



1981

Golding and Elliot: Making the News

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Recommended Citation

Mosco, V. (1981). Golding and Elliot: Making the News. 7(4), 89-91. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol7/iss4/7>

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Golding and Elliot: Making the News

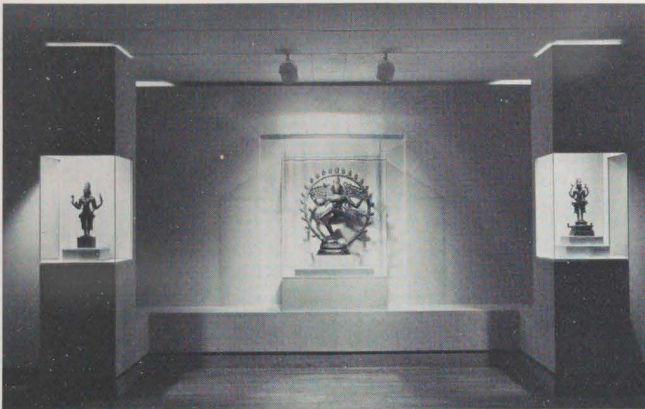


Figure 10 Entry to bronze gallery, Shiva as Nataraja flanked by other "processional images."



Figure 11 Central axis of bronze gallery: the goddess, Parvati, Shaivite saints, and the Los Angeles Nataraja.

Plan and photographs by Eric E. Mitchell (Figures 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11) and Richard C. Meyer (Figures 1, 2, 5, 7, 9). Courtesy of the Phila. Mus. of Art.

Peter Golding and Philip Elliott. *Making the News.* London: Longman, 1979.

Reviewed by Vincent Mosco
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Cecily: What field of endeavor are you engaged in?

Felix: I write the news for CBS.

Cecily: Oh! Fascinating!

Gwendolyn: Where do you get your ideas from?

Felix: (He looks at her as though she's a martian)
From the news.

Gwendolyn: Oh, yes, of course. Silly me... [p. 5]

Neil Simon wittily captures a prevalent view of news production: news is an independent *thing*, easily recognizable, but which only a few — professional journalists with a "nose for news" — are adept at gathering and reporting. Like the behavioral psychologist who views intelligence as whatever it is IQ tests measure, news is whatever it is a reporter delivers. To accuse a journalist of *making* news, Cronkite and other Personalities excepted, is as inaccurate as accusing the IQ analyst of making intelligence.

This view has of late been subjected to some well-deserved debunking, although, as the authors of this fine cross-cultural report on broadcast news-making point out, journalism is the last among knowledge-producing institutions to submit to demystification. Scrutinizing teachers and psychologists is itself something of an occupation today — witness the growth of professional education and mental health evaluation specialists. The same is not the case for journalism, despite mounting evidence of people's growing dependency on the communications industry for information ranging from the basic (What should I cook for dinner?) to the complex (Who has the power to determine whether I can afford dinner?).

Recent research has begun to remedy this shortcoming. Epstein's *News from Nowhere*, Gans' *Deciding What's News*, and Schudson's *Discovering the News* concretely detail the sociological truism that newsmaking, like any collective human endeavor, is a social process. The news does not exist, but events do. From these events a particular group of people, constrained by various financial, political, social, and organizational forces, select a sample, filter, and report. Halberstam's *The Powers That Be* notwithstanding, the process by which people shape events into news is leaving the realm of romantic mythology, of Great Men who build news dynasties and tough journalists who succeed because they understand the intuitive genius it takes to do a story.

Golding and Elliott's *Making the News* contributes substantially to the debunking and to our thinking about what more need be done. The most significant advance in their research is its explicitly cross-cultural focus. The book grows out of the 1968 UNESCO General Conference resolution to support research on the role of "the media of mass communication in modern society." The International Institute of Communications (then the International Broadcast Institute) funded the research through the Centre for Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester. *Making the News* reports on extensive participatory and documentary research conducted at broadcast news organizations in Nigeria (Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, West Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation, Radio-Television Kaduna), Ireland (Radio Telefis Eireann), and Sweden (Sveriges Radio). The authors' data provide much-needed empirical grounding for a debate that threatens to stagnate on the terms free flow/media imperialism. Hence their research is valuable not only because it speaks to the issue of how people create broadcast news but because it sets that issue concretely in a global context of newsmaking control.

Golding and Elliott use the material gathered from these three disparate societies to press the theme that, despite vast differences in levels of development, news philosophies, and political systems, broadcast news in Sweden, Ireland, and Nigeria sounds and looks the same. They link this to a structural view:

...broadcasting practice merely falls back on the historically bred routines and values of commercial journalism. For several reasons broadcasting is a relatively passive form of journalism, highly dependent on the news-producing groups in society, whose values and cultural definitions it inevitably reproduces and relays. ...the resulting content of broadcast news portrays a very particular view of the world that we can label ideological. Lacking two crucial dimensions of descriptive structure, process and power, it is inherently incapable of providing a critical account of events in the world. This is not the result of a conspiracy within newsrooms or of the inadequacies, professional or political, of broadcast journalists. It is a necessary result of the structure of news gathering and production, and of the routines and conventions built into professional broadcasting practice. News is the end product of patterned routines whose management is the process of news production. [p. 18]

Structure shapes content. What this means for the production of broadcast news and what it implies for efforts to change that production are revealed in their evidence. Consider structure first. By structure the authors mean more than the direct pressure of the state and its regulatory arms. The *mediating* role of Radioamden in Sweden, the more explicit state *inter-*

vention that the 1960 Broadcasting Act permits in Ireland, and the *accommodation* of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation to the military government's view of development journalism are certainly structural forces that distinctly affect news content. But more important in their view are internal constraints that govern news *planning, gathering, selection, and presentation*—factors that blur the apparent distinctions among these and other news organizations. Diaries and editorial conferences help reduce newsroom uncertainty by planning the kinds of stories to be covered over a period of time. Gathering is heavily influenced by international and regional news agencies as well as by governmental and other prominent institutions. Selection involves the filtering of these stories. Here the availability of film, particularly from a prominent production source, is a determining influence. This Nigerian example is illustrative:

Visnews had film (two weeks old) of student strikes in the Congo. No Congo news was apparent on the wires but there was a student demonstration in Dahomey. The two were integrated although the Congo strike was anti-government, the Dahomey demonstration pro-government. Nigerian journalists are as socially and politically aware as any others. The point is that production needs, and the exigencies of meeting programme requirements, override news value or social significance in selecting and compiling. To a large extent, these needs and exigencies can only be met by leaning heavily on the services of film agencies. [p. 110]

Finally, there is presentation, the application of news values or a set of "working rules comprising a corpus of occupational lore which implicitly and often expressly explains and guides newsroom practice" (p. 114). Visual attractiveness, "recency," elite involvement, and other not unfamiliar qualities make stories in Ireland strikingly similar to those in Nigeria. In sum, the pressures of political context, time, and lack of resources constrain broadcast journalists to fall back on traditional values that simplify and justify a consistent pattern of news production.

Golding and Elliott turn from these structural constraints to the resulting content. Again we read familiar themes, though here given an explicitly empirical, cross-cultural grounding. Emphasis is on the passing event, on personalities not organizations, on government as the sole source of power in societies, on a world that continues to revolve around the old colonial centers.

The authors' carefully described insights into the structure and content of broadcast news would benefit from a sharper theoretical focus. This is particularly evident in two areas: changes in the process of journalistic work and the political economy, increasingly global in reach, within which this work is carried out.

In the first area, the work process, Golding and Elliott conclude that broadcast journalism in all three systems is becoming a highly routinized activity:

Whether the broadcast journalist is a professional or not, his occupational values and ambitions are far from autonomous. The bureaucratic and work routines and exigencies that surround him severely compromise the free exercise of ideals or professional intent, and in turn such values come to incorporate and reflect such limitations. . . . The triumph of routine over professional ideology results from the technical complexities and scale of broadcast journalism, which make it a segmented and passive craft, often removed from the newspaper practices in which its ideology was formed. [p. 192]

But is it merely the complexity and scale of broadcast journalism that make for segmented, passive, even degraded work? The research of Braverman (1974) and others (Zimbalist 1979) suggests that computer scientists, engineers, and other so-called professionals, including print journalists, are experiencing the same routinization. According to this labor process focus, routinization and de-skilling result more from the drive to reduce labor costs and extend managerial control over potential sources of workplace opposition than from complexity of work.

Political economy extends beyond the labor process or the point of production. Time and resource shortages certainly lead to dependency on international and regional film services such as Eurovision and Visnews. But why are these the only available alternatives? What is it about the political economy of broadcast news production that makes Visnews dominant in Sweden, Nigeria, and Ireland? Wallerstein (1979) and Villamil (1979) have offered dependency models that would illuminate this question and overcome weaknesses in the policy recommendations that Golding and Elliott offer. These models would expand their focus of change beyond the need to reform the internal structure of broadcast news production by explicitly challenging the concentration of power in the hands of a few dominant broadcast news production sources.

These concerns are not meant to diminish the significance of their work. Indeed, it is the detailed empirical evidence that the authors present that makes concern about the labor process and the global political economy of broadcast journalism all the more pressing. Guided by a sharper theoretical focus, more work on making the news in different societies with different political and cultural traditions is necessary before it is too late to do anything about the issues *Making the News* raises.

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Briefly Noted

John A. R. Blacking and Joann Kealiinohomoku, eds.
The Performing Arts (World Anthropology, vol. 22). The Hague: Mouton (distributed by Walter de Gruyter Press), 1979. \$44.25.

This is a companion volume to *The Visual Arts*, both of which originated from formal sessions on the topic of art and anthropology convened during the Ninth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in 1973. The focus here is on music and dance, represented in twenty-four papers by researchers from Austria, India, Ireland, Japan, Nigeria, Romania, South Africa, the United States, U.S.S.R., Vietnam, and Yugoslavia. The contributions run the gamut from purely descriptive folkloric research to more general theoretical issues, but with the exception of a set of topics on musical perception they do not have any consistent themes or challenges. As in many other volumes in the World Anthropology series, the quality of the papers varies greatly. Some papers (Blacking, Hanna) repeat perspectives which their authors have developed in detail elsewhere, but a few are fresh and quite stimulating (Kealiinohomoku on continuity and change in Balinese and Hawaiian dance, Kubik's summary of research on pattern perception in African music) and others report data that are rarely discussed in English-language publications (Sikharulidze on Georgian poetic folklore, Comisel on the Romanian folklore calendar). While this collection is hardly an accurate barometer of world research in the performing arts, it nevertheless contains some captivating essays and descriptive materials valuable for cross-cultural research on performance.