematization of key events from the history of the nuclear industry. Although both substantive and formal considerations inform each section, the emphasis varies, so that, for instance, the discussion in *Proof and probability* has a primarily substantive focus whilst *Experts and ordinary people* shows more interest in forms.

Proof and probability

You can't prove a scientific theory when you're trying to look at cause and effect

These are the words of Robin Russell Jones, editor of *Radiation and Health*, the radiation expert who comments on the Sellafield leukaemia prosecution in *Heart of the Matter* '(Un)provability' is a thematic concern of all of the programmes, from the question of what caused one child's leukaemia at the lowest level of generality through to philosophical reflection on the nature of proof at the highest, taking in the difference between legal (civil and criminal) and scientific standards of proof. If anything is central to the nuclear risk debate it is this 'proof' issue. The discourse of this debate, as conducted in the public sphere and mediated by television, poses questions both of the past 'Has anyone been made ill or killed by the industry?' and of the future 'Will there be a nuclear accident in Britain and what will be its effects if there is?' With regard to the first, conclusive 'proof' would require watertight epidemiological axioms and a closed causal narrative (one from which alternative explanations of individual or collective suffering have been eliminated). These are impossible conditions, so the actual choice is

between 'talking up' an effects scenario, maximally into probability so convincing it amounts to proof, or talking it 'down' into mere possibility, improbability or even impossibility. Future danger, as envisaged in *From Our Own Correspondent*, is an even more speculative matter. Of course, possibility/probability is not just a matter of rhetoric: it is rational, other things being equal, to find certain kinds of evidence and argument more persuasive than others in respect of a given 'unknown'.

Both those who criticise the nuclear power industry and those who seek to reassure the fearful support their positions by appeal to rationality and scientific evidence. Their arguments are variously mediated in the texts we have used for this study. No programme addresses its viewers directly in the discourses of chemistry, physics or epidemiology (or allows its expert witnesses to do so); if necessary the language of the experts is translated for the viewers or explained to them. *Uncertain Legacy* introduces the concept of a 'millisievert'. *Energy - the Nuclear Option* explains the construction principles of a PWR with particular emphasis upon safety features. *Heart of the Matter* expounds, as an alternative to the account of Sellafield leukaemias as radiation-induced illnesses, an 'infection' theory of how such an excessive leukaemia rate might have come about. Only *From Our Own Correspondent*, with its 'what if...?' approach, stays at a distance from the scientific-empirical.

The programmes, particularly the broadcast ones (*Uncertain Legacy*, *Heart of the Matter*) which we shall concentrate upon here, all appeal to the rationality of the viewers themselves, as competent to make certain kinds of judgements on the basis of the evidence presented, even where, as in *Uncertain Legacy*, the inconclusiveness of even its own evidence is signalled. The presenter takes the viewers through a 'case study' in the Somerset County Records office, showing an increase in the numbers of infant deaths associated with congenital malformations, during a three year period which is also a 'peak' for leukaemia cases in the same area. This is the logic of 'telling coincidence', which the presenter invokes in detached terms, stressing the importance of cross-referencing statistical findings. Nevertheless, he concludes:

But of course you can prove anything with statistics. And whilst these figures strengthen the argument that we're dealing with radiation induced disease, they do no more than that. There is no smoking gun, no evidence of Hinkley Point's involvement. But clearly something happened here in Somerset in the late 60s for which there is no obvious explanation.

There is no smoking gun because the industry's own records do not show a significant increase in radiation emission for the relevant period. Viewers are allowed, rather than encouraged, to speculate that independent records on radiation emission might have shown something different: 'we have to take the

industry's word for it', Taylor says - and, for the purposes of the argument on hand, he does.

One very strong card that *Uncertain Legacy* plays, to strengthen its credibility of argument, is the challenging of those epidemiological axioms which have underpinned the discussion about radiation-induced disease. This card is a telling one as played within the programme's textualization of the nuclear power debate. It is of additional interest to us inasmuch as the validity of these axioms is again raised as an issue, but less conclusively, in *Heart of the Matter*. The axioms in question are, we learn, derived from data on the victims of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki atom bombs. They are thus above suspicion, in one sense - medical research has no interest in making the effects of the A-bombs seem better or worse than they are. Sir Douglas Black, in producing his report, thus relied just as much upon these axioms as did the industry in setting its maximum permissible dose limits. In doing so, Black came to the 'paradoxical' conclusion that Sellafield had emitted too little radiation to be responsible for the excessive cancer rate in the area. *Uncertain Legacy's* card is this - on the basis of the latest data from Japan medical research has changed its mind; the axioms need revision:

There has been a disproportionately high number of cancer deaths among the 15,000 Hiroshima and Nagasaki citizens who received comparatively small amounts of radiation. An average internal tissue dose of 103 millisieverts. Now if current radiation risk estimates are correct there should be no more than 20 excess cancers within this group but actually there's been over 100. Which suggests that our dose limits could be at least 5 times too high.

The presenter goes on to argue that dose limits could in fact be ten times too high, with support from John Goffman, an eminent American scientist. We discuss below the functions of expert, as against lay testimony in these programmes. Here it is sufficient to point out that viewers' rationality can be exercised in judging the credibility of evidence sources rather than in judging the evidence itself - the assumption being that only an expert could do the latter - with more or less assistance from within the text. In *Energy - The Nuclear Option* the trustworthiness of Sir Frank Layfield's testimony; the Layfield Report, that PWR's are a safe form of electricity generation, is not directly argued for but implicitly rests upon the impartiality of the inquiry process itself. By contrast, when *From Our Own Correspondent* seeks to discredit the reassuring testimony of official sources that a Chernobyl-type disaster is impossible in Britain, a rationale for scepticism is made more explicit. The Chernobyl accident happened although the authorities said it couldn't. So the British authorities could be wrong too.

But a rational approach, to evidence or to sources, is not enough to yield uncontested truths in the nuclear power debate. This ultimate indeterminacy is most directly confronted in *Heart of the Matter*. An industry spokesman puts the view

(with some support from Joan Bakewell) that a legal verdict (produced by a judge, or by a jury) is a different matter from a scientific fact (produced by a scientist or scientific community). The solicitor for the afflicted Sellafield family, hopeful of a verdict favouring his clients, admits that such a verdict is the more likely given that this is a civil case, where the standard of proof is the 'balance of probabilities' rather than 'beyond all reasonable doubt', as in the case of a criminal trial. Russell Jones, the programme's radiation expert, generalizes 'unprovability' to all scientific claims – he is nevertheless emphatic on the subject of the industry's responsibility, and his rhetorical strategy would seem to involve an attempt to shift the burden of proof from the litigants to the defendants:

You can't prove a scientific theory when you're trying to look at cause and effect. All you can do, in the words of Karl Popper, is to disprove it. In other words you have to find some item of data which actually disproves the link between the discharges and the leukaemia. And this was something that really has been misunderstood from the very beginning, people have expected science to provide proof. It is not in the nature of science to provide proof. It is in the nature of science to disprove things.

In taking a line against the industry, the critics in this programme offer BNFL two options: to fight the case but accept the burden of proof on epistemological grounds (Russell Jones' position) or not to fight the case and admit liability on moral grounds – the position of the local GP:

I think they should morally accept that connection whether it's out of court or in court, I don't think it matters. But I think it's been the attitude all the way along that BNFL won't accept a connection and while that happens it makes me very angry.

It is a reasonable position to take – and seems to be Russell Jones' premise – that since conclusive proof is not possible, probability has to be enough, for the law and for science. This is undoubtedly true insofar as science relies on statistical methods which are inherently probabilistic. On this reasoning it would be dishonourable for the industry to hold out for conclusiveness before they will admit liability. For they too must know, from their own scientific experts, that this is not possible.

In fact the industry comes across in the programme rather better than this (implicit) line of argument suggests: for the industry spokesman the litigants case rests on *improbable* facts, not on *unproven* ones in the hard sense, although his own position appears to rely upon the same epidemiological axioms as were challenged in *Uncertain Legacy*.

If the accusation is that the cause is radioactivity and radiation from Sellafield we just do not consider that that is possible. All the scientifically accepted relationships between dose and risk would have to be wrong, and not just wrong but wrong by several orders of magnitude for this to be the case.

An independent scientist, Sir Richard Doll, makes the same point – radiation could not have been the cause of the leukaemia cluster in this case. The industry spokesman and Doll also agree – the former more grudgingly – that some other aspect of the plant's operation could be responsible. The picture that emerges is of a genuine scientific problem in explaining particular leukaemia clusters. At its weakest, the case against the industry as mediated to the viewer in this programme relies upon the mere possibility of a causal relationship based upon the co-occurrence of radiation emission and excess leukaemia cases. That co-occurrence is most emphatically stated from the very beginning and is one of the things that is, as Bakewell explicitly establishes, beyond dispute for all parties. The emphatic tones with which the 'facts' are stated by Russell Jones (that Sellafield emits radiation; that there is a leukaemia cluster in the area) do not lead on to an equally emphatic content at this point: the best he can come up with is 'plausibility' for the causal connection:

So in the context of Sellafield the thesis is that the discharges are responsible for the radiation (sic). Now that is a perfectly plausible biological statement.

Russell Jones would, indeed, revise the 'scientifically accepted relationships between dose and risk', using evidence from Sellafield as part of the basis for revision. By the end of the programme the industry's liability remains unproven either way, though a scenario in which it is liable, but not through radiation discharges, is emerging as a strong contender. However, as we have noted earlier, it is a scenario of judgment in the *judicial*, not the *scientific* context which dominates the closing phase of this programme.

Experts and Ordinary People

The documentaries we examined used 'accessed voice' in a variety of ways within their accounts. By 'accessed voice' we refer to speech which is not that of broadcasting professionals. The most obvious form in which this occurs is the location interview, but there are considerable variations – interviewer seen/unseen, interviewer heard/unheard, interviewee fully established in setting or held in close-up, etc – all of which may modify the relations between 'accessed speaker' and viewers. A major division in the *kind* of speakers used is that between 'experts' and 'ordinary people'. This distinction holds good for a wide range of documentary programming but it is particularly true of those programmes where highly technical matters lie at the centre of the debate. Here, the principal speaking role of the 'experts' is that of authoritatively mediating knowledge, whereas the role of 'ordinary people' is usually that of recounting experience. This does not, however, lead to a situation in which expertise is *inevitably* placed superior to ordinary apprehension (and perhaps anxiety). First of all, it is possible for a programme to indicate the *conflict* of opinion which exists among experts.

So, for instance, in *Uncertain Legacy*, the use of the critical testimony of American scientist and former employee of the U.S. nuclear industry John Goffman, serves to problematize the flow of official, reassuring explanations. At points, conflicting judgements are given a 'shock' juxtaposition by inter-cutting. In *Heart of the Matter*, to take another instance, an expert in radiation offers an account of dose-levels and risk factors of a far more worrying kind than that presented moments earlier by a BNFL spokesman.

Secondly, far from presenting lay testimony and suspicion as something to be read within an outer frame provided by authoritative specialist knowledge, a programme may use 'ordinary' accounts to apply sceptical pressure to aspects of expertise. This latter may thus be projected as a vulnerable 'in theory' to which lay accounts of 'in practice' can be vigorously counterposed. An implicit antagonism of this kind occurs in *Uncertain Legacy* and it is interesting to note how it is indicated by the presenter, very early in the programme, projecting significant pronominal alignments:

We were all innocent once. When the CEBG built Hinkley Point we believed in the nuclear dream. Now, for many of us, it's become something to protest about.

In addition to the possibilities of inter-expert disagreement and of a programme itself being rhetorically organised from a markedly sceptical position, the extent to which given experts are perceived as *speaking for the industry* (and therefore as potentially compromised in their scientific impartiality) also needs to be addressed. It is, of course, a key factor in determining the degree of viewer-perceived conflict between expert and lay positions. *Energy - The Nuclear Option* raises this question most obviously, since all the expert speakers here (both scientific and technological) have volunteered to contribute their testimony within its essentially promotional design. Their discourse of objective professionalism is thus potentially compromised by readings of them as interested parties (as we document below in our respondent studies). This is especially so when the programme context for their speech excludes inter-expert debate and represents 'ordinary people' only by narrator projections of the 'typical' forms their fears and objections might take.

It might now be useful to review briefly the discursive sub-systems formed by different accessed voices in each of the four programmes we took for close analysis, drawing on and developing the points already made above.

As we have noted, the overall design of *Uncertain Legacy* is one which features inter-expert disagreement and which also counterposes 'ordinary' anxieties to the explanations of the industry's specialists. The narrator is able to use 'we' and 'us' very early in the programme, a signal of its intention to place one particular 'they' firmly under critical scrutiny. When, for instance, a Welsh farmer or Cumbrian mothers express their anxieties, these serve to develop and reinforce

the movement of the narration and imagery (see above). There is even evidence of the narration amplifying, if not actually distorting, the level of popular anxiety. When Cumbrian families are seen undergoing voluntary body-scan testing, one woman explains that it is to 'reassure' relatives in another part of the country that 'everything is all right'. Yet the narrator generalises above this instance to remark on the 'inner fears' of the local population. In *Uncertain Legacy*, then, the expert discourse of the industry, embedded as it is within an imagery of threat and an ironic narrator framing, is matched not only against counter-expertise but against a lay testimony of considerable cumulative power.

Such an 'imbalance' is precisely reversed in *Energy - The Nuclear Option*, where the strong projection of expert reassurance is the key rhetorical aim. Given the nature of this programme as a promotional video, 'imbalance' might be a misleading term to use. Nevertheless, the total exclusion of an 'ordinary' perspective from the account, except via the ventriloquistic projections of the narrator, runs the risk of failing to *engage* properly with anxiety in the public/audience before putting the case for its unfoundedness. Possible consequences of this - condescension of tone and a suggestion that the public is almost culpably prone to superstition - were detected in the programme by many of our respondents, as we document below.

From Our Own Correspondent is, from the start, constructed in such a way as to foreground 'ordinary people' as victims of governmental and industrial negligence. This is not only established visually, through the disaster scenario of evacuation and temporary accommodation in camps, but also through the two interviews with one such victim - a mother. In the second of these interviews, she identifies the 'popular' position which the whole item is designed to project:

British Electricity and the Government, they just refuse to accept any responsibility. They're batting the blame between the two of them and meanwhile it's us in the middle who have to suffer.

Finally, what distinguishes *Heart of the Matter* from the other programmes is a configuration which places the case of an 'ordinary' family right at the centre of concern, then draws back to an 'outer' ring of conflicting expert comment in an attempt at a more general understanding. This split-level approach reduces the more directly antagonistic expert-lay relations which we have noted elsewhere, a reduction which is further aided by the presentation of the family's case through the professional offices of a local lawyer. It is clear from respondent comment, however, that it is the sustained treatment of the *experience* of 'ordinary' suffering which provides the primary line of viewer engagement throughout.

The Imagery of Threat

Within the discursive repertoire which television brings to the treatment of the nuclear energy issue, there clearly exist possibilities for triggering evaluations and moods in the viewer in a manner which is both extra-rational and implicit – laying beyond the ‘official’ terms of the exposition or investigation. Such *associational* (and often *affective*) possibilities rely on an evaluative ‘set’ being already established in the viewer’s mind and available for rapid evocation by ‘trigger’ words or images. That it would be perfectly possible for a reporter or director plausibly to disclaim any intention to evoke such ‘sets’ of response in the viewer is a characteristic of this mode of discourse, giving it a strategic dimension. Such disclaiming is made possible because, whatever broader resonances of meaning are being produced, the choice of signifier is nearly always justifiable in terms of much more specific and narrow referential/representative functions (eg Hiroshima 1945 is, scientifically, a useful datum for arguments about radioactive dose-levels). In visual sequences, producers may even cite happenstance to support a claim of ‘non-motivation’ (dark storm clouds frequently *do* gather above the cooling towers of Sellafield).

As well as the range of quite generally applicable terms and images used by television (and by advertising) to generate affective responses in this way, there are sub-sets which have developed around specific topics, including that of nuclear power.

The use of particular place-names (eg Hiroshima, Three-Mile Island, Chernobyl), process descriptions (eg contamination, fail-safe, melt-down) and images (eg wire boundary fences, power stations next to mountain lakes, industrial installations at night) may serve not only to cue powerful local responses but also to frame the significance given to other words and images, finally acting, perhaps, as an interpretative guide in reading the programme as a whole. Clearly, what we have referred to above as the ‘sets’ of response used by viewers are often resourced from a very wide inter-textual grid (in which, say, a sequence in the feature film, *The China Syndrome* or the BBC ‘nuclear thriller’ *Edge of Darkness*¹³ might be more influential an immediate reference point than a recently seen documentary on energy sources).

Limiting discussion here to questions of visual imagery, and focussing on the projection of nuclear energy as *threatening*, we can note the prevalence of such

¹³ *The China Syndrome* (Columbia, 1979) dramatised an operational flaw in a nuclear power plant with such narrative plausibility and acting power (Jane Fonda and Jack Lemmon) as to become a regular point of reference in later discussion of the Three-mile Island incident. *Edge of Darkness*, a series thriller broadcast by the BBC in 1986, was plotted around a secret reprocessing plant involving State conspiracy and multi-national finance. Its negative portrayal of nuclear industrialism, reinforced by ‘sinister’ visuals and an eerie musical score, could hardly have failed to make a contribution to popular understanding and feeling on the issue.

material. Of the programmes we analysed, all but one of them (not surprisingly the CEGB promotional video) included shots which seemed to us to work associationally to produce strong negative feelings, as well as perhaps also working to constitute data within the logic of exposition. A very good example of such a shot would be one in *Uncertain Legacy* which we have described earlier. Here, after hovering above the surface of a lake adjacent to a nuclear power station, a lake which possesses a certain ‘ghostly beauty’ as a result of the steam rising from it, the camera slips below the surface to show, murkyly, the bottom. The commentary meanwhile talks of ‘a whole spectrum of nucleids...polluting the lower depths.’ It is important to note here how what was picked up by many of our respondents as a very powerful depiction of ‘unnaturalness’ and ‘hidden menace’, is dependent on the speech soundtrack both for specific information and also for the figurative polarities (on top, visible natural beauty; underneath, invisible unnatural menace) around which its meanings are graphically clinched. Later shots in this programme, of work on a new reprocessing plant and of piles of the waste *already* awaiting disposal, have enough self-evident referentiality to work with a minimum of narrational input, but here the use of music (slow tempo ‘eerie electronic’) reinforces the strength and direction of the response. If we take an example from *Heart of the Matter* – the very first shot of Sellafield, seen at a distance from a position on the edge of the Lake District fells – the negative effect here results from this shot’s positioning immediately after a shot of a tranquil, wooded lakeside. This is further reinforced by the ironic turn of the commentary, which having talked of ‘the natural life, the good life’, shifts tone to note ‘Well, that’s how it looks’ just as we are moved visually from lakeside idyll to a distant perception of something which is now imbued with *contrariness*. This articulation of threat by a contradiction with previously established images of ‘naturalness’ is, in fact, a key trope in generating extra-rational negative meaning and is the method used by *Uncertain Legacy* too, both in the example above and a further one offered below. It is also there in the organisation of *From Our Own Correspondent*, which is developed around a much more comprehensive and explicit ‘threat’ principle, but which employs a contradistinctive shift from highly ‘composed’ shots (e.g. long-take, steady camera, slow zooms) of trees, fields and cows to rawly ‘immediate’ shots of disaster and panic.

As one might expect, given its very different rhetorical brief, *Energy – the Nuclear Option* tries in its opening to give a musical and visual inflection of ‘positive naturalness’ to its depiction of the Sizewell coastline, an inflection which is an implicit *counter* to the subversive work of ‘threat’ rhetorics. One might, indeed, directly compare its portrayed beach, sunny and ‘alive’ with fishing activity and family walkers, with the beach near Sellafield in *Heart of the Matter*, the deserted character of which, given the commentary’s point that this is the ‘hottest day of

the year', reads as *ominously* unpeopled. Documented local fact is here on the way to becoming general symbolic truth.

The opening of *Uncertain Legacy* articulates 'threat' but it does so not by any single 'high resonance' shot reinforced by commentary or music, but by a whole scenario of shots which depict a threatened community next to Hinkley Point power station. A peaceful ruralism (established by the depiction of cottage, church, village shop and village school) is being 'de-natured' by its proximity to the nuclear industry. This encroachment upon normality is signalled by shots of a clicking Geiger counter intercut with village scenes, by the sight of 'emergency plan' leaflets being put through letter-boxes and being carried in shopping baskets and also, most powerfully, by the presence in the school office of potassium iodate tablets for emergency use. The 'wrongness' of the situation is, we would argue, established at a level deeper than that at which the subsequent reportorial inquiry will be conducted. In that sense, such an implied scenario, coming right at the start of the programme, sets up a resonance of 'threat' which it would be difficult if not impossible for any subsequent 'findings' to cancel. There is, then, a powerful metonymic discourse of 'threat' around the nuclear industry, upon which television productions can draw. They may do this by the single, 'telling' shot or by a more elaborate articulation. In both cases, extra-visual signification may also be involved. Certainly, the powerful impact of Chernobyl upon public apprehensions of risk would seem to have extended the range and strength of negatively resonant images. As our respondent reports show, it would be most unwise to ignore their contribution to taken meanings.

Lessons from the past

Three key datum points in the history of nuclear power technology feature in these programmes: the 1957 Windscale fire in Britain; the 1979 Three-mile Island accident in the U.S.A., and the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in the Soviet Union. It is with the verbal and visual evocation of these events to some rhetorical purpose that we are here concerned. These single, potent, catastrophic incidents cannot be ignored either by protagonists or by antagonists of nuclear power, but they can be read in different ways, their relevance can be disputed, and they can be played 'up' or 'down'. Other datum points in popular memory can also be introduced to inflect the argument as required. *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* reminds the viewers of the 1985 British miners' strike, with scenes of police-picket confrontation. The message here is that we must keep a nuclear capacity in Britain in case of interruptions to other fuel supplies. The 1974 Arab oil embargo is another reference point for this argument. *Uncertain Legacy* invites viewers to remember Hiroshima – the point of this (officially) is that medical research is still learning about radiation and risk from the effects upon the surviving victims.

Unofficially, of course, Hiroshima may provoke other reflections on technology and history.

In the context of a sequence on Downs' Syndrome cases in the vicinity of Sellafield, the Windscale fire is drawn into *Uncertain Legacy's* textualisation through archive newsreel footage showing cows and people 'recovering' from its effects. The original narration of this newsreel is framed as *shockingly* upbeat – at best naive, at worst complicit with a policy of official secrecy. This event also finds its way into the presenter's catalogue of 'incidents' which constitute the negative side of the industry's safety record. He uses this catalogue to confront the BNFL chairman. But as far as the chairman is concerned:

There has been nobody killed in British Nuclear Fuels as a result of a radioactive incident in the last thirty years.

The point of this phrasing is to indicate that the Windscale fire was a long time ago. There *have* been more recent deaths but radioactivity was not the cause! In *Heart of the Matter* the significance of Windscale is precisely the death-toll, not in itself a matter of dispute it seems. Bakewell is evoking Sellafield's poor safety record:

The 1957 fire at Windscale which burned out of control for at least 2 days certainly made the newsreels when milk from local farms had to be poured away. At the time the Government report was reassuring. Today's official estimate is that the fire was responsible for thirty-three deaths.

Elsewhere, *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* uses the fact that the fire happened in a BNFL military plant, not a CEEGB civil one, to play down the significance of Windscale.

In over a quarter of a century of operation there is no evidence that any member of the public has been killed or injured by an accidental release of radioactivity at a CEEGB nuclear power station.

This is a version of the Windscale 'no deaths' thesis which builds in even more insurance against gainsaying by confining its scope to members of the public, thereby excluding the workers who were the Windscale victims.

The accident at Three-mile Island is remembered too. For *Uncertain Legacy*, the U.S. authorities come out very badly in retrospect, and in a way which further supports our comments on expert and ordinary perspectives:

Although the amounts of radioactivity released during the accident were said to be small, it's now clear that they weren't even properly measured. And while the official view is that no-one was harmed by Three-mile Island, people who live near the plant prefer to believe the evidence of their own eyes.

By contrast *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* accepts the official 'no harm' view, and goes on to address the question of whether a similar accident could happen at Sizewell B, also a PWR. It concludes, with support from the Layfield report, that the design is different and safer, thanks to Britain's more rigorous safety standards.

Chernobyl-in-Britain is a central concern in both *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* and *From Our Own Correspondent*. The former argues explicitly that a Chernobyl-type accident is impossible in Britain. The latter assumes that a comparable event is perfectly possible, and addresses itself to the consequences rather than the causes. The relevance of Chernobyl in *From Our Own Correspondent* has to do with the inadequacies of emergency planning in the event of a catastrophe. The British authorities, it suggests, have not recognised this relevance. The chaos would be even worse than at Chernobyl if Hartlepool's reactor got out of control, because of the size of the local population. Of course the reassurance of the other programme might be thought to render these particular anxieties superfluous. Dominant explanations for Chernobyl itself have two aspects: operator irresponsibility and reactor design. *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* has a very strong line on the latter, which includes a degree of technical explanation:

The Russian reactor was known to be very unstable under some conditions. At low power it had what is known as a positive power coefficient. This means that if the power starts to rise from a low level it can suddenly surge to a high level in seconds. And this is what happened at Chernobyl during an unorthodox experiment when the reactor was being run at a very low power level.

It handles the faults of the operators less directly, acknowledging briefly that the Russian operators were found irresponsible by the Soviet authorities, before moving on to reactor design. Later sections of the programme portray the rigorous training procedures for British operators and the fail-safe mechanisms that by implication would prohibit irresponsible operator actions. However, the human element is the weak link for many of our respondents. For instance, in the Conservative Party group the question is asked 'how do we know that some people couldn't do the same thing here?'

Finally, as we have noted earlier, when Lord Marshall, the CEGB chairman, is invited by Brian Walden to address the question of a possible British disaster, his response is to agree that a disaster is possible – just as an earthquake before the end of the interview is possible. The generality of this answer fails to address the fear of a Chernobyl-scale accident of a different type.

The wide range of variation and conflict in approach between these programmes is both substantive and discursive. Substantively, although there is some shared ground on the kind of 'knowledge' which constitutes the parameters of the

nuclear debate, conflict about the status and meaning of that 'knowledge' is very apparent. Discursively, too, the approaches are very different, both at the level of general rhetorical strategies not unique to television as a medium, and in relation to the specific conventions of audiovisual discourse – the meaning of direct address from a news studio; the possibilities of intercut and contrastive images; the credibility values of particular speakers, etc. This variability has implications for the respondent study. It reinforces the expectation that respondents too will vary widely in their relations to the substance of the arguments. It also invites us to ask how far respondents vary in their relations to the discursive forms through which the arguments are mediated.

4 The Viewers

As we outlined in our introduction to this book, we wished to include as a primary element of our study an investigation into how viewers made sense of, and evaluated, the programmes we chose for analysis. 'Reception studies' have become an important part of media research in the last decade and before we indicate some of the details of our own research design, it might be worth commenting on a few of the general features of this area of inquiry.

To some extent, a growth of researcher interest in how viewers interpret what they see and hear can be seen as a re-connection with empirical modes of fieldwork research after a period in which the pursuit of general theory and of semiotic textual analyses held sway in British media studies. Researchers from sociology and social psychology, where an empirical concern with audiences has always been a principal research strand, would perhaps be inclined to view recent developments simply as a 'return'. However, this would be misleading. For what characterises the newer developments in reception study is an attention to the detail of signifiatory form (image and language) and to the 'creative' processes of interpretation of a kind not generally observable in the mainstream social science tradition. Without a doubt, the seminal text for this new strand of work is David Morley's *The 'Nationwide' Audience*¹⁴ published in 1980. Modest enough in scope, and working with a sometimes vulnerably mechanistic idea of interpretation as 'decoding', this study nevertheless explored in new and provocative ways the processes by which text-reader interaction produces socially differentiated meaning and it has rightly been one of the most cited and discussed works in international media research over the last decade.

Our reception study is conceived within the broad framework of the Morley venture, though with considerable differences in some of the guiding ideas and analytic methods. Nevertheless, in the context of 1990 there are two good reasons for us to note a continuity with his 1980 investigations. First of all, we are mostly concerned, as he was, with reading practices which are brought to bear on

¹⁴ David Morley *The 'Nationwide' Audience: structure and decoding*, London, British Film Institute 1980.

non-fiction television, where the interplay between 'story' and 'fact', imagination and knowledge, textuality and reference, is likely to be different from that of, say, popular series drama. This difference, and its implications for positions and practices of 'reading', does not seem to us to be sufficiently recognised in a number of recent audience studies which, though looking primarily at Soap Opera, have nevertheless appeared to want to construct a general theory of reception. Secondly, following Morley's 1986 study, *Family Television*,¹⁵ there has been a move in research towards investigating the domestic conditions of television use: routines, programme preferences and the range of activities co-extensive with viewing. As part of a broader anthropology of domestic culture as well as of an inquiry into determinants of the television process, this is wholly to be welcomed. In our view, however, its recognition of contextual difference and interactive variety should not displace the usefulness of conducting studies which attempt to plot the process of meaning production by looking at the relationship between specific programmes and viewer understanding and response. These studies, usually requiring the playback of taped material, have a quasi-experimental character to them which may seem false to the 'real'. But of course, nearly all socially investigative methods require an intervention into the very processes they wish to document – the creation of heightened awareness in the respondent, the requirement for people in some way or other to 'give an account of themselves', the setting up of 'artificial' situations. If researchers feel that, nevertheless, something of what is generated in their inquiries bears significantly on habits, meanings and processes going on independently of their intervention-ary sampling, then all they can do is be self-aware, cautious and honest in their practices. In drafting and applying our research design and in writing up our accounts we have tried, at least, to be all three.

Research design

We envisaged the sample audience for these programmes in terms that emphasised the most *relevant* aspects of their social identities – relevant, that is, for projecting their potential engagement with the topic of the programmes.

With this in mind, our sampling was oriented, in the first instance, to what may broadly be termed 'interest groups'. We anticipated that the main political parties would have reason to be interested in this topic (even though nuclear energy is not a simple partisan issue). We accordingly obtained the participation of respondent groups from the local Labour, Conservative and SLD parties. The net was extended to groups from the local Rotary club, one from the Labour and Trade Union Resource Centre of unemployed people, a women's discussion group, a group of comprehensive school pupils, a group of medical students,

¹⁵ David Morley *Family Television: cultural power and domestic leisure, London, Comedia 1986.*

some Friends of the Earth members and a set of workers at the Heysham nuclear power plant. In addition to these groups, which we treated as 'pre-constituted' groups for the purposes of the research since the members were already acquainted with one another, we recruited individuals on Merseyside into four mixed, 'researcher-constituted' groups. These were mainly shop floor workers in local industries such as Fords and Littlewoods. We also conducted four sessions with individuals during a pilot study exercise prior to Phase One and based upon the same programmes. We have made very little use of these, except for an occasional quotation in the final section of this chapter.

For the second phase study there were three participating groups: one involving the local Womens' Institute and two involving first year students at Liverpool University – one of Arts students and one of Science students.

The research sessions themselves were quasi-experimental in that, first of all, the circumstances of the viewings were non-naturalistic. Respondent groups generally came to the department, or we met them in their headquarters. Occasionally, sessions took place in the home of a respondent, but a home de-naturalised by the presence of the group as a whole, and of the researchers. Secondly, Phase One of the study was designed to elicit comparisons between the three programmes screened. This was done in full recognition that it would provoke higher levels of attention to programme *form* than if each programme had been screened singly.

Groups were primed to expect material on 'a topic of current interest', not specifically nuclear energy. Sessions, which were audiotaped, began by eliciting general views on the topic, then proceeded with the programme screenings (three programmes in Phase One of our study, one in Phase Two). This was followed each time by periods of semi-structured discussion around a common, basic agenda which we had prepared and then kept standard for each group, totalling about 50 minutes. We tried to elicit reactions on aspects of interest to us whilst at the same time allowing the groups to develop themes according to their own agendas. The Phase One programmes were screened in the order in which we discuss them above: *Uncertain Legacy; Energy – the Nuclear Option; From Our Own correspondent*. The relative advantages of group-based and individual-based respondent sessions has been a subject of much discussion in the literature. For the present study, the advantage of the group-based approach was the opportunity it offered for participants to negotiate with one another their often conflicting responses to the programmes screened. This keeps in focus the potential for divergence as well as convergence within sets of people who were participating as representatives of organisations. We are of course sensitive to the possibility that in some cases this may work to *produce* more consensus than might otherwise be the case.

The investigation of meaning in reception studies needs to differentiate analytically between 'understanding' and 'response', however interfused these may be in practice. For it is of course entirely possible for viewers to agree as to how to understand an item but to disagree in their responses to it. Less obviously, it is also possible for viewers to appear to share a response yet (perhaps unknown to each other) to hold to different basic understandings of what they have seen and heard.¹⁶ In practice, there is often a kind of 'to and fro' incrementalism at work by which meanings which have been processed into responses by viewers then 'act back' to constitute the reading frame for the reception of subsequent 'primary' understandings. In our study, rather than *separate* analysis off into two phases, we have tried to be alert to the incremental and meaning/value shifts.

We have characterised our approach as 'ethnodiscursive'. This indicates, on the one hand, the ethnographic basis of our sampling, and on the other, the close attention we have paid to the language used by the respondents in articulating and negotiating their responses to the programmes. Although we have not made use of any tightly categorical scheme of analysis we have found the notion of 'frame' a helpful one with which to approach the data. Respondents appropriate the programmes, or aspects of them, from within particular frameworks of understanding, which supply them with criteria of evaluation both for programme forms and contents. Central among these is what we have termed the 'civic' frame, concerned with propriety in addressing a national audience on a controversial topic. Within that frame, the major but not exclusive criterion of evaluation is that of 'balance'. Other frameworks that seem to us to be variously operative across the groups include a more directly *political* frame (subsuming an *environmentalist* orientation), a *personal* frame, and an *evidential* one, having a primary concern with the status of evidence and argument. Our way of using these 'frames' as broadly classificatory will be apparent in the accounts which follow.

Conservative Party Group

(This group consisted of two men and two women)

1. *Uncertain Legacy*

The group's initial response to this programme is largely a critical one and it is made within a version of what we have discussed above as the *civic* framing, a framing both of television programmes as public communication and of the topic itself as a public issue. Here are two opening responses from members of the group:

¹⁶ For a discussion of this and other theoretical issues on reception research see John Corner 'Cultural Power and the "Reception" Problematic in Recent Media Research' in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds) *Mass Communication and Society* (Second edition) London, Edward Arnold (forthcoming).

A. I thought it was rather unbalanced because it was basically all anti-nuclear. I would have liked to have seen some very experienced scientists also giving their side. Because the CEEGB man was only saying what he had been told to say. He didn't have any deep knowledge of it. So I felt it was too unbalanced.

B. I thought it was very inconclusive, it didn't come down really, in fact, no I'll rephrase that, it seemed to be coming down more heavily against the use of nuclear power from the possibilities of harm to human beings. I would very much like to have seen a debate at the end or somewhere in the programme for the pros and cons - some people who are involved and very knowledgeable debating with some people of anti-nuclear energy [views].

A number of themes emerge here, connecting this group's perspective on television's impartiality requirements to its views on scientific authority (and its suspicions that the programme has here been neglectful). At a general level, this connection can be seen to be one in which the group's *civic* frames of reference link up with its framings of the *evidential*.

Resistance to the programme appears to be partly *procedural*, a belief that a formal obligation to show 'the other side' has not been honoured, and partly *substantive*, in that it is believed the presence of more authoritative, expert assessment would have got closer to the truth of the matter than the programme managed with its chosen speakers. Speaker B's comments seem to show a tension between a desire for truthfulness (as against the 'inconclusive') and a desire for a balancing of 'pros and cons'. Perhaps it is precisely the degree of 'conclusiveness' in what the speaker feels to be an *erroneous* direction that underlies this contradictoriness of judgement.

That what is shown and said exerts a degree of persuasive force is directly testified to by one respondent:

A. I mean you must take note of the evidence presented to you and that seems to be, I won't say evidence you can't dispute because of course Lord Marshall and the managing director of Sellafield proved the opposite case I suppose. The evidence was rather more one side than the other and I suppose that in itself influences you.

A number of group members speculate, without reaching a clear decision, on the extent to which this 'one-sidedness' was either the product of the unavailability of certain types of speaker or of a prior motivation to present a negative case. There is evidence that this troubled concern with what is missing is partly the product of the group judging as unsatisfactory the contribution made to the programme by the most senior proponent of Nuclear Energy to appear, Lord Marshall. Despite the comment of the last quoted respondent that, against the main persuasive drift of the programme, Marshall 'proved the opposite case, I suppose' (the uncertainty here is significant) response to his interview is unambiguously negative:

B. I was rather sorry that Lord Marshall in that film appeared to be treating it rather lightly. I didn't feel that was fitting to the subject...just from his manner you knew he was brushing off things.

C. He was flippant.

B. I thought that.

C. He should have tried much harder to disprove some of the statements.

D. I thought that when he said you can put it in my garden [a waste site] he was saying that because he knew there was no likelihood.

'Imbalance' is also perceived as a feature of the programme's images. One speaker notes an unfair use of archive footage of the Atom bomb tests:

A. Well, that's another aspect of it being one-sided. We had brought home to us all the horror of the A-bomb, that was relating in our minds from that to nuclear energy.

But this detection of manipulative, rhetorical (and here, 'emotive') intent does not prevent other images in the programme securing an effect. For instance, following the comment above, another speaker, continuing the theme of the programme's visual exposition, refers to the Trawsfynydd lake sequence (see discussion in chapters 3 and 4) and the disturbing sense of pollution which the images carried. Given our earlier discussion of this sequence, it is of interest that this reference, though brief and rather fragmented, appears to understand the problem as being one of the lake's official use as a dumping ground for nuclear waste:

C. They were talking about the lake weren't they? Trawsfynydd. And that presumably was put at the bottom of the lake in some of these... I understood they were lead containers. The lake is supposed to be affected already.

2. Energy - The Nuclear Option

The particular 'civic' framing within whose terms *Uncertain Legacy* is registered as unbalanced is again brought to bear in the discussion of this programme, producing what might seem to be a surprising degree of critical comment on its 'opposite but equal' bias given the previously expressed desire of the group to see a 'fair hearing' accorded to the pro-nuclear position. The programme's status as a corporate promotional video does not, for this group, win for it the license to be 'one-sided' however. Indeed its emphatic advocacy of nuclear energy eventually produces a more strongly-phrased critical response from most group members than did the first programme screened.

C. It was the other side of the story wasn't it? It was supply and demand and safety this time.

B. There used to be a series on Sunday morning with Brian Walden. I feel that was just as much prejudiced to the other side. They referred to other methods of energy, the

windmills and they said these would be an eyesore and make noises but they can't be much more of an eyesore than the actual places ... Frankly, they'd made up their minds saying it was nuclear energy they were interested in.

D. They made it out that it was almost inevitable to my way of thinking that we were going to have it and it wasn't quite as bad as people thought. Certainly it was more on the other side.

The subsequent discussion contains some quite sharply contrasting responses: one member notes, for instance, that 'I just felt we were being brainwashed quite frankly', while another adopts a more deferent (if still uneasy) attitude, 'And so I mean we as lay people have got to sometimes accept what the experts say, I mean you can't query them.'

The 'civic' critique applied to *Uncertain Legacy* was in response to a structured 'bias' whose degree of motivation was unclear, that applied to *Energy - the Nuclear Option* becomes one in response to elements of the propagandistic. The changed terms of negotiation and (often) of rejection are shown in the discussion of the role of Brian Walden as the presenter. One member regarded the choice of Walden as being that of 'an experienced man to brainwash you' and whilst there was recognition of his skill and professionalism, the connection of these qualities with authority or indeed with any personal authenticity was questioned. Another speaker, commenting on the presentation, found it significant to note of Walden that 'he was being paid' (with clear implications for any civic framing of the integrity of his comments) whilst another observed:

B. He might be just as good telling you how terrible things were.

The same speaker developed a 'boomarang' account of the effect of the programmes emphasis on safety, with particular reference to two points in the exposition. First of all, in relation to the way in which the programme referenced Chernobyl:

B. And they kept on referring.. that the accident that happened in Chernobyl could not happen here. Now the accident in Chernobyl was absolutely due to negligence on the part of the operators who decided they were going to try out some experiment. So how do we know that some people couldn't do the same thing here?

Secondly, in relation to the filmed sequence on safety mechanisms and procedures which occurs towards the end of the programme:

B. It still comes over as very tainted you know. They were so reassuring that they'd done everything possible.. it wouldn't be necessary if it wasn't such a dangerous way of producing energy.

Clearly, we can extend the notion of viewer framing to observe that what happens with this viewer's reading (and it occurs elsewhere in other groups) is that a

pre-established 'risk' framing is triggered by those very items from which the programme seeks to promote a generalized interpretation of 'safety'.

More generally within the group, Lord Marshall's performance is judged critically despite the impossibility here of seeing this partly as a function of hostile context. In fact, this group is among those in which at least one member regards his answer to Walden's 'bomb' question (see our discussion in Chapter 4) not only as unsatisfactory but as revealing, in the blatancy of its perceived 'gaffe', of a more general inadequacy of account:

B. Well, I thought he said, Lord Marshall said 'Well, it doesn't explode like a bomb you know' and then in the next breath he said 'the top blew off of Chernobyl'.

3. From Our Own Correspondent

This *Northern Newsreel* item immediately provoked a strong negative response among the group and it was the *political* motivations which they detected at work in the piece which were most prominent in initial reactions. To that degree, we can see their response here as shifting from matters of civics and relations of knowledge to a more openly political engagement.

B. I would say it was a very biased politically motivated group. And I would render (sic) to suggest that it was something to do with the trade unions.

D. It was very interesting to hear the character blaming the government and the CEBB.

Unlike *Uncertain Legacy*, which is treated as unbalanced, and *Energy - The Nuclear Option*, which is seen as, in part, ineffectively propagandistic, the *Northern Newsreel* treatment is seen right from the start as an attempted *political* hi-jacking of the debate, an item with 'an ulterior motive'. The details of its production, distribution and use immediately become the subject of inquiry and discussion among group members. Two other factors interconnect with this political framing of the response. First of all, as in several other groups, the limited production qualities of the tape are commented on in a way which, without being explicitly argued, lends support to the dismissal of its informing ideas. Secondly, its strategy as a fiction causes both a degree of confusion about what actually *did* happen at Hartlepool and considerable suspicion about what are seen to be its deceptive intentions:

B. A lot of it was fiction and unfortunately I believe that there are some people who would see that film and would really and truly believe that it had happened. I would be far more interested to know the organisation behind it and the use to which it is being put.

Other group members talk of 'garbage for the masses', 'fifth columnists' and 'propaganda', whilst one observes that 'I know this is a democratic country but sometimes democracy goes too far here'.

The question of production quality and manipulative design are brought together in apparently rhetorical speculation as to 'who would be taken in by the film', a speculation which then turns back on its own dismissiveness with the comment that 'a lot of people might be'.

That the approach of the piece is to appeal to the emotions is registered by members of the group as a further aspect of its illegitimacy:

B. And the child having leukaemia and having to leave the dog, they're all very small points but they would register...It's appealing to your emotions, which are you know, emotions aren't sometimes the basis that one should form a judgement on are they? And a certain amount of hysteria is developed in that film and again we shouldn't be making absolute judgements from a hysterical...and it was very confusing and I think most people would find it very confusing to try to sort out.

Given the terms of our earlier discussion we can see this as a rejection of the appropriateness of the 'personal' framing for the handling of this topic, either by broadcasters or by viewers.

There is some discussion about the information concerning contingency zones with which the film ends but this is marginalized both by the level of antipathy felt towards the project as a whole and by a continuing confusion over the fact/fiction borderlines.

Summary

What group members regard as the under-representation of qualified scientific testimony becomes their major point of comment within a basic civic framing and is linked, as we have shown, to their expressed belief that such testimony would be likely to provide positive and trustworthy assessments of nuclear energy of the kind they are not able to find in any of the material screened. For this group, advocacy from within the industry itself and its hired public relations specialists is no substitute for such reassurance and the promotional strategies of *Energy - The Nuclear Option* are largely rejected, even though many of the substantive themes and assumptions of this programme coincide with their own, certainly much more so than the investigative scepticism of *Uncertain Legacy* or the dramatized alarmism of the *Northern Newsreel* item. No members of this group express a full confidence in the present levels of safety or in the honesty and integrity of those charged with public responsibilities in the industry. Without question, the most regularly cited substantive factor is that of 'waste', the absence of comment on which is thought to be an important limitation of *Energy - The Nuclear Option*. At one point suspicion is generalized, with group assent, into what might be regarded as a remarkably cynical assessment of the situation for a group so committed to established constitutional processes.

C. You don't know where you are. There's not much honest information given.

Labour Party Group

(This group consisted of two women and three men)

1. Uncertain Legacy

The initial response of group members is concerned with an assessment of how the programme's account squares with their own knowledge and views. Once again, however, as we found elsewhere, a civic sense of the need both for a 'fair' representation of contending factors and for propriety of treatment is installed as the primary perspective. As we also note in our account of other groups, the tension between this perspective and a more 'partial' one, reflecting members own dispositions and attitudes, forms a key feature of subsequent debate, if not always explicitly so. For speaker A the programme is inadequate because it has too limited an agenda and is guilty of omitting important aspects of the issue:

A. Well it didn't tell me anything I didn't know, I think it missed out a few things. It was just centred on whether people were going to die or not and there's more issues than that. There's this issue of people needing energy. I mean, I'm not a... I don't believe in nuclear energy but I can see that there is a problem with a lot of people not having it. I don't think it went into that. It didn't talk about acid rain which is also a problem.

The play-off in this comment, between a statement of current position and the recognition of factors which problematize that position (here, the huge scale of energy requirements, especially in developing countries, and the environmental hazard posed by fossil fuel sources) indicate the operation of 'civic' criteria with a useful explicitness. Against these criteria, the programme is found wanting. Other speakers, whilst using the same broad principles of assessment, disagree with this view by pointing to the legitimacy of the programme being highly selective in the interests of retaining a clear focus:

B. I thought the opposite in one sense. I accept what [A] said but I thought it was actually very thorough in the sense that it didn't quite, I don't know whether objectively is the right word, but quite calmly tried to examine what evidence there was from simply that point of view of the potential risks to health if you like, to human health. More in terms of people living around state power stations, that seemed to be the main emphasis. It didn't say anything about the much more global dangers, if something went wrong which it obviously has done in one or two cases. It didn't say anything about the effects on the people who actually work there. But you know, given its very particular purpose I thought it handled it well.

This comment sparks off discussion on what might constitute a good programme on a topic like this, revealing some interesting differences in perceptions of rhetorical strategy and efficiency:

A. You don't know what happened, what went on behind the scenes.

C. I was of the opinion strangely that that programme, it was very bad because it defeated its own ends. It was too much anti-nuclear. Now you see what happens - it's talking to the converted. Now people who are pro-nuclear watching that, 'Oh this is a load of rubbish,' they'd say, 'Its nonsense, I don't want that, switch it off.' A more subtle mind, a more insidious way, perhaps. Like, 'I'm objective now, I'm not for or against, here are the facts.' I don't think programmes like that do anything, whether it's anti-bomb or anti-anything, that are so obviously weighted, to do our case any good.

D. I think the subject's so horrendous and the facts so frightening that we should see them as they are. I don't see....

C. Yes but you must get a manner of presenting so that the people who are indifferent to it would watch it.

B. I don't agree with you... I don't think it was heavily biased. Certainly not in relation to the degree of bias both in quantity and quality that goes the other way.

Disagreement here concerns not only the matter of how best to persuade those viewers who will come to the programme with pro-nuclear attitudes but also, in a secondary vein, the matter of how far it is facts rather than opinions which the programme deals in. Both C and B shift away from the civic frame in order to make the case for countervailing persuasive tactics. However, C clearly feels that the obviousness of the programme's anti-nuclear stance is a block to effective persuasion (a more 'insidious', overt approach having stronger potential). Incidentally, C's comments show a feature of respondent talk which importantly connects with ideas about social difference in TV interpretation. This is the 'displaced' reading - whereby a programme is evaluated in terms of the reading which people other than the respondent, bringing to bear different predispositions and understandings, will make.¹⁷

As might be expected from a group having both an anti-nuclear inclination and a political distrust of conventional styles of official, bureaucratic reassurance, there is a certain relish taken in what is perceived as the negative performance of Lord Marshall. Interestingly, the poorness of this performance is seen as partly authentic and partly a function of the programme's depictive tactics. Clearly, they may be differences here in individual respondent perceptions:

B. I thought what came out most strongly is what idiots the most senior people emerged as, particularly Marshall... The chairman of the BNFL smugly smiling as he lied his way through the nonsense that he was speaking. I mean that was disgraceful.

¹⁷ We made use of this concept in previous work, discussing the responses of selected Liverpool viewers to a programme about unemployment on Merseyside. See Kay Richardson and John Corner 'Reading reception: mediation and transparency in viewers' accounts of a TV programme'. Media, Culture and Society v 8, (1986) 485-508.

and

C. *I think he (Taylor) was marvellous getting that chairman bloke to look a complete and utter idiot.*

Insofar as the programme's ending is found inconclusive, this group attribute inconclusiveness to the nature of the topic itself and do not therefore find the programme at fault. Furthermore, lack of conclusive proof does not necessarily strengthen the pro-nuclear case:

D. *They kept saying, 'Nothing can be proved by all these children having cancers, nothing can be proved.' But they didn't say it can be disproved either.*

In the absence of proof, questions of probability become central to the sway of debate:

E. *...he did say it was inconclusive, but just the coincidence really to me, all they did say it seems to be more than a coincidence, they hinted it was more than a coincidence."*

2. Energy - The Nuclear Option

Consistent with his previous remarks, speaker A once more employs a strong civic frame and makes an initial assessment which contrasts with the one he made of *Uncertain Legacy*:

A. *I enjoyed that one. I thought it was more informative and I think it gave a more balanced view...It did let people make up their minds.*

The rest of the group do not share this interpretation and voice strong criticisms of bias, opening up a gap between A's reading and everyone else's which was to be significant in the pattern of the subsequent discussion:

E. *No, I don't think so, he kept saying something about the benefits and the risks and I thought for the first sort of ten minutes or what ever, fifteen minutes, 'well right we're getting the benefits', it was all the benefits and at the end of the programme we still hadn't heard the risks. They didn't tell us any of the risks. They just said, 'oh yes and there's a little bit of a risk in Russia.'*

As this negative evaluation continues, the persuasive tactics of the text are recognised and condemned:

B. *I thought that what he was doing all the time was quite correctly raising the questions but then he proceeded to answer them in his own way, and gave the answers he thought we ought to be having...he shouldn't have answered them.*

After we disclosed to the group that this was a promotional video rather than a broadcast programme, the discussion shifted to an assessment of the item as a calculated piece of propaganda. Having been seen as responding positively to its apparent impartiality, A now regards the piece as 'well done' because it has

worked on him. Others in the group also appreciate the quality of its imitation of broadcast formats, finding it to be 'extremely clever' (C) in this respect. Once assured of the programme's partisan origins, the group become freer to articulate a more directly political response, now remembering the use of protestors and miners as negative images in the video. Even when it is regarded as an impressive, professional exercise in persuasion, certain limitations are noted:

B. *The basic thing of any programme is 'show don't tell', Walden was telling all the time. And you either, you can take a certain amount of telling but then you cut off anyway.*

Moreover one of the central tenets of the programme, those key points upon which the attempt at authoritative, reassurance depends, is not only rejected but found risible:

C. *'It can't happen in our country' (in a voice parodying programme).*

E. *That was it.*

B. *Yes that's right, the laws of physics don't allow it to happen in our country the laws of physics are different in Russia you see. (satirically delivered, followed by laughter)*

3. From Our Own Correspondent

The first reactions were a mixture of enjoyment in the drama and admissions of confusion as to the precise status of is what is seen and heard:

A. *Oh I enjoyed it, I thought it was good.*

C. *Yes I enjoyed it.*

E. *I think I'm a bit puzzled by it.*

C. *It was really drama.*

E. *It wasn't particularly good drama.*

D. *I didn't know whether it was real or not.*

A. *You know at the end though.*

D. *Oh yes it suddenly clicked.*

B. *What it raises for me is the whole question about what is actually true and what isn't.*

D and E do not see the 'play' as at all effective, it is too 'messy' for them. Other members of the group are wary of the dangers of letting the fact of low-budget production affect a sympathetic overall response to the item's perspectives and ideas. B notes, by way of response to charges of poor technical quality:

B. But doesn't that show you what you expect from television because the technical standards are so high that if you see something that creeps a bit at the edges then that actually reduces its credibility, which is an appalling thing actually if that's what we're doing.

Civic framings, with their language of balance and bias, do not here provide critical leverage, because the perceived anti-nuclear bias of the item is such that it didn't try to be anything else' and is therefore not accountable in the same way as the previous two programmes. However, the discussion ends with a criticism of the extent to which *From Our Own Correspondent* is guilty of 'feeding on people's emotional fears'. Such a judgement is in a certain amount of tension with the fact that no one seemed to have found this aspect of it particularly effective and group members were more frightened by the approach of *Uncertain Legacy*. Once again, it is a 'displaced' reading, one that might be made by other viewers, which appears to underlie this judgement, although it is of course perfectly possible to criticise intention whilst noting ineffectiveness of execution.

Summary

This group, like others we worked with, operates within a fundamentally civic perception of how the issue should be dealt with in public debate and (therefore) of how it should be presented on television. An exception is made for *From Our Own Correspondent*, which is licensed in its partisan account both by virtue of its status as imaginative work (as 'drama') and its self-admittance of polemical intent (though in normal viewing circumstances, this would at least as much be a function of its distribution context – a subscription video service – as of textual markers). The civic framing is in potential conflict with a partisan, political framing, which may understandably hold to certain disputed points as 'facts of the matter' and cannot therefore see everything as being really 'open to debate', however desirable this might be as a procedural convention. Clearly, members of the group differ in their weighting of civic against partisan perspectives and the three items screened play into this difference in such a way as to cause further differentiation both in respect of criteria of propriety and criteria of effectiveness. One of the characteristics of the discussion, which can at least partly be seen in the above quotations, is the extent to which Speaker A's evaluations tend to differ from those of other group members. This can be attributed, among other things, to the degree to which A feels the case for nuclear power is worthy of being seriously entertained. Another feature of the group's discussion, not surprising in active members of a political party, is the close attention given to the 'tactics' by which a public issue is debated and a consequent reluctance to assume the deference towards authority which certain kinds of pronouncements in the programmes appear to presume.

Rotary Group

(This group consisted of five men)

1. Uncertain Legacy

This group moves directly into an assessment of the programme as technically very good, and as partisan against nuclear energy. Technical merit is separated from merit in the substance of argument. Initially it is the statistical basis of the presenter's argument which is challenged:

A. *I think about the statistics they used, they said themselves part way through they're always suspect, that you can manipulate statistics to make almost any case you choose, therefore that didn't make a case for me, it made me suspicious of the case and I think I would have liked to have heard someone else produce counter statistics.*

The benefit of the doubt will not readily be given by this group to the 'victims' – they want more, or more reliable, evidence (for they do not register an ultimate inconclusiveness sufficient to problematise the very possibility of resolution). Later, it is the industry's statistical arguments which are disparaged as 'even barmier' than the programme's own. Many members of the group draw on their own expert knowledge in assessing the programmes:

B. *My knowledge of the American legal system would lead me to believe that the evidence produced around that Three-mile Island incident was actually counter productive and makes me less likely to believe the general thesis....And certainly that case of the Downs' Syndrome child, the majority of Downs' children are actually born to young women.*

Another line of criticism involves foregrounding what the programme did not deal with, implying that to have done so would have undermined its negative thrust.

B. *You can find clusters elsewhere not apparently associated. It may not lessen the fact that it is a little bit worrying that anyone near there should have been affected if they have been.*

The logic of comparative risk is invoked at one point (by the speaker who is the most sympathetic to the industry):

C. *What a marvellous case you could make for the abolition of motor transport, think of how many people's lives we could save if only we abolished that.*

They also react unfavourably to imagery perceived as manipulatory:

B. *A bit trite, sort of murmured threat and silk-like beauty with little cottages...the symbolism was a bit too obvious...dominated by the visual material apropos the music apropos what was being said, the scenes and the mood setting was I think I thought I was being dragged through the nose (sic) a little.*

Yet they do not, in challenging the programme, find the partisan standpoint it adopts to be an illegitimate one, nor do they entirely reject the propositions that underlie its provocations to anxiety:

A. It's going through a couple of aspects, our lack of understanding of the effects of low levels of radiation, and perhaps it's worse than we think. And I think the other one which is still skating round a little bit is, what do you do with it all when you've finished with it, what do you do with a power station? What do you do with a blooming great power station, tens of thousands of tons of steel and concrete? So I'd like somebody to tell me in a little bit more detail what's It's those practical aspects which concern me more, I think, whether you can make a better case

2. Energy – The Nuclear Option

This is immediately perceived as overtly pro-nuclear power although how soon they realise it is an industry film is unclear. Their own, qualified, pro-nuclear views do not lead to a sympathetic hearing for the programme as a whole. They are highly critical of both Walden and Marshall:

A. Brian Walden came over as either a Cleaneasy man who calls at the door or somebody lecturing at nursery school.

B. Well for someone who has totally changed his political viewpoint from Labour to far right Thatcherism, I mean, would you actually buy a Cleaneasy off him never mind the British Nuclear industry?

D. I thought that was marvellous that was, we've got the best nuclear power programme in the world and around every station the sun shines all the time. (parody of Marshall)

B. And I don't believe these statistics and in any case there's probably just as many around the Coal Board. (continued parody)

Walden also lacks conviction for them as a 'paid' voice in this production. As for other groups, the tone is found patronising, and the 'boomerang' effect again comes into play for one respondent who feels less confident about the industry having seen this programme. Speaker C believes in the industry's technical safety standards, not on the basis of this programme but from direct personal experience. Yet this belief is not on its own enough to constitute for him a defence against such challenges as the above, with which he seems to concur although he does not initiate them. His allegiance to the industry shows up, rather, in his repetitions of arguments initiated by the pro-industry spokesmen in the programme, like Marshall's argument that, where risk is concerned, there can be no absolute guarantees that an accident is not possible. This may reflect a 'consensus effect' within the group: in such critical company, only with great difficulty could he take a strongly contrary position. Their efforts as a group to give credit where

due, so to speak, are in evidence when another speaker contrasts the programme with *Uncertain Legacy*, favouring it for its greater factual content:

A. The second programme did explain about the technical aspects of nuclear power stations, it did explain about different types and it did relate the problem of Chernobyl to the ones in this country...whereas the first programme was all emotive, it never got involved in simple technical explanation.

3. From Our Own Correspondent

Recognition of emotional appeal, confusion at the shifts of time and place and of fact and fiction, and a negative response to poor technical quality, all feature in the group's response to this item. Confusion is registered in initial comments, then amplified:

D. We know that in great parts of that they were playacting...so how can you tell which is the facts from which is the playacting?

A. As a communication exercise that film left me completely unmoved because I didn't know whether they were condemning the CEBG, whether it was condemning the government...I didn't know what they were trying to get at...I think this was the overdramatic way they presented it, I think it was having it presented as being interviewed by a Russian, I thought 'well this is play-acting, are any of the facts that are reported are they based on the truth or are they...?'

The fictional treatment is here registered as destroying any possibility of evaluation in substantive terms. Another speaker then posits different grounds of evaluation:

C. I don't think they're trying to present anything factual, it's an emotional appeal, to try and put yourself in the situation. They did also mention that a fairly major accident had happened at Hartlepool.

They reject the item, though not as an illegitimate exercise in persuasion. Speaker B defends the 'directness' of the emotional appeal for the purpose of breaking through established ideas. But that is to defend intention, not execution or effect:

B. Having people with very fixed ideas, I think the way to overcome and break through that might be to sort of try an emotional approach which is very direct like this, it's going to irritate some people, amuse others, it might make some people change, I don't know.

The rejection derives rather from the item's incompatibility with their evidential concerns, and from their perception of its technical (and its aesthetic) quality as weak. For all the group the technical quality is a problem and their reluctance to accept the fiction is couched in generational terms – younger people would appreciate it more. This is seen as a factor for concern by some group members

who believe that it is younger people who are the most impressionable, implying that to be impressed by this type of film is not a good thing.

Summary

Concern with evidence and argument dominates the first two accounts, so when the group come to *From Our Own Correspondent* they have initial difficulties in finding an appropriate standpoint from which to evaluate it. Their frequent recourse to knowledge which they possess as professionals in relevant areas such as medicine is very striking, and goes along with the identification of 'missing' information which is neither explicit in the programmes nor available to them independently of it, but which is nevertheless considered necessary if an informed judgment is to be made. Whilst each programme is perceived as legitimate on its own terms, notwithstanding its bias, civic concerns are evident in the efforts made by this group to give credit for quality of presentation and argument even if at odds with their own sympathies. Such concerns tend to shift some of the responsibility for 'fairness' from the programmes to themselves as viewers. They require themselves to be open to both sides of the argument.

Unemployed group

(This group consisted of three men and three women)

1. Uncertain Legacy

Although this group begins by characterising the programme as biased, they are also swift to identify specific, unsatisfactory elements of the case made out by the nuclear industry's representatives within the programme. They suggest that there are too few interviewees on the pro-nuclear side: yet the ones who did contribute produced only 'stupid' analogies of anonymous origin.

C. I think it was a little unfair to be honest with you because pro-nuclear people were just like business-men or whatever. By and large. There was an inspector but the anti-nuclear people were by and large scientific, so the arguments were different so it was a little unfair on the chairman of BNFL...I would have preferred to have seen scientists from BNFL being interviewed as well.

D. And workers too. They didn't ask any workers about how they felt about actually being on site. Their opinion wasn't taken into account at all.

B. They (industry representatives) all referred to unknown people to support their argument because they were making stupid analogies you know, like it's saying, smoking one ciggy in your lifetime, and then they were just saying well we get the best advice possible, the best scientists, but they still remained anonymous

There is a tension within the group between C and the others, with C being more critical:

C. The thing that didn't convince me, though, was he didn't compare it with things in the coal industry, deaths in the oil industry or whatever....

B. I think the argument he used was the best one you could use, that you don't invent something that you've got no way of controlling, no contingency plan and absolutely no idea of how you're going to deal with the problem.

C here is evidently assessing the programme in terms of its 'fairness' as a forum for discussion whilst B assesses it primarily in terms of it being an argument about the truth, the adequacy of which can be judged against the speaker's pre-established sense of just where this lies.

Towards the end of the discussion, C and B appear almost to 'change places' in respect of the value they put upon impartiality:

C. I don't know where that bloke's (the presenter's) coming from. He seemed to be anti but he didn't actually say at the beginning. I think it would have been better if he'd stated that he was going to make a critical analysis of it. Maybe it would have been better if someone from Greenpeace had been on - I mean you would know what they were actually about and...you're aware of what sort of cases they're arguing.

B. I don't agree with that because what you're looking for in a programme is a kind, as far as possible, I think is an impartiality from the person..

C. I don't think you can be impartial

B. No you can't but as largely as possible, even if he's got an anti-nuclear energy view really, what he wants is all his arguments tested in front of the the viewers so that you're going to share his views but not from a totally biased start, from a more impartial start.

What in fact seems to happen is that B and C's original positions get developed out and modified in the course of reacting to the opposing view. C's stress on a civic integrity is still maintained in his argument that the programme would have done better to declare its critical view from the outset or else have it represented by a Greenpeace spokesperson but it is considerably threatened by his later 'countering' remark that impartiality is impossible. B's interest in seeing impartiality striven for is partly strategic (people expect it, so you have to look as if you're providing it) and partly a belief in the rightness of 'argument-testing' rather than unrestrained advocacy.

Finally, the group's own anti-nuclear position is reflected in comments which address the possibilities for the programme to be more effectively negative in its address, as in the following remark concerning visual effectiveness:

A. I think they could have done.. with a lot more on the environment. They did a bit about the lake and they had this idyllic lake with all this mist coming off the top which was nuclear reactive steam and, I mean, they could have done a good thing on that, pulled it out a bit longer.

2. Energy – The Nuclear Option

The initial response to this programme is one which registers its character as a promotional item – ‘it was like a lengthened advert for BNFL’ – and generally rejects its terms of reference:

D. It was clever sticking somebody who is supposed to be like an investigative journalist like Brian Walden... on these programmes that question politicians, and then allow him to go and ask questions that have obviously been prepared by the CEEGB. It's a con.

Speaker C, as before, employs a civic framing, registering that this second programme includes material omitted, perhaps intentionally, from the first – instancing the programme's view that nuclear power may in the future be a necessity. Other speakers however are not prepared to accept these pro-nuclear arguments on the programme's word alone. It is too suspect as a source of authoritative knowledge.

Such dissatisfaction with the discursive terms within which *Energy – The Nuclear Option* handles the necessity/benefit/risk relationship is widespread among group members, some of whom, in seeing the programme's address to the viewer as unacceptable, relate its intentions and origins directly to 'government':

B. I'm saying, no, it wouldn't really have impressed anybody. It certainly wasn't their best... government people are very good at putting arguments over, that was a very poor show. What he did was tell you... make very clear, categorical statements and it was as if it was.. 'I know and I'm telling you' and people don't like being undermined like that, I don't think, no matter what political fence they sit on.

They speculate that the programme is designed with a view to 'getting us all lined up for privatisation'.

The group objects to the 'patronising' and 'condescending' tone of the presenter, and also register cynicism about his role as the 'impartial' investigator:

D. Then for him to start asking him all these tough questions when he was actually asking the guy who was paying his wages...

B. I think he (Marshall) wrote the questions.

A. The way he answered the questions quickly without thinking about them just proved he had been given them in advance or maybe even wrote them you know.

The group is also like other groups in finding the reassurances which Lord Marshall offers in this interview either unconvincing or productive of greater

levels of anxiety, as in this comment – which also reflects more generally on the 'boomarang' effect of the emphasis on safety in this latter phase of the programme:

B. As long as you didn't ask any questions, it didn't make you think of another question... I mean all he's saying is 'an eight foot solid concrete block encased in another four foot solid concrete block' – so big deal we know we can get blown off the face of the earth... The guy at the end actually sort of showed the contradiction because the bit about Chernobyl, he said it blew a ten by ten square yard concrete block and so you knew... it just made him look like a block of concrete.

Like most of our groups, this group registers a considerable gap between communicative intentions and communicative effectiveness. Yet speaker C remarks on the way in which the sequence of screenings serves to 'prime' the group to be more critical, thereby noting as significant in the second programme certain omissions to do with health risk and waste disposal which 'people in the street' might not notice or ('unprimed') be so sharply concerned about.

3. From Our Own Correspondent

Three key themes, not unique to this group, feature in their response to this item: a level of confusion about the status of what is depicted; a registering of the distinctively low-budget, and in some ways unsatisfactory, character of the 'production values', and the nature of the main appeal as being to do with emotions and human empathy:

D. A small-scale Threads [Mid-80s BBC drama-documentary on nuclear war], a smaller budget.

B. A victim's view of it.

C. I thought it was tacky myself, you didn't know what was real.

A. Right at the beginning, I thought it was showing something that had really happened. It quite frightened me in a way. It was good for a low budget film.

C. I thought it was difficult to trust the information that was in it. I don't know what to believe and what not to believe. The programme-makers were coming from a definite side. It wasn't really based on hard fact, whatever that is...

With the exception of C (see below), the group finds that both the critical ideas behind the programme and their realization in a dramatic human narrative are quite acceptable. This dominantly positive reading nevertheless finds an obstacle to comprehension in the programme's design as an item which appears initially to be about Chernobyl:

A. It's like reinforcing the view that even the Russians said it would never happen in their industry and it happened... It confused me as well, at the beginning, with

Chernobyl and this Russian presenter. And I suddenly heard 'Hartlepool' and I thought 'hang on, that's not in Russia' you know, that confused me for about a couple of seconds.

Elements of confusion remain, after the screening. When one speaker says: 'If it had been people from Chernobyl, then that would've probably been the most effective' he seems to be missing the point of the programme, to alarm a British audience with an imagined British disaster. Perhaps surprisingly, it is C who defends the approach taken whilst criticising the execution. For others, the confusion remains as something which the programme should *not* have produced, even for tactical reasons.

The programme's status as a narrative fiction seems to make the identification of bias less obvious a 'move' for viewers to make, a point we have noted elsewhere. The reasons for this, and for the countering it receives, are instructive:

D. It wasn't biased though, because it took ordinary people who aren't involved in the planning decisions that go on or the management of the plant. All they're doing is living their lives and they've been affected. So she wasn't coming with any bias you know, her family had been affected by it, she'd lost her home...

C. I think it was biased because they put forward a scenario that the nuclear industry doesn't even recognise as existing.

B. It probably had a tinge of bias but you didn't notice it because it was ordinary people talking who aren't in Greenpeace, who aren't involved in fighting against nuclear energy, who aren't involved in sitting on a board deciding what goes on. Just like -

D and B appear to ground the innocence of the programme in the perceived innocence of its central character, a naturalizing move which then places the motivated nature of narrative structure, characterisation and enactment - the positions behind the fiction - beyond inquiry. C radically departs from this precisely by seeing the scenario itself as a projected 'given' (the constructed hypothesis of a 'they') which the industry itself would deny. Whether one agrees with it or not, its commitment to a contested position makes it impossible to see as 'balanced', though for C the real issue may be the way in which its depictions disguise its commitment - here by dramatic naturalism rather than by assumed journalistic neutrality. (It is worth noting that to most likely viewers of this tape in the domestic or group settings intended by its producers, the probability of its having strong political preferences structured into its items would be rated as high and perfectly acceptable).

Summary

This group in general uses a strong political framing to make sense of and assess the items which are watched. Within this frame, considerable suspicion of government-related institutions and spokespersons is manifested, making respondents sceptical of accounts from within the industry, however eminent the source. There is a stronger declared value attached to the testimony of 'ordinary people' than is found in many other groups and a related concern with assessing the benefits and risks question at this level too. The members of the group have anxieties both about the broadly environmental risks attaching to nuclear energy production and about the possibilities of a Chernobyl-style disaster occurring in Britain. The concern for 'ordinariness' and the high level of doubt about safety make the group in many respects ideal viewers for the *Northern Newsreel* account but as we have seen this does not prevent an experiencing of confusion in watching the programme. As in other groups with developed political affiliations, the interplay between civic and political framings of interpretative activity, particularly with regard to bias and balance, often sets up tensions not only among group members but also within individual member's accounts. The rules for 'fair' television are seen as conventions to be respected (not exploited for persuasive purpose as is seen to be the case in ENO) but the committed pursuit of the truth is also regarded by some members as a journalistic imperative and the differing strengths of their own sense as to where the 'truth' lies is often the source of variant readings and assessments. Speaker C, as we have noted, is far more committed than the others to viewing the programmes within terms of a model of 'balanced' exposition. Given the concern with bias which develops in relation to the first two programmes, we have noted how it is of interest that the text with which this group aligns most closely, *From Our Own Correspondent*, escapes from a charge of bias not by a counter-argument justifying committed-ness but by a shift to the level of the fictional characterisation, and of the political innocence therein depicted.

Heysham Nuclear Power Station Group

(This group consisted of five men)

1. *Uncertain Legacy*

This group strongly supported the nuclear industry. So it is not surprising that they are highly critical of *Uncertain Legacy*, perceiving it as hostile and therefore reacting, in civic terms, to its 'bias'. Where they can, they expose the illegitimacy of this, as entailing misrepresentation:

A. Well if I was you know Joe Bloggs, a member of the public and I didn't know anything about the nuclear industry then I would be so against nuclear power now that it's just

C. I think that's it, its the way you pitch it, isn't it? If he's talking on television [Lord Marshall] and that television programme's going out to the public, I think he's got to get down to something like their level, otherwise he's going to make no sense. And I think that's the way you tackle the question

D. The point he made was that there's that much radioactivity in your own garden, the amount that the nuclear industry sends out is negligible

Interviewer. You think that was a good point, did he put that across?

C. I think people understand things like that, yes.

A. I think if it had been backed up by the commentator saying things in favour, not in favour cause obviously he was so much against, but if he in fact spoke alongside Marshall on this type of thing and said 'yes this is perfectly true, these are, this is actually what is happening now' instead of having one man in isolation trying to put a case over in the few seconds that he's given. If it'd been backed up by the commentator being unbiased and saying 'this is indeed true'. You know. It was not that. It was all, as I say, fifty odd minutes against, and a few minutes for.

The 'you' in C's first contribution suggests a virtual identification by this speaker with Marshall's opportunities and obstacles as a participant in the programme. This contrasts with other passages where the impersonal 'you' seems to refer not to an industry advocate, but to a hypothetical, and open-minded, viewer:

B. But it was all, it was too one-sided, it was all one-sided. I mean if it, for a good interesting debate, argument you've got to have both sides and be able to get both sides into perspective and see both sides, you know, and make your own conclusions. That tried to make conclusions for you.

2. Energy - The Nuclear Option

The group is much more favourably disposed towards this programme, although initially seeing it as having a 'bias' that runs the opposite way to that of the first programme. Importantly, they perceive it as less manipulative because more factual:

A. So from that point... I mean, you know, it's not trying to gloss over the fact that radiation and contamination is dangerous. It wasn't biased that way, it was biased in the fact that it was saying that the way we build reactors and design them, and its as safe as anything could possibly be, you know, of that kind of thing. The other film dealt with, you know, hidden things that lurk in the night, you know, the mists.

They support the pro-industry conclusions of the programme, and they want to believe that it has achieved those conclusions by journalistically fair means. They do not perceive an illegitimate use of *Weekend World* as a model though they recognise Walden and read the interview sequence in terms of the normative principles of broadcast current affairs interviews:

not true. I'd be moving to Sweden, or wherever. It's as silly as that. I'll give you a for instance. It started off earlier on about Traws, that's the station with the lake, and its an early morning scene with the mist rising off the water, you know, and it's saying, and this is, they're discharging thousands of gallons of radioactive effluent into this lake which then goes you the immediate impression, and the high temperature, you know, that this was radiation and contamination sort of floating off the surface of the lake, an eerie, you know, sort of scary thing. It failed to say that the temperature was raised simply by the fact that you extract water from it, pass it through a turbine which is red hot turning steam back into water and it goes back into the lake, and that raises the temperature, it doesn't get anywhere near nuclear power, the nuclear side at all. But it failed to tell you that.

For another speaker:

B. There was no counter-arguments, it was all on the black side of things.

B, unlike A, seems to have some difficulty in simply rejecting the reality of the 'black side' as presented in the programme. A's use of 'insider' knowledge in his critique here is very specific. Elsewhere, the group settle for a weaker rejection strategy, which less well-informed groups used too - they talk about domains of evidence not explored by the programme, which might (though they can't be sure) weaken its critical thesis:

C. I think perhaps there is some concern about the leukaemia, but not necessarily, I think it wants examining....

B. That was something that they never compared against other areas with high instances of leukaemia that are away from nuclear power stations. They were all just on a concentrated area round the power stations.

C. I would have thought that if there was an actual link they should be surveying the actual people that work in the power stations, because surely we must be getting a fractionally higher dose than what the people are outside.....

B. that's right

C. ...so there would be a higher case for leukaemias but they never mentioned that, you know. We'd be dropping like flies according to statistics that they were putting over.

There is a tendency in this passage and elsewhere to take comfort in the inconclusiveness of the cancer/radiation arguments. If the critics haven't proved their case, if there is evidence that weakens the force of the known correlations, then the industry need not worry. They begin with the worry (see above) and then 'talk it down' in this way. They cannot substitute certainty for *Uncertain Legacy's* uncertainty, so they resist the terms of its final question.

Their concern for 'balance' at times shifts to an interpretative position which asks 'how do we come out of it, how could we have come out of it better'?

B. He tried to ask the questions that ordinary people, Joe Public would ask.

Groups critical of Energy – The Nuclear Option generally identify a pretence at this point: Walden asks questions scripted for him, the point of which is to give Marshall the opportunity to give reassuring answers. Such groups don't usually find these answers very satisfactory! Not only does this group overlook the possibility of pretence, but it also approves of Marshall and his answers here.

C. Yes but, the thing was, they took his replies as, they were positive replies weren't they? rather than negative, I mean, the first one. They gave him the question about the leukaemia which I thought was a good one, and he mentioned the fact that there were pockets of leukaemia in areas that had no nuclear installations round them, and, whereas in the first one, obviously the chap was trying to dig out that wherever you build one there's problems.

3. From Our Own Correspondent

The group's initial disgust at the bias of this item is quickly worked into a critique of its approach as an offence against rationality:

A. Well it was so biased, I mean, you know, absolutely unbelievable, totally biased one way that you know, I mean, even the people who were anti nuclear must think, look at that and think 'well that is a bit over the top' ...

B. It was scaremongering, that's ...

C. If the idea was to hit headlines or produce television that would provoke argument, then that's the type of thing that does it.

Later in the discussion the political motivation behind the production is explored:

A. It's highly political isn't it. It's really just a political group, rather than the general public, is that sort of thing.

Like the Conservative group they represent it as so extreme in character as to have violated norms of legitimacy at least for the purposes of broadcast transmission.

C. But its frightening that that could go out to release. That's what frightens me; it's been made and it's for general release to the public.

C's fears do not prevent him from concurring in the group appreciation of the programme's entertainment value, and expressing good-humoured appreciation of its merits on its own anti-nuclear terms, merits of argument (the reduction of the evacuation zones) and merits of presentation.

C. You couldn't go back for your possessions, everything had to be left behind, it was just up and away. And then you was housed in camps, which I thought that was good as well (laugh) (?) these big wooden huts, and 'this is like, your new home for ...'

As with other groups, some confusion is admitted. One speaker may be registering an interpretation of the 'disaster at Hartlepool' scenario as a falsehood rather than an intended fiction.

A. No, they were just piling on the agony weren't they really? They were saying, you know, in spite of all this that's happened, they're still reducing the limits etcetera, you know, of evacuation, which makes it to appear far worse. That's presuming that the thing happened at Hartlepool anyway in the first place.

Summary

This group's concern with the validity of fact and argument derives mainly from their very clear sense of themselves as insiders with access thereby to truths about the industry not possessed by the general public or by certain sorts of experts, namely journalistic 'experts' like the presenter of *Uncertain Legacy*. We have indicated the limitations of this privileged knowledge standpoint as these are manifest in the group's ongoing talk. Speaker B seems to represent the group at its most nervous in respect of the risk question; Speaker A contributes a distinctive focus upon (illegitimate) rhetorical mobilization of nonpropositional meanings.

These evidential interests are worked in relation to civic concerns, so that weak, false and tendentious arguments and facts correlate with 'bias': at a general level this is even-handed (both *Uncertain Legacy* and *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* are biased) but the group's identification with the industry reveals its strength in relation to the latter: they not only read with the grain of the programme's rhetoric (Walden asks challenging questions at the end of the film) but also approve the arguments given in reply (you do find leukaemia clusters wherever you look) – unlike every other group interviewed.

Their hostile response to the third item as a politicization of the issue takes them beyond the givens of TV practice into a fundamental querying of its legitimacy as public communication.

Friends of the Earth

(This group consisted of two men and three women)

1. *Uncertain Legacy*

In the initial stages of the discussion there is a strong emphasis upon the strengths and weaknesses of argument and the relation of these to the known and knowable facts. This is articulated with a concern for civic propriety, as in the following:

A. I thought it started off quite weakly, in that a lot of facts came out, various comments and statements made, but there was no sort of, you weren't, there was no real evidence, he didn't really go into the figures that were coming out.

It may have been, at times, I think, people might have thought it was rather reactionary and, you know, done from an anti-nuclear standpoint. ...To me, looking at it, it didn't seem a very balanced programme.

The 'real evidence' which for this respondent is missing is presumably evidence more conclusively anti-nuclear than what is actually presented - he does not want to learn that the risks are 'uncertain', he wants to learn that they are *real*. For him, then, the programme may be unbalanced in the sense that it is too ready to mount a critique of the industry on weak facts. However, there is also possibly a tension here - between the desire for truth and the approval of 'balanced inquiry' - of a kind which we noted in a number of groups.

In this phase, a strong if isolated assertion of positive personal response is made by one of the group, who is consistent throughout the session in insisting upon the validity of the 'gut feeling' as the basis for deciding issues and evaluating programmes.

D. It appealed to me a lot actually because I think they were just appealing to very basic fears, not particularly good facts but just people's basic fear instinct. I'm not very well up on the facts and so on of nuclear, but I know basically I'm scared of it, you know, and that's how it came across to me. I thought it was great.

However, despite their commitment to environmentalism, the group spend some time exposing the rhetorical effects of the programme as instances of *anti-nuclear bias*, as when one of them compares the presenter's framing of Goffman (the scientist critical of the nuclear industry) with his framing of Lord Marshall:

B. When he was asking people in the nuclear industry, people like Marshall, he was, like, biting wit (?) whereas when he was interviewing Goffman, he just took what he said as gospel, he didn't attempt any sort of critical questioning of him, which, well, he (?) with the other people he just sort of mocked what they were saying.

One speaker in particular recurrently evaluates the programme in displaced terms - its merits for her depend upon (her judgment of) its possible impact on others - since she does not need persuading that the industry is a problem. Her comments in the quotation which follows indicate that she is thinking initially of the open-minded uninformed viewer and then, after the interviewer's intervention, of the pro-nuclear viewer:

C. Well I think it would've increased people's distrust of the industry, it showed there were so many unanswered questions. But again, I did feel that the interviewer was obviously anti- the nuclear industry, so that ...

Interviewer. In the way that...?

C. The way he posed questions and that sort of thing.

Interviewer. Did you think that was something that in a sense flawed the programme or was a problem for you?

C. Not for me, but I feel that if I was pro the industry, I would think. 'Oh, this', you know, 'set up, they're asking the right questions, so that it shows the worst side of the industry rather than giving a fair crack of the whip to both sides'.

The group's consideration of the programme reflects a strong concern for credibility of argument, albeit displaced in some cases on to the credibility of particular 'expert' contributors. As the talk progresses, though, it is more and more the pro-nuclear position which comes under attack.

Speaker D, who responds in such strongly personal terms at the outset of the discussion, later combines a personal response with a kind of 'global fundamentalism' (i.e., protection of 'the planet' without reference to any specific human societies that are to benefit or to lose from its protection). We illustrate this here, not because it is an integral part of Friends of the Earth's discourse but rather because it is (perhaps surprisingly) infrequently in evidence in this discussion and entirely missing from the accounts of any other groups:

D. Well like I said, he was interviewing the way I would have liked to have done, because I don't know an awful lot, I just go by my instinct, and I know that it's too much for this small planet, that's how I feel, just, you know, so it made me feel a bit better, the (?) programme, it helped me stay as I am with my views. It didn't influence me towards nuclear in any way whatsoever. It's not natural, you know, so

2. Energy - The Nuclear Option

C. He was very much pro-nuclear, wasn't he, as if he was presenting the government's case, the industry's case. Extraordinarily dogmatic view, patronising view.

A civic frame once again generates the first response and is pursued in that the group recognises and criticises the programme's pro-nuclear bias. Environmental concerns are more to the fore however. In particular, planetary interests are still on the agenda for D, but this time giving her a more propositional (and political) 'handle' for her criticism:

D. Also, he said about... there'd been no accident in Britain, as if we're not one world. Doesn't matter if it's over in Russia or somewhere

A critical account of the programme's discussion of alternative energy sources is also mounted:

A. It was just taken as read that energy demand in the country was going to rise, that was good for the country, it was almost the case that, 'the more electricity we consume

the more profitable we are as a nation' and it totally glossed over that. It glossed over anything about how much energy savings could benefit. ... The only things it, the only opposite things it - well, it was coal, which it didn't want for political reasons - the miner's strike was obviously to the fore. Or that it was going to run out. We had a few windmills, and then a few ... possibility of a barrage, and tidal power, but there was no mention of solar power, or geothermal energy, or producing methane from waste, so it glossed over quite a lot of other alternatives.

A also remarks that neither of the two programmes deals with the effects of radiation on things other than human beings, extending even further the universalism of green consciousness:

A. It didn't say anything about the environmental effects of radiation on things other than humans. Having said that I'm not sure the other programme did either. It was only concerned with the environmental effects on people wasn't it? It didn't sort of say what the effect would be on other forms of life.

Other members of the group are ready to give credit where they feel it due, in keeping with their general disposition towards 'evenhandedness':

C. They really homed in on the safety thing didn't they ... It's obviously a thing they feel very confident about.

Interviewer. Do you think that was good then?

C. Yes, yes

A. I think we can understand it a bit better how it works.

Interviewer. Did you think as a consequence of that it was safer?

B. The safety bits, the interlocks and all that, that came over very well.

This can be read in two ways, giving rather different identities to C's 'they'. Perhaps both meanings are operative. On the one hand, it reads as a somewhat illogical conflation of praise for the programme's presentation of plant safety and praise for the industry's arrangements to ensure plant safety - illogical because if the real reason for their satisfaction is a new conviction that plants are safe they should be praising the industry for that, not the programme. But on the other hand, these two judgments reflect a perfectly rational understanding that if they found themselves convinced by that part of the programme, then the programme deserves credit for convincing them. Deconstruction of the programme's rhetorical structure and devices is pursued with some enthusiasm, with particular reference to the imitation of *Weekend World* that it attempts:

A. The way he started it, he started it just like he starts Weekend World with 'Good Evening' or whatever it was, like he was just doing that, like it was just that sort of presentation.

Their critique of this aspect is sharpened in considering the role of Brian Walden as presenter, which they return to several times in the discussion. Eventually they appear to concur in thinking that the Walden device does not work (after one speaker has praised his 'professionalism', and another objected to his patronising and dogmatic tone)

B. He's somebody that the public sees as impartial so to use him in a partial setting I don't think really works.

3. From Our Own Correspondent

The group broadly approves of this item and does not spontaneously query the legitimacy of its approach, even though it notes the special power of an imaginative appeal. On some topics, shock tactics are seen to be a proper way of starting a debate:

D. It's definitely visual. It brings it back, into your backyard.

Later, the same speaker reflects on the usefulness of the item:

D. I think it was useful, yes, to people who don't know an awful lot, who don't want to know an awful lot about statistics and so on, to get to just normal people, everyday people [The speaker here compares the item to the mid 80s BBC drama-documentary on nuclear war, Threads, noting how this 'shocked everyone']. And that's similar - very mild version. But that's the sort of thing that does get to people.

Despite accepting the power and legitimacy of 'What if...', there is emphasis too on the 'point' of the item - reappropriating it for rational purposes. Its point is perceived to be that a Chernobyl scale accident is possible in the U.K. Some disagreement is expressed on the merits of mentioning the comparatively small-scale but actual Hartlepool accident - the speaker who believes that it was right to mention that accident does so on grounds which indicate that he is operating standards of propriety in which it is appropriate to treat honestly and openly the arguments of the 'other side'. The counter-argument that he is sensitive to is the one that says a Chernobyl-type accident is not possible in Britain:

B. I think the point did need to be made, [about the real accident at Hartlepool] otherwise you could just leave it at 'well, Chernobyl happened', because the point has been stressed over and over by the government that 'it can't happen here'. That particular accident can't but other accidents can, or maybe can.

Summary

The group responded to the lack of balance in both of the first two programmes but, as noted above, in their account of *From Our Own Correspondent* the question of bias is scarcely raised. This pattern seems to tie in with group dynamics, in the following way. Although all speakers contribute to the civic framing with the

exception of D, it seems to be *driven* (introduced, and led) by the male speakers. It is in the contributions of the male speakers that 'civic' criticism gets its most detailed articulation with talk about the strengths and weaknesses of argument. When it comes to the third programme there is agreement (at least superficially) that it has only one main point: *that point* (the possibility of a nuclear power disaster in Britain) provokes, again, a concern for fairness in televisual argumentative practice. The male speakers focus on this concern, but for the group as a whole the item provokes considerations much broader than the balance/bias issue.

PHASE TWO

The following three groups are the ones which viewed a single programme, one edition of *Heart of the Matter*.

Women's Institute

(This group consisted of seven women)

It is a strong framing around the personal, rather than a concern with the conventions of public debate, which here provides the primary line of engagement and comprehension. This empathetic response can be seen right at the beginning of the discussion, as the plight of the mother whose child is afflicted with leukaemia is recognised:

A. We realise what a terribly anxious time it is for parents, and they must be really out of their minds, watching their children you know, grow up and get to a certain age and they realise, you know, that there's something wrong...

This is a theme returned to in attempts to make sense of the uncertainties surrounding the proof and probability question, as well as providing a point of comparison against other people in the programme who they feel are uncaring. In this way the industry is seen as big and powerful, trying to 'cover up' the truth about the dangers of radiation against the interests of 'an ordinary working person....on her own' who in their eyes stands very little chance if any of winning the law suit. In fact so dominant is the personal frame that ultimately their sympathetic identification and interest in the domestic situation overrides the difficulties presented by the programme's attempt to articulate the key terms of scientific and legal dispute.

The specific character of the risk depicted, childhood leukaemia, together with a belief that irrefutable proof is essential to the success of a law suit, lead to questioning of the programme's account in terms of gaps in the information it provides:

B. I just wonder how it's affecting children, how is it not affecting people, well, working directly with it. And you know it just makes you wonder how it's just the children that the programme's about, it doesn't mention anyone else there catching it, does it?

Interviewer. What sort of evidence will they give though?

B. Well they'll have to have positive proof, won't they, that it's causing that?

C. You mean the family?

B. Or the solicitor, whoever's agreed to it ... they'll have to have positive proof otherwise they can just close.

Interviewer. Didn't they say that in this type of case they can have a high probability rather than proof?

D. Well I don't see how they'd win it without positive proof.

C. I can't see it either.

Nevertheless, their final interpretation is that leukaemia is caused by radiation (they are convinced by the editor of *Radiation and Health* because he comes across to them as the most confident speaker) though they would have preferred more medical information, more facts:

B. How does it affect in other countries? Is the rate of leukaemia high there where they have the same workings going on?

A. What is the situation away from Sellafield, I mean, have they had a survey in the hospitals all over the country?

Their lack of satisfaction with the clarity of the programme's expert testimony (and, indeed, its own expositional discourse) is also evident in the discussion of the 'turns' in the direction of evidence given by just one of the contributors:

Interviewer. So what do you think the conclusion of the programme is?

E. Well it's hard to say, isn't it? One chap was saying it did (radiation did cause leukaemia), and then he was contradicting himself. That was that professor.

B. Well, the professor did seem to think it came from that, didn't he?

E. He said it didn't at first and then he sort of changed it.

C. He hadn't proved it. He said it could cause it and it couldn't cause it...

The group as a whole want to put their faith in an expert and want that expert to deliver clear answers. When these cannot be given they are uncertain how to proceed. The editor of *Radiation and Health*, however, succeeds in getting his message across and the plight of the mother gives a human force to what he says.

The personal feelings and own experiences of the group may at times appear to obstruct their path to understanding the terms preferred by the programme but they also seem to provide their primary channel of engagement with its account. For example, talk around whether or not radiation from Sellafield is the cause of leukaemia leads to talk on local pollution from a chemical plant, traffic pollution and toxic waste, which then turns *back* into a questioning of whether Sellafield can be blamed for the leukaemia.

To this extent the *details* of the programme are not registered. Indeed reference to the programme's argument are few and invariably turn on the problems of uncertainty. The major thrust of interpretation comes from the personal appeal within the programme and personal experiences external to it. The 'ifs and buts' of probabilistic argument in a situation where conclusive proof is either extremely hard or impossible to obtain are generally perceived as inadequacies. As indicated, the group's discussion tends to hover at the surface of the programme, preferring what they 'know' and thus feel most comfortable with as subjects for discussion, rather than following closely a narrative progression which seems to imply a causal link whilst also introducing information which could be used as evidence to the contrary. Just it is an empathy with the mother which forms the beginnings of their assessment, so it is the situation of her fighting alone which finally provides them with a 'conclusion' – morally, she should win her case, but they consider this doubtful due to the lack of hard proof, and to the sheer scale, influence and resources of the nuclear industry. The personal framing leads through to an implicit anti-nuclear stance, but one which only in part follows the anti-nuclear cues in the programme's exposition.

Arts Students

(This group consisted of two men and two women)

The group's initial responses made it clear that they understood the programme to be addressing a dilemma – that between the Sellafield plant as a major employer in the area and the possible health risks that this might entail. Each member saw the programme delivering a quite clear judgement on the central issue, for example:

A. I just think they make it really obvious that it does cause leukaemia.

Comment of this kind invites a consideration of whether the projecting of such a clear 'message' constitutes a problem of imbalance and bias. As we have noted in our earlier group accounts, a concern with the propriety of debate features significantly in most discussions at some point or other, and often right at the start. Speaker A believes that *Heart of the Matter* supports the idea of a link between Sellafield radiation and leukaemia but that this is, in fact, likely to be the

truth. It cannot, therefore, be seen as 'partial opinion', despite its being contested by a number of programme participants. Others feel that the programme attempts an objectivity which leaves the viewers free to make up their own minds. At the same time, they regard the account as being unequal in representation – there were fewer people interviewed who supported the side of the industry. One speaker adds a comment about the inevitability of a degree of 'bias' in a programme of this kind:

B. I think it was certainly trying to be fair, I mean the formula of the programme, it has to be fair doesn't it? That's the idea of it, to present you with the arguments and you make your choice, but obviously the people making it have to have some bias somewhere, and I think that necessarily comes through.

The group's response to the perceived 'imbalance' in the representation of the pro-industry case resembles that put forward by some respondents in our Phase One study, insofar as it is undecided whether or not the cause is *programme* bias or weaknesses in the pro-industry position. Certainly, when respondents discuss the contribution made to the programme by the spokesman for BNFL they find fault with his televisual presentation 'he came across as really pompous') and also with the substance of his arguments:

A. That man, you know, the one that was representing Sellafield, he did have his fair say, but his arguments were really weak and just bullshit really, honestly.

C. He came out with some stuff which was just total crap, he was just like trying to weakly defend it, like when he said 'this is not true' and quickly gave a back up of an organisation.

D. And like he was saying why in the middle of summer on the hottest day, the beach is empty and he said 'well this isn't Blackpool,' it was just laughable.

B. I mean 'this is a scarcely populated area' I mean Scotland is a scarcely populated area but you know they have tourists there.

D. From what I could gather he was sort of blaming leukaemia at one point on a sudden influx of people...

The scorn and level of disagreement with the BNFL account suggests, of course, a strong predisposition against nuclear energy. Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, the group sees the contrasting testimony and arguments of the editor of *Radiation and Health* as 'really persuasive' and 'interesting and succinct'. One respondent notes a strategic paralleling of the two speakers:

B. ...they set him up as the equivalent of the information person from Sellafield and I thought that worked very much in his favour.

The depiction of Mrs. D'Arcy and her daughter are important to the group's interpretation. There is a recognition of an emotional appeal but this is seen as

controlled ('they didn't dramatize that') as well as effective. The visual rhetoric of the programme is credited with impact in the same way - shots of Gemma D'Arcy in the paddling pool, the empty beach and the power station situated amongst the 'idyllic' countryside are cited.

Whereas the strength of Mrs D'Arcy's contribution ('she is...the one that sways people') is seen to follow both from the awfulness of her experience and her position as 'ordinary' ('she was, like, a real person'), Professor Doll's views receive respect on the grounds of his being an 'eminent scientist' and behaving as such:

A. ..he had a bit more sort of technical authority than the rest of them, it was like he was the intellectual, so he was the one whose point of view you had to take and because he was a scientist he was probably unbiased ... so you could accept most of what he said.

Doll's account of the probabilities involved in assessing the risk factor is one which most respondents find hard to follow. Interestingly, they note their expectation that he would confirm the link between radiation and the leukaemias, thus fitting into a pattern of assessment which they have discerned in the programme by that point. When he states that such a direct link is unlikely, the result is a degree of confusion. Discussion of this leads to reflections on the programme's conclusions and the way they hinge on probabilities.

B. You really get the impression that you cannot deny that it is something to do with Sellafield. Then again you get the feeling that you might not ever be able to prove it.

This, they feel, means that success in the courts is unlikely, and particularly so given their belief that courts are, in any event, inclined favourably towards Government interests.

Chemistry Students

(This group consisted of three men and two women)

The first impression of the programme voiced by this group was a unanimous criticism of its vagueness. As they amplify this point it becomes clear that the central element of their dissatisfaction is the inconclusiveness of the arguments, registered as an absence of 'solid facts':

A. ...I got part of the way through and I began to get bored of it, because it wasn't telling me anything, there's no facts and I didn't pay too much attention to what people said. I just took the general idea, the general idea was that there's a little girl with leukaemia and there's a big company and they're fighting about it. You know obviously the person that did the programme is biased towards the little girl. And I wasn't going to get any facts from it.

They do not, on their own account, interrogate whether the evidence reviewed supports any particular conclusion, even probabilistically. This may indicate a desire to keep themselves at a sceptical distance in the face of an unresolved dispute. Notwithstanding this distanciation from the arguments, they are prepared to give their endorsement to Professor Doll - 'you don't get to that sort of standard without knowing what you're talking about', whose position they are prepared to accept because of his eminence, rather than from any more direct evaluative engagement with what he says.

This recognition that the programme's propositional discourse does not resolve the issue one way or the other is complemented by a perception that it has an emotional structure which favours one side, as the above quotation shows. Their reaction to the existence of this emotional structure is a critical one - they believe it is illegitimate in such a programme, which should strive for objectivity. Perceiving that the bias favours the 'victim', not the industry, initially elicits from them denials of their own vulnerability to its emotional appeal, but later they admit the effectiveness of that appeal upon them:

C. It influenced you a lot because it kind of centres around family unity and it kept referring to Gemma D'Arcy and you know, she's a dead sweet kid, and you think 'oh its really sad'.

E. And they showed her when she said something about, 'if I don't get the bone marrow will I die?' ... its a bit of a tear jerker that sort of thing.

These comments contain elements which reflect their understanding of the programme's intention to achieve these effects as well as admissions that the intention has succeeded - though not to the extent of producing in them the conviction that the D'Arcy's case is a sound one which, therefore, ought to win in court. They seem to suspect what they see as a further programme intention to influence the viewers' judgement on this count.

They interpret the bias of the programme not only as a consequence of the foregrounding of this powerfully affective personal tragedy to attract the 'sympathy vote', as it were, but also as a bias which is manipulatively reinforced at the visual level. BNFL are, they believe, 'made to look bad'. The industry spokesman contrasted with Mrs. D'Arcy is seen as a 'big shot' sitting complacently behind a desk:

C.you expected to see someone with a big fat cigar in a minute - if you hadn't seen him it would have been better.

What is more they think his lack of knowledge makes him sound as though he is covering up the real risk.

This group begin with a desire above all else for facts. They try at points to differentiate themselves from other viewers, more vulnerable to the emotional appeal, and their affiliation to a scientific discipline may be responsible for their conviction that knowledge is objective and attainable, and that the authority of an eminent scientist is to be trusted. They are also, however, reluctant to engage with the scientific arguments as these are presented in the programme – no mention is made, for instance, of the hypothesis that dose limits in Sellafield are too low, and the relevance of this hypothesis. Four of the group members do accept at the end of the discussion that the nature of this court case rests on probability not proof. They themselves would like to see Mrs. D'Arcy win her case on these terms. This suggests that despite their dissatisfaction with the programme on grounds of inconclusiveness, they feel some sympathy for its appeal. One speaker, A, holds himself somewhat apart from this group consensus. His stance is a defensive one – he refuses to develop much engagement with a programme basically unworthy because of its lack of straight facts and its emotionality.

OTHER GROUPS

In this section we shall look very briefly at the interpretations offered by other participating groups and individuals. In the space available it is not possible to provide full accounts of that material on a group-by-group basis. We have concentrated therefore upon trying to illustrate the range of responses to each of the three programmes in Phase One of the study (all of the Phase Two groups have been discussed above), in an attempt to bring out important similarities between these groups and others already considered as well as interesting differences, and even idiosyncracies:

1. *Uncertain Legacy*

Several groups confirmed to us the significance of the visual imagery and picked out the sequence shot at Trawsfynnedd Lake for particular comment:

(Women's discussion and action group)

I thought some of the visual shots were really quite powerful, you, know, the ones in the green field like 'This is England and here we have this horror looming on the side of the shore' or 'here we have a nice little lake, guess what's at the bottom of it?'

The speaker here does not contextualise the shots in terms of the programme's narrative progression, but instead evokes an 'unseen threat' strand of meaning by mentioning two visual expressions of that threat and projecting each of them into words, the imagined linguistic equivalents of those images. Another speaker from one of the mixed groups spoke of this sequence as 'lovely *Jaws* photography', whilst the following comment was made by a member of the SLD group in the

context of discussing how visual images contributed towards the bias of the programme:¹⁸

(SLD group)

I think to a certain extent with the Trawsfynnedd thing, the fact that, they sort of sunk into the murky depths of the lake, it sort of made it seem a bit, well, dirty almost, and they were saying 'there is such and such a level of plutonium'

The tentativeness of this phrasing may be compounded of carefulness to get the description right, with caution in attributing intentionality to what is taken to be the general significance.

Most groups went through a moment in which they expressed the view that in some way or other, *Uncertain Legacy* favoured the anti-nuclear side of the argument, yet varied in their reactions to that perceived 'bias'. Thus, for instance:

(Mixed group 1)

I think it was an excellent film and I think it was biased against nuclear fuel but I think that's what we need.

It is hardly bias as 'unfairness' which is being advocated here, but rather the legitimacy in broadcasting of taking a critical, investigative position. Yet it is interesting to see the term 'bias' being used in this context, suggesting once more the difficulty, within the civic frame, of separating fairness and truth-seeking as criteria of evaluation. Another speaker in the same group avoids the use of the term bias but makes essentially the same point:

(Mixed group 1)

It was a good programme, it was there to bring the nuclear industry into question and it did that very well.

In contrast, the SLD group seemed less satisfied with the approach:

(SLD group)

A. It felt a bit as though we were comparing apples and pears. It would've been interesting to have had the same type of people talking to or about the same things on a say, on a technical level.

B. I think the programme was slightly against the nuclear industry and I think if they wanted a more balanced programme they would've had some sort of discussion between scientists.

¹⁸ This is a reference to the 1975 Hollywood disaster movie *Jaws*, featuring a predatory shark whose concealed threat to bathing holidaymakers set up terrifying associations around the ideas of surface and depth.

On the one hand these speakers are clearly reacting negatively to the absence of formal markers of balance – balance as a procedural requirement. But at the same time, behind that concern with propriety of presentation, lies a substantive anxiety which the other group do not share – that there are scientifically-grounded arguments on the other side of the case which were improperly omitted from the programme. This inhibits the group from discussing what is presented. So 'bias' for many of our respondents took the form of absences – here, it is the absence of scientists to represent the industry which is criticised. Lord Marshall of course is a scientist, yet, accessed in this programme in his capacity as chairman of the CEBG, he comes across to our groups primarily as a businessman. Elsewhere our groups articulated bias as manipulative imagery, as in the first of the SLD quotes above. Sometimes respondents produced quite complicated accounts of non-parallel treatments, as in the following (talking about the use of statistics in the programme):

(Women's discussion and action group)

But in fact they used them (statistics) quite cleverly, because they were talking about milliverts or whatever it was, and using statistical [data].... And that doesn't mean anything. But for the 'against' argument they were actually using the number of people that died, which is another statistic, but they're talking about it in human terms, which is far more relevant.

2. Energy – The Nuclear Option

More than one group found difficulties with this programme's attempt to present a favourable view of the nuclear industry in the framework of a current affairs documentary:

(Medical students group)

I thought it was more an advert than a discussion really. It was an advert by the electricity board saying 'nuclear power' well, they try to say that it's a discussion, but it isn't.

(Women's discussion and action group)

I kept expecting him to do the other side of it because he'd do that, for Weekend World, then you would've had more of the other side of the argument. I kept thinking, well he's going to come on to the other side now, and he never did.

Both of these quotations suggest that the Weekend World format has set up expectations of balance and open discussion, so that as the programme develops it is perceived as failing to deliver something it has itself 'promised' in virtue of adopting that format. There was, however, a speaker in one group for whom

Brian Walden's established reputation in broadcast television enhanced the credibility of a programme to which she had a favourable response:

(Mixed group 2)

I thought it was better than the first one because it showed the alternatives and the caring CEBG and they were saying 'we understand the problems with nuclear power and we're looking into other sources' and you get the feeling that they're not just throwing this dangerous product at you, they are looking at other things. It was better [than Uncertain Legacy]. And of course the fellow who was doing it, he does all the political programmes doesn't he? and you just take him as being a very honest chap who would only do the honest thing.

From the industry's point of view this would seem to represent an optimal response to the programme. Yet this kind of reading is rare – and even this speaker seems to be reflexively aware that Walden is being used to achieve the effect that has, in her case, been successful.

Mismatch between the programme's intentions and its effects takes a number of more specific forms as well as this general failure of the current affairs programme design. For example, there were several further instances of the 'boomerang' effect identified in the accounts above, whereby the emphasis upon plant safety eventually becomes so extreme as to heighten the anxiety viewers began with:

(Women's discussion and action group)

It's sort of counter-productive, so they kept talking about all these safety things, and safety things within safety things, and you thought, 'God, it must be bad because they've got that many safety things'. And then when that engineer was talking about the construction and how safe the construction of the actual building was, I suddenly started thinking about Roman Point and places that had fallen down.

A different kind of mismatch between intention and effect can be seen in the following:

(Mixed group 1)

They just kept saying, you know, 'Frank Layfield', 'Frank Layfield', and then showed a picture of a book, it just seemed very disjointed in that way I thought.

In this case, the fact that the independent Layfield Report is being used in the programme as an authority for the industry's own conclusions about nuclear energy – that it is acceptably safe, that there really is a need for nuclear power, etc. – is not registered. The respondent has noted Layfield's salience for the programme but not what that salience consists in.

3. From Our Own Correspondent

Admissions of doubt about what this programme presents occur amongst these groups as amongst the groups we looked at in more detail above. In the following example it is the status of the final on-screen written text which is questioned:

(Individual respondent A)

But at the end, whether what I was reading was fact or not, because it, was make-believe all the way through, when it came up with the statistics at the end I didn't know if that was related to the film I was watching or if that was the policy.

This is an aspect of the general interpretative problem that *From Our Own Correspondent* poses for respondents with its fictionalizations, its surprise effects, and its articulations a cross different time/space locations. Some groups reject the approach, others react favourably:

(Medical students group)

Once I realised it was fictitious it lost its credibility, its impact, you know, because, you knew, I mean I knew it was just make-believe after that.

[Same speaker] I think it was meant to make us feel like, because it was British people, right, more at home, but in a way it did exactly the opposite, cause it wasn't real, so you just had a good laugh at it, you know.

This can be contrasted with statements from groups who appreciated the impact of the human story as credibly realistic – in one case, below, from someone with a comparable personal experience and in the other case, through imaginative projection:

(Women's discussion and action group)

I found it unpleasant because it reminded me of when the riots were on, [British urban riots of 1981], cause I actually lived right in the middle of it and I had to run away and leave my home and, you know, take my two children, like she did, and just literally run, we never had no coats, nothing, my two sons never even had a pair of shoes, this is in the middle of the night. And it was very emotional in parts, you know, it was really convincing, although I knew it was just a set up I thought it was done very well.

(SLD group)

I thought it was very interesting because I thought at first it was the result of some kind of Glasnost or something, and then suddenly 'Hartlepool'. It was a very clever way of going about it. And it did seem realistic, I can imagine that sort of thing happening, I mean, that's what appears to have happened after Chernobyl. I mean it wasn't a very long film, it didn't go into a lot of detail, but it did seem to cover things which happened at Chernobyl.

The 'glasnost' theme occurred to more than one person. It has to be abandoned, of course, once the realisation dawns that this is not a news report on Chernobyl, but it provoked an interesting use of the story's comparative potential on the part of one respondent who said:

(SLD group)

Well actually, when it first started and I thought it was about, Chernobyl, I thought 'Oh wouldn't it be great if we had this sort of openness over here'. And I don't think we would, and the nuclear industry is infamous for its secrecy.

The speaker does not go on to draw the conclusion that one of the programme's intended messages concerns the secrecy of the British nuclear industry compared with the new openness of Soviet society – it is left as a 'private' inference, and since the Soviet news scenario is fictional, the warrant for the inference becomes hypothetical. Nevertheless, it is an interesting interpretative act, and one which the respondent himself found it worthwhile to mention, even after having relinquished it.

5 Variation and convergence

Introduction

In this chapter we approach the group accounts from a more comparative perspective. On the one hand, we have tried to identify aspects of interpretation and response which seem to us to be shared across all the accounts, albeit with different inflections according to the discursive context and the interpretative priorities of each group. On the other hand, we have tried to present analyses of the six Phase One accounts in such a way as to bring out as sharply as possible the differences between them, not so much in respect of particular programme characteristics but in their general orientation to the material screened. With this in mind this chapter has a section on *variation* and one on *convergence* – as well as a section, *dynamics of interpretation and response*, in which we go into more detail about the interpretative discourse itself.

The sections on convergence and on dynamics of response do not require any particular prefatory comment. The following remarks are concerned with the section on variation and explain how we have organised the material, and our reasons for doing it in that way. The *variation* section consists of three subsections. In each subsection we take two of the six Phase One groups and compare them. The pairings are: Labour and Conservative; the Rotary club and the unemployed; the Heysham workers and Friends of the Earth. The rationale for this approach is that two-way comparisons are easier to present than multiple comparisons. And of course the pairings have been chosen with some thought on our part as to the value of particular comparisons. The value of differing political allegiances, as in the Labour-Conservative contrast, is self-explanatory. In the case of the Rotary-Unemployed comparison, we were interested in exploring how a group of professional middle-class males with a strong official stake in the established social order would compare with a group whose unemployed status gave them no such official stake. In coming together as an organised group of unemployed people they can be seen as trying to create for themselves an oppositional social identity. The value of the Heysham/Friends of the Earth comparison was the potential it offered for exploring interpretative differences resulting from prior

affiliations. The Heysham workers were affiliated *de facto* by their employment to the very industry under scrutiny. The Friends of the Earth group had an affiliation, through their organisation's policies, to the anti-nuclear side of the argument. In developing these contrasts we have again made use of the notion of *frame* as an analytic concept. Framing provides us with a scaffolding for the comparisons. We have indicated the use made by each group of the five frames previously identified as the most salient ones across all of the respondent accounts – the civic frame, the political frame, the evidential frame, the environmental frame and the personal frame. A sixth frame – the formal frame – is also introduced. This allows us to identify more sharply and comparatively those moments in which groups give primary attention to the formal organisation of the screened material.

In this way we have been able to draw attention to some very significant variations. Different groups privilege different frames. A frame which is salient for one group is not so for another. The articulation of two or more frames is not the same across groups. It is at this level we begin to see the effect of a group's social identity upon their reactions to the programmes. The selection and ordering of these frames can be seen as an expression of the *agendas* which the groups bring to the interpretative task. We introduce this notion of agenda as a potentially useful analytic concept alongside that of frame. In this study, where the emphasis has been substantive rather than theoretical and the approach exploratory, we have found it preferable to keep a light conceptual apparatus, in which both frame and agenda receive only provisional theorization.

Variation

1. The Conservative Party and the Labour Party

The discussions of these two groups are marked, as one might expect, by differences in general disposition towards nuclear energy. The Conservative group incline towards sympathetic consideration of the case for its continuation and development as government policy, the Labour group are deeply sceptical. Nevertheless, within the terms of this basic distinction, there are a surprising number of variations and the Labour group includes one member who clearly views the pro-nuclear case much more positively than other members. The Conservative group also displays considerable anxiety over current safety levels and over the question of the disposal of waste, so this is by no means a simple 'pro/con' contrast. A second (and related) distinction can be seen in contrasting emphases. First of all, there is the frustration recurrently articulated by the Conservative group as they note the absence of authoritative scientific opinion in the programmes, and the presence, variously, of presenter assessments, the projection of the industry's own 'corporate' view (most unsatisfactorily exempli-

fied in Lord Marshall's contributions) and melodramatic alarmism. Such a search for the available underlying 'facts of the matter', together with an indication of how they might be *presumed* to favour the nuclear energy case, even if not conclusively, comes through in this comment about the desirability of:

(Conservative)

...some people who are involved and very knowledgeable debating with some people of anti-nuclear energy views.

Such an emphasis can be paired with the *tension* in the Labour group between a 'civic' acceptance of the need for balanced debate and a belief in the value of a weighted treatment in cases (like this) where the line-up of known facts is already, in their opinion, such as to count against an established position. A strongly naturalized version of this view of the available evidence comes through in the following remark:

(Labour)

I think the subject's so horrendous and the facts so frightening that we should see them as they are.

The Conservative viewers, too, sometimes have problems in achieving equilibrium between a desire both for 'fairness' (a central civic principle, of course) and for 'truth', but they hold to a different and less confident set of assumptions about the likely nature of the latter. Moreover, given this, they do not feel the urgency that members of the Labour group feel to influence public opinion (in the latter's case, to *change* it) by conscious persuasive strategy.

The emphases outlined above can also be related to the attitudes towards authority displayed by the groups – the Conservative group respectful (of the Layfield Report, the scientific community, Government policy) though severely critical of particular performances; the Labour group distrustful of the inter-connections between the nuclear lobby and political allegiance and more inclined to frame both 'evidence' and 'form' (in respect, say, of the probability/proof issue or of the conventions of commentary-over-film) as inherently problematic. Though the Conservative account is certainly not without its moments of cynicism ('there's not much honest information given') it stops well short of entertaining the negative scenario outlined in *From Our Own Correspondent*. This item is regarded not only as unsatisfactory in relation to the topic but as a *political* intervention of a kind which can only be responded to politically (by suggestions that it should be banned and the circumstances of its production investigated). For example:

(Conservative)

I know this is a democratic country but sometimes democracy goes too far here.

The Labour group, whilst noting certain deficiencies of execution in this piece, nevertheless generally approve of its thrust.

(Labour)

A. Oh, I enjoyed it, I thought it was good.

B. Yes, I enjoyed it.

A dislike of *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* is, however, shared by both groups, bringing out formal framings most sharply – the identification of televisual devices and their motivations. Although the inflections of interpretation vary, there is a good deal of common ground to the problems perceived here by both groups under analysis (we discuss negative responses to this programme across the whole range of groups in a later section). This involves a suspicion of the integrity of professional advocacy ('he was being paid', Conservative; 'he gave the answers he thought we ought to be having', Labour) and a critical response to Lord Marshall's attempts at reassurance (a reading made of *Uncertain Legacy* as well as of the CEGB programme). The last point comes through stronger in the Conservative account ('...and in the next breath he said 'the top blew off of Chernobyl'), perhaps partly as a result of their greater degree of disappointment.

2. *The Unemployed Group and the Rotary Club*

An 'evidential' framing is more salient for the Rotarians than for the unemployed, but both groups suspect, even if they cannot dispute, presented evidence. Even truth claims overtly authored by the programmes can become suspect, as when the unemployed say of Walden's comments on the exhaustion of other fuel supplies that 'he never went to anyone outside the industry or anyone outside himself really'. The Rotarians are less specific. Both groups suppose, of *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* and *Uncertain Legacy*, that other evidence could undermine the programme's stance. But the Rotarians warrant their suspicions by appeals to formal knowledge which they possess as professionals:

(Rotary)

My knowledge of the American legal system would lead me to believe, that the evidence produced around that Three-mile Island incident was actually counterproductive and made me less likely to believe the general thesis.

The evenhandedness of the suspicion also suggests a 'civic frame', with an impartiality requirement. Yet both groups find partiality legitimate and/or unavoidable. Speaker C (Unemployed) holds out for impartiality but eventually concedes its impossibility. This group (apart from C) reads the human story in *From Our Own Correspondent* as unbiased because experiential. For C the drama rests on the contentious point that a Chernobyl-type disaster could happen in

Britain. The Rotarians likewise recognise a 'point', made through emotionally compelling dramatization. They themselves resist the compulsion: the unemployed group less so:

(Unemployed)

Right at the beginning I thought it was showing something that had really happened. It quite frightened me in a way.

The only comparable 'personal' response from the Rotarians is a displaced one – the programme is not meant for their generation but for younger viewers.

The unemployed group more consistently than the Rotarians operates a 'political' frame. 'They' (industry-government) want to influence public opinion in favour of nuclear power and the interested basis of their case must always be kept in mind:

(Unemployed):

...they said beforehand that [Chernobyl] could never possibly happen, and it did, and they said again it could never happen and it did [Hartlepool] but right now they're saying it could never happen.

Only *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* pushes the Rotarians into a similar frame. They believe that the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate is beyond politics – its evidence would be truly compelling. This logic separates government (the NII's paymaster) and industry, which the unemployed conflate, and suggests the public interest can, without conflict, be built into institutional procedures. The unemployed give no evidence of sharing that belief.

In commenting on programmes' formal devices these groups notice the same things but evaluate them differently. Thus the unemployed seem to approve of overtly persuasive devices in *Uncertain Legacy* whilst the Rotarians object to being 'dragged through the nose' (sic) by it. *Energy* – the nuclear option attracts similar criticism from both groups whilst the (generally) hostile reaction to *From Our Own Correspondent*'s 'playacting' by the Rotarians is not shared by the unemployed group:

(Unemployed)

It was a representation of a normal human being not someone who sits in an office all day waffling a load of facts ... You had somebody who didn't know what was going on ... I think it was the fact that they suddenly brought home that this could actually happen.

In summary: the dominant frame for the Rotarians is the evidential, for the unemployed, the political. The Rotarian's evidential discourse brings in their professional knowledge. The unemployed group politicizes in conflating govern-

ment and industry as an unequivocally pro-nuclear interested party, as against the Rotarians' trust in the disinterestedness of certain institutions. Political differences at the level of 'pro' and 'anti' nuclear power map on to the groups negative/positive evaluations of persuasive devices in the programmes. The Rotarians privilege rationality over affect to a much greater extent than the unemployed, whilst 'environmental' framing is minimal for both groups.

3. Heysham workers and Friends of the Earth

Both these groups adopt a civic frame in order to identify the 'bias' of each programme. However, the idea that programmes should be balanced gives the Heysham workers hardly any critical purchase on *From Our Own Correspondent* beyond the registering of its extremeness: even an anti-nuclear viewer would find it, in their view, 'over the top'. Where the other two programmes are concerned, although both are 'biased' (in opposite directions) the bias critique is pursued more energetically in relation to *Uncertain Legacy*. Furthermore, those aspects of *Energy - The Nuclear Option* that were read as biased by all other groups (notably the Walden-Marshall interview) were not so read by this group. In this respect, Friends of the Earth are more even-handed. Although they are on the anti-nuclear side of the debate, they show concern for fair treatment of the opponents' case in *Uncertain Legacy* and *From Our Own Correspondent*, as well as for the pro-nuclear position in *Energy - The Nuclear Option*. Part of the motivation for this may be a desire to see the argument conducted so as to convince people less persuaded than themselves of the undesirability of nuclear power.

Evidential concerns are, for both groups, strongly articulated with these civic ones. So, Friends of the Earth are anxious about weaknesses of evidence and argument in *Uncertain Legacy*, and the Heysham group challenge particular perceived messages too. Yet the latter are often not notably more confident in counter-knowledge than other groups when challenging at the propositional level:

(Heysham group)

I would have thought that if there was an actual link they should be surveying the actual people that work in the industry, because surely we must be getting a fractionally higher dose than the people are outside.

Both personally-framed and environmentally-framed responses occur more directly in Friends of the Earth's account than they do in that of the Heysham group. Personal reactions of pleasure/displeasure in all groups are generally constructed, through group talk, into more impersonal critical positions. One Friend of the Earth member however, often adopts what we have called a personal framing by making intuitively-felt reaction the basis of her critical position. This does not happen in the Heysham group.

The environmentalism which we have noted as a part of Friends of the Earth's discourse is not their major line of engagement with the programme. But it is important in suggesting how they conceive of the nuclear issue politically - on a global as well as a national scale. By contrast, the Heysham workers follow the programmes in adopting a primarily national perspective.

It is only *From Our Own Correspondent* which provokes this group into adopting a directly political frame, in terms which register politicization as illegitimate partisanship:

(Heysham group)

It's highly political isn't it? It's really just a political group, rather than the general public, is that sort of thing.

There are some noteworthy differences between the two groups in their reactions to the formal properties of these programmes. The use of *Weekend World* as a model, and the contrived character of the Walden-Marshall 'interview' in *Energy - The Nuclear Option* escapes the critical attention of the Heysham group. For Friends of the Earth, these devices are found particularly problematic. The former group reads *From Our Own Correspondent* as scaremongering. Its 'What if ...' scenario barely saves the storyline from being condemned as falsehood. One speaker is amused as well as angered, recognising the intended effects of certain images. For Friends of the Earth, any success the programme may have in provoking anxiety is to be approved: anxiety about nuclear power's potential effects is an appropriate point of entry to the issues involved.

In summary - for both groups, a civic frame predominates, articulated with an evidential frame. There is more variation of framing amongst Friends of the Earth, who occasionally introduce a personal and/or environmental perspective. The civic-evidential articulation in both cases connects with a tendency not to see themselves as the intended viewers. The Heysham group objects when programmes give the intended viewer a misleading idea of what 'insiders' like themselves believe to be the case. Friends of the Earth want the intended viewer to hear arguments which are robust against cross-questioning. The groups' strongly divergent reactions to the programmes at the formal level are perhaps the most interesting differentiating feature of their accounts.

Convergence

1. In the case of *Uncertain Legacy*, the major point of convergence across the groups concerns the tension within it as between, on the one hand, its relatively restrained explicit discourse and, on the other, a subtext of threat. The former emphasises uncertainty and inconclusiveness - played off the industry's claims of near-absolute certainty - rather than proven risk. The latter works by encour-

aging inferences of danger, particularly through the use of visual images. All groups react, in one way or other, to this dynamic.

One response, seen in the account of the Heysham group, is to privilege threat as the primary meaning. This group is in no doubt that the programme offers a conclusive anti-nuclear message, by mischievous exaggeration, manipulation and exclusion of evidence. Readings which follow the grain of the programme's 'you can't prove anything but consider these coincidences' line of reasoning can result in inferences such as the Labour group's 'it seems to be more than a coincidence' which take that line one stage beyond the point where the programme itself (explicitly) stops. In one anti-nuclear group, Friends of the Earth, there is an apparent reluctance to make this move, and a concomitant regret that the programme does not more conclusively show that the risks are real.

Even pro-nuclear groups like the Conservatives admit difficulty in resisting the conclusions towards which the programme points whilst leaving the viewer to draw them. What the Conservatives are able to do is to challenge aspects of the programme's rhetoric, particularly its visual rhetoric, as illegitimate reinforcements of anti-nuclear conclusions. We have quoted above their comment on the use of Hiroshima film footage.

Such observations regarding the 'subtextual' level feature not only in the responses of pro-nuclear groups like the Heysham workers and the Conservatives, but come also from more equivocal groups like the medical students, and from groups with anti-nuclear sympathies. The unemployed group's favourable assessment of the visual effectiveness of the Trawsfynydd Lake sequence in *Uncertain Legacy* is an instance of this here. That they notice the treatment and have an interpretation of the intention behind it, is what they share with many of our groups. Approval of that intention is, unsurprisingly, restricted to groups which share the programme's critical view of the industry.

2. There was a clear convergence of agreement across all the groups about the unsatisfactoriness of *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option*. This was more surprising in groups like that from the Conservative Party, where predisposition towards the pro-nuclear case might have been expected to lead to a supportive reading. In fact, the only group to produce a consensus approval of this programme were themselves employees of the nuclear industry – the Heysham Power Station workers. Drawing on the material cited and discussed above, we can identify three principal reasons for the widespread failure of this programme:

(a) A rejection of the programme's *promotional* design, especially insofar as this imitates aspects of non-promotional television. Brian Walden, the presenter, is often the focus of questions about the programme's integrity as it attempts to connect with the discourses both of journalism and public relations.

(b) A sense that important omissions (the problem of waste) and insufficient attention to alternative energy sources give the programme's case for nuclear energy insecure foundations. This connects with 1. above insofar as Walden was often seen as being over-assertive in his presentation ('telling not showing'). Clearly, many groups had an anxiety about safety levels which, far from being eased by this firm approach, was actually worsened. We have noted a number of times the phenomenon of the 'boomerang' effect, whereby a textual focus on safety actually led, via interpretative inversion, to increased viewer worries about risk.

(c) A negative assessment of Lord Marshall as the head of the nuclear, industry. This was based on a number of factors, including ideas about his non-scientific status and about his possible 'foreignness' (his unusual accent suggests this to some viewers) but there was a general interpretation of his contributions (both to this programme and to the other in which he appears) as under-argued and, indeed, 'flippant'. What was presumably intended as a projection of informal frankness clearly failed with most of the respondents we spoke to. In *Uncertain Legacy*, it was the exchange with the interviewer about his likely response to a waste dump being sited in his garden that attracted the most criticism. In *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option* it was perhaps his vivid (but rhetorically imprudent) description of the effects of the Chernobyl explosion, in the context of a denial that power stations were 'like bombs'.

The degree of rejection of this programme surprised us and it is difficult to assess how far it is primarily a matter of a suspect form being used (an imitation of 'impartial inquiry', involving performances assessed as poor) or how far the especially deep concerns of our viewers about nuclear safety would have made it difficult for *any* committedly pro-nuclear programme to win approval. The more recent tack taken in nuclear industry promotion, towards highlighting the major environmental risks produced by fossil fuel use, may have provided a significant new factor in the 'public meaning' of nuclear energy which we were unable to monitor.

3. In reacting to *From Our Own Correspondent* our respondent groups converge in their admissions of interpretative difficulty. On the one hand, these are retrospective descriptions of 'on-line' interpretative trouble. That is to say, in talking to the researchers after the programme has finished the impression is given that the programme's puzzles of comprehension were resolved very shortly after these puzzles arose. There are no 'loose ends' in this type of accounting:

(Unemployed group)

It confused me as well ... at the beginning with Chernobyl and this Russian presenter. And I suddenly heard 'Hartlepool' and I thought 'hang on, that's not in Russia', you know, that confused me for a couple of seconds.

On the other hand there are statements which refer to interpretative problems that the respondent has not resolved by the end of the programme, like whether all of the programme or only some of it is 'play-acting' (Rotary group) and the status of the final on-screen text (Individual respondent A, quoted in the section on other groups). Given the complexity of the programme's communicative design, it is perhaps not surprising that some of its moves are experienced as problems. We have described how the programme deliberately 'false-foots' its viewers by allowing them to entertain the belief that it is an authentic Chernobyl report, before revealing its actual status as a fictional Hartlepool one. The Chernobyl interpretation is retrospectively constructed as a *mistaken* one, and some respondents seem almost to believe themselves guilty of a misreading, even though they have simply fallen in line with the guiding intentions of the programme. It is worth drawing attention, by contrast, to what we would see as actual 'misreadings' – for example, when the speaker in the unemployed group observes that the programme's point would have been more effectively made by using people from Chernobyl.

It is interesting, too, to note those cases in which groups who themselves understand the fictionality of the scenario, speculate that other viewers may not – that there are no intra-textual clues, or not enough, to make its status obvious to all. The suggestion is that the programme-makers hope its viewers will take fiction for fact. There is a hint of this in the Heysham group but it comes through most clearly in the Conservative group:

(Conservative group)

A lot of it was fiction and unfortunately I believe that there are some people who would see that film and would really and truly believe that it had happened. I would be far more interested to know the organisation behind it and the use to which it is being put.

Although our Phase Two study of *Heart of the Matter* was only conducted with three groups of viewers, it is clear that it was generally interpreted as suggesting a Sellafield radiation-leukaemia link, despite its drawing on explanations which problematized or even rejected this. Our own analysis suggested that it was, in basic structure, a two-level programme. At one level, it focussed on a particular instance of illness and the legal battle which was beginning around it. At another level, it engaged more broadly with questions of risk probability in the nuclear industry. But the sheer power of the depiction it offered of one family's tragedy, backed up the programme's own 'dark' framing of the industry (see our discussion in Chapter 3) tended to crystallise meanings at the lower level for our respondents, leaving the wider reach of speculation relatively unassimilated.

Indeed, there were indications that (not for the first time in our study) respondents were confused by the complexities and counter-hypotheses of expert testimony, preferring to stick with the causal claim which underlay the legal action, the main narrative dynamic of the programme. Once more, an official representative of the nuclear industry was seen to deliver an inadequate account – in this case, the adversarial edge on the questions asked by Joan Bakewell and the subsequent dimension of conflict introduced into the interview with the BNFL spokesman may have reinforced such an assessment. It is interesting that few of our respondents thought the legal case stood much chance in court. This was not by any means a reflection of their judgment on its rightness but the product of a cynicism about the relative power of a major industry against a single individual. Some of our student respondents politicized this view. Another factor at work here, though, was a difficulty with the idea of 'probability', despite the extent to which the latter part of programme opens out around alternative, plausible but conflicting ideas of cause. Only 'proof' will secure a legal victory, it is thought by most of our respondents, and the controversiality of the issue is projected by the programme with sufficient strength to ensure that most viewers do not think this will easily be forthcoming. (As we noted in Chapter 1, this programme takes its primary material from precisely that area which has seen the most important development in the 'risk' debate since we conducted our research – the statistical findings of Professor Martin Gardner concerning the incidence of leukaemia among the families of Sellafield workers.)

Dynamics of interpretation and response

It should be apparent that in the foregoing accounts of our respondent groups we are offering analytic interpretations of the talk produced during group discussions. More is involved than simply reporting what was said in the course of each session. We have tried to quote from the sessions as fully as possible, but the reason for this is not to provide abbreviated transcripts. Rather the quotations, and the comments which surround them, are intended to exemplify the analytic approach we have taken.

We have made an effort to cover the following points in the case of the nine groups covered in detail. Firstly, we have tried to characterise the interpretative positions of the group as a whole. Secondly, we have singled out for special comment any individual speakers whose responses differ significantly from those of the rest of the group. Thirdly, we have attended to the ways in which readings are collectively produced, involving the negotiation of meanings amongst group members; consequently, and fourthly, we have attended to the dimension of *time* in these group accounts. Initial reactions are in all cases developed and modified as the event progresses and, in Phase One, as each new programme introduces new comparative possibilities.

We have thus sought in our methods to avoid potential mistakes in interpretation of the data. We have been cautious about taking the remarks of a single respondent to stand for the group as a whole and only done so when other evidence supported that judgment. We have recognised the potential for a 'consensus effect' whereby individuals are drawn into a group consensus for reasons to do with group dynamics, so that aspects of their responses which do not 'fit' the consensus are marginalized by the ongoing talk. And we have not taken early comments as the definitive final word on a programme.

Some exemplification of these four points is in order. The first two are best taken together. The nine groups which we have considered separately were chosen for this treatment out of the full range of sixteen precisely because they were the ones which seemed to us to be most characterisable in group terms, notwithstanding divergences within them which we have, of course, addressed as we perceived them. Such features as the Labour group's distrust of official pronouncements, the Rotarian's desire for scientifically authoritative information, and the unemployed group's foregrounding of a political framework of interpretation, were strongly endorsed within the respective groups. However, to take an example of divergence, it was notable in the Heysham group that one speaker in particular was more nervous about the question of risk than the others. It was also apparent that another of the speakers in that group wanted to talk more about visual and affective meaning, such as the intended effects of the Trawsfynnedd Lake sequence in *Uncertain Legacy*, than the others did. The result was that although he got to make his points, and to receive assent for them in the talk, they were not picked up for amplification by others; nor did anyone else offer spontaneous observations of a similar kind.

The collective, negotiated production of meaning in groups is nicely illustrated by the unemployed group where, as we have described, the interpretative positions adopted by speakers C and B in response to *Uncertain Legacy* are initially negative and positive respectively, with C's criticisms, mounted from within a civic perspective, concerned with its lack of impartiality. In reacting to B's more favourable assessment, whilst hanging on to his own initial perception of bias, C later came to the conclusion that the programme should have been more explicit about its basic anti-nuclear stance. A comparable case occurs within the Labour group where one speaker's more equivocal position on the nuclear issue itself correlated with a more critical reading of *Uncertain Legacy* and a less critical one of *Energy - The Nuclear Option* than the other group members. Negotiating this divergence often contributed substantially to the group's sense of direction.

Apart from these opportunities for amplification and negotiation, the major effect of the time dimension upon the results of the study is that respondents had three programmes screened in a given sequence. One consequence of this was a

tendency to perceive the first two programmes as equivalents: the second is said by the Conservative group to be as biased in favour of the industry as the first was against it. Alternatively, either programme can be used as a framework and the other one read within the terms of that framework, so that *Energy - The Nuclear Option* can be read as 'leaving out' certain important things, because those were the things *Uncertain Legacy* had included (the waste issue, for example). This logic works the other way too. For the unemployed group, the screening of the second programme provokes the comment that the argument about the future necessity of nuclear power was omitted from *Uncertain Legacy*. Some groups are themselves sensitive to the comparison-effect upon their evaluations and reflexively draw attention to this.

The hardest thing to monitor in analysing this data is the *situational* consensus-effect. There is no way of knowing what any individual would have said in the context of a one-to-one discussion with a researcher, or in a group with a different orientation. In practice, we assumed that this effect would be most likely to come into play around the margins of debate, and that speakers would be unlikely to *abandon* their principal responses for the sake of consensus. Occasionally, we noticed traces of doubt too weak to take the form of explicit resistance to consensus. For instance, in the Rotary group a speaker with some professional loyalty to the nuclear industry goes along with the group critique of *Energy - The Nuclear Option's* communicative design, whilst showing a desire to protect aspects of that programme's substance from attack.

Conclusion

In this final section of our account we want to summarise the main points which have emerged from our inquiries. Given the range of issues upon which we have offered analysis and commentary, the points should not be seen as the 'findings' to which the preceding chapters stand as 'evidence' (each chapter argues its own local conclusions) but rather as an attempt at bringing out concisely the more significant features of our work.

If we start by considering what the implications of our case-study might be at the level of the general (and increasingly international) debate about television and public culture, then connection and development is strongest at four points of the inquiry.

First of all, the 'comparative textualization' aspect of our study has thrown into relief elements both of the rhetorical design and local usage of TV's *expositional* discourse. With the exception of studies of the news, this area of television has been relatively neglected in the research literature despite its centrality to the medium's public information role.

By taking a topic which has both scientific and general political aspects, our study illustrates some of the difficulties, of visualization and of appropriate speech, which characterize television's expositional narratives in the search for combinations of clarity, fairness and good 'viewability'. Some options and problems for more partisan formats are also identified. In the context of increased media attention to health and environment issues ranging from global warming to methods of food production - attention in which 'story-values', quite apart from individual disposition, tend to place TV journalists in implicit opposition to government and industry - this kind of investigation deserves to be developed.

Our study has also connected with 'influence' arguments, particularly insofar as we have registered the extent to which television images can exert a 'positioning' power upon viewer imagination and understanding of a kind which may prove more resistant to counter-interpretation than the devices of commentary, inter-view and voice-over. Viewers more readily naturalize images as unmediated

since, unless they presume a general *intentionality* behind the overall pattern of visual depiction, they are not generally provoked to reflect on, and deconstruct, specific representations. We comment further on the 'influence' agenda below.

Whereas 'influence' suggests a top-down process, our study (in line with much recent audience research) has also emphasized the active and differentiated processes of interpretation. Here, the disposition of viewing groups towards the televised accounts, varied as it is (among other things, by group affiliation) shows a considerable degree of fairness-seeking and the exercising of 'civic' consciousness. This offers some check to those theoretical positions still making heavy use of theories of selective perception in which viewers are supposed systematically to disattend to that which does not coincide with their favoured viewpoints.

These factors – of expositional form, mode of address, visualization and viewer expectation – are combined, along with other elements, in what we might see as the Television and Citizenship issue. This is an issue running through much contemporary argument about television and is one likely to intensify as the long-running question about how market-based media systems can best enable democratic information-flow and debate is addressed anew in Europe. It is an issue in which the politically pessimistic implications of 'influence' theory connect up critically with some of the optimism and sense of potential deriving from recent 'active viewer' research, with both being put in the context not only of changing television forms but, often, of changing principles of political life. Our focus in this book is some way from that level of generality, but not so far as to prevent it from having a contribution to make.

We can now turn to some of the more specific points which have been documented and attributed significance by our research. It seemed best to consider first those points of rhetorical design and generic expectation holding some significance for a general understanding of 'public affairs' television, and then to move to points concerning nuclear energy and the particular mediations and interpretations which surround it. Such a separation of form from content exerts a distorting pressure both on the programmes and the responses to them, but the clarity thus obtained may justify this.

Our analysis characterised *Uncertain Legacy* and *Heart of the Matter* as *quests*, in which a strongly personalised journalistic 'mission for truth' is undertaken and in which the reporter's intervention into geographic, social and, as it were, argumentative space is often dramatized as ongoing action. This mode is a primary one within British public-service journalism and we identified some of its local devices for maintaining both thematic coherence and viewer 'watchability'. Perhaps the key point here concerns the specific forms of interplay between explicit (if also often ironic) verbal discourse and the richer, associative, sometimes directly symbolic, significations of the visualization. The articulations

of an explicit even-handedness with an implicit critique which this permits seems to us to be caught by our research in a revealing and important way. We then analysed in detail the contrastive promotional tactics of *Energy* – *The Nuclear Option*, and developed an account of its imitative organisation (a 'pseudo-quest') and the discursive play-off between inquiry and persuasion which this entailed. The particular devices of ventroloquism and theatricality employed we find to be of considerable interest to an analysis of corporate audio-visual discourse and we believe that further useful work could be done in this general area as it continues to interconnect with the public forms of broadcast television.

From Our Own Correspondent raised general questions about the use, in public debate, of fully dramatised, imaginary formats to engage with more normatively documented accounts. Our conclusions here noted the problems of coherence and reality-status involved, particularly in using a mix of 'real' with 'imagined' information, and in emphasising emotional over propositional logics. Our formal analysis of all these issues of textualization relies extensively on the responses of the viewing groups as well as our own initial readings.

Responses, the major part of our study, are drawn together and made sense of in the last chapter, including a detailed patterning of programme-group convergences and variations, so further summarising here would risk unhelpful repetition. However, we would want to emphasise *the extensive presence in viewers' accounts of the 'civic' frame*, a frame which strenuously, and sometimes with great difficulty, seeks for overall 'fairness' above the weighted presentation of even a preferred viewpoint. Such a sought 'fairness' is massively problematized by its inter-articulation with ideas of balance and (more so) of truth, but it is the single most powerful regulator of interpretative assessments we found and it frequently provides the parameters within which a critical scrutiny of *forms* is carried out by the viewer. There may well be a strong topic-specific element at work here (i.e. you want fairness more when you're anxious and doubtful) but the scale and reach of such a civic consciousness is not the less interesting for this.

In our accounts of the programmes we noted how they variously engaged with and developed themes within the nuclear debate, accessing and framing both expert knowledge and experiential testimony to suit their distinctive rhetorical designs. The (un)decidability of contested points has a central place in the televisual textualization of the nuclear issue. This is represented both in epistemological and more political terms. Epistemologically, it is addressed as a question of 'proof' – for example, on leukaemia clusters. Politically, it is addressed as a conflict between interested parties – for example, on 'acceptable' risk levels.

The groups reacted to these indeterminacies in various ways, according to their own agendas of concern. The following points itemize what we would see as the most interesting features of the group accounts:

First of all, it was clear that respondents' own prior doubts and anxieties about the industry were widely shared – notably on waste disposal and leukaemia clusters – even by groups who might be expected to take a view more sympathetic to the industry. The programmes were playing into an interpretative context of deep uncertainty.

Secondly, we noted that uncertainty would often be *overlaid* by confidence, in either direction – the kind of confidence which is a matter of faith or hope, rather than specific factual knowledge. This led to patterns of critical attention to textual strategies as these were perceived against the background of the respondents' own preferred conclusions.

Thirdly, we noted that different groups attached differential value to the *affective* properties of televised texts – potent visualizations, dramatic simulations, eloquent personal narratives. For some groups the nuclear issue positively requires such strategies, to win the viewers' involvement. Others argued the danger of allowing emotions, not reason, to decide the issue. Yet this striking *divergence* between the groups should not be allowed to obscure the more important *convergence* – the power of the affective dimension, even on groups who reject its legitimacy, comes through in many ways. This may be of considerable significance in the shaping of public opinion about the issue. This third point connects our study to 'influence and effects' questions. Work focussing directly on 'effects' has been widely criticised in recent years for too positivistic and functionalist a perspective, neglecting both the existence of intervening variables and the very nature of meaning-making. But there has been an opposite, and in our view equally unhelpful, tendency in cultural studies research over the last decade towards celebrating the 'plurality' of interpretation to such an extent as to push questions of 'influence' almost entirely off the agenda. Quite apart from the habitual tendency of this work to collapse questions of primary meaning into those of response,¹⁹ it often entertains the idea of 'active viewers' crafting their significances from texts without any structured set of socio-cultural competences, options and limitations *bearing down* on what they do. We hope that our own work is not recruited to such a facile version of cultural 'liberation'. The 'influence' arguments continue, and though our findings suggest that, indeed, there is a good deal more at issue than many traditional approaches have assumed, they also suggest that taking the power of television seriously is as important as recognising the considerable extent to which it falls well short of being omnipotent.

In that that sense, we think that our research might further open up the research agenda to work which may, nevertheless, profitably differ from ours in scale, range of variables engaged with and relationships posed between formal and

substantive dimensions. A natural science model of cumulative knowledge developed via a research chain of 'carried-over' findings is an impossibility in the area of cultural analysis, but we think we have found out a number of important things about the TV process as well as about the public meanings of nuclear energy. Of course, it would be very satisfactory if, on reaching this stage, readers felt the same.

¹⁹ We have commented above upon the importance of this distinction. See the introduction to Chapter 4, 'The viewers'.

Selected Bibliography

We list below a few of the more important books and articles with inquiries in this book through either their substantive topics, frameworks or their methods. We can identify four areas where additional information than is provided in the footnotes would be helpful: Public Opinion and Science; Nuclear Energy; Broadcast Programming and Audience Reception.

1. Media Public Opinion and Science

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The Media, Resistance and Civil Society

Section 5: Theorising Media, Resistance and Civil Society

Main:

Fenton, N. (2000b) 'The Problematics of Postmodernism for Feminist Media Studies' *Media, Culture and Society*, (22) 6: 723-741.

Fenton, N. and Downey, J. (2003) 'Counter Public Spheres and Global Modernity' *Javnost – The Public*, (X) 1: 15-33.

(Please note: this item is included in Section 3)

Supplementary:

Downey, J. and Fenton, N. (2003) 'Constructing a Counter-Public Sphere' *New Media and Society* (5)2:185-202.

Author's contribution: 40%

(Please note: this item is included in Section 3)

The problematics of postmodernism for feminist media studies

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Postmodernism is seen to have a particular relevance for media studies and for feminism. The former because of the postmodern quest to understand a media-dominated world and the latter because of the challenge to essentialism and insistence on difference proffered by postmodernism. However, there are few instances where the inconsistencies and difficulties that are raised by the combination of postmodernism and feminist media studies have been examined.¹

Within feminist media studies there has been a substantial difference between research into textual meaning and issues of representation and research into cultural and media policy with an emphasis on materialist matters. Broadly speaking, empirical and institutional studies often work within a structuralist framework. This includes policy-oriented work, studies of employment, discrimination and so on with a largely political economic agenda. Research more focused on the media product itself tends to be concerned with subjectivity, difference and meaning and is more frequently located in a culturalist paradigm. Operating within this paradigm, postmodern theorists argue for the fragmentation of the concepts used in 'modernist' social theory and a move away from a central theoretical concern with 'structure' to one of 'discourse'.

This *apparent* divide between postmodern and modern approaches has been hotly debated within feminist thinking more generally. Postmodernism has been viewed variously as either an unprecedented opportunity for women to forgo fixed identities and explore fluid subjectivities; an escape from the Enlightenment's establishment of methods of reasoning that were essentially male; or as a cultural movement that stifles the possibility for meaningful action just as feminism is beginning to make a political and social impact.

What is claimed to be at stake in abandoning modernity as an enabling structure is the fear of losing the notion of the women's movement, losing the idea of what it is to be a woman, and losing with this a politics of representation. If women cannot be characterized in any general way, how can feminism be taken seriously? If we must forfeit the category 'women' for the sake of philosophical sophistication, what political grounding does feminism have? At the centre of this debate between modernist and postmodernist thought is the difference between essentialist and non-essentialist feminism, the conflict between objectivism and relativism and the push towards thinking in terms of either gender equality or of gender difference. Each of these issues cuts across the connection between universalism (what it means to speak about and on behalf of 'women') and a politics of change (that recognizes material inequalities that may be based on gender).

This article explores what the debate between universalism and difference in feminist theory means for feminist media studies. It takes two of the key tenets of postmodernism which overlap with much of the work in the field of feminist media studies – the notion of representation as reality and audience resistance. In the context of the metathemes of identity and difference, central to current feminist thinking, the article argues in line with Laclau (1996) that, without a universalism of sorts, the idea of equality in a fully functioning democratic society is impossible. However, use of the concept of universalism must be undertaken hand-in-hand with its deconstruction in order to recognize it as a contingent historical product. This is what I refer to as 'paradoxical universalism'. For feminist media studies this requires a mode of analysis which does not atomize and treat as separate the different phases of mass communications (Fenton, 1995) or individualize grossly our everyday experience of it. There has been a tendency in communication and media studies research to prioritize particular moments so that different emphases correspond to competing paradigms. In this way, news production studies (mostly undertaken from within political economy) which bring out the role of journalists tend to be disconnected from audience reception (mostly undertaken within cultural studies) which may only be loosely linked to textual analysis (Fenton et al., 1998). Rather, we need to examine production, content and reception as connected and integrated within transnational, national, local and personal socio-economic realities and in a way that is manageable within the practical constraints of empirical research. This is no small task.

The relationship of postmodernism to media studies and feminism

Craig Owens (1983) has suggested that 'women's insistence on difference and incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an

instance of postmodern thought' (Owens, 1983: 61–2). He was criticized for seeming to relegate feminism to the position of a subsidiary to a (male) main current. Nonetheless, he made a conceptual link between feminism's critique of patriarchy and the postmodern critique of representation.

In 1988, Fraser and Nicholson noted that 'since around 1980 many feminist scholars have come to abandon the project of grand social theory' (1988: 98). The gradual demise of that project is related to postmodernism. The feminist response has focused primarily on the problems of essentialism, universalism and legitimation on the one hand and on the intersection between the critique of patriarchy and the critique of representation on the other (Bertens, 1995).

Postmodernism and poststructuralism posit women as a non-self-evident category.² Feminist essentialism is exposed as a strategy of power, an attempt to enclose and foreclose the field of feminism which can backfire in policy debates: to attribute to women a set of essential characteristics or experiences (caring, compassionate, etc.) can have the effect of reproducing existing inequalities. Feminists therefore can unwittingly 'contribute to the regulation and reification of gender identities and along pretty traditional lines at that, a regulation and reification that it is surely one of the aims of feminism to disrupt' (Nash, 1994: 69). Feminist essentialism has been further criticized for beginning from a position based on Western constructs of feminism that focused on the notion of a global sisterhood of women universally united by oppression. In postmodernism the category of women is fluid, a political signifier. It is argued (Butler, 1990) that this celebration of the fluidity of boundaries resists the kinds of stabilization which seek to pin women down to something incontrovertible and instead expands the possibilities of what it is to be a woman. This includes re-drafting or redesignating the self not in an unproblematically voluntarist capacity but rather as a process which recognizes gender as more unstable and with more potential than is currently acknowledged in culture. This enables a reconceptualizing of identity and a deconstruction of the universal category 'woman', embracing the concept of difference within feminisms world-wide. And, as Butler (1992, 1993) argues, if gender is a staging of the body, a performance enacted on a daily basis, if woman is therefore put on, or applied, then there can be no natural female body. Instead, the body is only female and feminine to the extent that it is given these meanings right from the start. As Grosz says:

Feminism is placed in an unenviable position: either it clings to feminist principles that entail its avoidance of essentialist and universalist categories (in which case its rationale as a political struggle centred around women is problematised); or it accepts the limitations patriarchy imposes on its conceptual schemas and models and abandons the attempt to provide autonomous self-defined terms in which to describe women and femininity. (1995: 55)

One of the issues is whether feminism can survive as a radical politics if it gives up on a hierarchy of theory. Feminists have moved from grand theory to local studies, from cross-cultural analyses of patriarchy to the complex and historical interplay of sex, race and class, from the notion of a stable female identity or the interests of women towards the instability of female identity and the active creation and recreation of women's needs or concerns. Part of what drops out in these movements is the ability of women to speak about and on behalf of women as a category who are disadvantaged. This raises the question whether such developments leave feminists with nothing general to say (Barrett and Phillips, 1992: 7).

Representation as reality

The new cultural feminism, where postmodern approaches are located, can be contrasted to traditional feminism. Traditional feminism was interested in gender equality – a goal which cultural feminism implies has now been surpassed (Hermes, 1995a). Put crudely, traditional research on women and the media viewed mass-mediated communications as a major source for the general reproduction of patriarchal social relations. Much of this work rested on three main assumptions (not all of which are present in every instance): (1) that mass media imagery consists of unrealistic messages about women whose meanings are unambiguous and straightforward (for example, Tuchman, 1978); (2) that women (and men) passively and indiscriminately absorb these messages and meanings (for example, Dworkin, 1981); and (3) that we as researchers have some privileged access whereby we can recognize and resist such images (for example, Ferguson, 1983). Effects of the mass media were thereby generally conceived as detrimental to the general population and in particular to women.

The conception of a text with a unitary meaning gave way to a more sophisticated textual analysis that recognized multiplicity of cultural definitions within a media text. For example Modleski's (1982) study of soap opera which concludes that the text positions the spectator as the ideal Mother looking after and out for her family. This was important because it undermined the monolithic view of women as unconditional victims of a sexist media. However, studies like Modleski's do not distinguish between semiological levels of analysis and sociological levels of enquiry. They have little concept of a social audience, how people approach and deal with particular programmes in their particular lives. Ultimately the researcher is still only telling us what she thinks the text means. There has also been a shift from a consideration of what images did to women to what women could do with women's images. The traditional feminine sphere of the private and domestic was recognized as being both culturally constructed

and lived by women in different ways. Women's genres were recognized as giving a voice to women's experiences.³ The focus on women's genres was a political advance for feminist media studies. Genres such as soap opera and romance that had previously been labelled as 'trash', being largely consumed by women and focused on women's experiences, were given a new legitimacy. To claim such genres as worthy of study was seen as commensurate with claiming the personal as political in the general feminist struggle. The themes and values associated with so-called women's genres where narratives are located mainly in the private and public spheres were heralded by feminists as legitimate of study in their own right.

However, work on female genres was criticized for adhering to a 'conceptualisation of gender as a dichotomous category with a historically stable and universal meaning' (van Zoonen, 1996: 33), whereby the female experience is seen as being the same for all women. This was countered by studies that took their primary research interest to be the audience and their pleasures. Hermes describes this shift:

Critics who do not stop at equality but adopt a different approach stress the ambiguity of texts and raise new questions, including some about the pleasure that stereotyping and conventional media texts apparently offer women. The central issue is not social inequality but the popular text itself. (1995a: 58)

This perspective was influenced largely by Foucault who challenged the familiar hierarchy of value of the materialist perspective, counterposing the 'dumb' existence of reality with the ability of groups of signs (discourses) to act as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Barrett, 1992: 203, quoting Foucault). For poststructuralist feminists, the emphasis shifted from a determinist model of social structure to how discourses comprising words and statements and other representational forms brought together into a field of coherent textual regularity actively produce social realities as we know them. The material existence of women is seen to be borne through different, often competing discursive strategies which in naming, classifying or speaking the truth of women, also bring her into being. Power is conceptualized as highly dispersed rather than concentrated in identifiable places or groups. In media studies, this shift was seen in a move away from a political economic approach such as the gender-segmented labour market in cultural production to a concern with words, texts and representations.

Many postmodern theorists take the foregrounding of discourse one step further to claim that contemporary communication practices are non-representational and non-referential. In other words they have no purchase outside of the text, they have no separate external domain. Rather, they are self-reflexive and self-referential. Contemporary mediated culture then is no more than a constant recycling of images previously constituted by the

media. The recognition of media implosion has caused many postmodern theorists to question the practices of mass communication in terms of the relationship of an event and its media representation. It is claimed that the proliferation of new sophisticated media technologies makes it difficult, if not impossible, to discern the difference between images and reality. Moreover, many media images are hyperreal, that is more real than real. As Poster (1990: 63) explains, 'a communication is enacted . . . which is not found in the context of daily life. An unreal is made real. . . . The end result is a sensational image that is more real than real and has no referent in reality.' Thus the notion of representation becomes problematic. Contemporary media don't represent reality, they constitute it (Harms and Dickens, 1996).

The idea is that popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality, and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. It tries to come to terms with and understand a media-saturated society. Society has become subsumed within the mass media. It is no longer a question of the media distorting reality, rather the media have become reality – the only reality we have (Strinati, 1995). So, there is little point in studying the content of the mass media to see how it may affect our everyday lives; little point in counting instances of mediated hegemonic femininity and making an argument that this sustains the status quo; little point even in studying how people understand the media since 'one interpretation is not by definition better or more valid than another' (van Zoonen, 1996: 48). From the standpoint of postmodern relativism the media are reality, are inescapable, are our femininity. As McRobbie says:

We do not exist in social unreality while we watch TV or read the newspaper nor are we transported back to reality when we turn the TV off to wash the dishes or discard the paper and go to bed. Indeed perhaps there is no pure social reality outside the world of representation. Reality is relayed to us through the world of language, communication and imagery. Social meanings are inevitably representations and selections. Thus when the sociologists call for an account which tells how life really is, and which deals with the real issues rather than the spectacular and exaggerated ones which then contribute to the moral panic, the point is that their account of reality would also be a representation, a set of meanings about what they perceive as the real issues. (McRobbie, 1994: 217)

Postmodernists take this reasoning further to suggest that, as popular cultural signs take over in defining our sense of reality for us, this means that style takes precedence over content. This leads Hermes to state that feminism's 'overriding motivation should be to respect women and women's genres, and to demand respect for them from the world at large' (1995b: 151). Such an approach rules out any investigation of the media as an institution that frames, limits and helps to construct choices, pleasures and responses.

The idea that the mass media take over reality has been accused of exaggerating their importance (Strinati, 1995). Women's experiences are framed by many institutions, the mass media being but one of them. The notion that reality has imploded inside the media such that it can only be defined by the media is also questioned. Most people, it is claimed, would probably still be able to distinguish between the reality created by the media and that which exists elsewhere. Strinati is typical of this retort when he states, 'if reality has really imploded into the media how would we know it has happened?' (1995: 239). His response is that we only know it has happened because there are those who are all-knowing and have seen it. So, through extreme relativism, postmodernists are criticized for being in danger of becoming the very thing they deride – universalist. The proclamation that 'there is nothing but the text' involves universal truth statements – that there really are texts, that they really relate to other texts. The paradox is that those who defend relativism feel able to state categorically what really happens in the world and how it has come to be that way.

To claim that the media *are* our reality is further criticized by those who wish to point to the oppression of women as real. In this retort, reality is recognized as disorderly and fragmented but as also showing patterns of inequality. If the media are our reality it is argued that we effectively deny the existence of material inequalities unless they occur in representation:

Feminists struggled for decades to name 'sexism' and 'anti-lesbianism'. We said that particular images of women – bound and gagged in pornography magazines, draped over cars in advertisements, caricatured as mothers-in-law or nagging wives in sitcoms – were oppressive and degrading. The deconstructionist insistence that texts have no inherent meanings, leaves us unable to make such claims. This denial of oppressive meanings is, in effect, a refusal to engage with the conditions under which texts are produced, and the uses to which they are put in the dominant culture. (Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 1993: 15)

The world according to postmodernists is lived on the surface with nothing that hides behind appearances. Everyone and everything is living simulacra. No one experiences anything directly, there is only mediated reality resulting in a complete absence of lived experience. The concept of truth is destabilized to be replaced by speculation about the possible meanings of texts. This is where the media audience comes into its own – if experience only comes to us in textual form, if all reality is through representation – then the study of the way meaning is made in everyday life is crucial.

Audience as resistant

One of the main difficulties with postmodern media studies is the relationship between the assertion that representation is reality and the

equally voiced assertion that the audience is powerful and able to resist media messages. If the media is everywhere, is inescapable, it becomes difficult to conceive how it can be resisted, avoided and its constructedness recognized. Yet much postmodernism insists everyone is always actively resisting mediated reality through our knowledge of images and their construction. In other words we know we can't escape it, we know that it is as real as our material existence, but we also know that it is constructed and know that we can play a part in the meanings given to it. Each of us plays with the notion of constructedness taking whatever we choose from the bits and pieces at our disposal.

While modernism encouraged women to emulate ideal images encountered in magazines and on film, postmodernism has produced a more sceptical and knowing relationship with the image. Achieving the ideal is now a contradictory mix of rigorous bodily control and playful experimentation with dress, make-up and accessories. While this is liberating in freeing image for self-expression, it has also been accused of masking the gap between the image and women's continuing socio-economic struggles (Macdonald, 1997: 199). With the move to postmodernism, spectacle works to enlarge our fantasies, not bring us closer to identification with the particular or the material. Reverential attitudes and aspirations have been unsettled by a new awareness of the processes of image construction. In a postmodern age, fashion and cosmetics bring new freedoms in experimentation and play. Consumer culture is an arena of female participation and enjoyment; a route to developing multiple subjectivities for women from work to leisure that ensures women feel freed from the obligations of less liberated periods.

An emphasis on fantasy and the playful deconstruction and reconstruction of the self is similar to theories of the active audience from within feminist media studies. Such studies reacted against the simplistic conception of the process of mass communication as one of linear transmission from sender to receiver to claim that female audiences play a productive role in constructing textual meanings and pleasures. From this type of research, epitomized in the work of Ang (1985) and Radway (1984), came a celebration of the audience. In most of this work, audiences are seen as actively constructing meaning so that texts which appear on the face of it to be reactionary or patriarchal can be subverted. The subversion comes through the pleasures that are gained from it. For Ang (1996) the world of fantasy is the 'place of excess where the unimaginable can be imagined' (1996: 106). Again similar to postmodern claims of the resistive potential of the audience, active audience theorists in media studies have also been accused of political quietism and relativism gone mad.

Ang has attempted to overcome these criticisms by using Foucault's notion of discourse to undertake a poststructuralist analysis of the audience. As mentioned above, for Foucault, discourses are particular ways of

organizing knowledge in the context of serving specific types of power relationships. Foucault acknowledges that the real exists but maintains that since reality is only appropriated through discourse, it is discourse which is important. Ang's analysis concentrates upon institutional discourses about television audiences. These audiences do not exist naturally, nor can they be taken for granted. Rather they are constructed by particular discourses which seek to know them in order to exert power over them. For example, advertisers define audiences as consumers, and gather knowledge about their purchasing habits, because they want to sell to them. However, because audiences are constructed in this manner by the combination of knowledge and power within these discourses, it does not mean that real audiences will behave in the way predicted. Audiences can also be understood by the way they resist the discursive powers which try to construct them in ways which suit those powers. By exposing the discourses of the audience developed by the powerful television institutions, discourses which have also influenced academic studies of the audience, she hopes to shift attention back to the ordinary viewer. To achieve this it is necessary for research to look at 'the social world of actual audiences' and 'to develop the forms of knowledge about television audiencehood that move away from those informed by the institutional point of view' (Ang, 1991: 12).

However, Ang's use of the concept of power remains vague and abstract. The extent to which the space of fantasy is unconstrained and open to resistant readings is difficult to both accept and judge since the fantasies of romance readers to which Ang refers are more or less based on the romantic idyll promoted by romance novels. If power is vested in the hands of television institutions that seek to control audiences by discursive forms of knowledge, what are the particular reasons which make them do this? Is there a particular drive to exercise power that characterizes certain institutions? Are there specific social and historical reasons to explain why this should happen? Although Ang does provide evidence of the latter, a theory of this process still needs to suggest the interests that motivate power. Similarly, why should the power of institutions be resisted? What are the interests that motivate resistance to discursive power? Moreover, there is a tendency for this approach to dissolve the focus on power by seeing everything as discursively constructed, a problem heightened by the obfuscatory nature of the concept of discourse. For example, Ang suggests that to confront the institutional construction of audiences it is necessary to consider the 'social world of actual audiences'. However, this is in turn another discursive construction because 'we cannot presume to be speaking with the authentic voice of the real audience' as there is no such thing (1991: 165).

Ang accepts that institutional and academic knowledge about audiences is not completely useless, but it is difficult to substantiate this if all

knowledge is discursively constructed and we can never produce knowledge about real audiences. The problem for feminist media theorists is in laying claim to a particular reality while at once discrediting the concept of reality. Claims about unequal power relations can only be based upon some criterion which can distinguish between knowledge which is more useful and that which is less useful.

The active audience approach sits well with postmodern theory's emphasis on plurality and difference. Power rests with diverse audiences, not media barons or institutions. Active audiences produce local meanings from polysemic communications. The postmodern condition becomes characterized by a decentred subjectivity dispersed in time and space. In its most severe form this provides a vulgar reduction of Foucault, in which power is pluralistic and can be used by anybody, any time, any place, anywhere. It takes no account of the increasing power of multinationals and media conglomerates (mostly owned and controlled by men), increasing intervention by the state (operating firmly within patriarchy) and vastly unequal economic realities (working largely in favour of men). Or as Seiter et al. (1989) remind us, 'soap operas allow women to take pleasure in the character of the villainess, but they do not provide characters that radically challenge the ideology of femininity' (1989: 5).

The radical ability of the audience to create and play with meaning is said to release the reader from predictable, confirming signifieds. Or in the words of Ang (1996: 125), 'since a subject is always multiply positioned in relation to a whole range of discourses, many of which do not concern gender, women do not always live in the prison house of gender'. Furthermore, those moments where we can define ourselves despite our gender are declared as the truly liberatory ones. Based on the assumption that discourse is reality and there are always multiple discourses to choose from, the individual becomes a self-made jigsaw of bits and pieces. This frequently relegates to insignificance the fact that someone made the jigsaw pieces in the first place, shaped them, drew particular configurations on them, and gave them to us in particular packaging designed to appeal and to sell. The decentred self that resists and self-constructs at all times and is unbound by gender still reads the soap operas or the romantic novels and largely conforms to ideologies of femininity. Women are addressed and positioned by media texts in terms of their cultural expertise. To the extent that we respond to this invocation, we are positioned as female spectators (listeners, etc.). While the thought of being liberated from our gendered identity may seem attractive, it can also be depoliticizing. Lyotard argues that we inhabit a ragbag of language games and are shaped by so many forms of discourse that we can no longer say definitely who we are. If we deny the self's existence the possibility of agency and legitimate political and social inaction is weakened. The ability to criticize those media forms

that seek to interpellate gender in specific ways, largely to the detriment of women, may also be undermined.

Poststructuralism tells us that there is no pre-articulated gender identity. Postmodernism asserts that even if media consumption is gendered in some way it can only be understood by a close examination of meanings gained in particular contexts. Lyotard (1984) suggests that legitimation occurs only in the context of production of a particular knowledge. These can never be extended out to generalize about entire populations. This is what Ang and Hermes (1996) call postmodern particularism. This view accepts media saturation, inter-textuality, relativism and the availability of infinite subject positions.

Critics of such a particularist approach claim that all we are left with are descriptions of particular events at particular points in time which promote an individualist perspective and one that risks depoliticizing feminism. The problematic for feminist media theorists is whether to accept that sexism is based only on local legitimation or built into institutional structures. One response to this feminist dilemma is that profound gender scepticism is itself a critical reaction to the moral absolutism found in earlier feminism. The political act is to make reality appear unstable, complex and disorderly and thereby confront sexism.

While many feminists accept this as a legitimate political act, others wish to retain a theory that allows a focus on the social conditions and foundations for creating meaning and communication. In failing to situate analyses dialectically within larger historical and structural contexts, research has been criticized for a lack of historicity (Jameson, 1991). Much recent work on audiences has recognized the rampant relativism of previous active audience theory and sought to recoup the role of the media in the meaning-making process. Such work states that the meanings of mediated imagery are tied to a community and its shared experiences and to the actual ability of individuals to actively interpret it. This ability may depend on many things, not least educational and cultural capital, national, local and personal socio-economic realities (Fenton et al., 1998). From an anti-essentialist perspective, the concept of gender as discourse allows for the possibility of multiple subjectivities in women and men that may not always be gender-dominated. But are these discourses ever gender-neutral? An important point to remember from Foucault is that discourses reflect and produce power and certain discourses claim legitimacy over others. Aspects of contemporary mass media practices can be used to reproduce a repressive social system. There are also other material forces that shape the communication process.

The upshot of postmodernism for feminist media studies is that research should continue in an isolated preoccupation with the audience (even if it is radically contextualized), ignoring factors of production (such as the under-representation and under-payment of women in the cultural industries), the

centralization of mass cultural production and the subsequent limitation of representations on offer. But perhaps more worrying than the focus on one aspect of the mass communication process (which is, after all, a criticism that can be directed at the majority of media studies), is the way in which gender begins to lose its central position in understanding how the world operates.

Difference or indifference

By refusing a controlling subject, postmodernism derides modernist claims of logic and rationality. At the same time, as several postmodern feminists have pointed out, we need to be prepared to argue through and re-inspect openly the cultural and social positions from which we make our evaluations. Women need to challenge the linearity and certainties of those ways of thinking that have been called 'Enlightenment' and advocate more sceptical, self-aware and responsive modes of discussion. Arguments about positive images of women in the media to combat bias and ideology in gender representations have been rejected for assuming an essential or at least undifferentiated model of women's interests, experiences and identities to replace the negative images. If we want to argue for changing rather than deconstructing some of the myths of femininity that have lingered for centuries, do we need to admit to holding a rational position from which to argue this? Arguing that we should challenge rationality itself threatens to bite our critical noses off to spite our collective faces. We need to retain a historical approach to issues of identity and representation. Retaining a historical perspective means recognizing the structures and constraints of modernity while also recognizing that our existence in postmodern culture makes this a complex rather than a straightforward undertaking.

For Flax (1992a, 1992b), Fraser and Nicholson (1988) and others, postmodernism has had a wholesome effect on the feminist debate. Hegemonic patriarchal culture had already been exposed as constructed, not given, but postmodernism brought deconstruction into areas that (non-poststructuralist) feminism had left unexamined. Its insistence on difference has, for instance, deconstructed gender as a natural, essentialist category and has shown its constructed nature. But Fraser and Nicholson (1988: 100) are still wary of postmodern philosophy arguing for a 'postmodern feminist paradigm of social history without philosophy'. What is sought is the reconciliation of postmodern difference with Enlightenment emancipation. As Calhoun states, we need to acknowledge 'the real present day political and other reasons why essentialist identities continue to be evoked and often deeply felt' (1994: 14).

Bordo (1990) argues that it is too soon to let social institutions that have barely begun to respond to modernist social criticism 'off the hook via

postmodern heterogeneity and instability' (1990: 153). Harding (1996), who supports the attack on the Enlightenment subject – the naturalized, essentialized subject of liberal humanism – still cannot see how feminism could completely take leave of Enlightenment assumptions and remain feminist. For Skeggs (1991) it is difficult to see how people can travel through and live with differences unencumbered by structure.

In 1996, the British group Women in Journalism reported that 18 out of the 19 national daily and Sunday newspapers were edited by men. Most newsrooms are still heavily male-dominated 'testosterone driven, with laddishness oozing from the very templates of what makes news' (*The Independent*, 3 July 1996: 13). In 1994, the National Union of Journalists reported that in the UK women journalists predominated only in the lowest-paid sector – books. In every other area in the media industry, apart from the low-paid secretarial and clerical grades, women are in a minority (NUJ, 1994).

Material factors such as differential salaries and inadequate childcare provision, link gender difference to power relations in the cultural industries. Theories of modernity may have pushed feminist writers into a difficult corner but they also allowed oppression, violence and abuse by gender to be recognized and named. This may not necessarily have led to change – indeed, in many cases it has not; but disavowing completely the ideals of modernity in favour of a relativism which embraces difference within gendered categories while rejecting material differentials by gender raises the potential for encouraging indifference.

Braidotti (1992), Butler (1992), Flax (1992a, 1992b) and Spivak (1992) pursue a radical critique of modernity. Reason, humanity and equality are 'domination' Enlightenment concepts. To enlighten some was to regulate many others. The great achievements of rationality and knowledge were founded on disciplinary practices of a new order and dimension. This kind of questioning need not mean the abandonment of all reason; instead, it asks after the construction of reason or rationality. If feminism is one of the products of modernity and if it cannot and should not represent all women, how do we create a politics of feminism, to whom do we speak?

For Spivak, the community of women can only come after the recognition of difference between women, and after the raising of some of the key questions about who is talking to whom and why. This is a similar position to that described by Judith Butler, who also engages with a notion of a community of women. In articulating women from a feminist standpoint, such a category is immediately broken and it is the breaking that is the important point (Butler, 1992). Who is not spoken to in feminism? In addition, who was the 'subject' of feminism, but is no more? How has feminism opened itself out to speak to many female subjects and yet still engage with only a few? Relating this to feminist media studies we could ask, why is feminist media studies so restricted to certain areas? Is it

because the work undertaken is constructed not only by and about women, but also for and only of relevance to women (Brundson, 1997)?

Butler (1992) disputes the assumption that there must be a foundation and a stable subject to have a politics, seeing this as authoritarian. She asserts that postmodernism does not mean that we have to do away with the subject but rather ask after the process of its construction. The value of postmodernism is therefore that, like deconstruction, it shows clearly how arguments bury opposition: 'What women signify has been taken for granted for too long . . . we have to instead break from the list of meanings and expand the possibilities of what it is to be a woman' (Butler, 1992: 16). But can postmodernism deliver such a political transformation if it does not allow us to speak in ethical or moral terms? The question then becomes can we use postmodernism to incorporate difference and reject essentialism, in the manner that feminist theory would support, but reject a depoliticizing relativism? Can we have our proverbial cake and eat it?

Spivak (1984, 1992) believes we can. She conceives of concepts and theoretical principles not as guidelines, rules or blueprints for struggle but as tools and weapons of struggle. It is no longer a matter of maintaining a theoretical purity at the cost of political principles, nor is it simply a matter of the ad hoc adoption of theoretical principles. It is a question of negotiating a path between always impure positions – seeing that politics is already always bound up with what it contests (including theories) – and that theories are always implicated in various political struggles. She argues in this context for the 'strategic use of essentialism':

You pick up the universal that will give you power to fight against the other side, and what you are throwing away by doing that is your theoretical purity. Whereas the great custodians of the anti-universal are obliged therefore simply to act in the interest of a great narrative, the narrative of exploitation while they keep themselves clean by not committing themselves to anything. . . . They are run by a great narrative even as they are busy protecting their theoretical purity by repudiating essentialism. (Spivak, 1984: 184)

There can be no feminist position that is not in some way or other involved in patriarchal power relations. A purity from patriarchal 'contamination' entails feminism's incommensurability with patriarchy – thus the inability to criticize it (Grosz, 1995). As Braidotti (1991: 164) has cautioned, unless we take the possibilities opened by difference as our starting point, women, 'the external servants at the banquets of life . . . will have to satisfy themselves with the crumbs of modernity'.

The above approaches introduce the possibility of retaining the *concept* of facts and analysing the different roles they can have in differing contexts. Marshall (1994) endorses a theory which is post-positivist, critical of the hegemony of Western 'reason', listens to 'local stories', rethinks the notion of a coherent pre-existing 'subject' and rejects the universalizing impulse of 'grand narratives'. But she also believes that 'it is possible to

radically challenge the principles of the “project of modernity” as it has been construed in Western social theory, and to reshape its categories of analysis, without severing all ties to its emancipatory aspirations’ (1994: 159). Analysing how your cake is made doesn’t mean you can’t still eat it (Edwards et al., 1995).

The strategic questions that face contemporary feminism are now informed by a much richer understanding of heterogeneity and diversity; but they continue to revolve around the alliances, coalitions and commonalities that give meaning to the idea of feminism. Not only is the concept of ‘woman’ crucial to grasp the gendered nature of the social world, but so is that of patriarchy in order that we do not lose sight of the power relations involved. As Denise Riley (1988) has pointed out, ‘woman’ is indeed an unstable category, but one whose instabilities are none other than the subject matter of feminist politics. One may object to the Enlightenment dualisms in which the feminine, or women, are always cast as inferior to the masculine, or men, but total postmodern abandonment of these binary structures runs the risk of political suicide.

Conclusion

In an attempt to deal with the discontents of postmodernism, Bauman (1997) argues that postmodern politics aimed at the creation of a viable political community needs to be guided by the triune principle of Liberty, Difference and Solidarity; solidarity being the necessary condition and the essential collective contribution to the well-being of liberty and difference – one thing which the postmodern condition is unlikely to produce on its own without a political intervention. Without solidarity, he argues, no freedom is secure, while the differences and the kind of ‘identity politics’ they tend to stimulate end up more often than not in the internalization of oppression:

. . . as with all principled politics, so the postmodern politics is replete with risks of defying its own principles; in this respect its only advantage over other varieties of politics is that it is fully aware of such danger and therefore inclined to monitor carefully its own accomplishments. Above all it is reconciled to the absence of perfect solutions and guaranteed strategies, to the infinity of its own tasks and to the probable inconclusiveness of its efforts: this is perhaps the best available protection against the trap . . . of promoting oppression in the guise of emancipation. (Bauman, 1997: 208)

Feminist scholarship exists and its very existence indicates the continuance of patterns of discrimination articulated through gender. This is not predicated on a rigid universalism that refuses to acknowledge difference. Rather, it recognizes that universalism itself is constructed, has a history, is imbued with complex power relations, but nonetheless exists.

This approach challenges us to deconstruct universalism and requests that we reclaim the term as our own. We could usefully term this 'paradoxical universalism'. As Geraghty (1996) points out, work on media ownership, control and regulation has largely been undertaken by male academics. Thus, we still need feminist analyses of the media industries, even as we still need feminist textual analyses that state that the mass media portray dominant characteristics that are gendered and limited, and then to see how audiences work through their media consumption in their everyday lives. We also need to break with the hegemony of white/Western femininity that is reproduced in feminist media scholarship. We must do all of this without naturalizing sexual difference and at the same time ensuring we resist anthropological meanderings. Without this, we cannot answer questions about the influence of the media on ideology or belief or patriarchy.

Furthermore we need to adopt a holistic concept of mass communications that accepts the process of communication as a complex interaction of unequal relationships of power (Fenton et al., 1998), however difficult this may be to translate empirically. We need a mode of analysis which is connective and integrative and which tracks the social and ideological relations that prevail at every level between cultural production and consumption (McRobbie, 1994), from the production of cultural texts through textual analysis of cultural objects and their meanings to the study of lived cultures and experiences (Dickens, 1996). We need to examine the relationship between beliefs about gender and the political conclusions drawn by the public and the relationship between political conclusions and taking political action.

Through the sheer difficulty of living with difference, we do not have to abandon the feminist project. While the problems with the homogeneity of the term 'woman' have been recognized, political engagement still renders it necessary (Riley, 1987). By asserting a paradoxical universalism we can assure that we do not erase women from the feminist project within media studies while binary systems of gender that disadvantage women remain firmly in place.

Notes

1. Notable exceptions to this are Ang (1996) and McRobbie (1994).

2. It is recognized that postmodernism and poststructuralism are not one and the same thing. Several distinctions are made between them within this article to take account of the differences, but for a fuller discussion see Barrett and Phillips (1992).

3. This is a grossly simplified account of feminist media research and should not be read as suggesting that feminist media studies has moved on a linear path from simple content analysis to the more sophisticated understanding of discourse that rejects the idea of media images' independent meanings or impact on those who

consume them. Indeed, research continues on all aspects of media using a wide range of theoretical perspectives. Feminists continue to produce textual analyses that imply or assume the importance of the media's manifest content and narrative form alongside studies that use ethnographic techniques to demonstrate the power of the audience to construct their own meanings. There are also studies which include both textual and reception analysis (see Mumford, 1998 for a good summary of much feminist research in the field of television studies).

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Postscript

The process of putting this thesis together brought with it reflection on the nature of academic endeavour, the constraints placed upon research and its dissemination by institutional and higher education policies as well a consideration of one's own contribution to the academy and likely future intellectual direction. This postscript addresses these issues.

Submitting for a PhD at the mid-point of one's academic career is a risky strategy. What if you cannot find much to say or at least not much enthusiasm for what you have already said, where does that leave you intellectually? What if your peers do not assess your work as worthy, where does that leave your work and your career? Precisely because of these risks it is also a hugely instructive and challenging exercise. Putting together a PhD by publication has forced me to take stock of my own intellectual history, the politics and policies that have impacted upon it and assess my contribution to the field in general.

The politics of doing research

There are 2 main material social and political reasons why I never undertook a PhD after completion of a Masters degree. 1) I was already in debt from the Masters programme and did not feel able to increase my debt (a situation set to get dramatically worse with the introduction of student fees); 2) The department where I wanted to pursue a doctorate had been excluded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) from receiving studentships due to slow completion rates at the time.

As a result the first 7 years of my academic career were spent working as a contract researcher in two universities. As a contract researcher you are on a fixed term contract (mine varied from 2 years to 3 months in length) in a position of astute insecurity and powerlessness. Fixed term contracts can leave you feeling exposed and undervalued and place you in a relationship of grace and favour with those who have the potential to influence the extension or termination of your contract of employment.

Sometimes I worked as part of a team where I was not the principal grant holder but always the principal researcher and sometimes where I was the grant holder who managed other research staff. In some research teams I had more autonomy than in others. My time as a contract researcher prepared me for the realities of contemporary academic life above and beyond the traditional route of undertaking a doctoral degree. I had to manage my own research trajectory with a constant trail of funding applications; be ever vigilant of the requirements linked to the Research Assessment Exercise and the imperative to publish; develop relationships with a range of stakeholders including funding bodies and research subjects as well as personnel internal to the university; negotiate my way through staff/research team meetings and ingratiate myself to the academy. Because of the system of competitive tendering for research funding there was often insufficient time to complete a hefty research programme. There was certainly never enough time to consider your own career path and the possibility of pursuing a PhD concurrently was nigh impossible. This is the normal model for social science and humanities research contracts in the UK but not for the natural sciences where it is usually expected that registration for a PhD runs alongside a research contract. I was one of the lucky ones with a supportive Head of Department who has never seen the PhD as the sole entry point to the academic profession. Increasingly, however the PhD is being seen as crucial to working in a University with many institutions stating that it is policy not to employ anyone without one as institutions attempt to mark out their research standing in the ever more competitive higher education market. The obvious corollaries of this are that those who cannot afford to pursue a PhD (often those who are non-traditional entrants to university education e.g. without a familial history of higher education and from low income backgrounds) but want to work in research and academia will take contract work but never be able to move over into the established career posts enjoyed by permanent staff.

Contract Research Staff are at the beck and call of a system that does not value their role and often exploits their insecurity to the advantage of those in permanent positions. I was fortunate to be working with people who understood the issues and took great efforts to treat me on an equal footing. Nonetheless with competitive individualism being thrust upon academic research in the form of the RAE, with

funding bodies stressing ever more forcefully evidence of dissemination and with types of promotion criteria within institutions often implicitly or explicitly undervaluing joint publications issues of authorship rights and intellectual property were constantly being renegotiated. This explains in part the amount of jointly authored pieces included in this submission. I am not suggesting that the stated authorship for these pieces is invalid, far from it. I maintain that the best form of peer review is to work with others. It is more interesting, more stimulating, and I find, rather more difficult than writing on your own. Collaboration in academic work is to be applauded; it fosters interdisciplinarity and collegiality which require and deserve constant reinforcement. I would also like to raise the question of how far removed this is from (a minimum) 3 years of supervision and departmental support to complete a PhD that becomes a 'sole' authored submission?

My approach to constructing this thesis was based on a desire to tell a narrative. This collection does not represent all the work I have published but it is an attempt to show how my own thoughts and ideas have developed over time in relation to the concurrent development of theoretical thinking and changing socio-political realities. Much material had to be excluded. It is also constrained by other factors such as the difficulty in obtaining research funding to pursue particular research agendas. This thesis contains no systematic research on alternative media because funding for such research has not been forthcoming. The remainder of this postscript attempts to suggest ways in which this gap could be filled and explain further the direction of my own research by building on the concept of mediating solidarity referred to in the introduction to this thesis.

Mediating Solidarity

The work presented in this volume suggests that the relationship between the growth of popular mobilisation and the media in all its forms is one of interdependence. As the space available for public communication shrinks it would appear that people search out and in some cases produce other forms of information and communication. As alternative political media appear to increase in number it is timely to return to the question posed of political pluralists – does the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics necessarily lead to a multiplication of forces? Unless powerful efforts

at alliances are made the oppositional energy of individual groups and subcultures is more often neutralized in the marketplace of multicultural pluralism or polarized in a reductive competition of victimisations. Apart from the hegemonic interest in preventing counterpublic alliances, the structural problem that arises with the proliferation of counterpublics is one of translation, of communicating across a wider arena of discursive contestation particularly in a global economy.

The notion of fragmentation in modern life and in particular of political culture is fuelled by the rise of identity politics that focuses on consumption not production. Party allegiances and class alliances give way to more fluid and informal networks of action. Postmodern theorists celebrate fragmentation because it allows the recognition of diversity in political desires, acknowledges difference between individuals and debunks the myth of homogenous political units leading ultimately to liberation. But for political efficacy there must be more than the apparent freedom that comes with embracing difference and diversity. Based on the work in this collection, if we accept the description of society as fragmented, in order to create a viable political community then solidarity is crucial. Solidarity is the necessary condition and the essential collective contribution to the well being of liberty and difference (Bauman, 1997). In a global economy forms of media that can at once operate transnationally and outside of or at least alongside, the corporate reach of multi-national commercial media, such as the Internet, may provide the means by which global solidarity can be relayed. A few examples serve to illustrate this possibility:

On 30 November 1999 an alliance of labour and environmental activists congregated in Seattle in an attempt to make it impossible for delegates to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) conference to meet. They were joined by consumer advocates, anti-capitalists and a variety of other grassroots movements. Simultaneously, it is claimed that nearly 1,200 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in 87 countries called for the wholesale reform of the WTO, many staging their own protests in their own countries (The Guardian Online, 25.11.99 p.4). Groups integrated the internet into their strategies. The International Civil Society website provided hourly updates about the major demonstrations in Seattle to a network of almost 700 NGOs in some 80 countries (Norris, 2002). The demonstration was heralded as a success for transnational internet activism.

The internet, it is claimed, enabled large numbers of activists to support the Seattle demonstration itself or to mass simultaneously across the globe. Preparations for the event began months in advance with web sites set up and electronic links made to activist groups in several countries. Many were unaligned to political parties forming a fragmentary collectivity of people joined by nothing more specific than dissatisfaction with globalised capitalism. There appeared to be no unified vision for change, no coherent philosophy – anarchists joined forces with human rights activists, environmentalists with trade unionists. Even the intended outcome was difficult to pin down and often abstract and vague – frequently described as the pursuit of a ‘free society’. But there was no doubt that the protest was facilitated by the internet.

The People’s Global Action (PGA) organisation was formed in 1998 by activists protesting in Geneva against the second Ministerial Conference of the WTO, and to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the multilateral trade system (GATT and WTO). PGA describes itself as an instrument for co-ordination, not an organisation and its main objectives are:

- Inspiring the greatest possible number of persons and organisations to act against corporate domination through civil disobedience and people-oriented constructive actions.
- Offering an instrument for co-ordination and mutual support at global level for those resisting corporate rule and the capitalist development paradigm.
- Giving more international projection to the struggles against economic liberalisation and global capitalism, as well as to the struggles of indigenous people and original cultures. (PGA website [agp.org], October, 2004).

Another example of successful on-line activism is the protests against war on Iraq throughout 2002 and 2003. Leading up to Saturday 15 February 2003, the date of the second set of street demonstrations organized around the globe to protest about the possibility of war in Iraq, the internet hummed with excitement. One of the key organizations coordinating the protests was the brainchild of two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who saw the internet as a way of channeling political protest.

MoveOn.org was started in 1998 by Joan Blades and Wes Boyd as a way of reaching people with similar views who would coordinate protests and send their views to politicians and the media. After September 11, the MoveOn peace campaign was founded independently as 9-11Peace.org by Eli Pariser who joined forces with the original MoveOn. Since then organizers have seen their database of supporters expand to 700,000 people across the US alone, linked by the internet. In the US in January 2003 they financed an anti-war commercial broadcast on selected television stations and funded by MoveOn activists. It operates as part of a broad coalition bringing groups together and disseminating at speed information on rallies and protests. On 15 February 2003 anti-war marches took place in the streets of Seoul, Tokyo, Melbourne, London, Rome, across the US and throughout Spain. The coordinated demonstrations are said to mark the single biggest day of global protests in world history (Danaher and Mark, 2003) organised via the internet. These are only a taster of the many, as yet, uncharted groups working online to create alliances, organise protest and effect protest. Globalisation it seems has stirred up a host of anxieties while technological change has introduced a way in which citizens can unite to express their concerns.

The internet is also home to several organisations offering alternative news services often alongside campaigns for communication rights. These organisations place information and communication at the heart of all political projects. The sharing of information between oppositional groups and new social movements not found on mainstream channels illustrates how the power to communicate has become one of the key struggles in late capitalism. There are several not-for-profit web portals focusing on global media issues. Mediachannel.org claims to be a gateway to the largest network of media issues groups in the world. The site is driven by content from more than 300 international media organisations and publications and explores areas such as freedom of expression, citizen access to media, trends in media ownership, media arts and media and politics. It is a joint project of two foundations specialising in independent media, Britain's Oneworld Online and The Global Center in New York:

“We created Mediachannel in response to the crisis in the media world...the dumbing down of news and the trivialising of information is not just an American phenomenon but a global one.” (Danny Schechter, executive editor, MediaChannel press release)

OneWorld, an online community of over 750 organizations, covering the whole spectrum of development, environmental and human rights activities and extending from Manhattan to Delhi claim to provide the best, the biggest and the most up-to-date news and information service for people interested in understanding the real state of the world. Since its inception in 1995, the gateway to the OneWorld community, the super site OneWorld.net, has grown exponentially. In 2002 it carried over 1.5 million pages of text, images, video and sound and delivered them to millions of people around the world. Edited in eight OneWorld centers across the globe and updated twenty-four hours a day, OneWorld.net also has the web's premier search engine on global justice allowing users to find the content they want on the issues that matter most to them. Partner organizations range from global institutions like CARE and UNICEF to grassroots projects in the South tackling local hardship. They all use OneWorld.net to share ideas, to reach the public, to express solidarity and to take part in the global debate about the future of the planet and its peoples.

The Institute of Global Communications (IGC) offers a website that allows people to subscribe to advocacy and lobbying groups, affiliate with the organization, receive e-mailed policy newsletters and action alerts, send faxes and emails to decision makers, circulate electronic petitions, learn about forthcoming street demonstrations, protest events, job vacancies and voluntary activities, as well as share effective strategies for activism, contribute news items and participate in on-line discussions. The IGC site, established in 1990, contains about 350,000 links in over 8,000 pages. Another site, established in the same year formed by various NGO and civil society networks - The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) describes itself as “the first globally interconnected community of ICT users and service providers working for social and environmental justice” (APC Website). APC currently (2005) has 36 member networks serving more than 50,000 activists, non-profit organisations, charities and NGOs in over 133 countries with a strong mix of Southern and Northern organizations.

This apparent growth of internet activist/protest sites can be viewed alongside a dramatic increase in the late twentieth century in the proportion of people engaged in protest politics. The World Values Study of the mid-1990s compares trends from the

mid 1970s to the mid-1990s in eight nations (Britain, West Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, the United States, Italy, Switzerland and Finland) confirming that the experience of protest politics has risen steadily over the years. The proportion of citizens who had signed a petition in these countries doubled from 32 percent to 60 percent; the proportion who had attended a demonstration escalated from 7 to 19 percent; and the proportion participating in a consumer boycott tripled from 5 to 15 percent.

Alongside an increase in protest politics is the development of the World and European Social Forums. The World Social Forum (WSF) has established itself as the world's largest annual meeting for social movements and activists. It describes itself as "an international framework for all those opposed to globalization and building alternatives to think and organize together in favour of human development and surmounting market domination of countries and international relations" (WSF official website, October 2004). In 2001, the first World Social Forum brought together some 20,000 participants, around 4,700 of them delegates for a wide range of organisations from 117 countries as well as 1,870 accredited journalists.

The first event was so successful it was decided the WSF had to continue. For this purpose, the then WSF Organising Committee (now part of the WSF Secretariat) proposed drafting a Charter of Principles to secure the WSF as a permanent framework and process for building alternatives at the world level. In 2001, in order to enable the WSF process to interlink effectively at the international level, the WSF International Council (IC) was set up among thematic networks, movements and organisations with accumulated knowledge and experience in generating alternatives to neoliberal globalisation. WSF 2002 took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil with 12,274 delegates present representing 123 countries. The press turned out in force: 3,356 journalists, 1,866 of them Brazilian and 1,490 from other countries, from a total of 1066 publications. The total number of participants was estimated at more than 50,000, exceeding all expectations. The same thematic areas as at the first Forum were covered in 27 conferences, 96 seminars and 622 self-managed activities (i.e., seminars and workshops organised by groups participating in the WSF). WSF 2003, held in Porto Alegre drew close to 100,000 participants from all over the world. Some

20,000 delegates, from a total of 123 countries took part. In 2003, core organised activities included a total of 10 conferences, 22 testimonies, 4 dialogue and controversy round tables and 36 panel debates. These core activities alone brought together 392 speakers from a wide range of countries, three times more than in 2001, which had drawn a total of 104 speakers from networks, organisations and social movements from around the world. The number of self-managed activities swelled from something like 400 at WSF 2001 to about 1,300 in 2003 (WSF official website, October 2004).

The European Social Forum (ESF) emerged from the success of the World Social Forum. Its first two gatherings in Florence (2002) and Paris (2003) attracted over 50,000 participants from across Europe and beyond. More than 20,000 people from nearly 70 countries came to the European Social Forum in London in October 2004. The six key themes of the forum were: war and peace; democracy and fundamental rights; social justice and solidarity – against privatisation and deregulation, for workers, social and women's rights; corporate globalisation and global justice; against racism, discrimination and the far right – for equality and diversity; environmental crisis, against neo-liberalism and for sustainable society. Both the ESF and the WSF are used to mobilise protest on many issues and on many levels. The events often feel like chaotic gatherings of thousands of disparate resistant identities and the possibility of creating a political project appears a long way off. But whereas each person attending has a purpose in mind that may differ from the next person's they all share common ground, albeit defined by its vagueness, in the desire to work towards a better, more socially just world. And it is worth while reminding ourselves that five years ago social forums did not exist yet today tens of thousands of people meet each year to discuss alternatives to the neo-liberal global agenda. That in itself is a fascinating outcome of globalisation and new communication technologies.

There is, it would appear, a growing sense of protest and resistance to the neo-liberal agenda. It may be fragmentary but alliances have been forged and successful political campaigns undertaken. These campaigns have brought class-based opposition such as trade unions into alliance with social movements more emphatically than ever before. Computer mediated activism is qualitatively different from the party-based socialist and communist internationals. The Web links labour, feminist, race, peace, ecology

and other anticapitalist group suggesting the development of new forms of cultural resistance.

This offers the potential for the circulation of struggles or what Klein (2000) has referred to as a global web for the better transmission of oppositional practices. The ability of new communication technologies to operate globally and so respond to global economic agendas is key to their contemporary capacity to engender resistance. Whether the expression of resistance is powerful enough to effect social change is a question of human agency and a far more complex issue (Papacharissi, 2002).

Mansbridge (2001:240-1) argues that oppositional consciousness requires identifying with an unjustly subordinated group, recognising a group identity of interest in doing so, understanding the injustice as systemic, and accepting the need for and efficacy of collective action. She also states that the formation of an oppositional culture is both an additive and an interactive process (2001:249), where a variety of motivations are at play within the group. Social solidarity can be described as a morality of cooperation, the ability of individuals to identify with each other in a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity without individual advantage or compulsion, leading to a network of individuals or secondary institutions that are bound to a political project involving the creation of social and political bonds. Solidarity is the socio-political glue that prevents dissolution through difference (Dean, 1996, 1997). Solidarity also reaffirms the need for political intervention that may be translated and relayed in the symbolic immaterial world of cyberspace but originates from and solidifies in the material world of the real.

Seen in this way solidarity is no longer about struggles relating to each other like links in a chain but communicating like a virus or a global web (Klein, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2000) facilitated by new communication and information technology – a techno politics of the information age. Tomlinson refers to this as ‘complex connectivity: ‘By this I mean that globalisation refers to the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences that characterise modern social life’ (1999:2). Solidarity does not need to be linear, it does not need to follow a prescribed narrative:

These initiatives proceed without central focus. They constitute a diffuse coalescence of microactivisms contesting the macrologic of capitalist globalisation....They exist as a sort of fine mist of international activism, composed of innumerable droplets of contact and communication, condensing in greater or lesser densities and accumulations, dispersing again, swirling into unexpected formations and filaments, blowing over and around the barriers dividing global workers. (Dyer-Witheford, 1999:157).

Hardt and Negri ask: 'how can the endeavour to bridge the distance between the formation of the multitude as subject and the constitution of a democratic political apparatus find its prince?' (2000:65). In accord with Lash (2002) they believe that the answer lies in working with the flattened, fragmentary, immanent world of the information order and its relationship to the external, material world: 'any postmodern liberation must be achieved within this world, on the plane of immanence, with no possibility of any even utopian outside. The form in which the political should be expressed as subjectivity today is not clear at all' (Hardt and Negri 2000:65). Indeed, solidarity can be performative through information and communication and embrace a thousand fragmented subjectivities.

Contemporary movements are prophets of the present. What they possess is not the force of the apparatus but the power of the wordThey force the power out into the open and give it a shape and a face. They speak a language that seems to be entirely their own, but they say something that transcends their particularity and speaks to us all. (Melucci, 1996:1).

Breslow (1997) argues that the internet promotes a sense of sociality, but its anonymity and lack of spatiality and density may be counterproductive to solidarity. But the performative capacity of solidarity, the ability to give power to the word comes from the felt existence of struggles that are situated in the real material world of poverty, inequality and other social injustices. Furthermore, only through the embodiment of solidarity offline will social movements gain public legitimacy and political force. The immaterial mediated world that embraces fragmented political subjectivities connects with the material world at the site of conflict, bringing together disparate experiences of political reality and finding common ground, though that

ground may be uneven. The political project that may eventually emerge from this outpouring of resistance is as yet unknown but the possibility at least is real. The notion of mediated solidarity begins to describe this process and crystallises the issues. Chesters and Welsh (2004:317) call this an 'ecology of action' defined as 'the systems of relations between differing groups and individuals who are engaged in producing collective action within a context determined by fixed temporal, spatial and material constraints which are themselves a product of contingent social, political and cultural forces.' This is an important reminder of the social constraints all participants are subject to. Issues of cultural and economic capital are ever prevalent. The ability to define and shape the nature of any movement often falls to those with the relevant social and educational resources. Many of the high profile protests take place at distant locations – only those protestors with funds for travel can get to them. And as these protests are often organised on the internet the economic and cultural resources involved in the use of this technology also exclude many potential participants, probably those suffering the most impact of the very thing being protested against (Crossley, 2002).

This collection of thoughts is not intended to suggest that new media technology itself leads to a brand new age of political collective radicalism. Neither is it intended to suggest that the global reorganisation of capital is a monolithic force of impenetrable power and domination. Undoubtedly there is an enduring primacy of capitalist relations of production and capitalist imperatives dominate not only production but consumption and other domains of society and culture. Workers remain exploited by and struggle against capitalists and capital remains as the hegemonic force. What I do want to suggest is that we should always attend to the dialectical relationship between capital, technology and culture to grasp how new forms of social life and new politics are possible. To understand the present moment we need to interrogate the nature of global technocapitalism and how it is creating a new technoculture and new identities that bring with them threats as well as promises. The notion of mediated solidarity seems to me to be one way in to this theoretical minefield. Solidarity is steeped in the history of labour relations, struggles and conflicts rooted in the exploitation of labour by the pursuit of capital. It is a modernist concept based on the principles of a political economic order. The past decade has been marked by cultural activism that uses new communications technology to spread radical social critique and alternative culture –

the realm of new social movements. New forms of mediation have revealed new forms of protest. Mediated solidarity is far more than signing an online petition or clicking on protest websites while alone in your own home – this is not technodeterminism. Indeed online activism can be seen as lazy politics – it makes people feel good but does very little. It allows like minded individuals and organisations to talk to each other unfettered by too many social norms and actually do nothing. It can be criticised for further distancing people from each other and deepening already abstract social relations. Solidarity is about engaging beyond the click of a mouse and is about much more than mediation.

The possibility for counter political projects to emerge is likely to rest in part on the ability of localised protest groups to create alliances and organise solidarity locally and globally as well as on the ability to break away from, penetrate or disrupt the powers of capital. It would appear that new information and communication technologies can facilitate this process, although far more empirical research is required before this can be established. The concept of mediating solidarity suggests that the challenge is to articulate the communications politics with actual movements and struggles so that cyberpolitics is an arm of the real battle rather than its replacement or substitute. The virtual embodiment of solidarity suggests the potential for a social imaginary to develop that at least posits a dreaming forward - a crucial element in the pursuit of a better tomorrow.

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