

272

Mass Media and American Politics



Politics and Public Policy Series

Advisory Editor
Robert I. Peabody
Johns Hopkins University

Doris A. Graber
University of Illinois, Chicago Circle

*Interest Groups, Lobbying,
and Policymaking*
Norman J. Ornstein
Shirley Elder

*Congressional Procedures and
the Policy Process*
Walter J. Oleszek

*Financing Politics:
Money, Elections and Political
Reform, Second Edition*
Herbert E. Alexander

*Invitation to Struggle:
Congress, the President and
Foreign Policy*
Cecil V. Cobby, Jr.
Pat M. Holt



Congressional Quarterly Press
a division of
CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY INC.
1414 22nd Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037



READINGS

- Beer, Walter S. et al. *Concentration of Mass Media Ownership: Assessing the State of Current Knowledge*. Santa Monica, Cal.: Rand Corp., 1974.
- Barnouw, Erik. *The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- Hobanberg, John. *The Professional Journalist*, 4th. ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978.
- Johanson, John; Slavetski, Edward; and Bowman, William. *The Newspaper*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976.
- Owen, Bruce M. *Economics and Freedom of Expression: Media Structure and the First Amendment*. Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1976.
- Seiden, Martin H. *Who Controls the Mass Media? Popular Myths and Economic Realities*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- Small, William. *To Kill a Messenger*. New York: Hastings House, 1970.
- Tunstall, Jeremy. *The Media Are American: Anglo-American Media in the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

3

Newsmaking and News Reporting

"The biggest heist of the 1970s never made it on the five o'clock news. The biggest heist of the 1970s was the five o'clock news. The salesmen took it. . . . By the 1970s, an extravagant proportion of television news . . . answered less to the description of 'journalism' than to that of 'show business.'" The accuser is Ron Powers, Pulitzer-prize-winning television critic. The consequences of this show business approach to news, Powers believes, are ominous. When "news" programs are dominated by trivial chatter to gratify "the audience's surface whims, not supplying its deeper informational needs . . . an insidious hoax is being perpetrated on American viewers. . . . The hoax is made more insidious by the fact that very few TV news-watchers are aware of what information is left out of a newscast in order to make room for the audience-building gimmicks."²

What should be news? What is news? How do newpeople decide what to publicize? Of all the new developments each day that may be relevant to the lives and interests of audiences, which are the news that is likely to be published? Which are likely to be ignored? In the previous chapters, we have discussed some of the important factors which have a bearing on these questions. In this chapter, we will describe the process in detail and suggest the effects it has on the product brought forth by the mass media and the consequences it spells for politics.

MODELS OF THE NEWSMAKING PROCESS

Four models of the newsmaking process have been proposed and debated among scholars. Each represents a judgment of what the major forces behind newsmaking are or ought to be. Each of these varied conceptions of newsmaking has profound consequences for the nature of news and its political impact.

Proponents of the mirror model contend that news is and should be a reflection of reality. Newpeople observe the world around them and report what they see as accurately and objectively as possible. As propo-

nents of this view say, "we don't make the news, we merely report it." The implication is that newsmen are merely a conduit for information which is produced by others. They reflect whatever comes to their attention; they do not shape it in any way.

Critics of the mirror model charge that it is unrealistic. In a vast world in which millions of significant events take place every day, it is impossible for the media merely to reflect events. Choices must be made about the general categories and specific stories to be included. Stories that are chosen inevitably loom larger than life, distorting the picture which the real world presents. Stories that are omitted drop out of the picture, leaving unrealistic gaps. Even films and photographs distort reality. A small group of demonstrators looks like an invading army when cameras zoom in on them.

In the *professional* model, newsmaking is viewed as an endeavor of highly skilled professionals who put together an interesting collage of events selected for importance, attractiveness to media audiences, and balance among the various elements of the news offering. For economic reasons, audience appeal is the most important consideration. This, in a sense, makes the audience the ultimate judge of what stories may pass through the gates of editorial scrutiny to publication and what will be refused passage. In a word, people are "gatekeepers." What they accept, thrive. What they reject, languishes or dies.³

The *organizational* model is based on organization theory. Its proponents contend that news selection emerges from the pressures inherent in organizational processes and goals. Pressures springing from interpersonal relations and professional norms within the news organization are important, as are constraints arising from technical news production processes, cost-benefit considerations, and legal regulations, such as the FCC's fairness rules.

Finally, the *political* model rests on the assumption that news everywhere is a product of the ideological biases of individual newsmen, as well as the pressures of the political environment in which the news organization operates. When the prevailing political environment is capitalist democracy, with a moderately strong social welfare orientation, as is true in the United States, this orientation sets the tone for the world view implicit in most fact and fiction programs. Supporters of the prevailing system are pictured as good guys, opponents as bad guys. High-status people and institutions are covered; those who are outside the system or in low-visibility positions are generally ignored.

None of these models, by itself, can explain the newsmaking process. Rather, that process is a combination of all of them. The precise mix of factors which explains newsmaking in any particular instance depends on the orientations of news personnel as well as on the demands of a particular medium.

274

THE GATEKEEPERS

Relatively few people are usually involved in the news selection, or "gatekeeping," operation. They include wire service and other reporters who make initial story choices, editors who make story assignments and accept or reject submitted stories, disc jockeys at radio stations who present 5-minute news breaks, and television program executives. For the average newspaper or news weekly, fewer than 25 people are involved. On the three major networks, the combined editorial personnel responsible for the news number fewer than 60 people.

As Malcolm Warner has described it for a single network, "three men constitute the 'power elite' of the television news policy." A vice president in charge of news lays down the ground rules for general news policy. An executive producer selects news and determines the sequence and length of stories and the amount of film and word coverage to be given to them. The number three person is an associate executive producer who shares the executive producer's workload. Besides these three, news decisions usually involve a Washington bureau chief, a news editor who keeps up with the progress of various stories and edits films and reports, an assignment editor who apportions staff and camera crews to various locations, and one or more writers who provide copy which they or another newscaster will present on the air. Usually, there is also a copy editor who funnels wire service copy and stories from leading papers and newscasts to the newsroom personnel, reporters who collect the stories initially, and one or more newscasters/commentators. The latter may simply read or write and rewrite their own copy and decide which stories need verbal commentary or merely a raised or lowered eyebrow.⁴ Most of these people are totally unknown to the public, though not to publicity seekers who vie for their attention.⁵

These few people, particularly those who make news choices for nationwide audiences, have a tremendous amount of political power at their disposal. In fact, 500 leading citizens polled by *U.S. News & World Report* in April 1974 rated television as the greatest influence on decisions and actions affecting the nation as a whole. The White House and Supreme Court were tied in second place. Newspapers were third.⁶ As we saw in Chapter 1, recent studies have amply demonstrated that news stories influence what ordinary people as well as political elites will think and think about. True enough, media gatekeepers are not entirely free in their story choices. Coverage of certain stories, such as wars, assassinations, and airline hijackings, cannot be avoided. But others could be omitted. Probing into the operations of the FBI or CIA, or discussing women's role in the labor market are examples.

A few highly respected national newscasters may become extraordinarily influential individuals by singling out news events for positive or negative commentary. When Walter Cronkite or Eric Sevareid or

John Chancellor declares that voluntary price controls will not work or that Mideast peace is unattainable, popular support for these policies may plunge. A sixty-second verbal barrage on the evening news may destroy programs, politicians, and the reputations of major organizations.

This power may be used wisely or unwisely. Peter Braestrup, chief of the *Washington Post's* Saigon Bureau during the Vietnam War, claims that it was used unwisely with regard to the conduct of that war. After an exhaustive study of news reports and the commentary about the 1968 Tet offensive of the North Vietnamese, he concluded that mistaken media reports led to policies that changed the course of the war. What Walter Cronkite and other commentators had called a defeat for the South Vietnamese and American forces was really a defeat for the North Vietnamese. Yet, in the wake of these erroneous interpretations which heightened existing antiwar pressures, support for the war collapsed. American withdrawal began in earnest, and President Johnson abandoned a second-term race. People may differ about the wisdom of the end result, but we do need to concern ourselves with the great weight given to such media interpretations.

GENERAL FACTORS IN NEWS SELECTION

What becomes news depends, in part, on the background, training, personal makeup, and professional socialization of news personnel. As indicated in Chapter 2, in the United States this means, by and large, upwardly mobile, well-educated white males whose political views are liberal and who subscribe in ever larger proportions to the tenets of so-called responsibility journalism. It does not generally mean women and minorities, although their numbers have been rising in the wake of affirmative action policies.

News personnel operate within the general political context of their society. Most of them have internalized this context so that it becomes their frame of reference. As George Gerbner, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, noted, after comparing newspaper versions of the same story in different papers, there is "no fundamentally non-ideological, apolitical, non-partisan news gathering and reporting system." If a reporter's political context demands favorable images of racial minorities, news and entertainment will reflect this outlook. If adverse criticism of minorities is officially mandated, the same stories which will be used elsewhere to praise minorities will be used to defame them.⁹

As discussed more fully in Chapter 2, news selection also hinges on the intraorganizational norms and professional role conceptions to which newpeople are subjected. Pressures of internal and external competition are influential as well. Within each news organization, reporters and editors compete for time and space and prominence of position for their stories. News organizations likewise compete with each other for

275

Newsmaking and News Reporting 61

affiliates. If one station or network has a very popular program, others will copy the format and often will try to place an equally attractive program into a competing time slot to capture its competitor's audiences and advertisers. Likewise, papers may feel compelled to carry stories which they might otherwise ignore, simply because another medium available in the same market has carried the story. Stories in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* or *Christian Science Monitor* become models to be followed.

Political pressures also leave their mark. Media personnel depend for much of their information on political leaders and are therefore subject to the manipulation by these sources which springs from intimate contact and the desire to keep relationships cordial. For instance, when journalists were asked about their relationship with Governor Nelson Rockefeller, they agreed that he "co-opted the press in varying degrees and thus avoided . . . critical detachment or impassionate analysis." Newspapers admittedly were under his spell because "Rockefeller made himself and state political news interesting to reporters and their editors and then to the public. Not only did he skillfully work to make news . . . but he orchestrated it superbly and, whenever he could, tried to accommodate the professional necessities of newswriters."¹⁰ The ability to use the media to political advantage without antagonizing newpeople is the mark of the astute politician. Reporters can rarely resist such pressures without alienating powerful and important news sources.

Economic pressures are even more potent than political pressures in molding the news and entertainment which media produce. Newspapers and magazines need sufficient income to cover their production costs. Except for publications which are subsidized by individual or group sponsors, they must raise this income from subscription rates, from advertisers, or from a combination of these sources. For television and radio programming most costs are covered solely by advertising income. Media offerings must therefore appeal to large numbers of potential customers for the products that advertisers sell. This means that programs and stories must be directed either to general audiences in the prime time consumption middle years, or to selected special audiences who are key targets for particular advertiser appeals. For instance, while toothpaste, laundry detergent, and breakfast cereals are best marketed to the huge nationwide audiences who watch the regular nighttime situation comedies or detective stories, personal home computers, fancy foreign sports cars, or raft trips down the Amazon are most likely to find customers among a select few. Advertisers for these products are attracted to limited circulation journals like *National Geographic* or *Psychology Today* or to specialized television documentaries.

Since the bulk of programming must be directed to the general public, television and radio must maintain a smooth flow of appealing programs throughout the prime evening hour. Paul Klein, an audience research executive at NBC, contends that people watch television as such,

rather than specific programs. As long as they are satisfied through "Least-Objectionable Programming" (L.O.P.), they will remain with the station.¹¹ But if boring or controversial programs come on, a sizable part of the audience will defect to another station and remain tuned to it for the rest of the evening. Such considerations deter producers from mixing serious programs with light entertainment in prime time.

This need to keep audiences watching a particular station even affects the format of news and public service programs. News presentation in a bantering, joke-filled form — Happy Talk — was adopted to keep the audience tuned in for later shows. Fairly rapid public disenchanted with happy talk news, along with high popularity of a few documentaries such as the chronicles of the Adams family, show that media people occasionally underestimate the tastes of the public for serious presentations. But these are the exceptions rather than the rule. H. L. Moncken was probably right when he said that "nobody ever went broke by underestimating the public's taste." As one station manager reminded his staff somewhat condescendingly:

Remember, the vast majority of our viewers hold blue-collar jobs. The vast majority of our viewers never went to college. The vast majority of our viewers have never been on an airplane. The vast majority of our viewers have never seen a copy of *The New York Times*. The vast majority of our viewers do not read the same books and magazines that you read, . . . in fact, many of them never read anything. . . .¹²

When we say that what is publishable news is a decision that hinges on shared attitudes of newpeople and their audiences and on the nature of their social and political settings, we are saying that there is no magical quality that makes something "news." What is publishable in one setting for one medium is not necessarily appropriate for another. Newsworthiness of individual stories will vary from country to country. Audience to audience, and time to time. Thus in 1968, when the Wright brothers invited the press to Kitty Hawk to cover their attempts to fly, not a single reporter came. After the flight, only seven American newspapers considered the event newsworthy enough to print stories about the flight, and only two papers gave it front-page play. Seventy-six years later, when a pilot crossed the English Channel in the *Gosamer* *Albatross*, a plane using human pedal power, large crowds of reporters came and the story received nationwide press and television coverage.

CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING SPECIFIC NEWS STORIES

Beyond deciding what, in general, is publishable news, gatekeepers must choose particular news items to include in their mix of offerings. *The New York Times'* motto, "All the News That's Fit to Print," is an impossible myth. There is far more publishable news available to the paper than it can possibly use. Gatekeepers must also decide how they

276

want to cover each item. For instance, at the height of the Vietnam War, ABC cameramen were ordered to concentrate on bloody battle scenes. This led to a story emphasis on the military. Later on, the focus was placed on internal corruption, black-marketeering, political opposition, and the treatment of ex-Viet Cong, to prepare the home front for withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.¹³

What determines the choice of particular stories? There are five important criteria that most newpeople use. All relate to audience appeal rather than the political significance of the story, its educational value, its broad social purposes, or newpeople's political views. This emphasis, and the economic necessities which mandate it, needs to be kept in mind when media output is evaluated. It explains why the amount and kind of coverage of important issues is not commensurate with their significance in the real world at the time of publication. For instance, a single heinous crime may turn the focus on crime stories and lead to an upswing in the number and prominence of such stories. This may give the appearance of a crime wave at a time when crime rates are actually going down. A crystallizing event like the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health may call attention to a long-standing problem which has not changed in newsworthiness. By the same token, an important continuing event that has already received a lot of coverage may be dropped from peak attention because its news value is declining, even though its real world significance may be increasing.¹⁴

Table 3-1 presents graphic evidence that news coverage and significance do not go hand in hand. A 10-year comparison of media stories with corresponding statistics on escalation of the Vietnam War, crime rates, and urban riots revealed that stories often peak ahead of events. For instance, the peak year for riots was 1968; the peak year for riot stories was 1967. In 1967, the ratio of riots to riot stories was 4 to 1; in 1968 it was 12 to 1. With riots no longer anything "special," the ratio went to 16 to 1 in 1969 and 65 to 1 in 1970.

What are the five criteria for choosing news stories? First of all, stories must have a *high impact* on readers or listeners. Ten thousand Indians starving in Calcutta would not get the amount of coverage that two children starving in Minneapolis would get. The midwestern story would have a high impact on American readers. The Calcutta story would not. People presumably want to read about things relevant to their own lives. Smoke pouring from a window next door, the death of a local mayor, or a sick youngster's lost dog make more of an impact on people than things happening far away to strangers.

The second element of newsworthiness is natural or manmade violence, conflict, disaster, or scandal. Wars, murders, strikes, earthquakes, accidents, or sex scandals involving prominent people — these are the kinds of things that excite audiences. In fact, inexpensive mass newspapers became viable business ventures in the United States only after

Table 3-1 Comparison of Media Coverage and Related Statistics for Selected Issues*

| | 1960 | 1961 | 1962 | 1963 | 1964 | 1965 | 1966 | 1967 | 1968 | 1969 | 1970 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Number of articles on war in Vietnam | 7 | 5 | 7 | 28 | 49 | 160 | 206 | 160 | 123 | 99 | 44 |
| Number of American troops in Vietnam (in 1,000's) | — | — | — | — | 23 | 184 | 385 | 486 | 536 | 474 | 334 |
| Number of articles on crime | 3 | 5 | 5 | 11 | 18 | 35 | 21 | 25 | 35 | 25 | 22 |
| Crimes per 100,000 people | 1123 | — | — | 1292 | 1440 | 1512 | 1667 | 1922 | 2235 | 2471 | 2741 |
| Number of articles on urban riots | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 6 | 17 | 41 | 36 | 15 | 3 |
| Number of civil disturbances | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | 172 | 435 | 245 | 195 |

SOURCE: G. Ray Funkhouser, "Trends in Media Coverage of the Issues of the '60s," *Journalism Quarterly* 50 (Fall 1973): 636.

*Media data come from content analysis of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. Related statistics come from *Statistical Abstracts of the United States*.

Reprinted by permission of *Journalism Quarterly*.

1833 when the publishers of the *New York Sun* discovered that papers filled with breezy crime and sex stories far outsold their more staid competitors. Mass sales permitted sharp price reductions. Thus the "penny-press" was born.

People remember violent behavior better than nonviolent fare. For instance, in 1978, the most widely followed and remembered news event was the murder-suicide of 900 members of an American religious sect in Guyana. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents to a Gallup poll knew of the event — a number matched only by those who remembered the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and those who recalled the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

A third element in newsworthiness is *familiarity*. News is attractive if it involves familiar situations about which many people are concerned or pertains to well-known people.

The public's keen interest in celebrities is demonstrated by the amazing amount of detail that people absorb and retain about the powerful and famous. More than ten years after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, most Americans still remembered details of the funeral ceremony, as well as where they themselves were when they heard the news. The sense of personal grief and loss lingered, bridging the gap between the average person's private and public worlds. People value the feeling of personal intimacy that comes from knowing details of a famous person's life.¹⁵

The fourth element in newsworthiness, which is particularly important for newspapers and local television, is that an event must be *close to home*. This heavy preference for local news rests on the assumption that people are most interested in what happens near them. Local media continue to exist because local events are their exclusive province, free from competition by national television and national print media. In fact, roughly 75 percent of their space is used for local stories.¹⁶ Since national television news must concentrate on matters of interest to viewers throughout the entire country, it cannot depict events close to everyone's home. But because the public receives so much news from Washington and a few major metropolitan areas, these cities and their newsmakers have become familiar to the nation. This, in a sense, makes them "local" events in what Marshall McLuhan has called the "global village" created by television.

Lastly, news should be *timely* and *novel*. It must be something that has just occurred and is out of the ordinary either in the sense that it does not happen all the time, like the regular departure of airplanes or the daily opening of grocery stores, or in the sense that it is not part of the lives of ordinary persons.

Among these five basic criteria, conflict, proximity, and timeliness are most important, judging from a survey of television and newspaper editors.¹⁷ These editors were given 64 fictitious stories by a team of researchers and were asked which they would use and their reasons for

*Sun Times and Daily News data are based on sample coding of one constructed week for each paper. NBC local news is based on full hour broadcast, others on half hour. National news data are based on nine months of coding, April-December, 1976.
 **When stories of this type appeared in special sections (e.g. People, Leisure, Food, etc.) they were not coded individually. Rather, the entire section was counted as one story. This depresses the Human Interest/Hobbies story count.

| Topic | Chicago Tribune | Sun Times | Daily News | CBS local | NBC local | ABC national | CBS national | NBC national |
|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| State of economy | 2.4 | 2.1 | 2.4 | 1.1 | 1.0 | 1.7 | 1.7 | 1.9 |
| Business/labor | 5.9 | 6.4 | 4.9 | 6.6 | 10.2 | 7.8 | 6.8 | 6.8 |
| Minorities/women | 2.7 | 2.9 | 3.8 | 2.1 | 2.0 | 2.7 | 2.9 | 2.4 |
| Environment | 3.2 | 4.1 | 1.8 | 9.1 | 9.1 | 3.5 | 4.0 | 4.0 |
| Transportation | 2.2 | 1.9 | 2.4 | 3.8 | 5.0 | 3.2 | 2.8 | 3.3 |
| Disaster/accident | 2.5 | 2.4 | 1.6 | 3.3 | 4.6 | 2.1 | 2.8 | 3.2 |
| Health/medicine | 4.4 | 2.2 | 1.4 | 4.0 | 0.2 | 0.8 | 3.0 | 2.5 |
| Education/media/religion | 1.2 | 1.5 | 1.4 | 1.8 | 0.2 | 0.8 | 0.7 | 0.6 |
| Leadership style | 1.7 | 0.7 | 0.6 | 1.3 | 1.2 | 1.8 | 1.4 | 1.5 |
| Miscellaneous | 26.2 | 24.2 | 21.7 | 31.5 | 37.3 | 26.4 | 25.1 | 26.2 |
| Human Interest/Hobbies** | 2.9 | 1.9 | 3.4 | 6.0 | 6.8 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 2.3 |
| General human interest | 3.6 | 1.4 | 2.0 | 2.2 | 2.1 | 1.4 | 1.5 | 1.7 |
| Celebrities | 1.6 | 0.5 | 1.2 | 1.4 | 1.4 | 1.4 | 1.1 | 1.4 |
| Political gossip | 2.6 | 1.7 | 1.4 | 8.3 | 5.3 | 2.9 | 2.1 | 3.4 |
| Sports/entertainment | 10.7 | 5.5 | 8.0 | 17.9 | 15.6 | 7.5 | 6.5 | 8.8 |

| Topic | Chicago Tribune | Sun Times | Daily News | CBS local | NBC local | ABC national | CBS national | NBC national |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Crime & Justice | 4.7 | 7.2 | 7.7 | 3.3 | 3.1 | 1.5 | 1.6 | 1.5 |
| Police/Security | 5.7 | 5.0 | 4.0 | 4.6 | 4.7 | 3.6 | 3.4 | 3.7 |
| Judiciary | 4.0 | 5.7 | 5.5 | 4.0 | 3.3 | 3.1 | 3.3 | 3.1 |
| Corruption/terrorism | 7.5 | 10.2 | 9.5 | 7.8 | 8.5 | 4.1 | 4.0 | 4.6 |
| Individual crime | 21.9 | 28.1 | 26.7 | 19.7 | 19.6 | 12.3 | 12.3 | 12.9 |
| Government/Politics | 2.7 | 0.9 | 1.8 | 2.3 | 1.9 | 4.5 | 4.2 | 4.2 |
| Presidency | 2.5 | 4.1 | 3.0 | 1.7 | 1.2 | 3.7 | 4.4 | 4.1 |
| Congress | 1.9 | 1.9 | 1.6 | 1.9 | 2.0 | 4.9 | 4.5 | 4.4 |
| Bureaucracy | 9.8 | 9.8 | 10.3 | 4.6 | 5.2 | 16.5 | 17.1 | 15.0 |
| Foreign affairs | 7.6 | 10.0 | 13.8 | 5.6 | 4.5 | 6.6 | 7.6 | 7.4 |
| Domestic policy | 12.6 | 13.1 | 11.5 | 6.8 | 6.2 | 15.7 | 15.2 | 15.2 |
| Elections | 1.8 | 1.4 | 0.8 | 2.7 | 2.2 | 0.6 | 0.9 | 0.8 |
| State government | 1.9 | 0.3 | 1.2 | 4.3 | 3.2 | 0.7 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| City government | 0.6 | 0.7 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 1.0 | 0.7 | 0.6 | 0.4 |
| Miscellaneous | 41.4 | 42.2 | 44.0 | 30.9 | 27.4 | 53.9 | 55.0 | 52.0 |

278

Table 3-2-Frequency of Mention of Various Topics in the Chicago Tribune, Sun Times, Daily News, CBS and NBC Local News, ABC, CBS, NBC National News. (N=33,200 for the Tribune, 681 for the Sun Times, 506 for the Daily News, 1,597 for CBS local, 12,274 for NBC local, 7,962 for ABC, 8,193 for CBS, and 7,667 for NBC news. Figures in percentages.)

using them. Conspicuously absent from their choice criteria was the story's overall significance. Significance does play a part, however, when a very major event is involved, such as the outcome of a national election, the death of a well-known leader, or a major natural disaster. Still, most stories are selected primarily to satisfy the five criteria mentioned earlier.

GATHERING THE NEWS

Once newsmen agree on what is publishable news, they know where this news is most likely to happen and where to place reporters to gather it. This has led to the "beat" system. News organizations establish regular listening posts, or beats, in those places where events of interest to the public are most likely to occur. In the United States the public presumably wants to know about the affairs of political and social leaders and institutions. It wants to know about deviations in natural phenomena, scientific developments, and social occurrences, such as international wars, domestic strife, or interpersonal crime.

To report such events, news organizations establish beats at the centers of government, where they cover major political executives, legislative bodies, court systems, and international organizations. Places where deviations are most likely to be reported, such as police stations and hospitals, stock and commodity markets, and institutions recording economic trends, are monitored. Some beats are functionally defined, such as a "health" or "education" beat. Reporters assigned to them generally cover a wider array of institutions on a less regular schedule than is true of the more usual beats. Stories emanating from the traditional beats have an excellent chance of publication, either because of their intrinsic significance or because they come from a regularly covered beat. In the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, for instance, stories from regular beats outnumber other stories two to one and capture the bulk of front-page headlines.¹⁸

All the major media tend to monitor the same places, so that the news patterns are stable and uniform throughout the country. As Table 3-2 documents, the media are "rivals in conformity."¹⁹ The table is based on daily content analyses of three Chicago newspapers and five nightly news telecasts, two of them local to Chicago. It shows the proportionate frequency of mention of various news topics. It presents striking evidence that the same kinds of stories and story types — though not necessarily identical stories — are reported by newspapers, local, and national television. The same holds true for other media appealing to similar clientele in other cities throughout the country.²⁰

Each day, stories report what is new and current, of course, but the subjects and topics are familiar. News, as media scholar Leon Sigal has put it, is always "the standardized exceptional."²¹ Each day's or week's

logue, and with frequent replacements in the cast of minor actors, though not major ones. News is exceptional in the sense that it does not portray ordinary events, like eating breakfast or washing clothes or taking the bus to work. It is standardized in the sense that it deals with the same types of topics in familiar ways and produces standardized patterns of news and entertainment throughout the country. Coverage of the same familiar scenes over and over again conveys to the public the feeling that all is going according to expectations and that, even if the news is bad, there is little to worry about. It has all happened before.

Even large news organizations cannot afford to have full teams of reporters and camera crews all over the country. Therefore they generally station teams in half a dozen cities. Locations are chosen for the availability of good resources in terms of equipment, support staff, and news personnel. They are not selected with an eye to covering all parts of the nation equally well or to providing diverse settings.

Table 3-3 shows the percentage of network news time, exclusive of Washington, D.C., coverage, which was devoted to various regions of the United States in broadcasts monitored from 1973 to 1976. The table also contains the percentage of the population which lived in these states (1970 Census) and an "Attention Index" which shows the discrepancy

Table 3-3 Network News Time Devoted to Regions of the U.S.*

| Region | Percentage of news time | Percentage of population | Attention index** |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Midwest | 18.5 | 25 | -8.5 |
| Northeast | 24.5 | 21 | +3.5 |
| South | 12.2 | 12 | +0.2 |
| Southwest | 5.8 | 10 | -4.2 |
| Pacific | 21.4 | 13 | +8.4 |
| Middle Atlantic | 4.8 | 7 | -2.2 |
| New England | 6.5 | 6 | +0.5 |
| Mountain | 3.1 | 4 | -0.9 |
| Plains | 3.2 | 2 | +1.2 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | |
| Total news time (in minutes) | 2,301 | | |

*Excludes Washington, D.C., news and stories not limited to a particular location.

**This index shows the discrepancy between percentage of total population and percentage of total news devoted to the region.

SOURCE: Joseph R. Dominatek, "Geographic Bias in National TV News," *Journal of Communication* 27 (Fall 1977): 96.

between percentage of total population and percentage of total news in the region. One or two states in each region received the bulk of coverage while the rest were ignored. For instance, 72 percent of northeast news time went to New York. Ninety percent of Pacific region time went to California. For the deprived states, only one or two state stories, often trivial ones, were reported. For some, there was no coverage at all, denying their news and their problems a national audience.

Ninety percent of picture coverage comes from the cities in which camera crews are regularly stationed. Besides Washington, where fully 60 percent of all news originates, these generally include New York, Cleveland, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles.²² Of course, special events will be covered anywhere in the country. Every network reported the 1976 Republican convention in Kansas City and followed President Carter's visits to Camp David in the Maryland mountains, or his journeys to his home town of Plains, Georgia. A sensational murder trial in a small community like Aspen, Colorado attracted teams of reporters, as did the crash of a meteorite in Alaska. But these are exceptional events. Moreover, some of these events in remote sites are scheduled in advance so that plans can be made to have crews available.

Because of the problem of moving camera crews around, and the time needed to process and edit pictures, many stories require prior planning. This leads to an emphasis on predictable events such as formal visits by dignitaries, legislative hearings, or executive press conferences. The development of portable camera equipment producing videotapes that can be broadcast with little further processing has eased this problem somewhat. "Spot news" can be filmed and broadcast rapidly. This is only one example of the profound impact of technological developments on the content of the news.

NEWS PRODUCTION CONSTRAINTS

Many of the factors that affect news story selection spring from the requirement that news must be processed rapidly and published as quickly as possible. Time pressures explain why the press reports so many pseudo-events — events created for easy reporting by the media or for the media. In television news, these constitute almost 70 percent of all stories.²³ For example, politicians frequently plan pictorially attractive events, like dedicating a dam or visiting a fair, at just the right time and place to accommodate newspaper or broadcast deadlines. When newpeople need a quick story about a revolution in Iran or ways to cope with gas pump waiting lines, they arrange interviews with familiar leaders, whose remarks, knowledgeable or not, then instantly become the Iran or the gas shortage story.

Once stories reach print and electronic media news offices, selections have to be made extremely rapidly. Ben Bagdikian, a former *Washington Post* editor who studied gatekeeping at eight newspapers,

280

found that stories usually are sifted and chosen on the spot. They are not assembled and carefully examined for their overall policy effect. Here is how Bagdikian described the scene in a typical newspaper office:

The news editor arrives at 6 A.M. to find an overnight accumulation of fifty thousand words, most of it regional and national news from the wire services, some of it from the paper's reporters in outlying bureaus, who transmitted it by teletype the night before.

In addition to making decisions on incoming wire stories, this particular news editor makes decisions on local stories handed him by the city editor and the state editor. He also is handed the output of two wire-photo machines that during the day produce ninety-six photographs from which he selects sixteen.²⁴

In the course of the day, the news editor chooses additional items for publication by scanning the news from three wire-service machines as well as locally originated news. The editor examines roughly 110,000 words of wire news during the day, equivalent to the size of an average book. During the day, this editor must also judge and edit 5,000 words of news from the local staff. Other tasks are selection of photographs, which must be processed hours before press time, consultation with city editors about story assignments, and decisions about what to place on page one in light of the changing news scene.

Bagdikian reports that the typical newspaper gatekeeper was able to scan and discard stories in one to two seconds. When reasons for rejecting stories were investigated, only 2.5 percent were rejected because the editor did not care for the substance of the story or objected to its ideological slant. Twenty-six percent were rejected because of lack of space. The remaining 71.5 percent were rejected because they were judged to lack some or all of the elements of newsworthiness discussed earlier.

Rejection rates varied for different types of stories. Overall 89 percent of all wire service news was rejected. So were 93 percent of all human interest stories, 92 percent of crime news, 74 percent of farm news and 69 percent of science news. Even though much of the human interest information was rejected, it still constituted the largest single news category — 23 percent of total news. By contrast, science news took 5 percent of total space and farm stories 6 percent.²⁵

For stories that were accepted, it took fast gatekeepers four seconds to skim through the entire story and even make minor changes. The average reading time was six seconds. Stories of 225 words were disposed of in 2 to 10 seconds. At such speeds, judgments are almost instantaneous with no time for reflection or weighing of alternatives among the total batch of news available for the day. Stories are judged more by how they balance previously selected stories than by their intrinsic importance. If the gatekeeper has ideological preferences, these are served instinctively, if at all, rather than deliberately.

Because the flood tide of information continues throughout the day, the gatekeeper accepts very few stories in the early hours of each shift.

Closer to the deadline, when news has to go to press, the pace of story selection quickens. When the deadline arrives, a new story must be extraordinarily important to replace stories that have already been accepted or are already in press. Stories left over at the tail end of the day will not ordinarily be used on the next day because by then they will be old, and newer stories will have replaced them. This means that a story which breaks late in the publishing day, unless it is very unusual or significant, has little chance for publication. What becomes news thus depends heavily on when it happens. West Coast afternoon stories are frequent casualties because they are generally too late to be incorporated into the network evening news, which is run on an East Coast schedule.

Public relations managers know the deadlines of important publications like the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the network television news. They time events and news releases so that stories arrive in gatekeepers' offices precisely when needed. Thus the news production process, though it has its own irresistible momentum, is not immune to conscious control. News for which a minimum of publicity is desired is announced just past deadlines, preferably on weekends, when few newscasts are scheduled. For instance, the Nixon administration fired the special Watergate prosecutor on the weekend in what became known as the "Saturday night massacre." The hope that the timing would minimize publicity was only partially fulfilled in that case.

Publications with less frequent deadlines, such as weekly news magazines, have a lot more time to decide what to publish. News magazine staffs also have more resources than most daily papers to dig out background information and present stories in a context which helps readers to evaluate them. These magazines are therefore ideal for people who want quick, interpretive news that concentrates on a limited number of events.

Television news staffs have even less time for investigative reporting than newspapers, and far less time to provide background and interpretation for the news they present. When investigative stories do appear on television, they usually originated in the print media. A few highly popular investigative programs, such as CBS's "Sixty Minutes," are a much appreciated exception. Besides inadequate time for preparing stories, radio and television news also have the problem of insufficient time to present a story. When the average news story takes up little more than a minute, it is not surprising that it conveys primarily headlines. Complex stories must be omitted entirely if they cannot be condensed into such a brief format.

Print media have space problems as well, but they are less severe. The average newspaper must reserve 55 percent of its space for advertising. Out of its 45 percent "newshole," generally 27 percent goes for straight news stories, the remainder for features of various types. Some newspapers have a standardized amount of space for news; others expand

or contract the newshole depending on the flow of news and advertising. But there is rarely enough space to cover stories as fully as reporters and editors would like. This holds true whether the paper is a slim eight-page version or five to ten times that size.²⁶

Besides the need to condense a news story into a brief capsule, television reporters also need stories with visual appeal. Unfortunately, what is visually appealing may not be important. For instance, during political campaigns, motorcades, rallies, hecklers, and cheering crowds make good pictures. Candidates delivering speeches are visually dull by comparison. Television cameras therefore concentrate on the colorful scenes, rather than the speechmaker. If such scenes are flashed on the screen in competition with the speech, the pictures distract from what the candidate is saying. Events that make dull pictures may have to be omitted.

Since picture production is expensive for television as well as print, picture stories selected early are likely to be kept even if more important stories break later. Likewise, almost all information originated by the staff is used, for financial and personnel reasons. News organizations prefer stories from people already on their payroll to wire service stories by unknown reporters or stories from outside sources for which additional fees must be paid. News executives also have personal relationships with their own staffs and do not want to disappoint them by killing their stories.

EFFECTS OF GATEKEEPING

The gatekeeping influences which we have been discussing give a distinctive character to the American news product, considered as a whole. There are many exceptions, of course, when one looks at individual news outlets or at individual programs or specific news and feature stories. But, in general, several characteristics stand out. We shall discuss these under four headings, the first two adapted from Herbert Gans' study of news magazine and network television news.²⁷

People in the News

The gatekeeping process winnows the group of newsworthy people down to a very small array of familiar and unfamiliar figures. Familiar people appear in three out of every four spots in the news. Most are political figures. Fewer than 50 are in the news regularly. The list is headed by the incumbent president. Other people receive coverage primarily for unusual or important activities, but incumbent presidents are covered regardless of what they do. News about presidential candidates ranks next. In presidential election years, it often outnumbers stories about the president.

A third well-covered group consists of major federal officials, such as political leaders in the House and Senate, the heads of major congress-

sional committees, and cabinet members in active departments. In the post-Watergate period, major White House staff members have joined the circle. The Supreme Court is in the news only intermittently, generally when important decisions are announced. Agency heads rarely make the news, except when they announce new policies or feud with the president. Finally, there are some people who are regularly in the news regardless of what their current political status may be, merely because their names are household words. Members of the Kennedy clan are the prime example.

Below the federal level, the activities of governors and mayors from the larger states and cities are newsworthy if they involve major public policy issues, or if the incumbent is unusual because of race, sex, or prior newsworthy activities. Notorious individuals also receive frequent news attention if their deeds have involved well-known people. Presidential assassins, mass murderers, or members of extremist political groups like the Symbionese Liberation Army fall into this category. Ample coverage also goes to targets of congressional investigations and defendants in political trials, such as the Watergate defendants or key figures in the Pentagon Papers case.

Many powerful people are rarely covered in the news. Among the excluded are economic leaders, such as the heads of large corporations, financiers, and leaders of organized business, such as the National Association of Manufacturers or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. A few colorful labor leaders, like George Meany and James Hoffa, have been news figures, but this was probably due more to their colorful personalities than to their jobs. Important military leaders also remain obscure except on rare occasions when they are involved in major military operations. Political party leaders surface during elections but remain in the shadows at other times. Political protest leaders, like civil rights figures or the heads of minority parties, or consumer activists like Ralph Nader, come and go from the news scene, depending on the amount of visible conflict they are able to produce. The same holds true for the heads of voluntary associations, such as antiabortion groups or church leaders.

The names of most ordinary people never make the news because their activities must be very unusual to come to the attention of newsmen. Ordinary people have their best chance for publicity if they participate in protests or riots or strikes, particularly if these are directed against the government. The next best chance goes to victims of disasters, personal tragedy, and crime, and to the actors who brought about their plight. The grisly nature of crimes, disasters, or other human tragedies, rather than the identity of the people involved, determines their newsworthiness. Ordinary people also make the news if they become involved in highly unusual life styles or social activities, or if their behavior diverges greatly from what one would normally expect of persons of their age, sex, and status. Finally, ordinary people make the news in large numbers as nameless members of groups whose statistical

282

profile is reported or whose opinions have been tapped through polls or elections.

Actions in the News

A limited array of activities are likely candidates for coverage. The list is headed by conflicts and disagreements among government officials, particularly friction between the president and Congress. A large number of these conflicts concern economic policies.

Stories about government policies and ceremonies also provide frequent story material. These generally deal with policymaking rather than policy operation. Government personnel changes, including campaigns for office, are another news focus.

Several types of conflict action are routinely reported. These include violent and nonviolent protest, much of it about governmental activities, crimes, scandals and investigations, and impending or actual disasters. When the nation is involved in war, they also include a large number of war stories. Finally, two aspects of normal social change receive substantial coverage from time to time. They are major national ceremonies, like inaugurations or moon landings, and major social, cultural or technological developments, like the entry of women into positions previously closed to them, or major advances in the fight against cancer.

Characteristics of the News

The criteria for newsworthiness and the news production constraints (both discussed earlier) also contribute in a general way to the shape of American news, regardless of the subject under discussion. Several features stand out.

Effects of Stress on Novelty and Entertainment. The requirement that a story be new and exciting means that some news drops out other news that may be of more lasting significance. For instance, eight times as much space and time is devoted to sports news than to news about local community problems such as school finance or housing.²⁸ Sensational news certainly drowned out other news of importance in March 1977, for example, when the media focused on the terrorist activities of a Moslem sect in Washington. A remarkable presidential press conference occurring at the same time was all but swamped. In this conference, President Carter proposed a \$1.5 billion youth employment bill, a Youth Conservation Corps, a new approach to peace in the Middle East, new procedures for the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea, and a new atomic weapons agreement with the Soviet Union. As James Reston commented in the *New York Times*, "It is hard to remember any time since the last World War when an American President made so much news in a press conference or anywhere else . . . but nobody could hear him for the noise and the headlines about the terrorists."²⁹

The emphasis on the novel also leads to stress on trivial aspects of serious stories. Complex issues are presented in the form of simplified human interest stories. The reasons for inflation are hardly explained by showing pictures of a housewife paying high prices in the supermarket or a homeowner struggling to pay the mortgage, but judging from attention patterns, audiences enjoy these stories.

The search for novelty and entertainment produces news that focuses on the present and ignores the past and future. The here and now is what counts. The news also tends to be fragmented and discontinuous. It is aired as it is received, so that background needed to place a story in context is often missing. Clarifications are usually buried in the back pages. On television, snippets of news may be presented together to drive home an easily understandable theme, such as "Washington is in a mess" or "the inner city is decaying." The theme may come through, but the individual news item is buried.

Fragmentation makes it difficult for audiences to piece together a coherent narrative of events. More background and interpretation would help, but would also increase the chance for subjective interpretations by news commentators. A few papers, such as the *Christian Science Monitor*, do cover fewer stories in more detail. People who read *Monitor* stories carefully acquire a better background for understanding social issues, but they miss out on other news for which there is no space. They may also get skewed information if newspaper misinterpret the significance of complex events.

Effects of Stress on Familiarity and Similarity. The need for stories that involve familiar people and events close to home also has a number of consequences for the shape of news. There is, first, a circular aspect to such coverage; familiar people and situations are covered minutely, which makes them even more a part of the audience's life and therefore even more worthy of publicity. The reverse is also true.

During the 1976 presidential election campaign, for instance, Senator Hubert Humphrey and Edward Kennedy, who were frequently in the news, became candidates in many people's minds, even though they never entered the race officially. Senators Lloyd Bentsen and Fred Harris, though they were official entrants, received less media attention and remained unfamiliar. They were forced to abandon the quest.

Familiar people may become objects of prying curiosity into the details of their private lives. These details may take up an inordinately large amount of time and space in the mass media. For example, when Mayor Daley of Chicago died in 1977, the media provided a minute-by-minute account of his last moments. People were told about his blood pressure, about the emergency medical procedures performed, and about the manner in which his family was told about his death. For several days, much of the news in the Chicago area was taken up by these

story, obscured initially, was that the mayor's death had launched a major power struggle for control of Chicago's politics.

Another important consequence of the criteria of newsworthiness is that American news is very parochial, compared with news in other countries. Foreign coverage will be treated more fully in Chapter 9, but here we should say that this neglect of news about foreign people and cultures leaves Americans deficient in their understanding of international affairs.

Again, there is a circularity involved. If, for instance, events in Afghanistan are rarely covered, stories about Afghanistan require a lot of background to make sense to Americans. Except during a crisis, this may take more scarce time and space than the media are willing to give to any story. Therefore, much of the foreign coverage in American media is about people to whom Americans feel culturally close and whose politics are somewhat familiar, like the English, the Canadians, and the Australians and people in Northern European countries. Foreign news concentrates on situations that are easy to report, which often means violent events, like revolutions, major disasters, and the like. This type of coverage conveys the impression that most foreign countries are always in serious disarray.

Neglect of Social Problems. Despite the ascendancy of social responsibility journalism, the constraints of news production still force the media to neglect major ongoing social problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, environmental pollution, or care of the elderly and disabled. The pattern changes when a dramatic event takes place, such as a rash of deaths in old folks' homes or a big welfare fraud case. If a reporter investigates and finds that six elderly people starved to death because of neglect or that a few clients prosper on welfare, the spot-lighted incident may then lead to a series of reports on food in retirement homes. The recent deaths provide the element of novelty and entertainment. After that novelty has worn off, interest dims and media attention flags, even if much news still remains to be reported.

Social problems also are neglected because most media staffs are inadequately trained to cover them. Appraisal of the administration of nursing homes or prisons or pollution control programs requires technical knowledge. Specialized reporters who have expertise in such areas as urban affairs, or science, or finance are as yet available only in the larger news organizations. Even then, a science reporter can hardly be expected to be an expert in all fields of science. Nor can a reporter skilled in "urban problems" be expected simultaneously to master the intricacies of a major city's budget, its transportation system, and its services to juveniles. Since most news organizations throughout the country lack the trained staffs to discuss major social problems constructively, politicians can easily challenge the merits of media stories criticizing their policies.

Then, too, most of the public, judging from media use patterns, is not very interested in social problems or the hazards of alcohol and tobacco use. For those people who are interested and might be in a position to combat such problems, media silence makes it more difficult to rouse public support.

Effects of Emphasis on Conflict and Violence. The heavy news emphasis on conflict and bad news is most prevalent in big city media. It has three major consequences. First, and perhaps most far-reaching in its impact, emphasis on negative news events may create dangerous distortions of reality. This is particularly true with crime coverage. Media stories rarely mention that many neighborhoods are relatively free of crime. They convey the impression to many people that the whole city, but particularly inner city areas, are dangerous jungles. The impression may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the wake of crime publicity, many people have avoided the inner city; they even shun comparatively safe neighborhoods after a single, highly publicized crime. The empty streets then make crime more likely.

Studies of people's perceptions of the incidence of crime and the chances that they will be attacked indicate that their fears are geared to media realities. In the world of television, one has a 30 to 64 percent chance of being involved in violence; in the real world, the chance is only one-third of one percent.³⁰ Similarly, heavy media emphasis on air crashes and de-emphasis of automobile accidents have left the public with distorted notions of the dangers of each mode of transportation.

A second result of the emphasis on news involving conflict is the perception of many people that violence is the only acceptable way to settle disputes. Some argue that by bringing conflict into the open, media may promote its resolution, but clearly they may also make it worse.³¹ This often happens when media dramatize a conflict by highlighting its more sensational aspects and oversimplifying it, picturing it as a confrontation between two clearly defined sides. It is the hawks against the doves in war, the victors or losers in a legislative battle, the communists versus anticommunists in a struggle abroad. Even when there is little actual confrontation in a situation the media often structure it as a battle and call it a clash or a feud or a fight. Yet divergent viewpoints expressed by parties or unions or members of a legislature may not mean at all that they are locked in battle.

Average people, when presented with clashing claims, often feel confused and find it extremely difficult to determine where the truth lies. They have neither the facts nor the time to explore the issues. They are also left with the disquieting sense that conflict and turmoil reign nearly everywhere. This impression is likely to affect people's feeling toward society in general. They may contract "videomalaise," characterized by lack of trust, cynicism, and fear.³² The impact of such feelings on the climate of political action and the conduct of politics in the United States is a subject for speculation.

284

CAMERA FOCUS SHAPES MEANING



A tight shot (insert) exaggerates crowd size.

Finally, the popularity of violence stories has encouraged groups who seek media coverage to behave violently or sensationally to enhance their chances for publicity. One example comes from a lengthy strike by a union of Chicago workers against a Texas furniture company. During the first year, the nonviolent strike received very little publicity. To attract media coverage, the leaders therefore decided to stage noisy marches to the Capitol on the first and second anniversaries of the strike. Moderate language in appeals to the company and city authorities was replaced by fighting words. City councilors were called "rednecks" and challenged to stop the union's marches. This language created a confrontation, brought city police to the scene, and heightened tensions. Celebrities, including Senators Edmund Muskie of Maine and Birch Bayh of Indiana, and farm labor leader Cesar Chavez were invited to enter the fray. These maneuvers broke the year-long dearth of media coverage. No longer peaceful, the strike finally received ample publicity.

In turn, this created sufficient pressure to bring about a settlement.³³ A taste for conflict is not the same as a taste for controversy, however. The fear of offending members of the mass audience, or wire service subscribers, or affiliated station managers, through stories dealing with controversial subjects like abortion or corruption in the church, of-

ten keeps such problems out of the media, especially network television. If they are reported, the treatment is generally bland, carefully hedged, and rarely provocative. In fact, the world which television in particular presents to the viewer generally lags behind the real world in its recognition of controversial social changes. The civil rights struggle, women's fight for equality, and changing sexual mores all were widespread in real life long before they became common on the television screen, or received serious attention in the print media. Newspapers can afford to be more daring than television because normally there is no other daily paper in the same market. Moreover, the nature of the medium makes it easier for the audience to ignore stories they find distasteful.

Support for the Establishment

The gatekeeping process also yields news that basically supports current American political and social institutions. Although the media expose official misbehavior and inefficiencies, they display a favorable attitude toward the established American power structure and its methods of operations. They treat its symbols and rituals, such as the presidency, the courts and elections, and patriotic celebrations with a high degree of respect, which lends legitimacy to them. They cast a negative light on anti-establishment behavior, such as inflammatory speeches by militants or looting during a riot. Obscenity and profanity in public places usually are edited out of news events.

Generalized support for the establishment and the status quo is not unique to the media, of course.³⁴ Most institutions within any particular political system go along with it if they wish to prosper. People on their staffs have been socialized to believe in the merits of their political structures. In the media, moreover, they cater to advertisers and audiences who firmly support the American political system. Staff members whose personal ideologies differ nevertheless go along with established norms, to avoid conflict with their bosses, advertisers, or affiliated stations which may refuse to carry offensive programs.³⁵ People desperately want to believe that their government is competent, honest, and working hard to solve the problems. They do not welcome exposures which destroy these comforting myths. Media support for the establishment thus helps to raise respect for it and perpetuate it.

Support for the establishment is further strengthened by media reliance on government information and press releases. In the United States, the bulk of news, particularly when it comes from beyond the local communities' boundaries, comes from officials and agencies of the government.³⁶ Official viewpoints are likely to be particularly dominant when reporters must preserve access to their special beats, like the Pentagon or Justice Department, or when story production requires government assistance in collecting or gaining access to data. For instance, when military personnel are needed to transport correspondents to war

zones, or when film producers need demonstrations of moon-flight research, the resulting stories are apt to support official views.³⁷

Government officials and agencies are also used routinely for verification of information. Reporters generally equate official position and rank of sources with accuracy. The higher the official level and rank, the better. The assumption that official sources, like police departments, or Department of Agriculture spokesmen, or presidential press aides are reliable is, of course, debatable. Many private groups have complained that such reliance deprives them of the chance to publicize their own, more accurate, versions of stories and that it results in one-sided reporting, tilted toward support of the establishment.

An interesting illustration of establishment support is provided by a study of media coverage of the Durham, N.C., city council. A team of researchers at Duke University³⁸ observed city council sessions and then examined the newspaper reports about them. The sessions had been rather disorderly with little work done for much of the time. Council members had been observed "dozing off to sleep just as a vote is being taken on a crucial issue" and "smacking with abandon on a large wad of gum while the intricacies of a public housing dispute are discussed."³⁹ The mayor had cracked a number of jokes about the issues under consideration. The audience had screamed and had booed council proposals. Finally, toward the end of the lengthy sessions, when everybody was tired, a few resolutions were passed.

The published reports of the sessions conveyed a quite different impression. Nothing was said about the unprofessional behavior. Council members were quoted only for their meaningful remarks and not for their often pointless or facetious comments. They were described respectfully, each designated by official title. The stories made it appear that the city council sat down at the appointed time, immediately went about its business, and completed it promptly and efficiently without interruptions by the audience. This impression was conveyed by indicating the precise time the sessions were called to order, outlining the agenda topics, quoting a few of the arguments made during the debates, and then indicating the final decisions. Decisionmaking appeared to be a careful, deliberate, logical process, with the likely consequences of these decisions fully explored. Of course, nothing could have been further from the truth.

The type of reporting practiced in Durham is quite typical of reports of meetings in other places. Most Americans knew little about the con- gated Watergate tapes provided a realistic inside view. People in public life frequently behave in ways that do not meet the highest standards of decorum and honesty. But newspaper normally wink at this type of behavior, at least while the actors are in high office. For instance, the relationship between a Mafia-linked show girl, Judith Campbell Exner, and President John F. Kennedy did not surface until the mid-1970s.

Such protective conventions have been relaxed somewhat in the post-Watergate era, but it is doubtful whether the change will last.

Newspeople commonly ignore personal misconduct and scandals, but they often draw the line when matters of official conduct become involved. For instance, the sex scandal surrounding Representative Wilbur Mills, a powerful and highly respected member of Congress, was publicized when Mills became embroiled in a public incident involving police action. In earlier years, even that might have brought only casual mention. Representative Wayne Hays of Ohio received media coverage because he paid his mistress by putting her on the government payroll. That made the private affair a public concern about which the public was entitled to be informed. But the more usual practice is to give public officials an aura of dignity and to put the results of their efforts into the context of rationality and coherence, regardless of the actual facts in the situation.

Failure to disclose private and public misbehavior by government officials and sugar-coating of political reality is both detrimental and beneficial to the public interest. It is detrimental if politicians neglect the public business or behave irresponsibly. Such stories should be told. The fear of publicity might have salutary effects and voters might be put on guard. There are, however, situations in which covering up official misconduct may be helpful if negative publicity about public officials is unnecessarily harmful.

APPRAISING THE NEWSMAKING PROCESS

Do newspeople do a good job in selecting news and entertainment categories to be covered, the proportion of time and space to be allotted to each of these categories, and the individual offerings to be included in them? It depends on the standards that the critic is applying. If one contends that news can and should be a *mirror of society* that faithfully reproduces a teacup version of life, the newsmaking process leaves much to be desired. With its emphasis on the exceptional, rather than the ordinary, its focus on a limited number of regular beats to the exclusion of other sources of news, and its preference for conflict and bad news, it pictures a world which is far from reality.⁵⁰ If one adopts the classical — albeit debatable — American notion that the media should be the eyes and ears of intelligent and aware citizens who are interested primarily in news which is of major social and political significance to their community and country, one must again find fault with the gatekeeping process. Obviously, much space and time is given to trivia and many significant developments are ignored or reported so briefly that their meaning is lost. Often the human interest appeal of a story is emphasized over its chief substance or meaning.

Having said that, it becomes a very controversial matter to name specific significant events that failed to receive the amount and kind of

286

coverage they deserved. What is and is not significant, as well as gradations and ranks in significance, depends on the observer's world view and political orientation. Much of the published criticism of the media consists of polemical works which take the media to task for omitting the author's areas of special concern. But what is one person's intellectual meat is another's poison. Conservatives decry the emphasis on civil rights, misdeeds of the CIA and FBI, and the lack of support for defense spending. Liberals complain that the media legitimize big business and the military and neglect social reforms and radical perspectives.

Frequently, there is the additional charge that the choices made about inclusion and exclusion of media fare and about story focus and tone were dictated by political bias. These charges have been particularly common when the media have featured controversial public policy issues such as the dangers of atomic energy generation, or the merits of a new weapons system, or when political campaigns or demonstrations were covered.

A number of content analyses of such events definitely refute the charges of political bias if bias is defined as lopsided coverage of one candidate or selected issue or deliberate slanting of news. Instead, these analyses show that media lean toward covering a balanced array of issues in a neutral manner, and include contrasting viewpoints.⁵¹ But these analyses have usually involved situations in which bias charges could be anticipated and media personnel could therefore be expected to take exceptional care to treat the situation even-handedly. It is possible, therefore, that future studies of different situations may still turn up deliberate political bias.

When coverage is imbalanced, the reasons generally spring from the newsmaking process itself, rather than politically motivated slanting. For instance, candidate Ronald Reagan received more coverage of his campaign activities during the 1980 primaries than candidate Philip Crane, who campaigned far more vigorously. Reagan was a familiar, newsworthy figure, and Crane was not. Events in Chicago are reported more fully than similar events in Denver because the networks have a permanently leased wire from Chicago to New York, but not from Denver to New York. The New Hampshire primary receives disproportionately ample coverage because it happens to be the first in a presidential election.

Inevitably the stories chosen represent a small, unsystematic sample of the news of the day. In this sense, every issue of a newspaper or every television newscast is a "biased sample" of current events. Published stories often generate follow-up coverage, heightening the bias effect. Attempts to be even-handed may lead to similar coverage of dissimilar events, thereby introducing bias.

Besides evaluating news as a mirror of society and a reflection of socially and politically significant events, one can also evaluate it from the standpoint of audience preferences. By and large the media gatekeepers

287

appear to be doing well by that standard. People like their products well enough to consume them on a scale unheard of in the past. Three out of every four adults claim to read newspapers regularly; nearly all homes have radio and television, which most adults use. In the average household, the radio is turned on for three hours a day and television for seven. Millions of viewers, by their own free choice, have switched from other pre-television age sources of diversion to watching shows condemned as "trash" by social critics. These same people ignore shows and newspaper stories which have the critics' seal of approval.

Overall, if one views the media simultaneously from all three perspectives, one can say that they have developed a balanced approach. Most newspapers and broadcast enterprises try to mirror at least a portion of the world. Most also see it as their function to present some serious political and social information and analysis. At the same time, most cater to the audience's appetite for easily digested entertainment and diversion. The end product cannot fully satisfy anyone.

SUMMARY

What is *news* depends on what a particular society deems socially significant and/or personally satisfying to media audiences. The prevailing political and social ideology therefore determines what type of information will be gathered and the range of meanings which will be given to it. News collection is structured through the beat system to produce the desired information.

Beyond the larger framework, which is rooted in America's current political ideology, overt political considerations for news selection are rare. Instead, the profit motive and technical constraints of news production become paramount selection criteria. These criteria impose more stringent constraints on television than on print media because television deals with larger, more heterogeneous audiences and requires pictures to match word stories. Television, unlike newspapers which have no competition in the local market, must compete with several other electronic outlets for attention.

The end products of these various constraints on newsmaking are news media which support the American political system in general, but emphasize its shortcomings and conflicts — because journalists see themselves as watchdogs of public honesty and because conflict is exciting. News is geared primarily to attract and entertain rather than educate the audience about politically significant events.

The pressures to report news rapidly while it is happening often lead to presentation of disjointed fragments and disparate commentary. This leaves the audience with the impossible task of weaving the fragments into a meaningful tapestry of interrelated events.

The end product of the gatekeeping process is inadequate, if judged in terms of the information needs of the ideal citizen in the ideal democ-

cracy. This is especially true of television, which provides little more than a headline service for news and which mirrors the world like the curved mirrors at the county fair. Reality is there, but badly out of shape and proportion.

But if one concedes, as I do, that most of us only faintly resemble the ideal citizen, and that most look to the media for entertainment rather than enlightenment, a different appraisal suggests itself. By and large, American mass media do serve the general public about as well as that public wants to be served in practice, rather than theory. Entertainment is interpermed with a smattering of serious information. Breadth of coverage is preferred over narrow depth. In times of acute crisis, as we shall see in Chapter 8, the media can and do follow a different pattern. Serious news displaces entertainment, and the broad sweep of events turns into a narrow, in-depth focus on the crisis. Short of acute crisis, superficiality prevails most of the time.

NOTES

1. Ron Powers, *The Newscasters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
3. Popularity of specific newspaper stories or television programs is assessed through audience surveys. These are done most systematically for television, where major rating services like A. C. Nielsen and the American Research Bureau (ARB) use viewer diaries and electronic devices to monitor the shows being watched. Advertising rates are based on audience size for particular radio and television shows. A 1 percent increase in audience size can mean as much as \$1 million additional advertising income. For newspapers, rates are based on paid circulation, which is monitored by an independent agency, the Audit Bureau of Circulations. Audiences are rarely asked whether they would like to substitute different programs for existing fare.
4. Malcolm Warner, "Decision-Making in Network Television News," pp. 166-167 in Jeremy Tunstall, ed., *Media Sociology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970). Also see David L. Altheide, *Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage 1977).
5. The share of the networks in television gatekeeping has increased steadily. In 1967, the networks produced roughly 41 percent of evening programming. This increased to 96 percent by 1968. Tracy A. Weston, "Barriers to Creativity," *Journal of Communication* 28 (Spring 1978): 38.
6. Quoted by Powers, *The Newscasters*, p. 31.
7. Peter Braestrup, *Big Story* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1978).
8. George Gerbner, "Ideological Perspective and Political Tendencies in News Reporting," *Journalism Quarterly* 41 (August 1964): 496-508.
9. The social systems framework for mass communications analysis is sketched out in Phillip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue and Charles N. Olien, "Mass Communication Research: Evolution of a Structural Model," *Journalism Quarterly* 50 (Autumn 1973): 418-425.
10. David Morgan, *The Capitol Press Corps: Newsmen and the Governing of New York State* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 44-47.
11. Powers, *The Newscasters*, p. 30.
12. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 79. The evidence on whether or not editors and reporters

12. assess their audiences' tastes properly is mixed. Ralph K. Martin, Garrett J. O'Rourke, and Oguz B. Nayman, in "Opinion Agreement and Accuracy Between Editors and Their Readers," *Journalism Quarterly* 49 (Autumn 1972): 480-489, say they do. Leo Bogart, in "Changing News Interests and the Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23 (Winter 1968-69): 560-574, holds to the contrary.
13. Edward Jay Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 17-18.
14. G. Ray Funkhouser, "Trends in Media Coverage of the '60's," *Journalism Quarterly* 50 (Fall 1973): 533-538.
15. Somewhat similar feelings are harbored even toward the casts of soap operas. People whose lives are confined largely to their homes often adopt soap opera people as part of their family. They avidly follow the trials and tribulations of these people and may even try to model themselves after them.
16. A study of 149 small and large newspapers reports the following news space allocations: Local, 76 percent; Sports, 6 percent; National, 4 percent; Women's, 4 percent; International, 3 percent; Editorial, 3 percent; State, 3 percent; Financial, 2 percent. The measurements refer to space in column inches of total newshole. Dan Drew and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "Newshole Allocation Policies of American Daily Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly* 53 (Fall 1976): 434-440.
17. Robert W. Clyde and James K. Buckalew, "Inter-Media Standardization: A Q-Analysis of News Editors," *Journalism Quarterly* 46 (Summer 1969): 349-351.
18. Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1973), pp. 119-130.
19. The phrase is from Stanley K. Bigman, "Rivals in Conformity: A Study of Two Competing Dailies," *Journalism Quarterly* 25 (Autumn 1948): 127-131.
20. Joseph S. Fowler and Stuart W. Showalter, "Evening Network News Selection: A Confirmation of News Judgment," *Journalism Quarterly* 51 (Winter 1974): 712-715.
21. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials*, p. 66.
22. Joseph R. Dominick, "Geographic Bias in National TV News," *Journal of Communication* 27 (Fall 1977): 94-99.
23. Robert Rutherford Smith, "Mythic Elements in Television News," *Journal of Communication* 29 (Winter 1979): 76-82.
24. Ben Bagdikian, *The Information Machines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 99-100.
25. David M. White, "The Gatekeeper," *Journalism Quarterly* 27 (Fall 1950): 383-390, replicated by Paul B. Snider, "Mr. Gates Revisited," *Journalism Quarterly* 43 (Autumn 1967): 419-427. See also James D. Harless, "Mail Call," *Journalism Quarterly* 51 (Spring 1974): 87-90.
26. Drew and Wilhoit, "Newshole Allocation Policies of American Daily Newspapers," pp. 434-440.
27. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek & Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), pp. 8-31. Also see Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978).
28. Sandra William Ernst, "Baseball or Bricketts: A Content Analysis of Community Development," *Journalism Quarterly* 49 (Spring 1972): 86-90.
29. *The New York Times*, May 11, 1977.
30. George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, Suzanne Jeffries-Fox and Nancy Signorielli, "Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9," *Journal of Communication* 28 (Summer 1978): 176-207. Small-town newspapers

288

- are more apt to highlight the positive, telling what is good, rather than what is bad, because conflict is less tolerable in social systems where most of the leaders constantly rub elbows.
31. Clarice N. Olsen, George A. Donohue, and Phillip J. Tichenor, "The Community Editor's Power and the Reporting of Conflict," *Journalism Quarterly* 45 (Summer 1968): 243-52, present evidence that media watchdog functions increase as differentiation and pluralism increase in a social system. Also see Bruce Cole, "Trends in Science and Conflict Coverage in Four Metropolitan Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly* 52 (Fall 1975): 465-71.
 32. The term is Michael J. Robinson's in "American Political Legitimacy in an Era of Electronic Journalism: Reflections on the Evening News," in Richard Adler, ed., *Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism* (New York: Praeger, 1976), pp. 97-139.
 33. Stephen E. Rada, "Manipulating the Media: A Case Study of a Chicano Strike in Texas," *Journalism Quarterly* 54 (Spring 1977): 109-113.
 34. A strong attack on status-quo support is contained in Herbert J. Schiller, *The Mind Managers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). Also see Claus Mueller, *The Politics of Communication* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).
 35. Social forces are "more important than reporters' personalities in shaping the news," according to Warren Breed in "Social Controls in the Newsroom," *Social Forces* 33 (1965): 326-35. Reporters think otherwise. See Ruth C. Flegel and Steven H. Chaffee, "Influences of Editors, Readers, and Personal Opinions on Reporters," *Journalism Quarterly* 46 (Winter 1971): 645-51.
 36. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials*, pp. 119-130.
 37. A comparison of war movies made with and without Pentagon aid showed that aided movies depicted the military in a more favorable light. Russell B. Shain, "Effects of Pentagon Influence on War Movies, 1949-70," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (Fall 1972): 641-647.
 38. David L. Paletz, Peggy Reichert, and B. McIntire, "How the Media Support Local Government Authority," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 35 (Spring 1971): 80-92.
 39. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.
 40. George Comstock and Robin Cobby, "Watching the Watchdogs: Trends and Problems in Monitoring Network News," in William Adams and Fay Schelbman, eds., *Television Network News: Issues in Content Research* (Washington: George Washington University, 1978), 47-63.
 41. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-55.

