

## Media rhetoric

Media rhetoric: the art of speaking or writing effectively or the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication or persuasion. The processes of media production are, for the most part, actively concealed from the public. Media professionals constantly state that they are just reflecting the world as they find it. Simply to pose questions about the precise ways in which media texts have been constructed is to undermine this authority and to see texts as the products of specific human choices and practices.

However much we may be sucked into the illusion of a particular film or play, we are finally aware that we are watching representations- performances which have been scripted, rehearsed and acted, not reality. This is far from the case with much television and many newspaper stories, where even the most alert critic constantly needs to be on his/her guard against the apparent authenticity of what is seen or read. Hence, the necessity for deconstruction is much more imperative for TV and newspaper than for theatre and cinema.

Following are some techniques which are used by the media to construct meaning. These operations are performed behind the back of the audience. It is actually inevitable but the problem arises when media personnel are not open about these techniques and the audience is thus ignorant about these techniques.


### **Selection**

It is of great importance. It means 'inclusion and exclusion'. The utmost importance is the insight that the act of selection is itself evaluative. Claud Cockburns words: ' All stories are written backwards- they are supposed to begin with the facts and develop from there, but in reality they begin with a journalist's point of view from which the facts are subsequently organized.' To reveal the range of choices available within the media, attention needs to be drawn to syntagmic and paradigmatic relations. Each media text is a syntagm chosen from among various similar choices which, when put together offer a paradigm. To analyze the ways

in which meaning is conveyed we have to understand how signs work in relation to one another. For Semiologists there are two relational axes on which to focus – paradigmatic and syntagmatic.

- The paradigmatic axis concerns the relationship of each individual signifier in a text with set of alternative signifiers that could have been used instead. The set of alternatives is known as a paradigm. Paradigmatic analysis involves breaking up the text into its components and assessing the significance of each element by considering how the meaning would have been different if alternative signifiers had been used instead. The idea is to compare what was selected by the producer of the text with what was not selected.
- Syntagmatic analysis asks us to consider the ways in which the different signs present in a text interact with one another. Need to examine how components fit together. It involves an assessment of semantic impact of the ways in which components of a story have been arranged and combined.

Example: In a news construction, a headline ‘surgical strikes limit collateral damage’ in war story. Its syntagmatic in a headline. Whereas connotations by comparing words present with alternatives that are absent in paradigmatic. Here in the above headline why not bombs instead of surgical strikes and why not ‘civilian deaths instead of collateral damage. Paradigmatic approach to discourse analysis focused on selection of words.

<b>Paradigmatic</b> 	<b>Surgical strikes</b>	<b>Limit</b>	<b>Collateral damage</b>
	Smart bombs	Prevent	Unintended destructions
	Missile attacks	Cause	Indiscriminate killing
	Powerful bombs	Create	Civilian casualties
	<b>Syntagmatic</b>		

‘Our democracy would be a great deal healthier if media professionals openly acknowledged that .if the public understood, and if we all acted upon it. At a stroke this would reduce the power of the media to project their representations as objective evidence, produce less mystificatory and more illuminating journalism, and give audience a more realistic understanding of the media’s capabilities and limitations.

**THE RHETORIC OF THE IMAGE:**

Media literacy requires the ability to assess visual evidence. Television is considered as the most reliable source of information by most of audience because it deals with visual images which seem to be transparent, open, and authentic and which establish a consciousness of subjects ‘having been there’.

“Photographs do not translate from appearances. They quote from them.”-John Berger

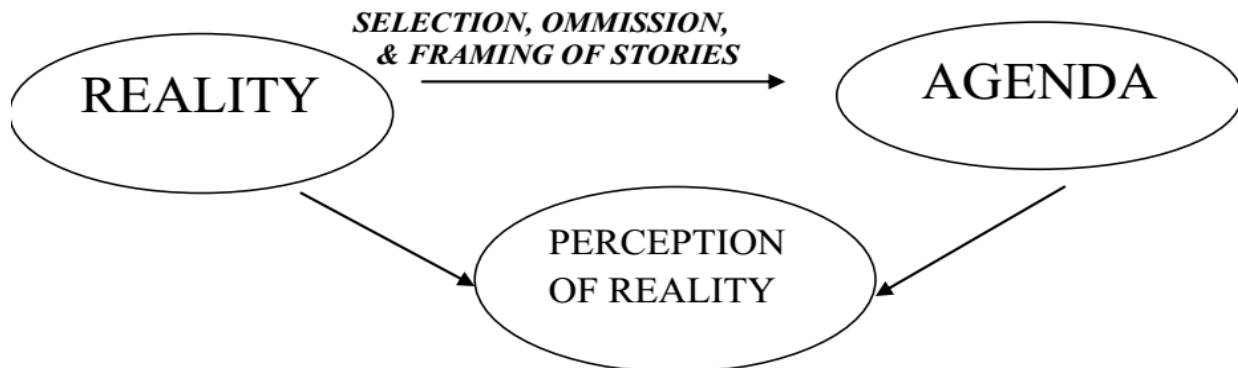
Roland Barthes argues that photographs are essentially ‘polysemous’, i.e. have the capacity to produce a whole variety of meanings, i.e., that is a photograph have variety of meanings for different persons

**SELECTION, AGENDA SETTING & GATE KEEPING IN NEWS CONSTRUCTION**

**Agenda setting**

- A theory that holds intense media attention increases the importance of certain topics, issues, and individuals
- It has the ability to tell us what issues are important and has a very powerful influence of the media. We perceive information the way mass media wants us to.
- Agenda setting functions mostly in mass communication and media
- We (as an audience to mass media) use agenda-setting to describe important events we have not personally witnessed.
- The media uses agenda setting theory to inform us on what they think is important to our society

- Max McCombs and Donald Shaw • They investigated the agenda-setting function of the mass media in the 1969 presidential campaign • The point? • To get information about the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual content of media messages during the actual campaign • Results? • Mass media (with the agenda-setting function) had a huge influence on what voters during the campaign considered to be the major issues • Why so important? • This study began the agenda-setting theory and is now why we study it today.
- Agenda setting theory can be beneficial in the sense that with the supposed control that the media has on the minds of the viewer, would make the PR professional more aware of the impact they may have on the message delivery and presentation they give to the listening audience.
- They do this by “framing” i.e. through selection , emphasis , exclusion and elaboration . These determine the salience of particular attributes of a story of issue.
- Media may not only tell us what to think about , they may also tell us how and what to think about it, and perhaps even what to do about it .Media may also affect behavior, for example, influencing sentiment about the economy, about travel etc.



- First-level agenda setting--the issues (objects) in the media.
- Second-level agenda setting tells audience what to think about these issues.
- Framing--process through which media emphasize some aspects of reality and downplay others creating interpretive schema (e.g., by subtopics, placement, tone, narrative form, details, etc.).
- Agenda Setting Theory (1970's)
  - Agenda Setting Theory in the communication discipline has concentrated on the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda
  - Types of agendas:
    1. Media agenda (topics covered by media)

2. Public agenda (topics public believes to be important)
3. Policy agenda (issues that decision makers believe are important)

## **GATEKEEPING**

Discussions about bias often focus on the ways in which particular stories are presented by news providers. Before any decisions about the construction of a given story are made, however, journalists and others must select which events to cover and which to exclude – a process largely invisible to the public and one that has substantial implications for the version of the world presented to us. By making such decisions, news organizations act as gatekeepers, with the capacity to affect what we know, care and talk about and what passes under our collective radar.

Detailed consideration of the criteria used by journalists and editors in evaluating newsworthiness provides greater understanding of the priorities of news media and the versions of the world they place before us. As well as excluding a host of undeniably trivial events, these criteria – known as news values – also result in selections and exclusions that are more controversial.

### **News Values**

There are differences of priority and emphasis between news providers in terms of the precise blend of stories they cover on a given day. Analysis has suggested that they also share a number of core criteria, or news values, which determine story selection.

The best-known attempt to outline these shared news values is provided by Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge (1973), who identify eight criteria that they present as universal and a further four that are deemed more specific to developed, capitalist countries. The criteria are intended to be cumulative rather than independent of one another – that is, the more of them that apply and the greater the extent to which they apply, the more likely an event is to be covered. Let's look at each of the criteria in turn.

### **Frequency**

For an event to make the news, argue Galtung and Ruge, its timespan should be compatible with the frequency with which news is published or broadcast. Criminal or violent incidents tend to be ideal because they play themselves out in the short time span between one edition of a newspaper or bulletin and the next. In contrast, gradual improvements in a country's education system are unlikely to make the news, unless highlighted by a discrete event, such as the release of a report or a high-profile school visit. A war-torn country is liable to receive less coverage than the bombing that damaged it. Some commentators have connected the notion of frequency with an increasingly prominent specific role for immediacy or recency, which refers to the particular emphasis placed by websites and television news on breaking brand new stories as quickly as

possible, to the extent that the most recent stories sometimes are prioritized even if they aren't particularly strong with respect to other news values (Bell, 1991)

### **Amplitude**

Amplitude refers to a threshold of notice ability. In order to be deemed newsworthy, a fire, for example, must be of a sufficient size or a crime of a particular level of seriousness. The more extreme or dramatic an event is within its category, the more likely it is to receive prominent coverage. In the age of television news, many have argued that the role of spectacle and drama in the selection of news stories is becoming ever more important (Baker and Dessart, 1998). A story is particularly likely to be covered if the drama is captured directly through sound, image or film. A dramatic police car chase, may be covered if caught on video, but not if the news provider would have to rely on a verbal descriptions alone.

### **Clarity**

The more clear or one-dimensional an event is, terms of the ways it ;can be interpreted, the more appealing it is likely to be for news providers. Events make good news copy. Stories that involve the clear attribution of right and wrong and obvious victims and villains fit well within this category. Acts of criminal violence, for example, can easily be centred on clear individual perpetrator (s), who can be blamed, and individual victim (s), with whom audiences can empathize. In contrast, arguments about political policy tend to be complex, messy and uncertain.

### **Cultural proximity**

News providers tend to favour stories that involve practices, places or people familiar or relevant to the audience. News is ethnocentric, argue Galtung and Ruge, in that it is biased towards that which is closest to us. Thus, in UK News, disasters in the UK itself or in countries regarded as culturally close to the UK tend to receive greater levels of coverage than similar events in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, events in culturally and geographically distant places may still sometimes be newsworthy if they have some other form of relevance. A disaster in Africa may receive more coverage in the UK if British citizens were among the casualties, while a change in the Iranian government might receive US news coverage as a result of ongoing diplomatic tensions between Iran and the USA.

### **Predictability (Expectedness)**

Newsworthy stories often tend to fit with our expectations and cohere with the way in which we believe the world to work. Predictability is related to clarity as the more a story can be presented

in a way that fits in without expectations, the less the potential for ambiguities. Sometimes this may relate to specific anticipated events. Media speculation about the possibility of violence at big football tournaments or protest marches often leads to the prioritization of coverage of any actual violence, even if it is minor. The expectation generated by the speculation renders the story newsworthy all by itself (Hartley, 1982). In other cases, stories are rendered newsworthy because they confirm broader social expectations or stereotypes. News stories about young people causing a nuisance, for example, activate stereotypical expectations about youth delinquency.

### **Unexpectedness**

In emphasizing cultural proximity and predictability, Galtung and Ruge do not mean to imply that news prioritizes everyday ordinary. Rather, these criteria operate in tandem with a tendency to emphasize events that are in some way extraordinary or unusual. A story about the disappearance of an infant within the country of a news provider may be liable to fit with various sets of established expectations (about the danger of pedophiles (child abusing, for example), as well as to satisfy the criteria of cultural familiarity (it happened to a family near us or like us), at the same time as attaining its newsworthiness primarily because of the rarity of such an event.

The unexpectedness news values is of great importance and, more than anything, explains why all the details of each of our everyday lives are unlikely to become news – they are simply too unremarkable.

### **Continuity**

Once a story has entered the news agenda, it may gain sufficient public interest to give it the momentum to continue to be newsworthy in the future. Individual stories can become like soap operas, in the sense that people become keen to find out what happens next. This can prompt news providers to allocate significant space to ongoing stories; even if there have been no significant developments.

Meanwhile, Allan Bell (1991) argues that the desire to continue to feed the public appetite for existing stories sometimes prompts the co-opting of smaller stories onto the agenda purely because they relate in some way to the bigger story.

### **Composition**

Galtung and Ruge's final universal news value emphasizes the need for bulletins or newspapers to fit together as a whole. Providers may seek to complement stories with others that connect to the same theme, or conversely, to achieve a balance of types of story within each edition, which may mean including some domestic stories on a heavy foreign news day, for example, or slotting in something light and trivial after a big political story.

### **Elite Nations**

Quite simply, events that relate to the most powerful nations in the world are of greater consequence and therefore more likely to be covered than those taking place in poorer, less influential places.

### **Elite people**

Similarly, stories about powerful or famous people are more newsworthy, on the whole, than those about poor or unknown people because the actions of the former are liable to be of greater consequence and interest than those of everybody else. Celebrity stories are particularly valuable because they encapsulate extraordinary levels of wealth, power and influence at the same time as having proximity and relevance to the lives of ordinary people (from relationships to babies to weight loss, for example), engendering identification and empathy.

### **Personification**

For news selection within capitalist developed countries, for Galtung and Ruge, is the extent to which a story can be represented by focusing on the intentions, actions or emotions of individuals. Rather than emphasizing the determination of individual lives by structural forces such as the distribution of wealth, news tends to present us with a world dominated by individual morals, decisions and behaviours. Stories that can easily be presented by focusing on individuals, therefore, are more liable to be selected than those which cannot. personification explains the increasing emphasis on so-called human interest stories, including those about crime, celebrities and disasters. Personification even plays a significant role in the selection of political stories, with increasing emphasis being placed on those relating to the character and lifestyle of politicians rather than policy arguments.

### **Negativity**

Finally, Galtung and Ruge argue that negative news stories are liable to dominate the news agenda because they tend to fit better with other news values than positive stories. Negative stories often concern discrete short-term events, they are easier to present in an unambiguous manner and tend to involve rare or unexpected phenomena. headlines were dominated by the latter, which, as well as being a negative rather than a positive crime story, also fitted better with established expectations, offered greater potential for personalization and formed an immediate, self-contained story with easily observable villains and victims.