

simply the communication of a chain of events. A key word here, perhaps, is chain. When we enjoy a story we may be attracted to a plot, a sequence of events, that we can arrange in our minds in a temporal way (we know what happens first, next, and what may happen later) and which often suggests a causal relation between events. A good story, a story with what may be called “aboutness,” is often not a collection of unrelated events, characters, or observations but an ordered sequence of events in which characters act, interact, and work toward some resolution. Surely you have heard someone on a Monday morning at school attempt to tell a story about something funny that happened over the weekend. After the storyteller makes a stumbling attempt at a bad story, someone remarks, “I guess you had to be there.” Someone else, on the other hand, may be able to take the same events and put together an engaging tale that results in gasps of disbelief, laughter, or further curiosity. Creating a narrative around an idea can be a very effective rhetorical device and is often at the heart of a political campaign, an advertising campaign, or even an argument in a newspaper editorial. In this course, as you move from section to section with different focus points, you will find that the questions you consider in relation to a work of literature like a novel or a short passage will apply across media and allow you to discuss the effects of narrative in mass communication.

Critical study of mass communication

During your study of language and mass communication you will use some of the practices we outlined in the first three chapters of this book to take a close critical look at language and media. Paying attention to some of the details of the complex relationship between language and the purposes and means of communication to a large audience, you will study a few broad topics such as textual bias, stereotypes, and language and the role of the state. There are a variety of ways to organize the course but no matter what topic you choose to investigate you will be considering different genres within media, the way mass media uses language to inform, persuade, or entertain, and the potential for ideological influence of the media. In the second half of this chapter we will examine a series of texts under the three broad topics of news organizations, political speeches and campaigns, and popular culture. These topics are broad enough so that many of the issues you will address in your own school’s particular focus will be touched upon here. Rather than giving you an in-depth analysis of language and mass communication through the lens of these topics we hope to give you a series of texts that will both raise important theoretical ideas and offer the chance for you to practice your skills of media analysis.

News organizations

The organizations that bring us news can be either public or private and can function across a wide variety of media. Until recently, news organizations or the institutions behind them (media conglomerates, the government) had to be relatively large, simply because these

services are expensive. A newspaper, news gathering organizations such as Reuters or the Associated Press, television networks such as CNN, BBC, and ABC (Australia), are corporations that employ large numbers of people to create, distribute and determine the product that is printed or broadcast as news.

Quite early in school we are taught to be wary of media bias in news reporting. Using basic skills of critical reading we are able to discern the difference between a newspaper article that at least presents itself as informational and an article that is editorial- or opinion-based. Words and phrases like “perhaps,” “it would seem,” “in our opinion,” or most likely” clue us in to the tentative or opinion-based nature of a piece. It is more difficult, however, to discern the political, social, or theoretical bias of a newspaper, magazine, journal, or television show. Understanding theoretical bias involves examining codes, assumptions, political affiliations and the social and professional context behind the argument and focus of the story. While some of the texts we will examine here involve a discussion of context and the underlying bias in particular organizations, it is important in the first instance to understand the institutional assumptions that are made when producing the news, regardless of any other political or theoretical leaning.

First and foremost, we should remember that the production of news is a profession like any other, with its own processes, rules, and routes to professionalization, all of which shape the communicative acts we finally call “news.” From the very beginning of mass communication the dissemination of news has been one of its primary functions. Humans, it seems, have a basic need or desire for information in order to understand their world or make sense of their own culture, either in relation to their private lives or in relation to distant cultures. News, then, has always presented itself as truthful information and, as such, journalists have almost always taken a stance, as a matter of professionalism, of integrity and objectivity. In the early days of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, an early leader during the transition from colonies to the United States, famously added to the responsibilities of the press by suggesting it might play the role of a check on the honesty of government. “The way to prevent” citizens from being led astray by misguided leaders, suggested Jefferson, was “to give them full information of their affairs thro’ the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the mass of the people.” Jefferson even went further, saying “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” This drive to inform, to remain unbiased, and to be a check on those in power, has remained a professional standard—if a sometimes lofty one—for news organizations and is a goal of both private and government-supported institutions.

But what other professional practices and conventions drive the production of news? While government-supported organizations

such as the BBC may not have to rely on raising money in order to stay viable, they may have other obligations to consider when they produce a news program—they are influenced directly by the government agencies and committees that provide their funds and, less directly, by the impressions of the people who pay taxes that ultimately support their programs. Publicly funded news media must be aware of the desires and concerns of their audience. Private news media, of course, have to also be concerned with generating an audience for both sales of the news product itself or for the sale of advertising time or space. These financial and political forces are underscored by other, more immediate, restrictions and imperatives. First, the news has a deadline to reach a prime-time viewing audience or a print deadline (who knows, in the 24-hour news cycle, what developments the next day will bring?). News organizations, far from simply *finding* news, must *create* consumable and interesting news out of a mass of experience. News professionals go to school and apprentice, like lawyers and doctors, to learn the particular jobs involved in putting together the news, and this process leads to a predictable and automatically expedient or biased product. Consider the following process. Journalists and reporters, both freelance and those working for news organizations, get stories from various sources. Some reporters are assigned to “beats” that are considered frequently newsworthy or interesting, like police headquarters, government organizations, or financial centers. Reporters also rely on major organizations and corporations that issue press releases (promotional statements that are sent to news organizations), press briefings (short conferences or meetings with the press, often governmental, to explain issues or events), news conferences, or relations with public relations firms. News is sourced, in other words, through attention to the usual sources and to outlets that are designed to provide product to news organizations. The myriad stories collected this way are then reviewed by news editors who determine which stories deserve development and which stories will not be needed.

Activity

Broadcast media: public or private

Which broadcast media in your country are public and which are privately funded? Most countries today have a mix of private and public news organizations and some public broadcasters today are in reality partially funded by donors or advertisers. Public broadcasting has some obvious benefits: without the pressure of finding advertisers, broadcasters can cater to small interest groups, including minority language groups, or focus on stories of more community interest if not more entertainment value.

List as many news media institutions as you can that are based in the area where you live. Where do you find your news? Does your news come from private or public sources? Is there a difference between these sources? Using either the radio, television, or the Internet (searching on sites such as www.youtube.com), listen to or watch two news broadcasts from the same day, one from a privately funded station and one from a public station. Write a brief reflection on the differences you perceive, if any.

This naturally leads to a certain similarity, or familiarity in the approach, even when the stories have a different origin with news coming from such a variety of sources. Take the case of an individual reporter trying to get stories published in a newspaper for which she works. The reporter generally works on smaller stories, but knows that if she finds a lead that is interesting, or topical enough, she may be able to convince her editor to give her a bigger assignment, more space in the upcoming edition, or a position on a more important page. Faced with a variety of news events occurring on her usual "beat," how would the reporter prioritize her focus? How would she decide which story is going to have a higher chance of making the paper? What criteria would the editor be using when choosing stories? In what ways would the decisions to publish depend on the size, location, and advertising revenue of the newspaper? Stories often get to be news, and get to be news in a number of broadcast media, because they meet certain well-established criteria that guarantee a readership.

Activity

Media bias

Read the following extract from a book about the nature of the creation of the news by institutions. This extract considers biases not in terms of political agenda but in terms of a philosophy regarding what counts as news and what people need or want to consume as news.

Text 1

This extract outlines the attributes of what is frequently called the informational bias of the news, that is, the bias news has towards certain kinds of stories and the types of information they convey.

Personalization Most news stories focus on individuals rather than institutions, and emphasize human-interest angles and emotional impact over and often at the expense of broader social contexts and political perspectives. Simply put, news stories are people-centered; they rely heavily upon interviews, first-person accounts, eye-witness testimony and expert opinions. The focus on individual people is designed to make stories feel more personal, direct, and immediate. But by focusing on individual actors, such as the President, in a story about economic recession, for instance, audiences are encouraged to view political issues individually rather than socially. Consequently, they are more likely to blame specific political actors for social ills and less likely to understand the underlying factors and root causes of social problems.

Dramatization The news is overwhelmingly biased toward the narrative presentation of information. Regardless of the specific issues journalists are reporting on, those issues tend to be structured as stories... Moreover, to heighten audience interest, journalists frequently focus on the most sensational, scandalous, and shocking details of a story. The

insistence on narrativizing the news has at least two significant consequences. First, since some issues are difficult to pictorialize and require sustained analysis, their dramatization leads to inaccurate or misrepresentative reporting (if they get covered at all). Second, since narratives have beginnings, middles, and endings, dramatized news has the potential to impose a clean and tidy sense of closure on complex, enduring issues.

Fragmentation A third information bias in the news is the tendency to treat stories in isolation, ignoring their connection to other stories and the larger contexts in which they occur. Both newspapers and televised newscasts organize the news into brief, self-contained capsules. This can foster the misimpression that the world is just a series of random, unrelated events. The compartmentalization of news stories can obfuscate not only the interconnections among stories, but also their historical significance. Fragmented news makes the world appear chaotic and unpredictable. Indeed, the prevalence of fragmented news helps to explain why the 9/11 attacks were so utterly incomprehensible to most Americans, who had no context for understanding the connections between the economic and foreign policies of the USA, and the religious zealotry of... extremists. To most Americans, the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and Pentagon are isolated events with no prior history or context.

Authority-disorder The fourth and final informational bias of the news is closely related to the first three, and in particular, the way that personalized news becomes dramatized. Since personalization leads to a focus on individuals and dramatization favors the sensational, it is common to depict the individuals and parties

involved in a story as in conflict or tension. This tension is typically represented as one between authority (i.e. police, government leaders, public officials) and disorder (i.e. criminals, natural disasters, terrorism). Furthermore, since the news is comprised of individual capsules that require narrative closure, the authority-disorder tension is generally resolved either in the direction of authority through the restoration of normalcy or in the direction of disorder and the cynical view that public officials are incompetent.

Source: Ott, Brian L. & Mack, Robert L. 2010. *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 62–63.

Questions to the text

- 1 How do you react to the list presented in the passages above?
- 2 Do you think news organizations purposefully or subconsciously, as part of their professional practice, adhere to this list?
- 3 Can you think of other attributes that would either structure a news story or make an event newsworthy?

Activity

Front page news

Compare the front page news of several different newspapers from your city or region. Or, take a major international paper, like the *New York Times*, and review its North American, European and Asian editions (the *International Herald Tribune*).

What is noticeable about the priority given to major news stories of both a national and international

relevance? How do you think the different editorial decisions reflect the priorities of the different regions and the target readership? How does the language reflect the readership? How do local or national news media groups differ in their approach to news coverage in comparison to an international consortium like the *New York Times*?

Activity

Television news

Watch at least two different news programs on television or through the Internet. Compare a “prime time” news program with a 24-hour news program on a cable or satellite station. What factors influence which stories count as news on television? How are videos used as sources of information? How are other visual factors such as set design, graphics, and newscaster appearance important?

What effect does music play in a news program? Why would one program use an anchor person who stands at the scene, while another is seated behind a desk? Expand your brief comparison of a daily news program, to compare it with the front page of the same day’s newspaper. What is covered and what isn’t? How does the medium and the intended audience change the news on offer?

The future of news

What changes will the Internet bring to news organizations or, more generally, to the type of news we encounter? As we write this book, the fate of many large newspapers remains in doubt. Over the past couple of decades private news organizations are increasingly being bought by multinational corporations that now control a large number of media outlets. Certainly, the centralization of news could be harmful to the variety and amount of bias in coverage. Now, small and large newspapers alike are under threat by the Internet, not only potentially affecting gathering itself. It would be difficult to outline here all of the possible effects the widening audience for Internet news and the shrinking audience for print newspapers will have on traditional news sources (including television). For one thing, we are in the middle of the changes now. Second, for every negative effect

there is a possible positive effect. Here are a few issues to consider when thinking about the effect of the Internet on traditional journalism:

- **Local coverage** Smaller newspapers are often the first to feel the effects of shrinking readerships. The loss of local newspapers often means the loss of focus on smaller communities. At the same time, the growth of local websites, community bulletin boards, and local web magazines or newsletters could lead to greater coverage of community news through alternative sources. But what would happen to the regular features that we now consider to be the mainstay of the local press: the reporting of marriages, births, and obituaries for instance? If local newspapers move online, will they be able to generate enough revenue to hire staff and reporters?
- **In-depth reporting** As newspapers currently feel the pressure to provide more entertainment and light news in their pages, they justify the time spent on more frivolous content by stating that the money they make funds more serious, in-depth and often less flashy reporting. Some feel that the Internet will mean less funding for specialist reporters and expensive investigative journalism. On the other hand, some websites, because they do not have the obligation to be generalists, specialize in a given topic, politics for example, and provide continuous coverage. Other news sources on the Internet, and some print newspapers as well, are beginning to rely more on outside sources for most of their information, acting more as a collector of already produced news stories. Newspapers, and increasingly these aggregating websites, then grow and support their own smaller stable of expert reporters.
- **Financial resources** Ultimately, newspapers rely on money from sponsors, governments, or advertisers. All news sources are currently struggling to find where exactly revenue will come from as the digital age progresses. While the *New York Times* has a successful online presence, its print newspaper still generates the main share of its advertising revenue. In 2010, *The Times* in London began charging subscription rates for access to its online service, starting what may be a future trend. Professional journalists and editors can devote their time to the gathering of news because it is their job and they get paid. Some bloggers post “editorial” comments on their websites in their spare time or as an adjunct to their primary profession (an economics professor might blog in a less academic register about the economy online, for example), but is this likely to be a reliable source of information in the future?
- **Reporter access to information** Who gets to interview the prime minister? Who is given a press pass to watch and report on the finals of the French Open? Who gets to sit with a notepad in the front row of Armani’s spring show? While news is often generated by those who have power and influence through events, announcements, and press conferences, access to this

information is necessarily limited. While the Internet allows for easier public access to some events (YouTube has recently featured both live debates and live professional cricket matches), many organizations choose who they want to distribute a story and the choice usually falls on professional journalists. Will the producers of Internet news have the same access to information as other journalists? The answer is still up in the air. There are recent cases of online celebrity reporters who have “scooped” traditional media in key stories and some political news websites. Bloggers who have special access to information have been quoted as sources in the mainstream media.

- **Informational bias** Consider the “informational biases” in the front-page news stories you discussed. How many of these attributes would also apply to online news sites? Would the wide audience and wide number of sources on the Internet lead to a different set of news features becoming more prevalent?
- **Flexibility** How is a news-gathering organization able to respond to events as they happen, and to the changing needs of an audience? All news organizations have been influenced by increasingly more sophisticated digital technology. It is much easier for organizations to find, record, and send news through satellite, the Internet or cell phone connections. News services are able to draw on the insights of private individuals and local reporters who may have information that is easily communicated through contemporary technologies, rather than a regular foreign correspondent posted overseas. But are smaller organizations better able adapt to new technologies and pursue stories in the way they see fit? Or, are large organizations with substantial funding better able to consolidate and use new technologies to their advantage? Are small, user-generated organizations more flexible and quick to respond to news and audience demands, or do more well-resourced professional organizations play a greater role in keeping and creating new audiences?
- **Fragmented audience** There is something for everyone on the Internet. It is also relatively easy to avoid the things you *don't* want on the Internet. If your passion is road cycling, there are myriad sites that will fulfill your need for very specific and detailed information about cycling. And if you are not interested in hot air ballooning, just don't search for it. Or put a parent lock on ballooning sites. But is there a loss of a broader sense of community? One function of a strong local news presence may not only be the dissemination of news from an area but the building of a community of readers who share information and debate. Does the Internet create a broader, global news community or a more fractured whole? If large multinational newspapers like the *New York Times* do create a sense of community that crosses borders, is this beneficial or limiting?

The blog

Blogging is one of the online genres that has the potential to change the way news is produced and consumed. The power of the independent, informational blog is so strong that savvy traditional media outlets now produce their own blogs so that their staff writers and reporters have another outlet for their material—material that often sits outside traditional news boundaries. Look at the following extracts and consider the nature of the blog in relation to traditional news outlets like television news and newspapers. How do the “headlines” on a blog differ from the headlines in newspapers? Do the stories in a blog fit into the models of informational bias and newsworthiness as previously discussed? Does the

language of the blog article indicate to you in any way that it is a different genre from a typical newspaper article? How is the article different in style, register, or content? Is the blog and its article more or less useful than a traditional newspaper? Do blogs add something to media culture that was not possible before the Internet? Does the language of the blog article indicate to you in any way that it is a different genre from a typical newspaper article?

Text 1

The “front page” of a private blog by the British journalist Toby Young.

GO

NO SACRED COWS

BLOG JOURNALISM BOOKS FILM RADIO TOBY'S SCHOOL

TOBY YOUNG

COMFORTING THE AFFLICTED
AFFLICTING THE COMFORTABLE

Tuesday 1st February 2011

Ed Miliband says he's never taken drugs because he's "a bit square"

It's hard to understand why any party leader would consent to an interview with Piers Morgan in GG, given the mess that William Hague and Nick Clegg made of it. Is it now considered some sort of rite of passage? Or has a deal been struck behind the scenes whereby Miliband has been promised an outing on Morgan Live in return? (To read more, click [here](#).)

COMMENT | COMMENTS SO FAR: 0 [FIXED LINK] | EMAIL TO A FRIEND | BOOKMARK

Sunday 30th January 2011

Katharine Birbalsingh isn't to blame for the closure of her old school

How utterly shameless of the chair of governors of St Michael's and All Angels Academy to blame Katharine Birbalsingh for the closure of the school.

According to the report in today's paper: "Canon Peter Clark, the chairman of the school's governors, said that her attack on incapable teachers "blinded by Leftist ideology" had dealt a fatal blow to the school. "The publicity that she generated was very unhelpful, which certainly didn't help in terms of pupil recruitment," said Canon Clark."

To begin with, she didn't identify the school in question during her Conservative Party Conference speech about the shortcomings of state education. While she drew on her own experience as a teacher in a host of state secondary schools, she was talking about system-wide problems, not criticising any one school in particular. (To read more, click [here](#).)

Great post about @Miss_Snuffy on Archbishop Cranmer's blog [link](#) (5 hours ago)

- TWITTER
- FACEBOOK
- LINKEDIN

- WIKIPEDIA
- IMDB
- EMAIL

BEST OF THE WEB

[Peter Sissons dissects the BBC's leftwing bias](#) - Daily Mail

[Peter Osborne on Labour's future with Balls](#) - telegraph.co.uk

[Gove's school reforms reach tipping point](#) - spectator.co.uk

[Tuition fees myths busted by Iain Roberts](#) - iainroberts.mycouncillor.org.uk

[Student protester privately-educated Cambridge undergraduate with father worth £78m](#) - Daily Mail

[Rioting students were middle class public schoolboys](#) - Daily Mail

[Ed Balls gave £600,000 of taxpayers' money to the football team he supports](#) - Daily Mail

[The book publishing business is about to go bust](#) - blogs.telegraph.co.uk

[Courageous deputy head dares to challenge leftwing orthodoxy in state schools](#) - Daily Mail

[Dominic Sandbrook on the rise of the Political Class](#) - Daily Mail

[Prostitute claims to have slept with Beckham for \\$10,000. Rates him 7.5/10](#) - huffingtonpost.com

[Brown in his bunker: Final Hours](#) - Guardian

Source: <http://www.nosacredcows.co.uk>.