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Title	Representing Realities : an Overview of News Framing
Sub Title	
Author	Watoson, James
Publisher	Institute for Communications Research, Keio University
Publication year	2007
Jtitle	Keio communication review No.29 (2007. 3) ,p.107- 131
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Journal Article
URL	http://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AA00266090-20070300-0107

Representing Realities: An Overview of News Framing

by James WATSON*

As Stuart Hall (1990) notes, “the media are... part of the dominant means of ideological production. What they ‘produce’ is precisely representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work”.

Frames make an apt metaphor for media because of their variety, and in part because they are imprecise – allowing us a degree of flexibility of definition and use. We have picture frames into which we insert images that in turn, in some way or another, provide us with a *representation*; something that has been subject to a number of wider frames, each one influencing and influenced by the other. It is helpful to differentiate between frames that are visible, immediately identifiable, and those that are invisible, whose presence you sense but are often difficult to locate, to put your finger on. The newspaper page is a frame. We can talk of headlines, captions, the positioning of photographs, the differing style and size of print: the bigger the story, the bigger the type-size? Well, not exactly and not always. With television we can readily identify the framing devices, illustrated in Figure 1, working at the operational level. Invariably, music serves as an initial frame, its intention to combine the serious with the buoyant, to set the tone of what is to follow. It summons our attention as the process of mediation, between events and presentation, comes into play.

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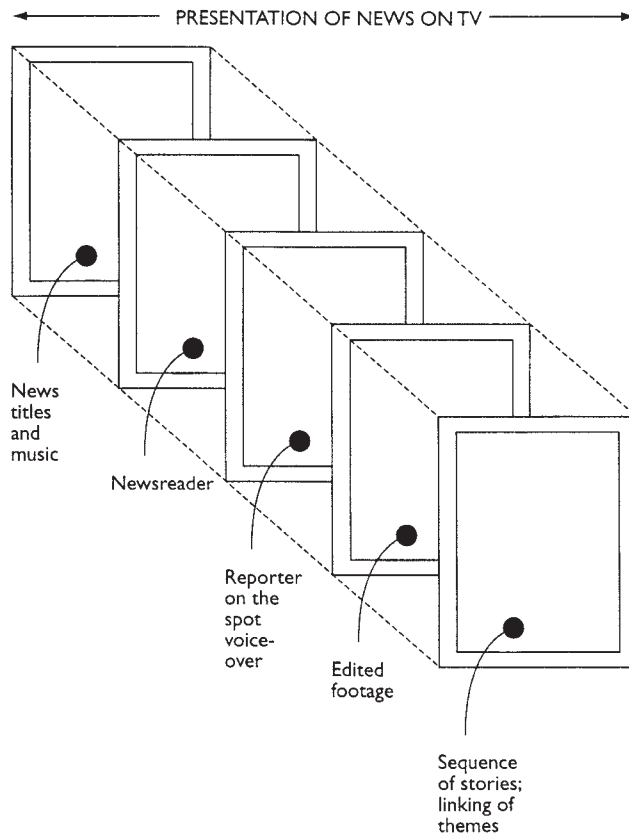


Figure 1 Multiple Frames of TV News (Watson and Hill, 2006).

The music combines with graphic imagery to remind us of the routineness of news while at the same time giving emphasis to the new and possibly unexpected. We are invited to respond to the urgency of what is to come. Whether the newscast lasts 20 minutes or 24 hours we recognise time as a dominant frame, the invisible assumption being that there is too little of it, that time marches on; and perhaps if we are not alert to its imperatives, it might march on without us.

Immediacy – as opposed to such practices as savouring, contemplating, allowing matters to unfold – not only dominates the news: it can be recognised as a factor in our everyday lives. We often find ourselves conforming to deadlines as rigorously as the reporters who produce the headline stories that compete for our attention.

Deadlines cut things short. Deadlines drop things out. They are so familiar to us that we consider them natural, a necessary corollary of our modern lifestyle. We do well, however, to recognise how *culture-specific* these deadlines are. It

follows that they are not ideology-free any more than our versions of reality can be detached from the subjectivity of our visions.

Of course what we as audience do not see or hear we do not miss, unless we are experts in the field, have a particular interest in a news item or issue, or if we have actually been present at an event we see reported. Only then does it become manifest how the real world is challenged by the mediated one; and on the rare occasions when it does happen, we may very well find that events as reported fail to match our recollection of them.

Reality through the media lens

Such is our media-dominated world that for most of us reality beyond personal experience exists, and sometimes only exists, in the media frame, or what Van Gorp (2005) terms “a repertoire of frames that we dispose of in our culture to represent reality”.

What helps us begin to see the wood for the trees is the *study* of the subject; putting the whole process of media production under the microscope. Indeed, could anything be more a right of citizenship than the younger generation learning the ways and means – and the power – of mass communication?

I confess to being worried sometimes, and occasionally upset, when in my own country I hear Media Studies being described as a soft-option, a self-indulgent and marginal subject. Regrettably such criticism often emanates from media practitioners themselves. Are they, one wonders, sometimes a little nervous that the audience might have grown wise to the conjurer’s bag of tricks?

We should probably take heart from public criticism of the study of media on the grounds that if what is being studied were safe, if it in no way constituted a threat to the existing pattern of things, then there might be no criticism and the subject might stagnate in the margins of academic life. It would be in danger of slipping out of the educational frame altogether.

James Bronterre O’Brien (1805-64), Chartist leader and editor of the short-lived but immensely influential *Poor Man’s Guardian*, declared that there were two forms of knowledge – that which those in authority wished you to have; and that which would sooner or later challenge that authority. It is arguable that Media Studies, the scrutiny of media purposes and performance, has the makings of the second. It engages reality as directly as any other subject of study.

This does not place it within the dominant frames of contemporary education, at least in Britain, where deadline culture is reflected in the obsession on the part of the authorities with mechanistic modes of assessment and league tables, indicators of a society whose framing principles have been seen by some critics as resembling those of fast-food culture, what Ritzer (1992, revised edition 1998) has termed the *McDonaldisation* of society – efficiency, calculability, predictability and control.

In British education today, these principles constitute the in-philosophy of decision-makers, defining, shaping and ruling every practice. Very like printed or broadcast news, what won't fit in to the frame of such principles, what cannot be conveniently measured according to what might be described as the "hamburger paradigm", is not assessed at all. It is off the educational agenda.

Setting agendas, operating gates

With that word "agenda" we begin to close in on the complex world of media framing. In class, I ask students, what *is* an agenda? And they usually have a good idea of what agendas are, especially if they have sat on committees of one kind or another. Very rarely, though, do they perceive agendas as anything other than straightforward, above-board lists: simple, uncomplicated, instrumental.

Pushed to examine how agendas come about, that is, *who* decides what goes on to the agenda, who prioritises items on that agenda, students begin to recognise the shadowy frames of authority and power. Pretty soon, students come to recognise the existence of *hidden agendas*. This I see as the cue to focus on the criteria and processes of selection, what is included in the news narrative and what might be excluded from it. Students readily enough recognise that selection in one form or another is something they are doing all their waking lives.

They may, for instance, be selecting their teacher out, preferring to think about their girlfriends or boyfriends, whether they want to go out on the town tonight. On the other hand, if there's a test tomorrow, they may well put aside thoughts of love and promote teacher and his or her subject-matter up the agenda. After all, how would systems of education fare without frames of control, in particular the apparatus of student assessment?

So we talk about *gatekeeping* – in everyday life, in college, at work. I ask students to give examples of occasions when they have been gate-kept. Often, in their researches for example, when they are seeking information or help from strangers, when they are phoning up with queries, they encounter the prime gatekeeper of the business world: the boss's secretary.

Why is it so difficult for a student to pass through the gate? Is it something to do with the student's lowly status; might it be because giving help or advice to a student offers little chance of a profitable return? Or could resistance, the closed gate, be because requests from students resemble a busy day in the newsroom when hundreds of stories compete for attention and inclusion?

The gate swings shut, it swings open; sometimes wide open, sometimes ajar, but there is always someone, usually more than one, who gate-keeps. Students quickly identify operational factors in the gatekeeping process, beginning with the apparently self-evident – if an event is important it will pass through the gate. Once through the gate, the item is on the agenda.

But *what* qualifies for admission, and who decides? A regular answer is that “People who gather and transmit the news are doing it every day of their working lives: they’re professionals, they know what news is”.

Even a cursory analysis of news texts, printed or broadcast, seems to confirm this assertion. Lo and behold, different news channels seem more or less to keep to the same or similar agendas. The same headline stories get similar treatment, using similar and familiar framing devices, to the point when one begins to think there is a natural order of selection.

It is only, of course, when one switches from BBC or ITN news in Britain, CBS in the States or NHK in Japan, to that of the Arab news service Al-Jazeera that one recognises an altogether different ball-game; a different reality, in fact. Either way, we can say with confidence that gates swing on hinges of expedience.

Let us for the moment linger at the desk of Mr. Gate, honouring, as I think we should, pioneering ideas and research from the springtime of the study of mass communication. Mr. Gate was the pseudonym given to a telegraph wire-editor of an American non-metropolitan paper by White (1950), and the inspiration for one of the earliest models in the history of media study:

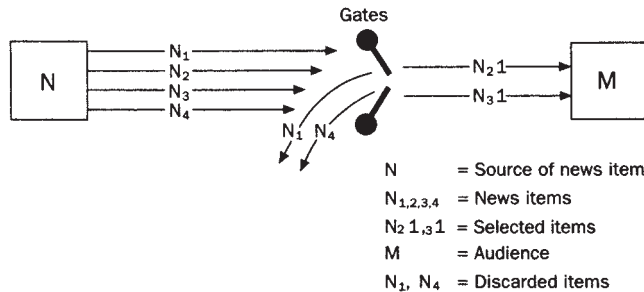


Figure 2 White’s Simple Gatekeeping Model (White, 1950).

Despite its oversimplification, the model warrants attention. I show it to students as an illustration of one *presence*, the existence and the power of the gate, and two *absences*, the actual *multiplicity* of gates and the *criteria* for selection or rejection. White’s model seems to suggest that the selection process only operates *at* the gate. Yet it is crucial for students to understand that mediation takes places at every possible stage between event and transmission; and that while by the time of transmission the media have, for the moment, completed their task, another phase of mediation has just begun – on the part of the audience, who in their turn exercise the opening and closing of gates of *attention*, and *comprehension*.

News values

The more we study the process the more we realise that it could not effectively take place without a set of rules of selection: rules of selection, yes, but equally rules of process and of structuring; all working according to wider constraints. We identify a sequence: if gates operate according to agendas, then agendas work according to rules which in turn arise out of values – *news values*.

Once more, and with a nod of respect, we return to the pioneering days of study and celebrate the work of Norwegian researchers Galtung and Ruge (1965):

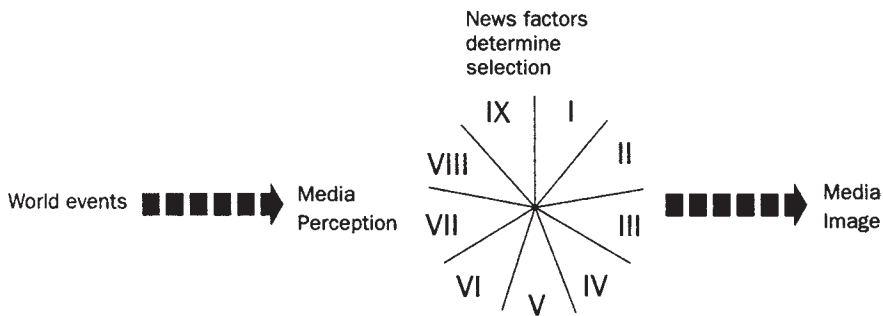


Figure 3 Galtung and Ruge's Model of Selective Gatekeeping (Galtung and Ruge, 1965)

Their taxonomy of news values appertaining to the reporting of foreign news has acquired something of the status of the Ten Commandments; and even in the age when text struggles to compete with the image, it continues to have relevance.

The model resembles the revolving door into a desirable hotel. The well-to-do may enter, these being ladies and gentlemen who fulfil one or more important news values; others will be blocked at the door as undesirables while others, making a brief appearance in reception, slip out almost unnoticed the way they came.

One of the most enjoyable classroom exercises is student discussion and report-back on what constitutes a news value. Groups usually approximate to the values identified by Galtung and Ruge, ranging from *amplitude* (the more the merrier, the bigger the better), via *ambiguity*, *lack of* (brevity and simplicity at all costs), *surprise* (man bites dog) through the *factors of composition* (such as ending a news bulletin with something amusing (an antidote to general seriousness of news)).

Students are quick to observe how stories about *elite* people and nations are welcomed through the revolving door and, these days, the lives of *celebrities* in particular. Sooner rather than later they recognise a value that turns up on practically every listing – the *negativity* of news factors.

Processing events: three stages

Galtung and Ruge argue that once selection has taken place according to one or more news values, two further processes occur – *distortion* and *replication*. Those characteristics of an event perceived to be newsworthy are accentuated, and inevitably distorted to a greater or lesser degree; and it is the distortion that is replicated. This *version* of reality is what is heading for the reader. The longer the chain of processing activities, write Galtung and Ruge, “the more selection and distortion will take place...every link in the chain reacts to what it receives... according to the same principles”.

There have been plenty of news value listings since Galtung & Ruge, aiding our understanding of how events become headlines. One that proves a favourite with students and is an excellent stimulus for discussion, is that posed by Jorgan Westerståhl and Folke Johansson in 1994:

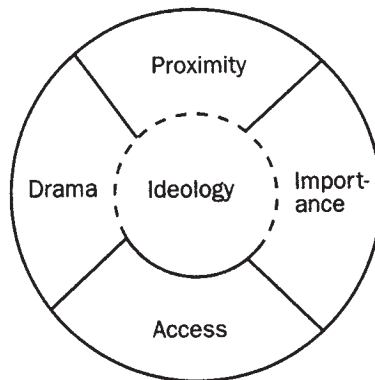


Figure 4 Westerståhl and Johansson’s Model of News Factors in Foreign News (Westerstahl and Johansson, 1994).

This gives us four grounds for inclusion – whether an event is *dramatic*, whether it is considered *important*, whether the event is *accessible* to the reporters, photographers or film makers who wish to turn that event into news, and a criterion which I see as of particular interest to those studying the international nature of media in the 21st century – *proximity*; that is in terms of geography, culture and/or economic and political interdependence.

A focus on proximity raises one or two problems. In the United Kingdom we are a short Eurostar ride from our European neighbours, yet events taking place in those countries are reported far less frequently, and in far less detail, than those that involve our Atlantic cousins. The link here is cultural of course and self-evidently linguistic. Yet, as a friend of mine living in the States once advised me, “Don”t fall into the trap of thinking the Brits and the Yanks are the same simply because they

share the same language. In all sorts of ways, they are very different”.

It is a timely reminder when a Briton is actually in the States to note the absence of references to things British in American news media. *They* may be constantly in *our* headlines, but we are rarely in theirs – whatever the nation’s commitment in supporting war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Reciprocity may not necessarily be a news value; and though Britain may deem itself a partner of America, a mate even, it as often as not that it finds itself outside the American frame of consciousness and therefore at the outer limits of the media frame.

If it is not language that is the key link between Brits and Yanks, it has to be *ideology*, the centre-piece of the Westerstahl and Johnsson model. Before we concentrate attention on the framing role and the key news value of ideology let us briefly return to agendas as framing devices. Below, is another landmark in the study of media, the Agenda-setting model posed by McCombs and Shaw (1972, 1976, 1993) and illustrating the connection between news production and public response:

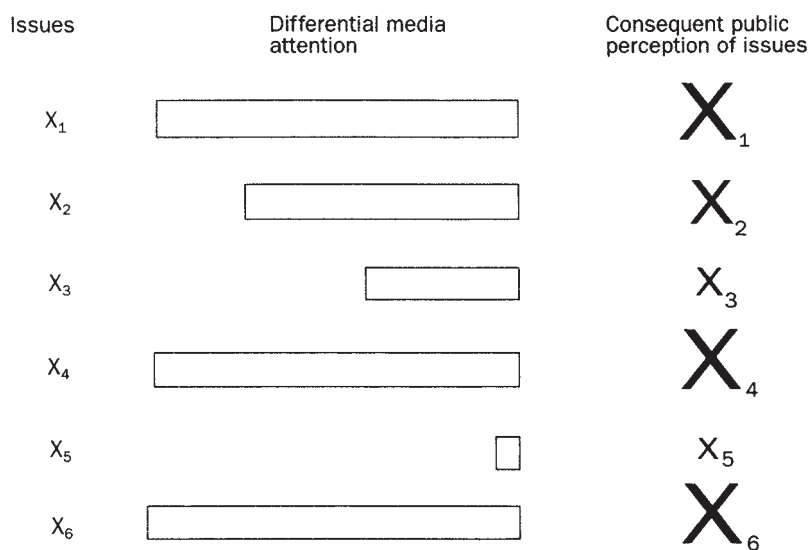


Figure 5 McComb’s and Shaw’s Agenda-setting Model of Media Effects (McCombs and Shaw, 1972)

At first glance the model seems to be a statement of the obvious: the more media coverage an event or issue receives, the larger it looms in the minds of the public. In short, what the media *say* is important is what the public *believes* to be important.

Conversely, what the media neglect to report, or barely report, produces a

minor effect upon the public mind. The model does not tell us why some Xs get the super treatment and others suffer from neglect. After all, the sexual preferences and peccadilloes of celebrities may not be important, but they fill the news pages in many cases to the displacement of more important news, hence the many accusations in recent years that the media have been and are continuing to be, dumbed-down.

It would seem that there are no absolutes when it comes to defining what is important, especially when we find the media so often blurring the difference between what is *in* the public interest and what interests the public.

We need to work from McCombs and Shaw in the direction of the *attribution* of value, as it were the V (for Value)-factor that gives each X its ranking in the news agenda. At the same time, it has to be made clear that different media work within different frames of attribution.

For example, Semethko and Valkenburg (2000) in a *Journal of Communication* article “Framing European politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News” point out that while television and the serious press work within the frame of *attribution of responsibility*, the popular press aim for the *human interest* frame.

The McCombs and Shaw model implies that control over the coverage of events is the business of the media alone. In fact, just as there are many gates there are numerous agendas and these agendas are sometimes in competition or conflict with one another. The name of the game is dominance.

Public sphere, public opinion

In theory at least, the agora of ancient Greece was history’s first public sphere, a space in which citizens gathered to argue over the affairs of state. Albeit excluding women and slaves, these democratic assemblies proved a model over the centuries, aspired to and imitated. Ultimately they were reincarnated first in the pages of newspapers, then across the developing media spectrum.

Today, the media *are* the agora, for better or worse; like the Greek agora, they function as a marketplace of ideas, definitions and agendas, legitimising and celebrating some, downgrading or dismissing others. It is an arena in which agendas compete with each other for public attention and public affirmation, and one in which jaw-jaw often resembles war-war.

In day-to-day terms it constitutes *public opinion*, which is given due recognition in the model suggested in by Rogers and Dearing (1987):¹

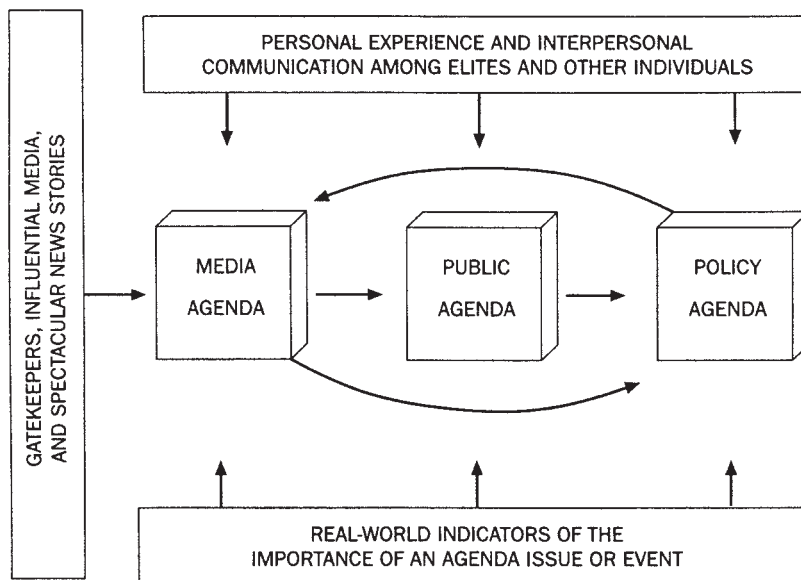


Figure 6 Rogers and Dearing's Model of the Agenda-setting Process (Rogers and Dearing, 1987).

Here we encounter three major agendas, that of the Media, that of the Public and what Rogers and Dearing term Policy – that is, government; the agendas of those in power. Putting the Public Agenda in the very centre of the model rightly suggests that it is the focus of attention of the other two: government wishes to influence the public in its favour. It will try communicating in one way or another directly with the public; though inevitably much of its own communication will not escape mediation on the part of the press, radio and TV.

Except in a totalitarian state, Policy and Media make an uneasy partnership. What Policy wishes to do is inform and persuade the public to its own advantage; what the Media Agenda is looking for is a good story; a scandal or two maybe; or more seriously it may wish to damage Policy in the eyes and ears of the public.

The Rogers and Dearing model includes reference to *real world indicators* – the public's own personal experience, knowledge, observation; not the least, their feelings about things; their instincts.

The authors also recognise that some stories, what they term *spectacular news events*, can sweep through the steady-state of the usual agendas, the happily ticking-over news values and alter the landscape, dramatically, though rarely for ever or indeed for very long. Dramatic events, told in dramatic ways, may influence attitudes or even behaviour; but they rarely alter structures.

The corporate frame

I have ventured, in Watson and Hill (2006), to suggest a modification of the Rogers and Dearing model, in the following tripolar variation:

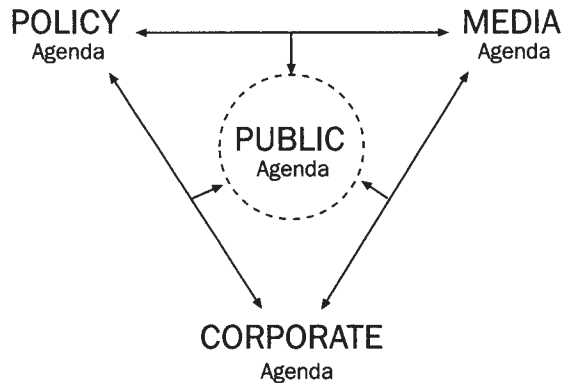


Figure 7 Tripolar Model of Agendas: Policy, Corporate and Media (Watson and Hill, 2006).

On to the scene strides another actor to join the Usual Suspects – the Corporate Agenda, the potency of which is supplemented of course by corporate ownership of the media, whose voice often if not invariably becomes the voice of its masters.

Surrounded by such behemoths, the Public Agenda could be forgiven for thinking that it was an impala about to be savaged by lions. Mercifully, the “stalking” of the public is, on the face of it, more benign. The target of governments and business is not flesh but hearts and minds.

Yet while the Public are the centre of attention of Policy, Media and Corporate agendas, it is difficult to identify the kind of specificity of agenda that translates into *power-value*. The Public Agenda is less likely to lead than be led; more likely to be, as it were, pig in the middle or even the manipulated victim, especially if the other agendas enter into alliance with one another.

Policy-Corporate “partnerships” have long been a focus of study in relation to the working of democracy in the public sphere. As Deetz (1992) warns, “corporations control and colonise” modern life, the inference being that both the Policy and Public Agendas interact within a corporate frame.

This is not to deny the notion of the *active audience*, merely to say that on the battlefield of the agora, while the Public Agenda may draw its strength from superior numbers, Policy, Corporate and Media agendas stand to gain by *logistics* – organisation, know-how and often well-paid mercenaries. Most of the time, I would argue, as the tripolar model suggests, the Public’s is essentially a porous agenda, generally more influenced than influencing.

Although the power of corporations may be obvious to scholars and professional media-watchers, I have to say from experience that it needs detailed exposition for students. Sure, they have been nurtured on Disney; they've eaten McDonald's hamburgers, but rarely in my experience have they any idea of the business and cultural synergies regarded in academic circles as issues of concern. Explaining the implications of *liberalisation*, *deregulation* and *privatisation*, the three-headed hydra of globalisation, can be an uphill struggle.

Yet the corporate frame has to be examined and understood because of its ownership of and control over media, its power to dictate their functions and processes – most significantly, in relation to democracy, which some commentators fear has been drawn into the corporate embrace.

Gitlin (1994) in his chapter “Prime time ideology: the hegemonic process in television entertainment” in Horace Newcomb's *Television: The Critical View* says it is not only happiness that global corporations promise, but liberty, equality and fraternity: all can “be affirmed through the existing private commodity forms, under the benign, protective eye of the national security state”.

Of course in an obvious and practical sense, the corporate view is that media are a commodity sold for profit like any other. Thus where corporations own media, agendas are dictated by necessities arising out of economics and considerations of circulation, listening and viewing figures.

A trend frequently commented on in recent years is what a UK *Economist* (1998) leader has termed a “modern paradox”. Referring to “this age of globalisation”, the paper says “news is much more parochial than in the days when communications abroad ticked slowly across the world by telegraph...newspapers which used to be full of politics and economics are thick with stars and sport”; and news is “moving away from foreign affairs towards domestic concerns”.

At the same time commercial pressures give priority to the speed of reporting and the immediacy of presentation. Allen (2004) talks of an “incessant drive to be first to break the story”. He fears that “due care and accuracy are sacrificed in the heat of the moment”. The stress is on “immediacy for its own sake, not least with regard to the implications for reportorial standards”.

Framing by “Climate of opinion”

The tripolar model of competing agendas also finds resonance in a phenomenon expressed in the Japanese word, *kuuki*, a term shared by the Chinese and Koreans, meaning *a climate of opinion requiring compliance*. *Kuuki* resembles the German, “*zeitgeist*” or spirit of the times.

Ito (2002), explaining the concept of *kuuki*, refers to “social, political and psychological pressures demanding compliance to a certain specific opinion, policy or group decision” and these are “usually accompanied by threats and social

sanction...”²

Professor Ito points out that the phrase “climate of opinion” has a long history and was probably first used in the 17th century by the English philosopher Joseph Glanville (1636-80). Ito cites as an example the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 in which the climate of opinion in Japan was fervently in favour of war. Pro-war newspapers flourished while the circulation of those papers against the war shrank dramatically:

...one of the anti-war newspapers *Kokumin Shimbun*, was attacked by angry mobs, set on fire, and eventually went bankrupt. Another anti-war newspaper, *Yoruzu Choho*, changed its editorial policy during the war and switched to the pro-war side.

Ito argues that *kuuki* can work for good or ill. Fired by jingoism, “it can be undemocratic and destructive”. The worst-case scenario “is when *kuuki* is taken advantage of by undemocratic groups or selfish and intolerant political leaders. Even if the situation is not as bad as this, *kuuki* can make people’s viewpoint narrower and limit their policy options”.

Interestingly, during the run up to the invasion of Iraq by the United States and Britain in 2003, the anti-war stance of the tabloid *Daily Mirror* led to significant and substantial falls in the paper’s circulation. Yet it is problematic whether a form of *kuuki* was operating in this circumstance. After all, several newspapers maintained their anti-war stance throughout, and so, until the troops went in, did a sizeable proportion of the British public.

With a million protestors marching through the streets of London; with several newspapers alarmed at the imminent decision to invade, one might have expected *kuuki* to, as it were, kick in. Why, when public and press were practically at one, did the third party, in this case the UK government, go ahead regardless?

A question worthy of keen debate and exploration, I would suggest, and with particular attention being paid to the *case of the dog that didn’t bark* – the corporate voice.

As Ito points out, *kuuki* constitutes two matching features: a demand for *compliance* and a willingness to *comply*. But there is more: there are external, overt pressures and concealed, sometimes covert agendas in operation. In America the Corporate Agenda was in compliance with the war effort, both overtly and covertly; in the UK it was more covert than overt, but the Power Agenda was arguably the same, the overthrow of Saddam Hussain being seen, at least at the time, as being of possible long-term corporate benefit.

Kuuki may have constituted an uneasy fit in the UK in explaining the Iraq war with regard to government, media and public, but in hindsight it assumes virtually formulaic status if we cast our minds back to the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany

or anti-Communism in the United States during the 1940s and 50s.

Because *kuuki* is more spirit than the corporeal, it is neither as predictable nor as controllable as more customary framing devices. However, when the climate is right, *kuuki's* power can carry a nation; though not everyone; perhaps not the radicals, the intellectuals. Yet the zeitgeist of the moment becomes conformity. Suddenly the spirit of the times has eyes and ears. Its faithful servants are *surveillance* and self-censorship.

Spirals of silence

The socio-cultural outcome of this spirit of the times is illustrated in the following model suggested by German media analyst and social critic Noelle-Neumann (1974) :

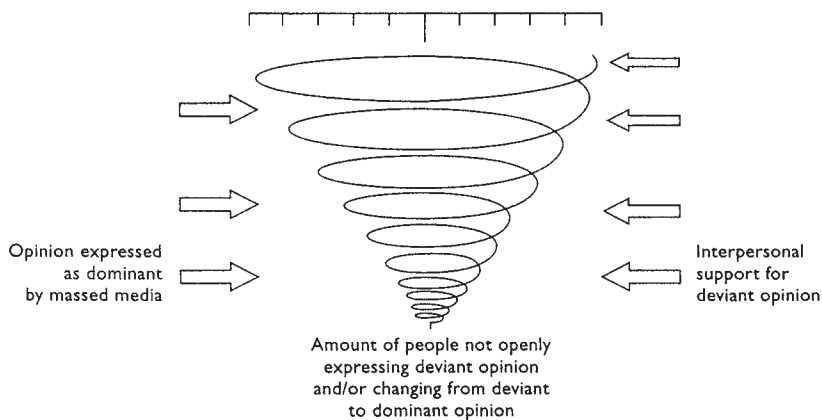


Figure 8 Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Model of Public Opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

We are presented here with another tripolar interaction: media *discourse* in relation to *interpersonal communication* and *perception*. In fraught political situations, such is the pressure to conform as expressed by a united front of press, radio and TV that individuals sense themselves becoming isolated. What might have been readily acceptable views on issues such as war and peace, justice rather than retribution, tolerance rather than persecution, suddenly become problematic and then dangerous.

Noelle-Neumann argues that a person may find that "the views he holds are losing ground; the more this appears to be so, the more uncertain he will become of himself and the less he will be inclined to express his opinion"; thus, the spiral of silence.

In these circumstances, free speech loses its prominence and status in the discourses of the time; it may even be deemed an obstacle to “good government”, a threat to national security. It slips down the public agenda; and those individuals or groups who attempt to hold on to it, seek to preserve it, are in danger of *demonisation*. What they stand for is suddenly “out of the frame”.

Failure to take refuge in a spiral of silence may result in reprisals ranging from being ignored, victimised or sacked from one’s job to being assaulted, abducted or simply made to disappear. The media, meanwhile, move in the opposite direction, up an ascending spiral, providing a cacophony of confirmation, legitimisation and reinforcement.

For example, it was very late in the day when the press of the United States began to seriously reflect upon its uncritical support for the Bush regime in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The American public eventually received an apology from the *New York Times* for so readily believing what it was told by government and transmitting the arguments for invasion so unquestioningly to its readers.

Yet this was in 2006, three years after the event when, though battles had been won, the war for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people was being lost and when the American public were themselves having serious second thoughts about the enterprise.

Apologies may salve the occasional media conscience, but they are unlikely to produce a sea-change in the relationship between media and power, whether this is the Power Agenda or the Corporate Agenda or both of them in alliance. Knightley (2000) predicts that this scenario, as far as the reporting of military conflicts is concerned, will continue, because, he states, the media consider their “commercial and political interests lie in supporting the government of the day”.

Ito (2002) quotes Kuroiwa Ruiko, president of the newspaper *Yorozu Choho* justifying its switching from anti-war to a pro-war stance during the Russo-Japanese War, by saying, “Newspapers should be anti-government in peacetime, and chauvinistic during wartime”.

The hegemonic frame

Such a comment leads us back to the very functions of media – their role in society as expressed by the useful if sometimes ambiguous *canine* metaphors. The media serve community, or to be exact, those wielding power in the community, varyingly as guard-dogs, watchdogs or (heaven forbid) poodles.

The guard-dog role resembles that of the sentinel at the entrance to the cave of an ancient community: the dogs bark, the geese cackle at the footfall of the intruder. It is the *hegemonic* role – arguably our ultimate frame and, to mix the metaphor for a moment, perhaps the cornerstone of study of the news in contemporary society.

In turn, the watchdog role suggests that the media operate as servants of the people, protectors of the agora, keeping under watchful surveillance the conduct of those in authority. In democracies there is plenty of evidence of the media fulfilling this role, and plenty of cases where the media fall short of the highest expectations. Bearing in mind such factors as ownership and the imperatives of profit and competition, it comes as no surprise to witness the clash of roles, guard-dog versus watchdog.

In most circumstances the media fulfil the requirements of hegemony, as agents of control; yet by definition, through consent. This suggests a strongly persuasive and legitimating function, one in which the guard-dog has from time to time to take on the mantle of watchdog. According to the “father” of hegemonic theory, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), a state of hegemony is achieved when a provisional alliance of certain groups exerts a consensus that makes the dominant group appear both natural and legitimate (Gramsci, 1971).³

This dominance depends on the “won consent” of the majority, thus the maintenance of hegemonic control is an ongoing and often formidable task, subject to cultural, political, economic or environmental upheaval; the target of rival ideologies and vulnerable to spectacular, and largely unexpected events.

ISAs and RSAs

According to the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-90), societies are governed by two complementary control mechanisms – ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses) and RSAs (Repressive State Apparatuses) (Althusser, 1995). The first works in the mode of persuasion, enculturalisation and socialisation, and is exemplified according to Althusser by the family, education, religion and, perhaps most significantly of all, mass communication. Then there are Repressive State Apparatuses – the law, the agents of law and order, prisons, the military.

Except in times of emergency, RSAs are neatly tucked in behind the ISAs, and out of sight. Coercion, the prime function of the RSA, if it maintains too public a profile, is perceived to be bad for civilisation and bad for business. It is only employed when the front-line ISAs cease to work convincingly and efficiently, when hegemony seems about to break down.

The restoration of hegemony is therefore predicated, at least in part, on the media exerting their powers sufficiently to dominate communicative exchange, to maintain control of the “means” of mass communication; not the least, to be the definers of reality. Also in our approach to hegemony we need to examine its own frames or levels of operation and interactivity as illustrated in Figure 9:

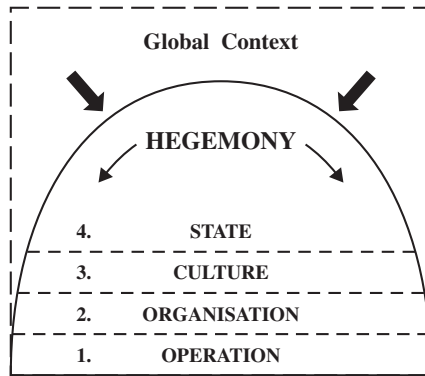


Figure 9 Hegemony's Levels of Operation (the author).

Infusing each level of operation is ideology and in a democracy the levels can often be contested territory with widely varying degrees of dominance and resistance. Allen (2004) affirms the crucial significance of the theory of hegemony in our studies of media, but he argues that "the concept of hegemony needs to be elaborated much more than it has been to date in journalism studies".

In part this aim "could be realised...by focusing our analysis more directly on the indeterminacies or contradictions (the exceptions to the conventionalised rules) implicated in news discourse's preferred appropriations of 'the world out there'". Allen talks of scholarship identifying in news discourse "the slippages, fissures and silences which together are always threatening to undermine its discursive authority".

Hegemony survives by adapting to new circumstances, new challenges. The question has inevitably to be asked how effectively it is adapting to *new media technology* which appears, at least on the face of it, to be bringing about rapid and seemingly far-reaching changes in transmission and reception at every level of operation.

New media, new frames?

Once upon a time the means of mass communication could be counted on the fingers of one hand: the press, radio, TV and film. Rich and powerful press barons cornered the newspaper market; broadcasting was subject to regulation and wavelength scarcity; corporate muscle commanded all aspects of film production and distribution.

Gradually, and then with accelerating pace, the micro chip infiltrated and transformed not only the means of communication but the relation to it of readers, listeners and viewers who, until the advent of computer-generated communication,

had been receivers only.

Interactivity was born. All at once, audiences could talk back; indeed they could talk first. Choice suddenly meant being able to seek information without recourse to traditional mass media. Perhaps most importantly, people, via their computers, could participate in discourses with others, locally, nationally and globally, at minimal cost.

Network communication, fed by ever-new technology, opened up possibilities for increasingly computer-literate communities to make communication a two-way, indeed a multiple way, process, suggesting at least to idealists that democracy might be on the move.

There are still those you meet who ask, “What’s this thing called a blog?” Yet already blogging, individual news-and-views casting on the Net, aided and abetted by diaries, self-confessions, political haranguing, is showing exponential growth. During the first terrible minutes of the terrorist bombing of the London Underground in July 2005, the first reports emanated from witnesses’ and victims’ mobile phones, and the first pictures were being transmitted long before professional TV crews could make their way to the scenes of disaster.

Quoted by Elliott (2006), the BBC’s interactivity editor, Vicky Taylor, saw this as a turning point in “how the news broadcast industry viewed content sent in from our audience...Through the thousands of email accounts, pictures and video sent in to the BBC, we were able to tell a story we wouldn’t have been able to using our professional reporters and camera crews”.

Culture shifts

New modes of report, comment and expression are jostling for attention. The comments of bloggers have become diary items on broadsheet and tabloid papers alike, staff being tasked with scanning cyberspace for items they have missed, or never even considered newsworthy.

This seeming revolution in the transmission of information and opinion, what might be described as a *re-territorialisation* or at least a significant *incursion* upon previously “owner-controlled” discourse, has been accompanied by changes in patterns of reception. One is led to surmise that we might be verging on a frameless universe of exchange at all levels of society.

Mizuko Ito, associate professor at Keio University, and visiting scholar at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg Centre, writes of “sweeping changes to how we co-ordinate, communicate and share information” (Ito, 2003). (See also Ito, Okabe and Matsuda, 2005). She is talking about what, in Japan, is termed *Keitai culture* in what has already been described as the Age of Mobilisation.

As Ito puts it, “To not have a keitai [or mobile] is to be walking blind, disconnected from just-in-time information on where and when you are in the

social networks of time and space”.

At the very least, the author seems to be suggesting, the traditional top-down pattern of public communication is under assault from the decentralising effect of networking. “Just as weblogs are distributing journalistic authority on the net,” says the author, “the mobile media further de-centres information exchange by channelling it through networks that are persistently available to the mobile many”.

Ito makes clear in her case study work with young people and their use of the mobile that the “constant stream of text messages is mostly about peers sharing personal news...” If this is the case among similar mobile users globally, we are faced with questions only thorough and ongoing research will answer: is there a generation turned off the news altogether; and if so, what influence, if any, does this “turning away” from news as traditionally transmitted, affect the bigger media picture?

Politics: shake but not stirred

It could be said that such intensive patterns of what is essentially interpersonal exchange identified by Ito may be oblivious to hegemonic structures and practice; but they do not make them go away. True, Ito adds that “Out of this micro-level swarm of messages...more systematic forms of organisation are emerging”. Yet evidence so far does seem to suggest that mobilisation is more likely to be localite rather than cosmopolite, the personal dominating if not excluding the political.

This makes it difficult at the moment to envisage how such discoursing could undermine or even challenge hegemonic practices; except, of course, by ignoring them altogether. What is likely to be of concern among the providers of mass communication, bearing in mind the popularity of blog-following and participation in showcases such as YouTube, ifilm.com, Google Video or My-Space.com is whether there is anybody out there paying attention.

Before predicting the end of mass communication as we have known it, and therefore the undermining of hegemonic practices, we need to recognise the degree to which existing power structures can absorb challengers. Their simplest defence measure is to buy up the opposition (as Google did with YouTube in the Autumn of 2006).

These days the little guy has no problem with access, for the Net can provide a potentially global audience. Yet start-up and running costs will always imperil new challengers to the status quo. Such are the transfer fees offered for quality players, the sharpness of competition and the uncertainties brought about by constant change in terms of technology and its uses, that the temptation to sell up to the highest bidder is often irresistible. Neither permanence nor continuity is a salient characteristic of network communication.

Knowledge unframed

Nevertheless, engaging the possibilities of net-power and net-effect is a current necessity in the study of communications at all levels; and that study will address prevailing climates of uncertainty. In this epoch of apparently melting frames, definition of what is fact and what is fiction, what is true or false, what is important or not important is no longer the monopoly of experts.

Today we can submit our own entries to the Wikipedia⁴, the frameless online encyclopaedia – frameless in that it has so far been free of editorial control. Anyone can write an entry, anyone can alter an entry. Here, knowledge itself is liberated (if that is the right word) from ownership and control; it is also unshackled from the constraints of verifiable truth.

In this and other ways, old verities, once-reliable frames, are confronted by the new which in turn may be adjusted by the day or the minute. We may find that our definitions – of hegemony, of *kuuki*, of meaning, reality or truth – are losing substance to holographic apparitions. We sense ourselves being catapulted into a world of blurred boundaries, fake identities, vulnerable data.

Reliability of source becomes immensely problematic; the purposes or goals of communication on-line equally so. In an interview with the UK *Guardian* newspaper, Tim Berners-Lee (23), inventor of the web, worried that the Net might become “a place where untruths start to spread more than truths”.

Similarly apprehensive, Barney (2000) believes that “the network medium is...essentially an uprooting technology”. It is “fragmented, de-centred, partial, unstable, multiple” and by its nature it is disengaged from real, as compared with virtual community.

Could a situation occur in which people grow tired of networking; gradually become bored with its amazing possibilities? There are few signs of this, but then McLuhan in the 1960s was of the opinion that the printed word was heading for the junkyard. Either way, big business, the entrepreneurs, the corporate innovators – the usual suspects – have, after a slow start, turned their colonising sights on the Net, in all its manifestations.

Reassertion of control

At the same time, governments of all hues have been putting in place the machinery of control. What may have begun as a territory free to all, a great open prairie, where free speech and free expression were open to all as never before in history, is daily being curtailed by enclosure.

One can surmise that in future the hegemonic frame may not possess the same power to dominate the discourses of communication, bearing in mind the limitless viewing and listening possibilities brought about by the digital revolution; but we

can be sure that sooner rather than later it will adjust to circumstances.

Its power to dominate will continue where it matters – in the traditional institutions and practices of control. Indeed the fragmentation of audiences in a period when the emphasis is on individual rights to expression and in circumstances when the Net makes this possible, could prove an advantage to traditional power bases.

After all, what threatened and stirred fear in such bases in the past was the *collective*. Now the Net does not obviate collective action as the various Net-initiated protests at world conferences of ministers have proved. Vast numbers of like-minded people can be mobilised via the Net. However, where are these “collectives” now; where their organisation, leadership, funding, policies, action strategies? Meanwhile, the good ships G8 and the World Bank sail on.

Framing by myth

Ultimately, when under threat, all agencies – at least the ones with power and influence – retreat within the frame of the flag. Although, as has been mentioned, the UK *Daily Mirror* conducted a blistering campaign against Bush and Blair prior to invasion of Iraq in 2003, as soon as British troops engaged in conflict, the anti-war sentiments softened and then got lost in ambiguities. The paper was against the war, but in support of British troops, illustrating perfectly Kuroiwa Ruiko’s point about war demanding from the media appropriate chauvinism.

There is no need to stress here the inflammatory nature of patriotism or the media’s role in promoting it. What is worth focusing on is its mythical properties –that is, something dramatically clear, assertively pronounced, borne along by apparent consensus and self-evident truth, while at the same time being too entrenched to be successfully checked by argument, analysis or even verifiable facts.

In a definition of myth relevant to our study of media, Cavendish (2003) writes of a “charter of authorization for groups, institutions, rituals, social distinctions, laws and customs, moral standards, values and ideas...” that “authorise the present state of affairs”. The author adds, as if the downside of *kuuki* were in his thoughts, their power “transcends rational argument”.

For Roland Barthes (1915-80) the purpose of myth (in its contemporary function) is to simplify things: “it purifies them, makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (Barthes, 1973). It is a useful framing device for mass expression because myth acts economically, “it abolishes the complexity of human acts” (just as selection does in the media process); “it gives them the simplicity of essences” (as do news headlines).

In short, Barthes believes, myth defines “eternal verities” which largely go

unquestioned and, unquestioned, take on the “verity” of common sense, matters too obvious to be challenged.

Study and scholarship: vital roles

News frames enclose reality, harnessing in a highly organised, and selective way, public perceptions of the “world out there”. Gates, agendas and news values work within those traditional frames, reinforced by the principles of professional practice, underscored by hegemonic imperatives that shape roles and functions within specific communities and cultures, all cloud-wrapped in the myths of national identity.

Truths float on the dynamic of all these agencies like frail barques on a turbulent ocean. Observing from the shore, through an eternal spray of propaganda, distraction and spin, are students and scholars of media. They serve, albeit modestly and tentatively, an apprenticeship as watchdogs of the watchdogs. Theirs is a role that warrants nurture, encouragement and celebration.

The rapidity of change makes the definition and ongoing support of media standards a mighty task for practitioners and critics alike. Seaton (2005) believes that “while ultimate truth is a chimera and all reporting is to a degree socially and politically determined, values survive that are worth defending, and in a violent world it is essential that they *are* protected”.

Media citizenship contributes to the understanding and maintenance of those values. It realises the existence of dominant frames; it examines, analyses and is prepared to challenge such devices and is wary of the realities that seem to fit so naturally into those frames. Such scrutiny contributes to the immensely important task in any society of holding the media to public account.

NOTES

1. See also Rogers and Dearing (1996) in which they examine research into agenda-setting, focusing on longitudinal audience studies.
2. In his paper Professor Ito refers to a 1977 publication, in Japanese, *A Study of Kuuki* by social critic Yamamoto Shichihei who argues that kuuki was more responsible for Japan's history between 1930 and 1945 than anybody or anything else.
3. In Gramsci's own words, hegemony exists when "'spontaneous' consent" is "given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production".
4. Wikipedia, online encyclopaedia created by James Wales; began net-life January 2001. The public worldwide contribute entries which can be added to and altered by anyone, giving rise to concerns about error and misuse.

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