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MEDIA IMAGES AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

William A. Gamson, David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Theodore Sasson

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02167

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“Big Brother is you, watching.”

Mark Crispin Miller (1988)

Abstract

Ideally, a media system suitable for a democracy ought to provide its readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives. It is difficult to find anyone who would claim that media discourse in the United States even remotely approaches this ideal. The overwhelming conclusion is that the media generally operate in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence, rather than active citizenship and participation. Furthermore, all the trends seem to be in the wrong direction—toward more and more messages, from fewer and bigger producers, saying less and less. That’s the bad news.

The good news is that the messages provide a many-voiced, open text that can and often is read oppositionally, at least in part. Television imagery is a site of struggle where the powers that be are often forced to compete and defend what they would prefer to have taken for granted. The underdetermined nature of media discourse allows plenty of room for challengers such as social movements to offer competing constructions of reality and to find support for them from readers whose daily lives may lead them to construct meaning in ways that go beyond media imagery.

INTRODUCTION

By now the story is familiar. We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which we receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. And the special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible.

This chapter is about this story. For the most part, we accept its general argument, using it to raise questions and draw out implications for which there are—or might be—empirical evidence. Sometimes we think important qualifications and reservations are in order. The story we tell has more tension and contest in the process. It is less determined than the original and leaves more room for challengers and ordinary citizens to enter as active agents in constructing meaning (cf Ryan 1991).

We emphasize the production of images rather than facts or information because this more subtle form of meaning construction is at the heart of the issue. But the distinction between conveying images and conveying information and facts is not very useful. Facts, as much as images, take on their meaning by being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame. The term “images” is useful in reminding us of the importance of the visual, of attention to verbal imagery, and other modes of conveying a broader frame—through music, for example.

A focus on images also allows us to connect our discussion with postmodernist writers who play off the two meanings of the word. Images are, on the one hand, reproductions, but they have a second meaning as well: a mental picture of something not real or present. Baudrillard (1988) argues that dramatic changes in the technology of reproduction have led to the implosion of representation and reality. Increasingly, the former becomes dominant as “simulacra” are substituted for a reality that has no foundation in experience.

Conscious design to persuade is largely irrelevant for our purposes. We assume that a wide variety of media messages can act as teachers of values, ideologies, and beliefs and that they can provide images for interpreting the world whether or not the designers are conscious of this intent. An advertisement, for example, may be intended merely to sell cigarettes to women, but incidentally it may encode a message about gender relations and what it means to be a “woman.”

In talking about those who decode such messages, we use the term “reader” rather than “audience.” As Fiske (1987) suggests, the latter term “implies that television reaches a homogeneous mass of people who are all essentially identical, who receive the same messages, meanings, and ideologies from the same programs and who are essentially passive.” By readers, we mean those

who “read” or decode sights and sounds as well as printed text. Reading media imagery is an active process in which context, social location, and prior experience can lead to quite different decodings. Furthermore, it is frequently interactive, taking place in conversation with other readers who may see different meanings.

The first section below deals with the organization of imagery production. The economics and technology of “the consciousness industry” (Enzensberger 1974) have been changing rapidly. We examine arguments concerning the increasing concentration of ownership and control in this industry and whether or not it makes any difference in the content of the images it produces. The emergence of media conglomerates with a global market has led to an unprecedented integration of multiple media which can simultaneously market the same message in multiple forms through a dazzling array of new technologies. We examine the implications of such changes for political consciousness among media readers.

The next section examines the messages in the imagery, focusing on the implications for understanding the operation of power in American society and world politics. We find it useful to distinguish two realms of content—one “naturalized” and taken for granted, the other contested terrain with collective actors offering competing interpretations. The failure to make this distinction allows writers to talk past each other, each addressing a different realm.

We then turn to arguments concerning the readers of media imagery and the role they play in negotiating meaning. Some writers on media content ignore the decoding process, assuming an undifferentiated audience in which the dominant meaning will be passively accepted by everybody. Those who examine how people actually use the media in constructing meaning invariably challenge such assumptions and find various kinds of oppositional and negotiated readings of cultural texts.

The consequences of the media role for democratic politics seem largely negative, promoting apathy, cynicism, and quiescence at the expense of political participation. We conclude, no doubt predictably, that things are pretty bad but not hopeless. It isn’t just Big Brother in our heads, but a whole bunch of unruly siblings, including a few black sheep with whom we may identify if we choose.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF IMAGE PRODUCTION

Researchers have long been interested in the social and economic organization of the mass media. In the 1970s, a series of organizational studies examined how the news is produced. Tuchman (1978) suggested that the organization of news into “beats” had a great influence on what was and was not considered

newsworthy. Sigal (1973) examined the relationship between journalists and their sources and found that journalists rely to a great degree on official sources and routine channels. While such standard newsgathering techniques may be essential for journalists to do their work, the consequence, Sigal suggests, is that journalists "are exploited by their sources either to insert information into the news or to propagandize."

Gans (1979) further explored the relationship between reporters and sources. He argues that the power of official sources, combined with the need for journalistic efficiency, ultimately structures how news organizations decide what's news. Gans suggests that "efficiency and source power are parts of the same equation, since it is efficient for journalists to respect the power of official sources." And Epstein's (1973) analysis of network television news found that "the pictures of society that are shown on television as national news are largely—though not entirely—performed and shaped by organizational considerations." In particular, he argues that the economic and organizational logic of network television structures the scope and form of network news.

Ownership and the Market

More recently, researchers and critics have looked beyond the internal demands of media organizations to understand the context in which media images are produced. Ownership of media organizations has been a particular concern. Bagdikian (1990) articulates the most well-known argument about the problems of media monopoly. He argues that a "private ministry of information" has emerged in the past 25 years, as ownership of major media has become increasingly concentrated.

The third edition of his book (1990) reports that in the United States "twenty-three corporations control most of the business in daily newspapers, magazines, television, books and motion pictures"—down from 46 in 1983. This, he argues, has grave consequences for democracy: concentrated ownership of media inevitably narrows the range of information and imagery that is disseminated. In short, "contrary to the diversity that comes with a large number of small, diverse, media competitors under true free enterprise, dominant giant firms that command the nature of the business produce an increasingly similar output" (Bagdikian 1990).

Bagdikian raises a central question about the relationship between competition and diversity. While his argument is complex, an underlying premise is that competition is more likely to encourage a wide-ranging, diverse media. Responding in large part to Bagdikian, Entman (1989) argues that the connection between newspaper competition and quality news is not at all clear. He suggests that competition has "negligible effects" on newspaper quality and that there are sound theoretical reasons for suspecting that this would be the case.

Entman is quick to point out that local newspaper monopoly, one of Bagdikian's central concerns, is "a product of the very same economic market forces that putatively nourish free press ideals." Because it is the free market system that has produced local newspaper monopolies, Entman is skeptical about the claim that we should look to competition for a solution. He makes an important distinction between the economic market and the marketplace of ideas, arguing that ensuring diversity in the latter should be the principal focus for those concerned about democracy. If publishers in a competitive market follow free enterprise norms of profit maximization, it is likely, Entman argues, that newspapers will provide a least common denominator product that attracts a mass audience and pleases advertisers. In short, "success in the economic market seems to contradict service to the idea market."

Entman tested the relationship between competition and four measures of quality, using data from 91 newspapers facing varying degrees of competition. His regression analysis demonstrated very little relationship between newspaper competition and his measures of quality news. McCombs's (1988) content analysis of Canadian newspapers arrived at similar results.

So what are we to make of the argument that competition encourages higher quality, more diverse media content? The data seem compelling, and there are strong theoretical reasons for expecting that newspapers in competition will not compete by increasing quality or diversity. At the same time, Entman's discussion of local newspaper monopolies does not adequately deal with several larger issues raised by Bagdikian and others who have written about the media monopoly. First, Entman does not deal clearly with the issue of advertising. Second, he does not discuss the horizontal integration of the new media empires. Third, he does not address the larger implications of corporate control of media imagery.

Advertising

Imagery production in the United States is overwhelmingly a for-profit enterprise, heavily dependent upon advertising. Media organizations use news and other programming as a commodity to attract an audience which they can then sell to advertisers. Beyond its size, these advertisers are concerned with the "quality" of their audience (defined in terms of purchasing power) and the company which their advertisements keep. Bagdikian (1978) offers the example of a *Detroit News* editor who instructed his staff to aim its reporting at people in their thirties with hefty salaries. The story choices, he explained in a memo, "should be obvious: they won't have a damn thing to do with Detroit and its internal problems." The editor calls for more stories about "the horrors that are discussed at suburban cocktail parties."

The need to attract advertisers induces programmers and editors to produce content that is likely to create a "buying mood." Herman & Chomsky (1988) point out that large corporate advertisers will have little interest in sponsoring

media content that targets audiences with little buying power or that produces images critical of corporations. More generally, advertisers shy away from sponsoring material that is disturbing—since such material interferes with the buying mood they wish to maintain.

Steinem (1990) describes the continual problems that *Ms.* had with advertisers before the magazine decided to abandon advertising altogether. Especially in women's magazines, advertisers demanded a "supportive editorial atmosphere" or "complementary copy." She describes the "insertion orders" given to advertising salespeople from various manufacturers. S.C. Johnson & Son, makers of Johnson wax and numerous other products, ordered that its ads "should not be opposite extremely controversial features or material antithetical to the nature/copy of the advertised product." Procter & Gamble, a powerful and diversified advertiser, ordered that "its products were not to be placed in *any* issue that included *any* material on gun control, abortion, the occult, cults, or the disparagement of religion. Caution was also demanded in any issue covering sex or drugs, even for educational purposes" (*italics in original*).

Advertising, then, is a force toward the homogenization of imagery, but not merely because such imagery is inoffensive. Advertising inevitably competes for attention with non-advertising content. Dull and predictable stories or programs make ads all the more interesting, their freshness and visual innovativeness standing out in contrast. Program content should not only create the proper buying mood but should avoid upstaging the advertising content that pays the bill. As we discuss below, the flood of upbeat images has an implicit political message.

Global Media Ownership

Bagdikian is not merely concerned with local newspaper monopolies. He points out that a few large multinational corporations are now global media empires, owning large portfolios of newspapers, magazines, television stations, movie studios and publishing houses. This kind of ownership concentration opens up new possibilities for these empires in the production of imagery.

Media giants can beam the same images and ideas at a national and global audience in different forms via different media. The different components of the media empire are used to promote and reinforce each other and to sell affiliated products. When corporations own both the production houses and distributors of media images, they can guarantee themselves a captive audience for their product.

Bagdikian paints a vivid picture of how corporations are taking advantage of their wide ranging media properties. He suggests the fondest scenario for media giants is:

[A] magazine owned by the company selects or commissions an article that is suitable for later transformation into a television series on a network owned by the company; then it becomes a screenplay for a movie studio owned by the company, with movie sound track sung by a vocalist made popular by feature articles in the company-owned magazines and by constant playing of the sound track by company-owned radio stations, after which the songs become popular in a record label owned by the company and so on, with reruns on company cable systems and rentals of its videocassettes all over the world. (Bagdikian 1990)

New technologies, which were once seen as democratizing forces, only accentuate this trend toward both horizontal and vertical monopoly. Neuman (1991) argues that there is an enormous potential in the new communications technologies for a diverse pluralism and increased participation in public life but concludes that it is unlikely to be realized: "When new technologies conducive to increasingly diverse and smaller scale mass communication emerge, commercial market forces and deeply ingrained media habits pull back hard in the other direction." The result is an increase in volume but not a corresponding increase in diversity, a "pattern of common-denominator and politically centrist political communication. The new media will not change this in the main."

Corporate Ownership

Finally, Bagdikian is concerned that the few corporations who own most of the media have strikingly similar interests. Media empires are not simply a result of the market system; they also serve as cheerleaders for it. Bottom-line pressure to turn a profit plus the need to protect the image of corporations as good citizens will continue to put pressure on journalists to create media content that is politically safe.

Take the case of General Electric, owner of NBC. Putnam (1991), editor of *National Boycott News*, describes how he was called by NBC's *Today* show in June, 1990 about a story on consumer boycotts. He was asked about "the biggest boycott going on right now." After some research, he called his interlocutor to tell her that "The biggest boycott in the country is against General Electric." "We can't do that one," she responded immediately. "Well, we could do that one, but we won't." The boycott against General Electric, stimulated by its leading role in the production of nuclear weapons, was supported by an estimated one percent of US consumers and had reportedly cost GE \$60 million in sales, largely from hospitals refusing to buy their medical equipment. The eventual story on NBC described boycotts against Philip Morris, Hormel, Nike, and several other corporations but had no mention of the boycott of GE products.

Herman & Chomsky (1988) suggest that deregulation in the 1980s increased profit-making pressures and led to an increase in corporate takeovers and takeover threats. As a result, media organizations "have lost some of their

limited autonomy to bankers, institutional investors, and large individual investors whom they have had to solicit as potential 'white knights'."

The argument, however, goes beyond the direct defense or promotion of corporate interests to include broader, indirect cultural effects. Like Bagdikian, H. Schiller (1989) suggests that commercial concerns dictate important elements of media content, prompting a privatization of culture. In his argument, the media are the central component of an "organic process by which the corporate 'voice' is generalized across the entire range of cultural expression." Barthes (1973) suggests the whole bourgeois culture is made to appear "normal" and "universal" in the cultural mythologies conveyed in media programming and advertising. The promise offered is access to such a culture through the purchase of consumer goods.

New information technologies only increase this advantage since their high cost limits access. Private wire services, electronic press kits, private video and computer networks provide corporate America with new ways to communicate with journalists and the public. D. Schiller (1986) concludes that these new technologies give corporations the ability "to restrict access to strategic information about their activities while at the same time gaining unparalleled control over the flow of positive images to the public at large."

In sum, Entman's suggestion that it is simplistic to champion competition among multiple media organizations to provide a wider marketplace of ideas is useful. Global media empires need to be understood as a new phenomenon. New technologies appear to enhance and reinforce the same general ownership pattern and increase the range and power of the production of imagery by large corporations with many shared ideological and cultural interests. The net result is a homogenization of imagery that celebrates existing power relationships and makes them seem a normal and acceptable part of the natural order.

MESSAGES

If all we have learned is that reality construction takes place in a commercialized space that promotes a generalized "feel good about capitalism," this does not take us very far. It leaves open a bewildering array of messages that are produced in many voices and many modes and that can be read in many different ways. Whatever we can learn from reality construction by examining the production process, it leaves a great deal open and undetermined.

The media images produced by the process can be treated as texts that take many forms—visual imagery, sound, and language. The difficulties of tracking the messages in these texts are compounded by the problem of layers of meaning. Some part of the meaning is "naturalized"—that is, it comes to us in

the form of taken-for-granted assumptions. One cannot take texts at face-value since they contain subtexts; a whole set of texts may have an even more invisible metamessage.

Many different disciplines take on this daunting task of decoding media texts. Typically, researchers carve out some particular domain of discourse on which to focus their attention—for example, race, class, or gender relations, or policy domains such as health, housing, energy, and the like. The research is some form of text or discourse analysis with different disciplines emphasizing different techniques. No short review could hope to do justice to the thousands of insightful analyses of media imagery.

We confine our attention to three issues with particular relevance for political consciousness: (a) issues raised by the concept of hegemony, (b) framing and frame transformation, and (c) the fragmentation effect.

Hegemony

Perhaps the word is better left at home but one cannot dismiss the issues it raises. Gramsci's (1971) enduring contribution was to focus our attention beyond explicit beliefs and ideology to see how the routine, taken-for-granted structures of everyday thinking contribute to a structure of dominance. Gramsci urged us to expand our notion of ideology to include the world of common sense.

In usage, however, the term has lost its more specific reference to this world of common sense and seems to mean no more in most cases than the dominant message in some domain of discourse—in particular, the message of powerful state and corporate actors. But what kind of hegemony is it when one can frequently observe instances in which elites have been forced to defend supposedly hegemonic ideas, sometimes even unsuccessfully, against the attacks of challengers? The very act of having to defend one's premises and assumptions, even if the challengers are a minority lacking significant political power, would seem to belie the existence of hegemony.

The existence of contests over meaning has led some media critics to propose making the concept of hegemony more flexible (Hallin 1987, Kellner 1990, Rapping 1987). Kellner makes the argument most succinctly:

The hegemony model of culture and the media reveals dominant ideological formations and discourses as a shifting terrain of consensus, struggle, and compromise rather than as an instrument of a monolithic, unidimensional ideology that is forced on the underlying population from above by a unified ruling class. . . . The hegemony approach analyzes television as part of a process of economic, political, social, and cultural struggle. According to this approach, different classes, sectors of capital, and social groups compete for social dominance and attempt to impose their visions, interests, and agendas on society as a whole. Hegemony is thus a shifting, complex, and open phenomenon, always subject to contestation and upheaval.

We have no quarrel with the approach—in fact, we actively adopt it in this chapter. But using the term “hegemony” to describe it salvages a jargon-laden word while losing much of the original Gramscian meaning. We would do better to abandon the term while saving an important distinction between two separate realms of media discourse.

One realm is uncontested. The social constructions here rarely appear as such to the reader and may be largely unconscious on the part of the image producer as well. They appear as transparent descriptions of reality, not as interpretations, and are apparently devoid of political content. Journalists feel no need to get different points of view for balance when they deal with images in this realm. When they conflate democracy with capitalism or matter-of-factly state that the United States is attempting to nurture and spread democracy abroad, they express images from this realm.

It is worth noting that even on hotly contested issues, there may be subtle messages about what is “normal.” Hoynes & Croteau (1989) examined the guest list for ABC’s *Nightline* for 865 programs over a 40-month period in the middle to late 1980s. They make the point that *Nightline* does not merely reflect who the serious players are on a policy issue; it is an influence in defining them for other journalists. *Nightline* is itself an important player in creating spokespersons.

They commend the show for giving a voice to foreign guests, even those from countries in serious conflict with the United States—something comparatively rare on American television. But criticism of US foreign policy comes almost exclusively from these foreign sources. On Central American policy, for example, Nicaraguan foreign minister, Alejandro Bendaña made some 11 separate appearances. Elliott Abrams was *Nightline*’s most frequent spokesman of choice to articulate and defend American policy. In 40 months, only “two guests (out of 68) were anti-intervention spokespersons.” So while conflicting frames were presented, suggesting open debate and contention, the metamessage was that Abrams’ highly controversial frame was *the* American frame, one that largely excluded domestic critics. At the same time, by relying so heavily on foreign spokespersons to critique US policy, *Nightline* made dissenting views “foreign by definition (and often ‘anti-American’ by implication)” (Hoynes & Croteau 1989).

Much of media discourse, however, does involve struggles over meaning. That actors differ in their resources and access and that some have enormous power advantages in such contests does not make it part of the natural or hegemonic realm. Even an uneven contest on a tilted playing field is a contest. Moreover, great success in getting one’s preferred meanings featured prominently in media discourse does not ensure dominance in the meaning constructed by readers.

This distinction between realms has the additional advantage of focusing

attention on movement between them. Gamson & Modigliani (1989) studied the shifting media discourse on nuclear power from the beginning of the nuclear age in 1945 through the accident at Chernobyl in 1986. Until the early 1970s, there was no anti-nuclear power discourse in the mass media. Nuclear power was a naturalized symbol of technological progress, part of the long story of human mastery of nature. Even the partial melt-down at the Fermi nuclear reactor near Detroit in 1966 failed to produce any media discourse on the merits and demerits of nuclear power.

It moved into the contested realm during the 1970s. Gamson (1988) traces the role of the environmental and anti-nuclear power movements in this evolution, showing the complex interaction among movement and more institutionalized actors in the process. On this issue, at least, far from aiding the maintenance of hegemony, challengers were helped by the media. The meanings preferred by powerful corporate and political actors proved vulnerable and media norms and practices worked to some extent against their preferred interpretation.

Even on US intervention in Central America, there were significant breaks in hegemony. Hallin (1987) examined media coverage of Central America in the early 1980s and found important differences from coverage of Vietnam in the 1960s. He suggests that issues that had been uncontested in media coverage of Vietnam were contested in the Central American coverage. For example, "questions about the American stance toward revolution not publicly aired in the United States since the onset of the Cold War [broke] into the arena of mass political communication" in coverage of Central America. And media discourse questioned both the suitability of a Cold War interpretation of the conflict and the credibility of American officials. Still, Hallin emphasizes that powerful constraints limit the impact of such challenges.

The anti-intervention movement contributed to the shifting discourse on US policy. Ryan (1991) studied the impact of a local anti-intervention group on media coverage of Central America in the mid-1980s. She found that the group, against long odds, "succeeded in presenting an alternative to government and other dominant frames once reported without contest in their local media." While the discourse did not fundamentally change, the group temporarily opened the local media to a different interpretation of the situation in Central America. Like Hallin, Ryan warns against exaggerating this success, noting that "to sustain themselves as a permanent alternative news source would have required more resources than [the group] commanded."

Public controversies also die. That which was once contested becomes naturalized. By studying symbolic contests historically, examining media discourse over time, one can trace movement between realms in either direction. What is uncontested now may be difficult or impossible to detect

without contrast with a discourse in which such matters were once de-naturalized and matters of contested meaning.

Contemporary discourse on affirmative action provides a clear example. Even those with a coded racist message do not challenge the idea of equal opportunity. "I support equal rights for all, special privileges for none," claimed erstwhile Klansman David Duke in the 1991 Louisiana governor's campaign (*Time Magazine*, Nov. 4, 1991:32). All sides take equality of opportunity for granted as the only legitimate goal even as they argue over whether affirmative action programs help to achieve it or instead make "some more equal than others" (cf Gamson 1992). Contrast this uncontested idea with the words of University of Virginia Professor Paul Barringer in 1900 (quoted in Woodward 1966):

The negro race is essentially a race of peasant farmers and laborers. . . . As a source of cheap labor for a warm climate, he is beyond competition; everywhere else he is a foreordained failure, and as he knows this he despises his own color. . . . Let us go back to the old rule of the South and be done forever with the frauds of an educational suffrage.

Framing and Frame Transformation

Media sociologists have come to rely increasingly on the concept of frame (Tuchman 1978, Gitlin 1980, Lang & Lang 1983, Gamson & Modigliani 1989). As a concept, it seems both indispensable and elusive. Frame plays the same role in analyzing media discourse that schema does in cognitive psychology—a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols. "Media frames," Gitlin (1980) writes, "largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports."

As used by Goffman (1974), the concept of frame maintains a useful tension or balance between structure and agency. On the one hand, events and experiences are framed; on the other hand, we frame events and experiences. Goffman warns us that "organizational premises are involved, and those are something cognition arrives at, not something cognition creates or generates." At the same time, he calls attention to the fragility of frames in use and their vulnerability to tampering. This underlines the usefulness of framing as a bridging concept between cognition and culture. A cultural level analysis tells us that our political world is framed, that reported events are pre-organized and do not come to us in raw form. But we are active processors and however encoded our received reality, we may decode it in different ways. The very vulnerability of the framing process makes it a locus of potential struggle, not a leaden reality to which we all inevitably must yield.

While this antinomy in the framing concept is a virtue, there are unnecessary ambiguities and problems that contribute to its elusiveness. First,

there is an inherent ambiguity in the use of a word that has two somewhat different meanings in English—frame as in picture frame and frame as in the frame of a building. Most researchers who use the concept seem to emphasize the latter sense of frame as a latent structure. But the meaning of frame as boundary sometimes slips in as well, especially in Goffman (1974).

There is a more fundamental ambiguity in the level of abstraction implied by the concept and what it is that is being framed. First, it is possible to talk about the framing of particular events or stories—for example, the accident at Three Mile Island (TMI). Or, one can speak of issue-frames—for example, nuclear power—in which events such as the TMI accident, appear in an ongoing strip, requiring continuing interpretation. Or, one can speak of larger frames that transcend a single issue, such as a cost-benefit frame for analyzing many issues. In specifying issue-frames, one can aggregate or disaggregate subframes, and researchers to date have provided few guidelines or consensus about what is the appropriate level of abstraction.

The concept of frame also may be too static to do justice to its intended use—to study a process of constructing meaning. The action for most observers is in change over time, in what Snow and his colleagues call “frame transformation” (Snow & Benford 1988, Snow et al 1986). Especially where there is contest, one focuses on changes and how they occur, including changes in what is taken for granted.

With this conception, a frame is more like a storyline or unfolding narrative about an issue. Bennett (1975) uses the term “scenario” to express this more dynamic conception of framing. Stories frame events as they occur over time. “Narratives are organizations of experience,” writes Manoff (1987). “They bring order to events by making them something that can be told about; they have power because they make the world make sense.”

An interest in processes of frame transformation focuses attention on the contested sector where social actors compete in sponsoring their preferred frames. This approach shifts attention to media discourse as an outcome or dependent variable. Because of their presumed influence, the media become, to quote Gurevitch & Levy (1985), “a site on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality.” The media, in this view, provide a series of arenas in which symbolic contests are carried out among competing sponsors of meaning (cf Kellner 1990).

Participants in symbolic contests read their success or failure by how well their preferred meanings and interpretation are doing in various media arenas. Prominence in these arenas is taken as an outcome measure in its own right, independent of evidence on the degree to which the messages are being read by the public. Essentially, sponsors of different frames monitor media discourse to see how well it tells the story they want told, and they measure their success or failure accordingly.

Gamson & Stuart (1992), for example, studied the symbolic contest over issues of nuclear war and Soviet-American relations by examining more than 700 editorial cartoons over a 40-year period. They acknowledge that most readers either ignore editorial cartoons entirely or rarely grasp the meaning intended by the cartoonist. The relevant readers of the messages here are not the general public but the sponsors of different frames, using the cartoonists as a peanut gallery, providing feedback on how they are doing.

Fragmentation

Many media analysts focus on broader cultural effects that go beyond what the concept of frame seems able to capture. The most prominent example is the proposition that the total media experience leads to a fragmentation of meaning. One version of this argument is developed by a diverse group of writers who are generally collected under the rubric of postmodernism.

The new global networks of information and communication, in this argument, have compressed time and space. More of the world is accessible to more people, making the globe a smaller place. Viewers are able to sit in their own living rooms and "access" the world via satellite. Live television coverage of Scud missile attacks in progress or of students demonstrating in Tiananmen Square provide viewers with "real-time" access to events on the other side of the globe.

The compression of time leads to a preoccupation with the immediacy of surface meaning and the absence of depth. News comes in quotations with ever shorter sound bites. The spectacle of seeing journalists donning gas masks during the Persian Gulf War overshadows the reality that there was no chemical attack. The information may be correct or misleading, but the immediacy of the experience remains in the images one retains.

The preoccupation with immediacy results in a proliferation of fleeting, ephemeral images which have no ability to sustain any coherent organizing frame to provide meaning over time. Advertising is the vanguard of the fleeting image, but news programs lag only slightly behind. The "action news" formula adopted by many local news programs packs 30 to 40 short, fast items to fill a twenty-two and one-half minute newshole. "One minute-thirty for World War III," as one critic described it (Diamond, 1975). The result is a fragmented sense of reality (see Harvey 1989, Lyotard 1984).

For some postmodernists (Huysens 1984), the fragmentation of reality has a positive side, bringing with it a promise of flourishing diversity and cultural pluralism. But applied to the experience of the media, fragmentation has few celebrators. Taylor (1987) argues that television is "the first cultural medium in the whole of history" to present the past as a "stitched-together collage of equi-important and simultaneously existing phenomena largely divorced from geography and material history and transported to the living rooms and studies

of the West in a more or less uninterrupted flow." Because there is no contextual constraint for the reception of images, the media spectacle is experienced with "heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect" (Jameson 1984).

In postmodernist argument, it is not simply the fleeting imagery in different issue domains but the long-term effects of the electronic media that produce fragmentation. It was McLuhan (1964) who first brought attention to the medium itself rather than the content, an insight pursued by postmodernists such as Baudrillard (1983, 1988). Distinctions between entertainment and news are artificial because they are all part of the same media spectacle, interspersed with the same advertisements in a seamless, everpresent montage.

The primary effect, regardless of content, is to substitute hyperreal representations ("simulacra") for the "real" world. Baudrillard contends that such mediated simulations have come to conceal the absence of reality. Unlike a map which has referents in the real world, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1988). In the "photo opportunity," for example, an event is created for the specific purpose of being represented in a media image, to be consumed by viewers as reality.

Following McLuhan, Baudrillard (1983, 1988) argues that in the postmodern condition the boundary between representation and reality implodes. As a result, the experience and foundation of the real disappears. "Disneyland is presented as imaginary," he writes, "in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation." Advertisers tout the "naturalness" of synthetic foods. Nostalgia creates demand for imaginary styles of the past. Watergate, says Baudrillard, was a "scandal", which helped to cover up the routinely scandalous nature of politics. The moral and political principles reaffirmed through the Watergate investigation helped to conceal their ultimate absence in the real political world.

It does not require a postmodernist perspective to come to the conclusion that news media provide a fragmented and confusing view of the world. Bennett (1988) analyses the news product as a result of journalistic practices that combine to produce such an effect. "The fragmentation of information begins," he argues, "by emphasizing individual actors over the political contexts in which they operate. Fragmentation is then heightened by the use of dramatic formats that turn events into self-contained, isolated happenings."

The result is news that comes to us in "sketchy dramatic capsules that make it difficult to see the connections across issues or even to follow the development of a particular issue over time." The structure and operation of societal power relations remain obscure and invisible. The implication of this line of

argument is that if people simply relied on the media, it would be difficult to find any coherent frame and they would feel confused about many if not most issues.

READERS

Many people undoubtedly are confused by some issues—and some by most issues—but they are able to draw on their own experiential knowledge and popular wisdom along with media fragments to make sense of most of them. Hall (1982) reminds us that people are not “cultural dopes,” passively reading texts as the producers intend. Texts in general and media imagery in particular can be read in different ways—to use the jargon, they are polysemic. Texts may have a preferred meaning and point of view which the reader is invited to accept. But many readers decline the invitation, either entering into some negotiation with the dominant meaning or rejecting it outright with an oppositional reading.

Eco (1979) calls texts “open” when they do not attempt to close off alternative meanings and narrow their focus to one, easily attainable meaning, but rather when they are open to a richness and complexity of readings. Much of television discourse seems especially open in this sense. The news, Fiske (1987) argues, is “a montage of voices, many of them contradictory, and its narrative structure is not powerful enough to dictate always which voice we should pay most attention to, or which voice should be used as a framework by which to understand the rest.”

Certain symbolic devices increase the openness of a text. Fiske (1987) discusses five—irony, metaphor, jokes, contradiction, and hyperbole—showing how each depends on the simultaneous presence of different meanings. Irony, for example, is a statement that appears to say one thing while actually meaning another. Metaphors describe one thing in terms of something else and frequently have unspecified entailments. “The collision of discourses in irony and metaphor,” Fiske writes, “produces an explosion of meaning that can never be totally controlled by the text and forced into a unified sense. . . . The contradictions are always left reverberating enough for sub-cultures to negotiate their own inflections of meaning.” While there is a tension with forces of closure that attempt to close down potential meanings in favor of preferred ones, television imagery—including the news spectacle—is heavily infused with all of these devices that keep it open.

Viewers' Work

There was once a strong tendency in cultural studies to make assumptions about how people understand media imagery without actually taking the trouble to find out. In the last ten years, influenced by Morley's (1980, 1986)

pioneering work, this tendency has been counter-acted by ethnographic studies of how real viewers make sense of various television texts. Hobson (1980, 1982) went into people's homes and observed and talked to them about the meaning of television in their lives. Palmer (1986) observed children watching television in their homes and interviewed them as well. Liebes & Katz (1990) had groups of couples from five different cultures watch *Dallas* and discuss it, recording their comments during the program and afterwards. Livingstone (1990) examined how viewers made sense of popular British and American soap operas.

These ethnographic studies all emphasize what Katz (1990) calls "viewers' work"—viewers who are wide awake and draw on their wisdom and experience in making sense of what they see on television. Of course, some work a lot harder than others. Liebes's (1991) study of the interaction in 50 Jewish and 20 Arab families during and after watching Israeli television news suggests the systematic nature of the interaction between the frames that viewers start with and their characteristic reading of what they see. In hardline Jewish nationalist families, the text was accepted at face value as a transparent representation of reality; they assumed what MacCabe (1981) calls the subject position of "dominant specularly" invited by the text. In hardline Arab nationalist families, the text was read oppositionally—in effect, inverting the identifications and point of view suggested by the text. "Jewish doves and Arab moderates, on the other hand, negotiate with the text, confronting it with their personal and collective experience," Liebes (1991) writes. The negotiators do the bona fide viewers' work.

Using Media Imagery

These ethnographic studies focus on specific texts and how they are interpreted by different readers but other studies compare media work and viewers' work on the same issue domain. The question here is not how the readers understand specific texts but what are the parallels and differences in the two discourses and what is the use that people make of media imagery as a resource.

Swidler (1986) invites us to think of culture "as a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems." If the problem is making sense of the world of public affairs, media imagery provides many of the essential tools. Of course, those tools that are developed, spotlighted, and made readily accessible have a higher probability of being used. Whether this is true for any given issue must rest on empirical evidence that shows which images are playing a central role in the construction of meaning.

Gamson (1992) examined a series of "peer group conversations" among American working people on four issues—affirmative action, nuclear power,

troubled industry, and Arab—Israeli conflict. He shows how some groups were able to construct shared frames for understanding these issues that integrated media discourse, popular wisdom, and experiential knowledge. The particular combination of resources and people's ability to integrate these multiple resources varied from issue to issue. On affirmative action, for example, media discourse entered in a more secondary and supportive role, but the media were more likely to be the primary resource for constructing meaning about nuclear power and Arab-Israeli conflict.

Graber (1988) did a series of intensive, open-ended interviews with a small panel of respondents, exploring what they paid attention to in the media and how they incorporated media materials into their understanding. Rather than having them interpret particular texts, she conducted a content analysis of the newspaper and television news program that they claimed as their major source of news. Media impact, she concludes, depends on the salience of specific issues to the individual. While people's attention is influenced by media cues about what is an important story, they "evaluate news in light of past learning and determine how well it squares with the reality that they have experienced directly or vicariously."

The most persuasive direct evidence that media frames really do make a difference in how readers understand issues comes from the experimental work of Iyengar & Kinder (1987, Iyengar 1991). Using actual news broadcasts on events, they carefully edited them and showed comparable but different versions to research subjects, randomly assigned to different experimental conditions. Iyengar & Kinder (1987) demonstrate that where the television news spotlight is focused helps to define the standards that viewers apply in evaluating presidential performance.

Using similar methods, Iyengar (1991) provides evidence on how the form of presentation in news reporting affects attributions of responsibility. He contrasts two forms—the "episodic" and the "thematic." The episodic form, by far the most common one, "takes the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances." In contrast, the much rarer thematic form emphasizes general outcomes, conditions, and statistical evidence.

By altering the format of television reports about several different political issues as presented to experimental and control groups, Iyengar shows how people's attributions of responsibility are affected. More specifically, he shows that exposure to the episodic format makes viewers less likely to hold public officials accountable for the existence of some problem and less likely to hold them responsible for alleviating it. They tend to attribute causal responsibility for problems to victims rather than to societal forces. These results provide additional evidence for the fragmentation effects described above and for its primary consequence of obscuring the operation of societal power relations.

Iyengar (1991) also found important individual differences, reflecting the use of cultural resources beyond media discourse on some issues and differences in political sophistication. Some people have learned to read critically and continue to draw on a broader public discourse than is reflected in general audience media. Experiential knowledge and popular wisdom also teach about societal power relations. Those who bring something to the media imagery they encounter, construct reality by negotiating it in complex ways that we are only beginning to understand. Furthermore, they often do it in interaction with friends and family, adding yet another layer of complexity to the decoding process.

CONCLUSION

Ideally, a media system suitable for a democracy ought to provide its readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives. It is difficult to find anyone who would claim that media discourse in the United States even remotely approaches this ideal. Paletz & Entman (1981) describe the major consequences of media depictions as "frustration, misdirected anger, and apathy, not insight and political activism." Edelman (1988) observes that "News about 'public affairs' encourages the translation of personal concerns into beliefs about a public world people witness as spectators rather than participants." Bennett (1988) notes the main effects of mass media news in American politics as "Setting limits on the imaginable and the politically possible; arriving too late (and doing too little) to educate people and get them involved in policy making."

The overwhelming conclusion is that the media generally operate in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence rather than active citizenship and participation. Furthermore, all the trends seem to be in the wrong direction—toward more and more messages, from fewer and bigger producers, saying less and less. That is the bad news.

The good news is that the messages provide a many-voiced, open text that can and often is read oppositionally, at least in part. Television imagery is a site of struggle where the powers that be are often forced to compete and defend what they would prefer to have taken for granted. The underdetermined nature of media discourse allows plenty of room for challengers such as social movements to offer competing constructions of reality and to find support for them from readers whose daily lives may lead them to construct meaning in ways that go beyond media imagery.

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