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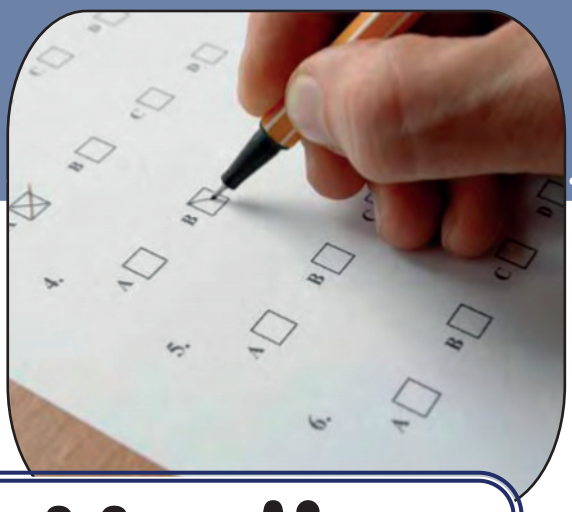


Mass Media

Selection and Presentation of News

Chris Livesey

The Selection and Presentation of News

This section looks more closely at some of the factors affecting how media content - with a specific focus on news - is created and distributed: what **Barrat** (1992) calls the '*social context of media production*'.

News, in this respect, is a *label* given to particular forms of information and styles of presentation that, **Allan** (2004), argues, first appeared in Britain in the mid-19th century with the idea of news as an impartial and objective account of a factual reality.

Conventionally, therefore, news is constructed around the notion of *objective* (factual) characteristics that differentiate it from opinion, comment or entertainment.

What constitutes news is always **socially constructed** in the sense it inevitably involves the selection of some types of information, rather than others, for presentation in specific ways - and to understand how, why and by whom news is created out of the vast array of information produced around the world each day we need to understand the roles of some *key players* in its production.

The State

Although different types of government have different rules governing media content - variously expressed as **media regulation** or **censorship** - all governments lay-down basic rules governing what can or cannot be selected as news.

While **China**, for example, operates strict censorship rules across a range of online and offline media and subjects (news outlets are banned from mentioning things like the Tiananmen Square democracy protests of 1989) Western democratic governments rarely engage in such *direct forms* of news censorship outside of material relating to "state security".

China places severe restrictions on the Internet sites and content its citizens can access..

In Britain, **the Official Secrets Act** governs information the government decides is a 'state secret' (or *classified information)* that cannot be legally published. Similarly, **Defence Notices** cover non-classified information about the armed forces. Although this is largely an informal, non-statutory, system, the 'D-Notice' Committee has the power to advise about and, in some instances censor, publication.

Indirect media regulation does, however, occur through the legal system (banning orders can, for example, be used to censor access to Internet sites) and Commissions overseeing media content, a selection of which include:

- the Office for Communications (Ofcom), formally established in 2003.
- the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) that regulates advertising content.
- the Press Complaints Commission (funded by the newspaper industry) that 'dealt with complaints from members of the public about the editorial content of newspapers and magazines'. The PCC closed in 2014, to be replaced by:
- the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). This exists to adjudicate on claims that a particular publication or publications has broken the IPSO Code of Practice. It's remit, however, is limited to those organisations who have volunteered to meet the standards laid down by the Code.

In addition, a range of *legal rules and regulations* surround areas like:

- advertising - covering things that can and be legally promoted or presented as factual information - and
- general broadcasting (explicit forms of sex and violence cannot be shown on terrestrial television before the 9pm watershed).

A further layer of indirect media regulation involves areas such as **copyright** - how and by whom certain types of information can be used - and **libel**.

Owners

The role of owners in the social construction of news is one that has been discussed and disputed by different sociological approaches - a debate mainly focused on the extent to which owners directly and indirectly influence the production process. This is discussed in more detail in "The Ownership and Control Debate" as well as the concluding section here.

While there are well-documented instances of *direct owner intervention* - **Boardman** (1988), for example, suggests HarperCollins, a subsidiary of News International, commissioned and then decided not to publish a book by Chris. Paten, the ex-governer of Hong Kong, that was critical of the Chinese government - a country where News International had extensive media interests - these appear to be *exceptions* rather than the rule, for two reasons:

Firstly, it is difficult to conclusively prove owners persistently intervene directly in the selection and non-selection of news and where such proof is available it is largely piecemeal and *anecdotal*.

Secondly and perhaps more significantly, direct intervention is rare because owner intervention may be more-subtle and indirect. Where media companies are owned / controlled by powerful individuals, such as Rupert Murdoch or Mark Zuckerberg, they control the conditions under which news is selected and presented by editors and journalists.

Fox News in America, for example, promotes an explicitly conservative news agenda, one that reflects the conservative economic and political agenda of its owner and audience.

Brown (2004), in this respect, argues owner interventions generally take the form of "guidance" and "discussion" with senior editors around issues like hiring journalists who reflect the owner's views.

And not hiring those who do not.

Where media companies have diverse and diffuse ownership, such as large numbers of shareholders with no clearly-identifiable owner, a range of factors may influence how news is generated, selected and produced, examples of which include:

- **Production and distribution** costs, especially those for old media, influence the selection and presentation of content since they impact on things like news gathering. A national media company, for example, has more resources at its disposal (such as journalists and production staff) than a local equivalent - although both use global **news agencies** (such as the Press Association or Reuters) that collect and sell aggregated news content to lower the cost of reporting.

- **Production values** relate to the *quality* of the product presented to an audience. The BBC, for example, routinely spends more on its news programmes than small satellite TV channels. Within different forms of media programming, costs may also vary and this goes some way towards determining how content is selected and presented. Rewriting corporate press releases, for example, is much cheaper than investigative reporting.

- The **delivery** of some physical media (such as newspapers, magazines and books) also restricts the selection and presentation of content. Print media, for example, have space restrictions, with additional costs related to the production of extra pages that don't apply to newer media such as web sites and blogs.

- **Technological costs** are a further factor affecting both production and distribution. A global media company can select programming from a diverse range of sources that are not available to individuals producing small web sites or documenting events in their local community through a blog.

A safe pair of hands?
George Osborne, the ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer in David Cameron's Conservative government appointed to edit a Conservative-leaning London Evening paper.

Editors

The argument owners rarely directly intervene in the selection process is also based on the idea their relationship with media controllers, such as editors, means direct intervention is largely unnecessary.

This follows because the selection and presentation of news relates to a number of *ideological, bureaucratic and organisational considerations* that determine how and why some information is selected as news.

Ideological considerations, for example, are linked to the political, cultural and economic beliefs of owners that arguably determine the overall political stance of a newspaper, magazine, TV channel or web site.

Within this general ideological framework, such as whether a newspaper, tv channel or web site takes a broadly left or right wing political position, **bureaucratic** and **organisational** considerations come into play.

One of the most significant of these is **newsworthiness**: the extent to which some information, out of everything going on in the world, is considered to be news.

The concept of newsworthiness, as **Brighton and Foy** (2007) note, is a somewhat nebulous one as far as individual journalists or media professionals are concerned: it is rarely, if ever, objectively articulated in ways that identify the criteria by which some information is categorised as "news" while other, even very similar information, is categorised in some other way. As they found in their research, journalists were prone to define news as something:

"*I know when I see it*".

They generally relied, in this respect, on apparently commonsensical or, as they preferred to express it, "gut" feelings.

These apparently commonsensical ideas about "what does and does not constitute" news do, however, hide a much deeper, largely unstated but well-understood, set of meanings through which news is actually understood - an idea bound-up in the concept of *news values*.

News Values

Chibnall (1977) defines news values as:

"*The criteria of relevance which guide reporters' choice and construction of newsworthy stories...learnt through a process of informal professional socialisation*".

These are the values used by organisations, such as the BBC and individuals, such as editors and journalists, to guide and underpin their understanding of **newsworthiness:** the stories, among the many generated each day around the world, deemed worthy of being selected and presented as *news*.

This suggests *News* is not a neutral concept; rather, it is an ideological construction that involves things like:

- **assumptions** about what interests an audience.
- **bureaucratic conventions**, such as the rules and agendas that govern how information is collected and from whom it is collected. The views of "significant people" in a society (politicians, celebrities and the like) are routinely sought-out and reported in a way the views of "ordinary people" are not.
- **organisational demands**. Something considered newsworthy for a television channel or newspaper, may not be considered newsworthy for a political magazine or web site.

The significance of news values is how they serve to classify events in particular ways and contribute to decisions made by media professionals, such as editors and journalists, about newsworthiness: how and why certain types of information and sources are selected and presented as news. In this respect it's worth looking at a range of news values researchers have identified over the years, beginning with **Galtung and Ruge's** (1973) classic formulation:

News value	Meaning
Frequency	The duration of an event is a consideration for different media (visual media like to feature fast-moving stories with plenty of action).
Size	The scale and importance of an event - bigger means more newsworthy.
Unambiguous	The more clear-cut an event, in terms of the issues involved, the more likely it will be defined as news. If an event is complex it will be reduced to simple, clear, issues.
Meaningfulness	The closer the fit between the event and an audience's cultural background, the more newsworthy the event.
Consonance	The ability to predict or want something to happen makes it news and relates to ideas such as folk devils, moral panics, self-fulfilling prophecies and agenda setting. If the predicted events don't happen, that too becomes news.
Continuity	The extent to which a news story can be given a context, such as a past and a future.
Composition	News organisations like to feature a mixture of different stories, such as human interest, celebrity gossip, financial news and comment.

News Values:
Galtung and Ruge (1973)

News Value	Meaning
Immediacy	'News' is what's happening now.
Drama	The more dramatic an event, the more likely it is to become news.
Personalisation	'Important people' (defined in terms of the audience) are given more attention and prominence in different media. For The Sun, for example, "news" is more-likely to be defined in terms of the behaviour of celebrities. Stories also have more value if they given a "human interest" angle.
Titillation	Sex is used to sell some newspapers, magazines and TV programmes.
Convention	Events can be explained in ways familiar to an audience and their expectations.
Structured Access	Some people (**primary definers** such as reporters and experts) are given more opportunity to define the meaning of a news event. This involves hierarchies of credibility, where more importance is given to some commentators than others.
Novelty	If an event is unusual, rare or a new angle can be given to an old event, it is more newsworthy.

Chibnall (1977)

News Value	Meaning
Weight	An event's significance in relation to other, current, stories.
Controversy	Arguments and debates, particularly between the rich and famous, increase the value of news.
Usefulness	The extent to which the story helps people to understand the meaning of something.
Educational value	The extent to which people may be taught something of value.

Lanson and Stephens (2003)

Harcup and O'Neill (2017) argue news values are rarely, if ever, explicitly acknowledged or articulated by media professionals. The task of *unmasking* and exposing these underlying values has generally been undertaken by sociologists and media researchers who recognise that news values:

"*inform the mediated world that is presented to news audiences, providing a shared shorthand operational understanding of what working journalists are required to produce to deadlines. It is the way news values work in practice that results in them being articulated and conveyed to new journalism trainees and journalism students, and they are also used by public relations professionals and others aiming to obtain maximum news coverage of events (or pseudo-events)*".

News values, in this respect, are related to both *bureaucratic routines* and *organisational needs* rather than the beliefs and values of individual editors or journalists. Neither, for example, actually have to *personally* hold these values to produce newsworthy stories.

Editors - and, to a more-limited extent, journalists - do however play an important *gatekeeping* role in that they make the specific decisions - informed by their understanding of the particular news values that apply to different media - about which stories count as *news*, which stories don't and which should be considered as something else, such as advertising or opinion.

The role of media gatekeepers, such as a newspaper or web site editor, is essentially to allow consumers access to certain types of information (*what they want you to know…*) and deny access - by not publishing it - to other forms of information (*what they don't want you to know…*).

In this respect the managers employed by news organisations, from editors to television controllers, also have a significant *policing* role in terms of the decisions they make about what counts as the news values of particular organisations. And this role is based on whatever *agenda* is being set by the underlying news values of an organisation.

Agenda setting

This refers to further editorial functions that reflect the specific organisational values of different companies.

An editor is responsible for ensuring the "news agenda" set by owners is followed, while also ensuring journalists understand and conform to organisational news values:

In the UK, *The Times newspaper* doesn't print pictures of topless women, whereas *The Sun* makes this a (*Page Three*) selling point for its audience.

The role of media gatekeepers is one of allowing and denying access to different types of information.

The decision not to report something - the concept of **omission** - is a further aspect of agenda setting. In the 1990s, for example, little or nothing appeared in the British media concerning the British bombing of Iraq following the 1991 war.

More recently, the phone-hacking and bribery scandal uncovered by The Guardian newspaper in 2011 received little or no coverage in News International publications such as The Sun - even those this company was heavily involved in the scandal that involved hacking the mobile phones of celebrities in order to discover gossip and scandal that could be subsequently published.

Finally, most privately owned media rely on advertising for their profitability and one aspect of agenda setting is not to behave in ways that upset advertisers.

The closure of the News of the World in 2011, for example, was partly prompted by the massive withdrawal of advertising it suffered following the disclosure its journalists had hacked the mobile phone of murdered schoolgirl Millie Dowler and, by so doing, hindered the police investigation into her disappearance.

Journalists

As we've seen, *news* is not just 'something that happens'; certain types of information, based in great part on different organisational news values, have to be selected "as news" and presented to an audience in ways that make news understandable.

Journalists are, of course, an integral part of a presentation process and they represent what might be considered the final link in "the social construction of news" chain: their role is not simply one of objective recording and reporting but, as **Hall** (1980) notes, it's rather one of *framing and interpreting* the meaning of a news event for an audience.

News journalists, in other words, don't simply report what they see. They attempt to locate what they see in a shared "universe of meaning" with their intended audience that involves, **Hall** argues, suggesting in numerous subtle, but largely unstated, ways a "preferred reading" of a news event.

The role of news journalists, it's argued, is not simply to tell an audience what has happened but also to tell the audience how to understand and react to what has happened. For **Chibnall** this involves the use of what he calls **legitimating values**: positive and negative ideas used in news reports to provide cultural cues that 'tell' an audience how to interpret a story.

Positive values	Negative values
Consensus	Conflict
Moderation	Extremism
Order	Disorder
Honesty	Corruption
Communication	Spin
Good	Evil
Democracy	Dictatorship

Examples of positive and negative legitimating values

New Media, New Values?

While there are arguments about the precise nature of the relationship between the state, owners, editors and journalists, new media developments, such as blogs and social networks, have arguably challenged this general perception of news selection and presentation.

New media, for example, can be **global** rather than national, allowing it to escape restrictions placed by the State on what can and cannot be published. It blurs both the distinction between owner, editor and journalist - new media, with its low start-up and running costs folds these roles into the individual blogger or tweeter, for example - and, **Schudson** (2011) notes, between writer and reader, producer and consumer.

The continuing development of new media, from blogs and news website at one extreme to massive media sites like Facebook at the other, has raised some interesting questions about news values in terms of both their continued relevance to any debate over news selection and presentation and the specific content of contemporary news values.

This is a particularly pertinent debate in the light of claims that new media such as Facebook is not "produced" in the way old media such as a newspaper is produced; content, for example, is broadly user-generated rather than being created by paid professionals.

A counter-argument here, however, is that the kind of "news" disseminated on these very large networks is, by and large, selected from traditional media sources - reposting a story that has been read in a newspaper or online news site, for example. News, in this respect, is subject to a *double-selection process*: firstly it is selected as worthy of being presented in a traditional or old media setting and secondly it is selected for presentation in a new media context.

If the development of new media hasn't necessarily meant a radical deviation from the basic idea of "news selection", it has at the very least raised a few significant questions about how we view the notion of news values.

Firstly, are the kinds of news values we've previously identified as flowing from Galtung and Ruge's original research consonant with new media news values? In other words, are the values that underpin the selection and presentation of news in *old media* the same or very similar to the values underpinning the selection and presentation of new media news?

While there's probably no definitive answer to this question, **Harcup and O'Neill's** *comparative research* does at least provide an insight into a possible answer.

Their 2001 study based on a *content analysis* of "*news stories published in the UK's three market-leading daily national newspapers (The Sun, Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph) during a sample month in 1999*" identified 10 basic news values:

News Value Rank (2001)	**Stories**	Frequency Rank: Newspapers 2014	Frequency Rank: Social Media 2014
The power elite	Concerning powerful individuals, organisations or institutions.	5th	9th
Celebrity	Concerning people who are already famous.	8th	=7th
Entertainment	Concerning sex, human interest, showbusiness, , animals, an unfolding drama, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, entertaining photographs or witty headlines.	3rd	1st
Surprise	That have an element of surprise and/or contrast.	2nd	2nd
Bad news	With particularly negative overtones, such as conflict or tragedy: "If it bleeds, it leads".	1st	3rd
Good news	With particularly positive overtones, such as rescues and cures.	9th	=7th
Magnitude	That are perceived as sufficiently significant either in the numbers of people involved or in potential impact.	7th	6th
Relevance	About issues, groups and nations perceived to be relevant to the audience.	6th	5th
Follow-up	About subjects already in the news.	4th	4th
Newspaper agenda	That set or fit the news organisation's own agenda.	10th	10th

Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2017)

In their *2014 follow-up* study the sample was expanded to cover 10 newspapers, 8 paid and 2 free-distribution dailies (*Metro* and London's *Evening Standard)*.

The news values they identified in 2001 were still present in 2014, but their frequency was subtly different.

"Bad News", for example, was the most frequent news value found in 2014 while it was the 5th most frequent in 2001.

Similarly, these news values were also present on the two top social media sites (Facebook and Twitter) sampled, although again the frequency of various news values was significantly different to both of the newspaper samples.

While this suggests that the kinds of news values H**arcup and O'Neill** identified seem fairly consistent over time and place (across both old and new media) - the prominence of values such as "Bad News", "Celebrity" and "Entertainment" shouldn't be particularly surprising given that these values have been something of a traditional mainstay as a way of "selling news" - they did find a number of "newer news values" underpinning newspaper stories that are increasingly designed to be shared across social media (and Facebook in particular).

News Value	Stories
Exclusivity	Generated by, or available first to, the news organisation as a result of interviews, letters, investigations, surveys, polls, and so on.
Conflict	Such as controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare.
Audio-visuals	That have arresting photographs, video, audio and/or which can be illustrated with infographics.
Shareability	That are thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media.
Drama	Concerning an unfolding drama such as escapes, accidents, searches, sieges, rescues, battles or court cases.

Harcup and O'Neill (2017)

In terms of news values, the relationship between old media (such as newspapers), "old new media" (such as online versions of printed newspapers) and new media like Facebook is neatly-summarised by **Phillips** (2012) when she notes:

"*The hugely successful Mail Online creates loyalty by giving readers what it already knows that they want and they know it by observing which stories are the most likely to be shared by Facebook*".

Gatekeeping Too?

A further dimension to gatekeeping involves sites such as YouTube. While such sites aren't primarily news organisations, they contain vast amounts of aggregated news that, as with their print peers, is selected and presented to users. It's just not selected by human beings but rather by computer algorithms - programs that, as Tufekci (2018) notes, analyse user behaviour and promote further information that might be of interest.

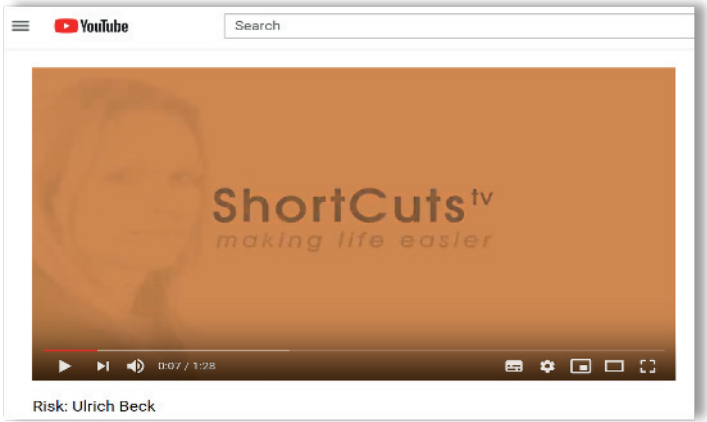
As with their human counterparts in traditional media, these algorithms contain hidden biases designed to keep people watching because, as she notes:

"*The longer people stay on YouTube, the more money Google (it's owner) makes*".

The problem, she argues, is that the YouTube algorithm "*seems to have concluded that people are drawn to content that is more extreme than what they started with*".

While this isn't particularly problematic if you're searching for information about, say, pets and are increasingly served information about oddly lovable animals doing adorable things. It does, however, become a little more problematic when:

"*During the 2016 presidential election campaign, I watched a bunch of videos of Donald Trump rallies on YouTube. I was writing an article about his appeal to his voter base and wanted to confirm a few quotations. Soon I noticed something peculiar. YouTube started to recommend and "autoplay" videos for me that featured white supremacist rants, Holocaust denials and other disturbing content.*"



YouTube: Thankfully, it's not all bad…

As she concludes: "*YouTube's recommendation algorithm promotes, recommends and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes. Given its billion or so users, YouTube may be one of the most* powerful radicalising instruments of the 21st century".

Theoretical Explanations

Thus far we've looked at how *news*, produced and distributed through both old and new media, is socially constructed in terms of concepts like *newsworthiness* and *news values*. We've also outlined how such values are policed across a range of media.

What it would be useful to do next, however, is look at a selection of **Marxist** and **Pluralist** approaches that seek to explain the significance - or otherwise - of the selection and presentation of news.

Instrumental Marxism

This general perspective explores the social construction of news in terms of **power** relationships. Owners and controllers, for example, are both:

- *economically powerful* because they own and control the means of physical production.
- *ideologically powerful* because they own the means of **mental production**, such as newspapers, television channels, web sites, social media networks and the like.

From this perspective this ownership gives them control over how people both *think about the world* and how they behave on the basis of these beliefs. Media owners directly and indirectly control information and, in so doing, propagate a **worldview** (or ideology) that explicitly favours the rich and powerful - the members of a **ruling class**.

This **instrumental approach** to understanding news construction focuses on how a ruling class use their media ownership as a *tool* to manipulate public opinion. The media, in this respect, are a powerful agency of **social control** - a similar role filed by religion in the past - with a number of dimensions:

On a simple level, control is exercised through entertainment and diversions that stop people thinking about how they are exploited and oppressed.

More complexly, those whose views accord with media owners are given **privileged access** to the media - as experts, for example. Ideas favourable to a ruling class are consistently highlighted and promoted; newspapers and television channels, for example, consistently promote the views of "business leaders" while alternative views are **marginalised** - pushed to the edges of any debate - through the use of negative legitimating values (such as 'extremist').

Just as, historically, the **Glasgow Media Group** (1976) highlighted how television news manipulated the portrayal of business leaders and trade unionists during strikes in the 1980s, **Hussain** (2002) has shown how ethnic minority groups are frequently targeted in the media as the cause of "social problems".

This type of **scapegoating** has made frequent appearances in the British media - from black muggers in the 1970's, through welfare scroungers in the 1990's to "Muslim / Islamic" terrorists in the 21st century - and the creation of **moral panics** focused around identifiable folk devils serves two purposes:

- they create "hate figures" to divert audience away from "crises in capitalism" (from high levels of unemployment and inflation to increasing social inequality).
- they allow the extension of highly-restrictive *social controls* aimed at "socially problematic groups"- from Anti-Social Behaviour Orders ASBO's at one extreme to Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIMs) at the other - into the lives of the population as a whole.

The UK popular press: threats to the "British Way of Life?

The roots of this approach can be found in the work of the **Frankfurt School** in the 1930s and the concept of **mass society**, a type of society, according to **Ross** (1995), where 'the masses' have very distinctive characteristics, such as **wide dispersal** across a geographic area. People are not in daily face-to-face contact and this creates a sense of **social isolation**. What interaction there is, through work, for example, is largely **instrumental** and people lack strong social ties binding them together in communities.

Isolation and limited social interaction mean people rarely feel they are part of a functioning social group, community or society - a gap filled by the media. In the recent past this meant old media like newspapers and television. More recently it has additionally come to mean new media, particularly social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. **Ross** suggests the media are used by powerful groups to create a missing "sense of community and culture". People feel as if they are part of an "online community like-minded people" (who they rarely, if ever, meet in real life) and this opens them up to manipulation by powerful groups and organisations.

Manufacturing an artificial sense of community…

A related concept here is **mass culture** - the idea of a culture manufactured by the media that provides the values and beliefs socially isolated individuals can share to create the illusion of a common culture.

Again, while this is not something exclusive to new media, the latter are seen to facilitate the development of *manipulated communities*; people who, for whatever reason, find themselves socially isolated and easily lead.

Instrumental Marxists see the kinds of cultural and subcultural groupings that coalesce around social media, for example, as inauthentic communities. It is not merely a synthetic, artificial form of culture - one not being created by the people who consume it - it is also artfully manufactured and mass produced.

In this way, cultural commodities such as news, **Fiske** (1995) argues:

"are produced and distributed by an industrialized system whose aim is to maximize profit by appealing to as many consumers as possible".

To appeal to 'the masses', therefore, cultural products - from news through films to video games - have to be safe, not intellectually demanding and predictable.

Mass culture is significant because of its control by a *ruling elite* through the media; if powerful groups control the culture of the masses they are can manipulate cultural norms and values to their own continued advantage.

Neo-Marxism

As we've seen, cultural **hegemony** is a key concept for this approach and the media's **hegemonic role** is considered in terms of how it acts to create and sustain a broad political consensus around a set of **core** or 'fundamental' values. These reflect t*aken for granted beliefs* about a society that set the agenda for debate.

Anything that *threatens* these values - from social inequality to alternatives to capitalism - is either not reported, actively criticised and marginalised.

Anything *outside* these core values, from sexual deviance to the effect of video games, can be discussed and argued over - which allows the media to reflect a variety of opinions while absorbing critical views that may threaten the stability of the system.

The ideological role of the media is *not* one of providing a 'common culture for the masses' - *mass society* is seen as an over-simplified concept - but rather one of *maintaining the broad status quo* by protecting and enhancing core values. This hegemonic approach solves the problem for a bourgeois (ruling) class of how to win control over how people think and behave in a way that encourages them to contribute to their own (ultimately economic) exploitation.

Neo-Marxist approaches, therefore, involve a **reflexive** approach to understanding the role of the media; they examine how the structure of capitalist societies both *conditions* how an audience sees and interprets the world and is in turn *conditioned by* audience behaviour. A core value of capitalist society, for example, is the pursuit of individual private profit and the role of the **state** is to act in ways that protect and enhance this value; from enshrining it in law to acting in ways that limit the development of monopolies and encourage competition.

Media **owners**, for their part, as **Follett** (2012) notes, have a *fiduciary* (legal and ethical) duty to their shareholders to pursue profits and this, in turn, places a range of practical and ideological constraints on the behaviour of media **professionals**, from editors to journalists; from the selection of stories as "news" (*agenda setting*) to how news content is selected and presented.

While the media is "biased" in the way it constructs news this, as **Philo** and **Berry** (2004) argue, results from how it is organised around a particular capitalist worldview, rather than from covert manipulation by a ruling class. Owners and professionals operate within a particular set of assumptions about the world that, in turn, condition how they carry-out their respective roles.

manufacturing consensus

A key idea here, therefore, is the **manufacture of consensus**. The role of the media is one of manufacturing *a* consensus about core values around which people are socialised. This role is an implicitly ideological one; influencing how people think about society while appearing to do no such thing - a trick achieved in two ways: firstly through **hierarchies of access** and secondly through the manufacture of **trust**.

Traditionally, **access** to the mass media (producing a newspaper, film or television programme) has been *restricted* by things like **cost** and the fact that for your voice to be '**heard**' you have to be employed by a media owner.

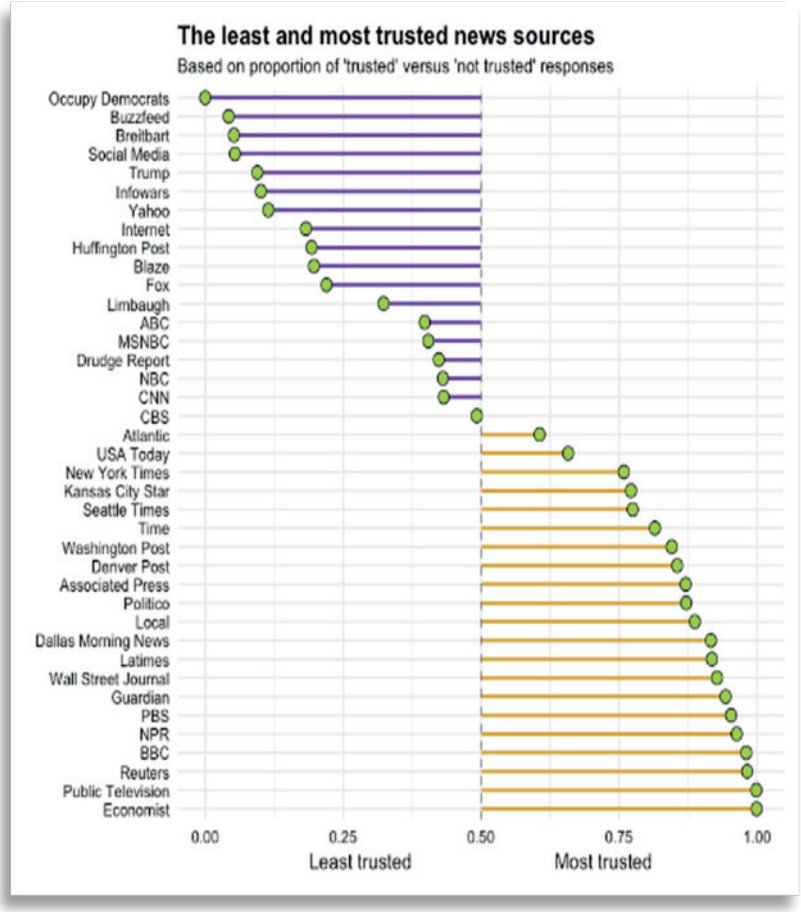
The development of **new media** - particularly but not exclusively social media - has made entry, cheaper, easier and more accessible, although restrictions still apply - you need a computer, an Internet connection and so forth - and this is a problem for Instrumental Marxism. This follows because it's much more difficult to see how a new **mediascape** that has much wider access and greater information diversity can be as tightly and instrumentally controlled as this approach claims.

Neo-Marxism avoids this problem through the concept of **trust**. Information (such as news) is not equal; people place different levels of *trust* in information depending on how they perceive its **source**.

Hargreaves and Thomas (2002), for example, found:

- 91% of respondents trusted television news
- 73% trusted newspapers and
- 15% trusted the Internet.

While these levels of trust might have been expected at the turn of the century - the Internet, for example, was still a relatively new and exotic medium - **Kearney** (2017) found much the same distribution of trust across television, newspapers and the Internet nearly 20 years later.



Kearney: Trusting News Project Report (2017)

In other words, old media creates greater levels of *trust* in an audience than new media - and this is hugely significant for the *hegemonic role* of those who own and control such media.

The BBC is consistently cited one of the world's most trusted sources of news.

A further aspect of both **access** and **trust** is that, in general, old media give greater access and prominence to the views of the rich and the powerful.

They are also more likely to be given a platform, such as a newspaper article or a TV programme, that lets them speak *directly* to an audience, rather than have their views reported by a journalist. The voices of the poor and powerless are much less likely to be featured in both old and new media.

The relationship between *hegemony and core values* also overcomes the problem of **media diversity**. The focus on core values means different media can be aimed at different audiences; readers of the *Daily Mail*, for example, don't usually read *The Guardian*. Although these newspapers have very different political values, they arguably share many core economic and political assumptions about the society in which they operate.

Politically and culturally miles apart, but all agree on economic fundamentals

While *pluralists* see the explosion of new media as evidence of media *diversity* - many millions of dissenting voices around the globe that cannot be easily channelled or manipulated - this involves, for neo-Marxists, an **ecological fallacy**; the assumption that the characteristics of the whole are reflected in its individual components.

Thus, while something like blogging is hugely diverse (there are estimated to be around 200 million unique blogs) and has a massive global audience, the problem, as **Logan** (2010) notes, is that "the average number of readers of any given blog is 7".

And while this may be something of a statistical exaggeration (it includes an unknown number of blogs with no readers because they have effectively ceased publication) it suggests that diversity, in itself, is not always a particularly useful measure. Rather, it's the **social context** within which diversity occurs that is significant.

Pluralism

Pluralism is a general name given to a range of approaches that share some fundamental beliefs about the nature of society and the role of the media - one of the most important being **diversity**; even where old media are highly **concentrated**, there exists a range of views on offer and this ideational diversity (relating to ideas and concepts) is even more evident in new media.

The significance of media diversity for this general approach is that it leads to **choice** and, more-specifically, choice focused around audiences. Whereas different forms of Marxism tend to focus on the role of producers in the mass media, pluralists see media consumers as the most important factor in understanding how and why news is constructed.

This follows from the deceptively simple observation that in situations where choice exists the customer is king. If they choose to buy a particular media product it will flourish. If they don't, it won't.

market discipline

The 'discipline of the market place' is a *reflexive process, an idealised version of which involves:*

- owners competing to win audiences,
- creating **innovation** and **diversity** as new and different media products are developed,
- which in turn draws in new audiences…

Owners and controllers, driven by the need to maintain and enhance market share, continually look for ways to improve their product:

- technologically (satellite and cable channels or digital television, for example) and
- qualitatively, such as developing new types of programming and presentation.

For Pluralist approaches the *economic imperative* (the requirement to make profits by drawing in customers, subscribers and so forth) gives audiences a pivotal role: as active, knowledgeable and discerning consumers that buy into content that fits their lifestyles or beliefs - while ignoring content that doesn't.

New media increases diversity and choice - there are websites that reflect most shades of political and ideological opinion - and this places media **controllers** in a powerful position through their ability to seek out and respond to audience demand.

From this general perspective the media provides a range of individual and collective benefits to consumers:

- news media, for example, provide **information** services that keep people in touch with political and economic developments and cater for specialist interest groups (such as youth or ethnic minorities).
- media diversity ensures audiences can choose from different sources of information, local, national and increasingly global.
- the media has a **policing** function, whereby the activities of the powerful can be scrutinised, exposed and criticised. **Wintour** (2012), for example, highlights the role played by the media in exposing tax avoidance schemes amongst senior UK government officials.
- a plurality of media, catering for a wide range of ideas, facilitates **freedom of speech** and allows for **public debates** around issues, such as fox-hunting, phone-hacking, membership of the EU and so forth that contribute to democratic discourse.

A key argument for Pluralists is that the media do not create attitudes; rather, **Thomas** (2004) argues, they "reflect and reinforce them"; if British newspapers are broadly conservative, this is because the prevailing attitudes of British consumers is broadly conservative.

New Right

While most Pluralist approaches see the State as playing an **indirect role** in democratic societies that guarantees media diversity and consumer choice **New Right** forms of pluralism are generally antagonistic towards the State playing any role in the functioning of economic markets because they argue government interventions distort the workings of free markets and, by so doing work against the interests of consumers by limiting their choices.

The BBC, for example, is guaranteed funding through a compulsory licence fee and doesn't have to compete with other channels or organisations for viewers and revenue. Its size and funding also means it can potentially stifle **competition** in the markets it enters.

Anything that hinders the working of economic markets is undesirable since, for New Right approaches, only free markets can deliver innovation and economic development.

This applies, for example, to *media convergence* - how different types of media combine to create newer forms, such as streaming television pictures over the Internet. Government regulation limiting cross-media ownership, is seen to prevent companies developing these new technologies.

New Right approaches, in this respect, tend to focus on the problems associated with State-owned media and government interventions, while the anti-competitive behaviour of privately-owned media receives much less attention.

Major new media corporations such as Google and Facebook are just as capable - and more than willing - to stifle the development of potential competitors by simply taking them over.

Facebook, for example, has consistently targeted and bought companies that either compete directly with the services it offers or which complement and extend those services. In recent years, for example, Facebook has acquired:

- Instagram, the photo and video sharing platform, and
- Whatsap - a messaging service that was a direct competitor to Facebook messenger

WhatsAp was such a successful competitor in the personal messaging sector that Facebook decided to buy it rather than compete with it…

- LiveRail - a video advertising technology company and
- Oculus Rift - a major player in emerging virtual reality technology.

It is also arguable that, in the UK at least, successive government attempts to regulate media markets have been designed to *promote*, rather than stifle competition.

The **Cairncross Review** (2019), for example, an "*independent review into the future of high-quality journalism in the UK*", is just the latest attempt to reinforce pluralist notions of competition.

Cairncross Review Recommendations

1. New codes of conduct to rebalance the relationship between online platforms and publishers: Those online platforms upon which publishers increasingly depend for traffic should be required to set out codes of conduct to govern their commercial arrangements with news publishers, with oversight from a regulator.

2. Investigate the workings on the online advertising market to ensure fair competition: The Competition and Markets Authority should use its information-gathering powers to conduct a market study of the online advertising industry.

3. News quality obligation: Online platforms' efforts to improve users' news experience should be placed under regulatory supervision. Platforms have already developed initiatives to help users identify reliability and the trustworthiness of sources.

4. Media literacy: The government should develop a media literacy strategy, working with Ofcom, the online platforms, news publishers, broadcasters, voluntary organisations and academics, to identify gaps in provision and opportunities for more collaborative working.

5. The BBC's market impact and role: Ofcom should assess whether BBC News Online is striking the right balance between aiming for the widest reach for its own content on the one hand and driving traffic from its online site to commercial publishers (particularly local ones) on the other. The BBC should do more to share its technical and digital expertise for the benefit of local publishers.

6. Innovation funding: The government should launch a new fund focussed on innovations aimed at improving the supply of public-interest news, to be run by Nesta in the first instance, and in due course by the proposed Institute for Public Interest News.

7. New forms of tax relief: The government should introduce new tax reliefs aimed at (i) improving how the online news market works and (ii) ensuring an adequate supply of public-interest journalism.

8. Direct funding for local public-interest news: The Local Democracy Reporting Service should be evaluated and expanded, and responsibility for its management passed to, or shared with, the proposed Institute for Public Interest News.

9. Establish an Institute for Public Interest News: A dedicated body could amplify existing and future efforts to ensure the sustainability of public-interest news, working in partnership with news publishers and the online platforms as well as bodies such as Nesta, Ofcom, the BBC and academic institutions.

Postmodernism

This approach reflects a *broadly pluralist perspective* in that it questions Marxist arguments about the media's ideological role. In a world that, to use **McCluhan**'s (1992) phrase, increasingly resembles a *global village*, the media can no-longer be subject to the kinds of controls, checks and balances that historically once restricted the free flow of ideas and information.

- **Content reflects interpretation**: How different people in the network interpret information contributes to its development. Media content, in other words, is interpreted differently by differently-positioned individuals (such as males and females, young and old) and these differences reflect back on content. Owners and controllers can't influence how particular forms of content will be seen or interpreted by an audience.

Whereas Marxist approaches view information as flowing hierarchically, from producers to consumers, postmodernists see information in terms of **networks**; power**,** in terms of control over the production and distribution of news, is no longer concentrated within institutions (such as media companies) but within social networks where information is both produced and consumed by the same people. Information flows between different points (people) within a network in such a way as to make it impossible to distinguish between producer and consumer.

Tuomi (2002), for example, identifies the characteristic features of *postmodern media* in terms of three ideas:

- **Consumer as producer:** they are increasingly the same person.
- **Backstage is Frontstage**: While **Goffman** (1959) classically argued that in our everyday, face-to-face, interactions, our "backstage" is where we privately rehearse the "frontstage performance" we plan to give when we present ourselves to others. With something like a social media site all social interaction is played out within the confines of the medium and the face we present to the world is increasingly the unvarnished, unmediated, person we are.

On social media, Frontstage is Backstage…

In postmodernity the media are seen to operate in a world where, **Sarup** (1989) argues, knowledge has become:

"*fragmented, partial and contingent*".

Knowledge in postmodernity is increasingly held to be relative to, or dependent on, your particular viewpoint rather than the statement of some sort of essential empirical truth. It reflects a world in which, as **Milovanovic** (1997) argues:

'*there are many truths and no over-encompassing Truth is possible*'.

A significant role of the media in postmodernity, therefore, is one of giving form and apparent solidity to a world in flux: where what we knew to be true yesterday will no-longer be true tomorrow - unless and until the media says it is.

In such a situation - presupposing we're inclined to accept it reflects a certain reality - the construction of news is necessarily, *by definition*, *ideological*. In a world of contingent truth it cannot be otherwise.

In relation to something like news, for example, we experience *mediated realities* (realities that are almost entirely created by the media) whereby information is organised in terms of **discourses** - what **Fiske** (1987) defines as a system of representation, developed to circulate ideas, beliefs and values about something, that creates a framework for its interpretation by an audience.

Part of the function of a *news discourse*, for example, is to define the concept of news itself and once this occurs, further refinements take place. This includes the ability to define meanings for an audience through a range of *narratives* or *stories* that indicate to audiences how they are supposed to interpret news events (as good or bad, man-made or natural, accidental or deliberate, important or unimportant and so on) that **determines** their response to whatever is being presented as news. How it is selected and presented, in other words, influences how it is perceived.

In this situation the media propagate, control, organise, criticise, promote and demote (marginalise) a variety of *competing narratives* that only become important in the context of *power* and the ability to represent the interests of powerful voices in society.

In our society for example, crime news is generally presented in terms of a "*danger discourse*", one that characterises crime as "a social problem" that reaches into and affects all levels of society at all times. Supporting narratives may involve selecting unusual and atypical crimes and presenting them as usual and typical or focusing on specific forms of criminal behaviour, such as interpersonal violence, that lend support to the overall narrative.

Again in our society, mediated crime narratives generally solidify around the "crimes of the powerless" (relatively common but trivial forms of criminal behaviour involving relatively minor harms) while generally ignoring the crimes of the powerful.

changing perceptions

The question here is not whether news discourses are 'true or false', nor whether they 'accurately or inaccurately' reflect the 'reality of crime' (or whatever behaviour is being presented and represented); rather, it's how they affect our **perception** of that behaviour - and this has significant ramifications for how we understand and explain the role of the media.

In particular, it rejects both traditional and neo-Marxist arguments that we can, at some level, discern a *social reality that is real*, as distinct from *media manufactured realities* that serve to obscure exploitative (class) relationships. **Baudrillard** (1995), for example, illustrates this idea through the concepts of:

- **Simulacra** or "representations that refer to other representations". What we call "news", for example, is nothing more than a *simulacrum* - a "*copy without an original*" - and this involves the related concept of:

- **Hyperreality** - something that is "more real than the thing it purports to represent". Through the act of selecting and reporting something "*as news*" for example, journalists (or whoever) effectively construct the thing that purports to be something real and original. However, since an audience only knows "the reality of an event" through how it is reported it's impossible to separate "the real from the representation"; the real *is* the representation.

These ideas are hugely important when considering the significance of media ownership and control in contemporary societies because if we accept this argument it follows that in postmodernity "*representations are the only reality*" and those who have the power to create and perpetuate their representation of reality will necessarily be hugely influential.

While modernist approaches like Marxism and, to some extent, traditional forms of Pluralism such as those represented by the New Right, consider representations in terms of how and why they *misrepresent* particular groups, **Baudrillard** argues representations can't be assessed in terms of whether something is accurately or inaccurately represented because how something is represented *is* its reality.

Modernist approaches suggest the media represents something like "ethnicity" in ways that distort its reality; "*the real"* is compared to its media representation in order to disentangle it from the "*not real*". If you've ever spent any time on social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook you will probably find this technique familiar - people arguing about which representation of reality (their's or those they are arguing with, is real).

Baudrillard, however, suggests this approach is mistaken on two levels:

1. It assumes things in the social world have a reality outside of how they are represented. In the physical world, for example, we can look at something like the original, authentic, Buckingham Palace and compare it with the various ways it has been represented through *inauthentic copies* (such as the "Buckingham Palace Care Home" or any other inauthentic copy you care to devise).

A representation of the real Buckingham Palace. Which, when you think about, is actually ironic…

Concepts like “news”, however, have no "authentic" reality because they are social constructs; the product of how they are initially described and represented. All the media does, therefore, is construct *representations of representations*.

2. That which we call "reality" is experienced differently depending on who you are, where you are and your source of information.

Every audience constructs its own version of reality and everything represented in the media is experienced as multiple realities, all of which - and none of which - are *authentically real*; everything is simply a representation of something seen from different viewpoints.

In relation to ownership and control, therefore, the ability to “*control representations*” through the power to shape a discourse and the narratives it contains is hugely important, as can be exampled in relation to something like crime news. While crime has no single, overriding, reality, it is frequently explained in terms of different, often contradictory, media discourses that exist in the same social (hyper) space:

- **Domination discourses** involve the media mapping out its role as part of the overall ‘locus of social control’, where the ‘media machine’ is tightly integrated into society’s overall mechanisms of formal and informal social control. This involves calling for new, tougher punishments and criticising ‘soft on crime, soft on the causes of crime’ approaches.

This discourse weaves a variety of narratives drawing on traditional punishments, such as prisons and newer forms of technological surveillance, such as CCTV, to create a discourse that locates ‘criminals’ and ‘non-criminals’ in different physical and moral universes.

- **Democratic discourses** involve the media acting as a **watchdog** on the activities of the powerful; exposing political and economic corruption or as a focal point for oppositional ideas.

- **Danger discourses** involve narratives of **fear** - crime is reported in terms of threat - and **fascination**; crime as a ‘media staple’ used to sell newspapers, encourage us to watch TV programmes (factual and fictional), and so forth.

These two narratives come together, **Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne** (1995) argue, in terms of crime as **postmodern spectacle** – crime is news because of the powerful combination of fear and fascination (such as the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center (*sic*) in 2001).

"Spectacles” are an integral part of the crime discourse in postmodern society, constructed as both news *and* entertainment - an example of **intertextuality** where ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ are interwoven to construct a seamless web of ‘fear and fascination’, such that the viewer is no longer sure whether what they are seeing is real or reconstruction.

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