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BIAS AND THE BIAS CALL

by

Richard Pinet

B.A., McGill University, 1977.

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS (COMMUNICATION)

in the Department

of

Communication

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ABSTRACT

The thesis attempts to integrate two seemingly disparate views on the nature of news media bias. Critical media scholars have suggested that the concept of bias be abandoned for the purposes of assessing news media output. They claim the concept has limited value as it cannot deal with the more pertinent issue of the ideological power the media exercise in constructing, maintaining and reproducing 'world views'. Yet, the term continues to be widely used by those who disagree with media representations. Media institutions and personnel alike have adopted standards to guard themselves from charges of bias, and press councils and broadcast renewal committees often mediate disputes which centre on the bias claim.

The thesis attempts to subsume these positions by making the notion of "bias" itself the object of study. Unlike traditional approaches which use the term as an evaluator of news media messages, the thesis demonstrates that a more critical understanding of the term bias (and of the media) is achieved when it is investigated as part of media discourse itself. Through the examination of the institutional structures in place to handle charges of bias, a facet of the hegemonic power of the media is effectively analyzed.

The thesis begins with a discussion of how notions of objectivity, balance, and impartiality are the means by which the ideological effectiveness of the media is achieved. This section is followed by a historical examination of the rise of objective news practices, and then a critical examination of content and semiotic analysis. The final chapter examines the relationship between the bias call and the institutional structures in place to deal with such charges.

The thesis demonstrates that the hegemonic power of the media is achieved through the institutional structures and procedures in place to handle charges of bias and paradoxically, through the assumptions of some those who make bias claims.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A prominent critical approach in the study of the news media suggests that the notion of bias has limited value when it is used to assess the way in which media representations actually work.¹ This critical approach argues that the term bias, when used to describe news that is distorted or intentionally slanted, falsely assumes that news representations simply reflect a pre-given 'real' world. Furthermore, this conception assumes that the world is endowed with an essential truth that can be rendered without bias. As I will demonstrate, these assumptions are problematic. Events are, of course, very different from accounts or representations of events. Analysts who adopt a critical perspective towards the media argue therefore, that the concept of bias is too simplistic to account for the very real characteristics of the media that it is supposed to describe.

Increasingly, these scholars propose that the more pertinent question in dealing with the media's signifying practices should focus on the power the media exercise in constructing, maintaining, and reproducing "world views". Part of the ideological work of the media then, can be understood as the means by which the media are able to accomplish this task. According to O'Sullivan, the concept of ideology has become central in the study of the media because it has been useful in showing that not only is there no 'natural' meaning inherent in an event or object, but that "the meanings in which events and objects are constructed are always socially oriented — aligned with class, gender, race, or other interests." (O'Sullivan et al., 1984:110.) Those who adhere to a critical perspective then, have suggested that the term bias be avoided for the purpose of analysing news messages. As Robert Hackett notes: "the view that news operates as ideology fundamentally broadens and even contradicts the view that news messages are biased in accordance with the motivations of the communicators." (Hackett, 1984:245.) Yet, in everyday interactions of people and the media, "bias" is the word news consumers often use to describe

¹It must be made clear that although there is a tradition in Canadian scholarship which examines bias in reference to *form* (Harold Innis' "Bias of Communication" for instance), part of my concern in this thesis will be to critique those works which use the term as an evaluator of media *content*.

their occasional dissatisfaction with media representations. Media institutions and editorial personnel alike have adopted standards to guard themselves from such claims, and institutions (press councils and broadcast licence renewal committees, for example) often mediate disputes which centre on the bias claim.

Is it possible to integrate these differences? Might it be possible to retain a critical understanding of the ideological effectiveness of the media and, at the same time, take into account the everyday understanding of the term bias, as it is used by actual producers, consumers, and arbitrators of news media messages? One way in which this concern may be addressed, is to make bias itself the object of study. That is, unlike conventional approaches which use the term as an evaluator of news media messages, I suggest a more critical understanding of the term (and of the media) may be achieved if bias were to be examined as part of media discourse.

Media discourse, or more specifically, press discourse may be understood not only as the newspaper content itself, but also includes the familiar codes, genres, conventions, and styles of the mainstream press. Furthermore, press discourse includes the practices and textual devices and strategies we learn to identify and expect. (O'Sullivan, et al., 1984:74.) The concept of discourse however, denotes a further complex of factors. It includes a large body of sense-making representations "that have been established as the available modes by means of which our watching or 'reading'... is fixed, directed, regulated and encouraged along particular lines." (O'Sullivan, et al., 1983:75.) 'Bias' too, may be investigated as part of media discourse because, as I will demonstrate, our understanding of it is directed and encouraged in certain ways. Therefore, in an effort to retain the common, everyday understanding of the term bias (as the intentional or unintentional deviations from objective truth / distortion, or as favouritism of one over other incompatible perspectives), and at the same time to recognize that the more pertinent issue may well be the ideological role the media exercise, I propose to explore the "bias call" and the manner in which the media institution deal with such charges.

Bias calls may be understood as those claims made by individuals or groups who disagree with the media's particular or overall interpretation and/or treatment of issues and/or events. Through an

examination of the way in which the press council handles the bias claim, and a critical assessment of the procedures one need follow in order to gain a hearing before such a body, the ideological/hegemonic function of the media is more effectively understood and analyzed.

Conventional studies of the news media claim that bias is the result of the organizational imperatives of news production or the result of intentional deviations from "objective truth". **Chapter 1** will review some of the literature from these perspectives. The discussion in this chapter will progress from an understanding of bias as a result of deviations from "objective truth", or as a consequence of partisanship, to an argument that notions of "objectivity", "balance", and "neutrality", are themselves the means by which the ideological effectiveness of the media is achieved.

In **chapter 2**, two ways of understanding objectivity will be examined. The first way is suggested by Gaye Tuchman in "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual" (Tuchman,1972:660). She argues that a clearly defined set of formal procedures aids journalists in the gathering and processing of information. In following these procedures (which may be exemplified by the use of quotation marks, the presentation of conflicting truth claims, and the separation of fact and opinion, for example), journalists can claim objectivity. Similarly, journalists are able to defend themselves from criticism (from their sources, their editors, and the general public) by citing the formal procedures followed. In this way, Tuchman suggests that "objectivity" may be understood as a strategic ritual, protecting newswriters from the risks of their trade (for instance, to aid in the protection from libel). The significance of understanding objectivity in this way will be emphasized when we examine the manner in which the "bias call" is dealt with by the press and the press council.

The second way of understanding objectivity is through the particular historical conditions that served to shape the contemporary press. A number of social, economic, and political factors led to the decline of the partisan "penny press" and the rise of the commercial press. The major factor in this development, advertising, came to replace political subsidies which transformed news production into a major commercial undertaking. "Objective" news, because it appeared as though it had no political,

partisan axe to grind, could satisfy the advertisers need for larger audiences and, simultaneously increase revenues. The second part of this chapter then, will examine these historical, economic and social factors which led to the emergence of "objective" journalism. This section will also trace the changes in the conception of objectivity, and with it, the practices of objective journalism. This section concludes with a discussion of how the "technical" angle, prominent in today's "objective" news practices, fundamentally alters the public's perception of, and participation in, political life.

Chapter 3 begins with a critical examination of two methodologies often used in the assessment of news media bias / ideology: content and semiotic analysis. Through this examination, two areas will be addressed. First, the concept of ideology as the "conscious or unconscious bias of the communicator" (Carney, 1972:182.) will give way to an understanding of ideology as the structures through which "reality" is fashioned. Ideology here, is understood, in part, as "the practice of reproducing social relations of inequality within the sphere of signification and discourse." (O'Sullivan et al., 1983:107.)

Second, the concept of the reader will be considered in terms of both an unproblematic element in the communication process, (for example, content analysis) and as a crucial variable in the meaning-making process. After providing a description and critique of content, and semiotic analysis, I will introduce a model that more effectively deals with the role of the reader in terms of how actual readers and texts interact to produce meanings: the encoding / decoding model of Stuart Hall and Dave Morley. As I will demonstrate, this model may provide the theoretical base for a more informed understanding of bias — specifically the bias call.

What emerges from examining these three methodologies in this particular sequence, is an increasingly clearer conception of the reader. For instance, content analysis never raises the issue of the reader. Meaning, as it is understood by this approach, is the property of the text alone. Readers are assumed to take the meaning *from* the text, as it is given. Semiotics on the other hand, acknowledges the existence of the reader. However, the reader that semiotics is concerned with is not the actual reader, but the reader *inscribed* by the text. The inscribed reader may be understood as the position that an actual

reader is invited to adopt through textual strategies like point-of-view and mode-of-address.

The encoding / decoding model however, goes further, to examine how actual readers interact with texts to accept, reject, or negotiate with the propositional messages of the text. This approach attempts to understand how different reading publics produce either, *preferred*, *negotiated*, or *oppositional* readings of the same texts. While this model is in need of revisions, it is nonetheless effective in addressing the social and interactive nature of meaning production. It also provides a basis from which to understand various reading positions.

I propose to take this model one step further. Unlike the encoding / decoding model which addresses the relationship between readers and texts, I want to examine the hegemonic power of the media at the level of the relationship between actual readers and the media institution. This will be accomplished by first drawing on the category of the *negotiated* reading, (as defined by the encoding / decoding model) and explicating its similarities with the bias call. **Chapter 4** then, will critically examine how this group of readers (negotiated readers / bias callers) enters into a "dialogue" with the institutional structures in place to deal with criticisms of this kind: the letters-to-the editor section of the newspaper, and the press council.

Chapter 4 will begin with a brief discussion of the history and mandate of press councils in Canada and provide a general overview of the British Columbia Press Council. Part two of this chapter will be a case study, and will examine how charges of bias against the Vancouver Sun's coverage of the Solidarity Coalition march of October 1983 was dealt with by the newspaper (first by its publisher, then by its letters-to-the editor section of the paper), and by the British Columbia Press Council. In this way **Chapter 4** can be seen as an attempt to operationalize the concept of the hegemonic power of the media through an examination of the "impartial" institutional structure of the press council, the rules and procedures one need follow in order to gain a hearing at the council, and the exchange of letters between Roger Boshier, (who took this case to the B.C. Press Council) Bruce Larsen, (Managing Editor of the Sun), and Gordon Purver, (Executive Secretary of the B.C. Press Council).

I will argue that the hegemonic power of the press is achieved both through the structures and rules it establishes to contain critical readings (in order to maintain the media / audience relationship crucial to its ongoing commercial viability), and through the active participation and consent of the audience. By positioning media representations as deviations from the formal journalistic ideals of objectivity, neutrality, and balance, readers who charge bias, paradoxically reinforce and legitimize prevailing media practices which are themselves ideological.

I will conclude with a proposal which calls for news practices themselves to be challenged, whether through the institutional structures provided by the mainstream media (by a more informed, possibly more effective "bias call"), or through institutions outside of the mainstream mass media (through audience participation in media lobby groups, education and alternative media).

CHAPTER II

BIAS/OBJECTIVITY/IDEOLOGY

Literature Review

Despite the requirements of "objectivity", "balance", "impartiality", etc., the media remain oriented within the framework of power: they are part of a political and social system which is "structured in dominance". Objectivity, impartiality and balance are exercised within a framework and that framework is one which, overall, the powerful, not the powerless — elites, not audience — crucially define... a way of perceiving an event, as well as a way of explaining or contextualizing it." (Hall, 1973:15-16.)

Contemporary approaches to the bias issue in media studies are numerous and fraught with difficulties. Various conceptions of what constitutes bias, what conditions lead to bias, and the different methodological procedures used to identify bias in the news text, have for the most part, tended to focus on the production process and the news product. In these approaches, bias is conceived of as:

- (i) the result of the condition of production and the production process on the news media messages;
- (ii) the result of journalists' own political bias; or
- (iii) the result of the failure of the news product to *reflect* the reality it seeks to represent.

Through an investigation of these approaches I hope to show the limitations of such understandings. Though they best represent the manner in which bias has been conceived and analysed by media scholars, these approaches contain three significant problems. First, the notion of bias itself has been criticised for not being a very useful metaphor to explain the way media representations actually work. The conventionalist perspective argues that the term implies that there exists a pre-given 'real' world and that the media's failure to 'reflect' this 'world' results in bias. As Fiske and Hartley point out,

Events are very different from representations of events, so these cannot simply reflect events; and the idea that there exists just one truth inherent in an event or a representation is usually a sure sign of special pleading — where one's own point of view is imputed to the event itself. (O'Sullivan, et al., 1983:22-23.)

Second, 'bias' implies that the main problem with news is that it is deliberately manipulated. I will argue to the contrary, that the structure of the mass media is shaped by impersonal market forces,

particularly the imperative of selling audiences to advertisers, more than by the partisan prejudices of some elite of media owners or news managers.

Third, even if we were to accept the notion of bias as the intentional or unintentional distortion of "objective truth", there remains yet another problem with the way it has been conceived and investigated. The object of study in news media bias is, for the most part, the news text. It is from the messages embedded in the news text that analysts attempt to determine the possible causes of news bias. As we have seen, these approaches claim that bias is the result of the production process, of individual journalists' own bias, or of the failure of the media text to 'reflect' the reality of the event or issue it seeks to represent. There have been however, very few studies that focus on the role of the reader in the assessment of news media bias.¹

This is a serious oversight because, as we shall see, words, images and texts do not have 'meaning' in and of themselves. Meaning is what is generated from the interaction between text and readers -- as readers ultimately bring meanings to, and make interpretations of, news media messages. Similarly, it must be understood that, to claim a news story is biased, is to claim that 'bias' is the property of the text alone. Yet, what may appear biased to one, obviously may not to another. This problem is compounded when we consider the role of the analyst as 'reader'. As is often the case, media scholars assume that their 'readings' of other 'readings' are not only accurate but also unproblematic. Sharrock and Anderson note,

'The reader' does not make many appearances in the media literature as anything other than a passive dupe...It does not seem to occur to these theorists that the viewer may be no less capable than they, 'the experts', of exercising judgement, wit, scepticism, a sense of proportion, a different conceptual scheme, an appreciation that its only a newspaper story, or a television item, or even a quasi-Marxist suspicion of capitalist institutions and organization.(Anderson,Sharrock, 1979:374.)

In this way, the role of the reader in the assessment of news bias has been a factor sorely overlooked.

This problem will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

¹For instance, in "Biasing the News: Technical Issues in Media Studies", The Journal of the British Sociological Association (September, 1979) p.367., D.C. Anderson and W.W. Sharrock criticize media scholars precisely for this oversight.

I now wish to examine each of the approaches cited above. The first two — "Bias as the result of the conditions of production" and "Bias as the result of journalists own political bias", are briefly presented. The third approach, "Bias as a result of the 'distortion' of social reality" however, is considerably more complex and is therefore dealt with more extensively. In order to make this section more accessible, it will be broken down into the following subsections: (i) News as a 'reflection' of social reality, (ii) Media Autonomy, (iii) Balance, (iv) Neutrality, and, (v) Impartiality. It must be kept in mind that these categories are made for expository purposes only. In actuality there is a degree of overlap in these terms, especially in the latter three.

Bias as the result of the Production Process

Lee Sigelman's "Reporting the News: An Organizational Analysis" (Sigelman,1978:132-151.) attempts to characterize the technical requirements of news writing, editorial control and socialization and recruitment of news staffers as all conspiring to render the news product as *potentially* biased. In the face of such claims, Peter Bruck argues,

it is evident that any recruitment and socialization has an influence on the output of an organization...in the case of the news media, there is no non-organizational news production. Consequently, all news shows the scars, slants and virtues of its production process: At this point the concept of bias becomes meaningless as it loses its discriminatory function.(Bruck, 1981:8.)

He goes on to state that "there is no news which does not display 'biases' from these factors since there is no 'news' without media organizations." (Bruck,1981:18.)

It becomes apparent that recruitment, socialization and editorial control do have their influences on the news media product — but to conflate this influence with the term bias serves only to render the discriminatory function of such a term useless. It would seem one short step from embracing a conspiracy theory of the media as well. In the area of recruitment for instance, if we extend this proposition to its logical conclusion, we would find that political columnists employed by the same newspaper would all espouse the same political convictions. Although the political spectrum represented is indeed quite

limited, a cursory examination of, for instance, Vancouver Sun will immediately dispel any such assertion. Columnists such as Peter McMartin and Vaughn Palmer do offer somewhat different views of provincial politics. (Indeed, they reflect the whole range of opinion to the right of the NDP.) Opposition as well as government statements are reported, and sometimes even demonstration organizers are quoted. The commercial media could hardly do otherwise if they wish to retain their credibility and mass audience appeal. (Hackett, et al., 1986:278.)

Bias as the result of Journalist's Political Views

Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman's article "Media and Business Elites" aims to discover the background and outlooks of those responsible for news content and their attitudes towards American society and their own profession. A major finding of this study revealed that ideologically, a majority of leading journalists in the U.S. describe themselves as liberals. Citing Lichter and Rothman's work as proof, there have been those who claim that journalists own political views shape their news stories. Yet, the authors' own caveats clearly states:

The crucial task that remains is to discover what relationship, if any, exists between how these individuals view the world and how they present that world to the public. (Lichter, Rothman, 1981:59-60.)

A more recent disclaimer appeared in a letter written by the authors to The Wall Street Journal which stated that "journalists personal beliefs matter only if they effect coverage" but that it was "still an open question." (Lichter and Rothman, 1985:10.) Despite these and other disclaimers, many neo-conservative theorists have drawn faulty inferences from this work to claim that journalists' political views *are* reflected in media content. Terry Dolan, head of the National Conservative Foundation in the U.S., cited data from Lichter and Rothman's subsequent work (Lichter et al., 1982: 26-27.) to justify a million dollar campaign to alert the public to "media bias". (Gans, 1985:30.) The research has also been used by Michael P. McDonald of the American Legal Foundation to "support court cases and complaints to the Federal Communication Commission in order to fight what McDonald calls the media's "liberal outlook". (Gans, 1985:30.)

Other evidence suggests that journalists do not have strong personal politics, as the nature of their work does not encourage a personal political development. Edward J. Epstein in his book, News From Nowhere : Television and the News, notes that recruitment and promotions do not go to those with "an axe to grind". (Epstein, 1974:22.) Similarly, the codes of professional journalism inhibit journalists from deliberately introducing conscious bias into their news copy.

The conservative critique assumes rather than demonstrates a link between journalists' alleged political views and news content. Yet, experimental evidence suggests that journalism students' own attitudes towards a source have little impact on their news writing. It has been shown that, in some situations students have been known to overcompensate for their personal views. (Kerrick, et al., 1964:207.) Furthermore, the assumption that deliberate conscious partisanship is the byproduct of individual reporter's political subjectivities, implies that newsmen are authors of their own practices. This view overlooks the organizational and structural factors which shape the news product.

Fundamentally, the way material is routinely classified, organized and transmitted provides the primary framework in which journalists must operate. For instance, it may be true that for the most part, advertisers do not directly influence editorial copy. There are however, more subtle constraints. Consider the narrative form of a typical 'hard news' story. It is an inverted pyramid, with the 'facts' of the story presented in descending order of (perceived) importance. Should more advertising space be required, the article can be reduced by deleting as many sentences as necessary, from the bottom up. This is only one way in which the formal properties of news stories, as well as the methods used to obtain and present 'objective' news accounts, influence news content at a level well beyond journalists' subjectivities. (Hackett, et al., 1985:37.)

Bias as the Result of the Distortion of Social Reality

The third position views bias as arising out of the relationship between the news product and the reality it is supposed to represent. Several key assumptions become apparent. Briefly, these assumptions can be characterized as the belief that news can and ought to be "objective, balanced and a reflection of social reality." (Hackett, 1984:234.) Bias, from this perspective, is the result of news reports which do not meet these standards. A host of other terms as well are often used to characterize bias. They include such terms as "distortion", "impartiality" and "partisan". Yet, as will be demonstrated here, these terms too are not without their problems when used to assess the validity of news messages.

As I suggested in the opening of this chapter, this section is the most complex and is best approached by five thematic subsections. They are: (i) news as a "reflection" of social reality, (ii) media autonomy, (iii) balance, (iv) neutrality, and (v) impartiality.

News as a Reflection of Social Reality

It is often suggested that the media function like a mirror in an effort to *reflect* social reality. The concept of 'reflection' may be understood in two ways. First, though there are problems with the apolitical nature of this formulation, it is often used by those who subscribe to a liberal-pluralist conception of society. This view characterizes society as a complex structure of competing groups and interests, not one of which is predominant all the time. In this way the media are said to 'reflect' the diverse expressions and interests of competing groups.

A more critical understanding of the 'reflection' analogy has been used in a negative sense, to claim that media fail to 'reflect' social reality. This situation is often characterized as the result of a distortion by the media, in the portrayal of events and/or issues. Implicit in this formulation is the belief that a neutral, transparent, translation of an external reality is possible. But, as Morley argues, the possibility of neutrality assumes there exists a neutral, value-free language "in which the pure facts of the world could be rendered without prejudice". Inevitably though, "evaluations are already implicit in the concepts, the

language in terms of which one observes and records." (Morley, 1976:246-7.) This is a position from which the notion of bias is critiqued. 'Reality' then, does not exist 'out there', awaiting a discovery that we then can attach names to. Rather, language signifies and does not stand in place of the issue or event represented. Fundamentally, the problem inherent in the assumption that language (and, by extension, the media) merely reflects what is 'out there', stems from the belief that there exists a one-to-one correspondence between the word (signifier) and the object or concept it represents (signified). This assumption does not take into account the arbitrary or polysemic nature of language. All language is socially constructed. Language therefore does not simply reflect social 'reality'. As Fiske and Hartley note:

Reality is never experienced by social man in the raw, whether the reality in question is the brute force of nature or mens relations with other men, it is always experienced through the mediating structure of language. And this mediation is not a distortion or even a reflection of the real, it is rather the active social process through which the real is made. (Fiske, Hartley, 1978:161.)

There is no natural relationship between a word and its referent: all depends on the conventions of linguistic use, and on the way in which language intervenes in nature in order to make sense of it. As Stuart Hall has noted, at least two theoretical positions can be derived from this argument. First, a Kantian position would say that therefore "nothing exists except that which exists in and for language of discourse." Another position would argue that "though the world does exist outside language, we can only make sense of it through its appropriation in discourse." (Hall, 1982:70.) Fiske and Hartley then, appear to adopt the former position here. By adopting the latter position however, we can say that the media do not function apart from social reality, but in fact help to actively shape and define it. Though the media do not reflect social reality, they do play a significant role as *definers* of social reality. The notion of media as definers of social reality enables a more critical understanding of the mediatory function of the mass media. It does so because it acknowledges that through mediation, the news media structure what 'events' are reported. Furthermore, it suggests that the manner in which events are signified will have a bearing on the way in which we perceive and come to act in the world. (Bennett, 1982:228.)

The news media however, are not the only definers of social reality. The media never work independently of other social institutions. Invariably media significations are shared by and with other institutional and organizational "definers": the judiciary, police, government, business, and other social institutions. The nature of this mutually dependent relationship and the implications it raises in the perception of the power of the media are topics of considerable debate between those who subscribe to a pluralist conception of society and those who adopt a more critical or marxist perspective.

Media Autonomy

The following discussion will focus on only the more pertinent issues with regard to the question of media autonomy. Not intended to be exhaustive, it will nonetheless point to ways of thinking about the media that go well beyond the mere "reflection" analogy and extend the discussion of the media as "definers". This will be achieved through an examination of the two major currents within mass media studies: the liberal-pluralist and marxist perspectives.

The emergence of the liberal-pluralist tradition of social theory came about through a criticism of the mass society tradition of social theory which characterized society in terms of "the dissolution of non-rational forms of social attachment, the weakening of traditional ties and obligations, (and) the attenuation of power of established hierarchies" (Bennett,1982:39.). There arose a need within Western democracies "to develop a theory that would distinguish the social structure of Western democracies from those of totalitarian political systems" (Bennett,1982:40.) rather than lumping them together as the mass society critique tended to do.

Edward Shils, a leading theorist of the liberal pluralist perspective asserted that, if by 'mass society' one meant a society in which "'the masses' had moved from the periphery to the centre of social, political and cultural life", then that was acceptable — that is, if 'the masses' were conceived of as "a pluralist hotch-potch of differing regional, ethnic, religious and economic primary groupings." (Bennett,1982:39.) The mass media from this perspective, is characterized as exercising an "important degree of autonomy from the state, political parties and institutional pressure groups." (Bennett,1982:39.) Furthermore, it is

argued that the mass media provide a forum whereby competing social and political positions may be expressed and compete for public support. The media are able to do so because a mutual interdependence exists between media professionals and representatives of other social institutions. The capacity of the media to 'deliver' large audiences, it is argued, guarantees them "a semi-independent power-base vis a vis other power centres in society"(Curran, et al.,1982:21.) The implication is not that an *equality* of power obtains between the media and other powerful institutions, but rather that some measure of independent power enters into the dealings of the media with these institutions.(Bennett,1982:40.)

In the marxist conception, capitalist society is understood as one of exploitation and class domination. Marxists insist that capitalist society is fundamentally stratified and that the media are best seen as part of an "ideological arena in which various class views are fought out, although within the context of the dominance of certain classes."(Gurevitch, et al., 1982:1.) From this perspective the communication media are seen as systematically serving dominant interests. However, the manner in which this preferential treatment is accomplished and the extent to which it is perceived as a determinant, closed system, is itself a contentious issue within marxist studies of the media.

The more orthodox (or instrumentalist) approaches suggest that the media are nothing more than power brokers for the dominant interests of corporate and state capitalism. This perspective suggests that elites actively and consciously use the media to reinforce their own political and ideological perspectives. As Wolfe argues,

Because the media are part of the capitalist system...it is not surprising that the media engage much of their time in preserving existing state of affairs. They do this by reinforcing indirect consciousness manipulation, and by not serving as an informative vehicle.
(Wolfe,1978:124.)

The structuralist perspective of the media on the other hand, point to the impersonal structural forces that shape the media environment. This perspective argues that the news media organizations function as relatively autonomous institutions, able to act independently of state and direct commercial control, yet continue to rely on the definitions of other powerful institutional organizations. The nature of

this reliance is brought about by practical needs the news organizations face in their day to day activities to obtain information which is both reliable and timely. The structuralist perspectives acknowledge that,

powerful institutions and groups do have privileged access to the media, because they are regarded as more credible and trustworthy, and because they have the resources to process information and to offer the media their views in a viable and attractive form, tailor-made to fit the requirements of the media. (Bennett, 1982: 20)

The tendency to rely on "official" sources however, should not be construed as evidence of a conspiracy, in which political and/or business elites collude with media owners in an effort to "dupe" the public. Rather, as Stuart Hall et al. claim in Policing the Crisis, (Hall, et al., 1978.) the framing definitions are shared with those institutions which provide the media with information. These authors argue that the definitions of the media and the discourse of the powerful tend to reinforce and sustain one another because of the close ties of dependency that exist between them. That is, the media depend on dominant public figures as a primary source of news copy "just as the latter depend on the media for placing their diagnoses and prescriptions before a wider audience". (Bennett, 1982: 301) The institutional media then, do not function as a mere mouthpiece for dominant interests. They are not a 'tool' of the dominant class, used for the domination over subordinate classes. Rather, the mass media, like the capitalist state, "are able to exercise a degree of autonomy from the capitalist class that, at times, allows them to pursue actions which may impinge on the rights and privileges of the capitalist class." (Dreier, 1982: 112.) In this way the media are granted a degree of autonomy and, at the same time, are seen as acting largely "in tandem with the dominant institutions of society." (Curran, et al., 1982: 21.) This issue will be explored further in my discussion of 'impartiality'.

Because the media are often criticised by both the left and the right, and because such criticisms (as well as potential criticisms) can influence the way in which the media continue to operate, the media must be understood not as a closed ideological system, imposed from above, nor as a hotbed of radical

²In a talk before a University of B.C. audience dealing with the influx of "partisan, self-admitted bias commentators" in the mainstream press, Marjorie Nichols noted that "the New York Times hiring of conservative speechwriter William Safire in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal ... was a gesture designed to appease the critics..." *Politics of the Media*, Vancouver Sun, 25 February 1985. p.B5.

progressivism. It would be more fruitful to understand the media as operating within a reformist tradition. As Milliband suggests, the media might more properly be understood as an "ideological terrain (that) is by no means wholly occupied by 'the ideas of the ruling class'... it is a highly contested territory." (Milliband, 1977: 54.) This assertion then, inevitably leads to questions concerning the hegemonic character of the mass media which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

In this section I have explored the fallacy of seeing the mass media as mere "reflectors" of social reality, explored the implications of conceiving them as "definers" of social reality, and proposed that a more fruitful conception of the media may be to understand it as an ideological terrain — where power to define is either won, or is lost.

BALANCE

One of the first tenets of objective journalism is that news reports should present "both sides" of controversial issues. In practical terms, this practice creates a reliance on offsetting and juxtaposing conflicting statements from authoritative, official spokespersons and representatives of interest groups who have privileged access to define the "issues". Consequently, such a practice has the tendency of orienting media's sense of social reality in the knowledge-generating routines and interests of the powerful — while at the same time creating the appearance of an open forum for public debate. As we have seen in the example of the official unemployment rate, the media's interdependency with other social institutions influences what it considers noticeable and newsworthy events or credible and important "facts". As Hackett notes,

.... the appearance of 'balance' between competing (views), the presentation of 'both sides of the story' may serve to deflect the viewers attention from the question of why the issue is being cast in these terms, or why it is an issue at all, and why these individuals are accorded the right to define the issue. (Hackett, R.A., 1984, :248.)

— Balance can also be understood in relation to its opposite — partisanship. In political communication, a news item or news program can be seen as partisan when it fails to allocate equal time to opposing viewpoints; or, as Fiske and Hartley note, "where what is said is less important than the time

it is said in."(O'Sullivan et al.,1983:113.) In print journalism, balance is often said to be achieved when an equal distribution of space is allocated for competing views. (Dreier,1982:113.) As will be discussed in the next section on objectivity, it is not in the newspapers' or broadcasters' interest to promote one political view over and above others. The decline of the 'party press' at the turn of the century came about, in part, by the advertisers' need to attract a large audience which, in turn, spurred news organizations to promote and reverse 'objective' news practices. By providing news accounts which did not favor one party, the competition for larger audiences (and hence, larger advertising revenues) could commence. This was accomplished not by appealing to a particular segment of the political terrain, but by addressing an undifferentiated audience as consumers.

Neutrality

It is often said that journalists strive to be neutral. Implicit in this formulation is the belief that journalists can be detached and disinterested conveyors of information, especially in their presentation of 'the facts'. Notwithstanding the theory which states that the act of observation will have an effect on what is observed, the above assertion assumes that,

- (i) The separation of fact from opinion is possible. In other words, that the reporting of news is separate from interpreting it. Not only does this assertion assume that each have an independent existence, but also that the 'facts' speak for themselves; that they are finite and can be identified as such.
- (ii) News is amenable to a story format -- with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This presumes that it is possible to arrive at a set of discrete and newsworthy events that can be abstracted from the essence of social life, whose boundaries are clear and unproblematic. (Altheide,1974:173.)
- (iii) News stories have two sides to them. As we have seen in our discussion of balance, the proposition that there exists two 'sides' to a 'story' has a tendency of orienting media's sense of social reality in the knowledge-generating routines and interests of the powerful. Furthermore, such a proposition would seem to overlook the fact that there exists a multiplicity of interacting and overlapping positions. Rather, it assumes that interests are rigid and unchangeable. (Tuchman,1978:110.)

Impartiality

The notion of impartiality is often distinguished from two other concepts that have already been discussed, namely — balance and neutrality. The normative claims of the term implies something different. For instance, we can say that a news item is impartial when it is presented in such a way that the reporters own personal views do not identify with, or repudiate the subject of the report.

Furthermore, the doctrine of impartiality is legally enshrined. It is a statutory requirement imposed on broadcasters (but not the press) by Parliament. In practical terms this strategy aids in the accomodation between broadcasters and the parliamentary political parties: "It is a strategy whereby reporters are supposed to take account of (i) a full range of views and opinions (ii) the relative weight of opinion...and (iii) *changes* that occur in the range and weight of opinion over time." (O'Sullivan, et al., 1983:112.)

With reference to current forms of representational party politics, the statutory requirements of due impartiality tends to reproduce the dominant view of those political parties which claim popular support (made evident through votes at the ballot-box). This imbalance is achieved because the formal requirement for reporters to take account of the "full range of views and opinion" is subsumed within the requirement "to take account of the *weight* of opinion which holds these views." (Connell, 1983:140.) In this way, positions which fall outside the consensual political arena — communism, the Socialist left, and 'terrorism' (to name only a few) are excluded.³

Ian Connell suggests that by fulfilling these formal requirements (especially #ii), television journalistic practices "reproduce accurately the way in which public opinion has already been formed in the primary domains of political and economic struggle, how it has been structured in dominance there." (Connell, 1983:140.) That is to say, although the normative claims of impartiality are operational strategies employed by news workers, the routine manner in which events are handled, inevitably leads to a closing-off of possible alternative understandings. Chibnall suggests that these "structures of meanings" are part of journalism's "stock of knowledge". As conventional wisdoms, this "stock of knowledge"

³For instance, in the words of the United States' Federal communication Commission (FCC), fairness rules are not intended "to make time available to Communists or to Communist viewpoints". (cited in Epstein, E.J. *News from Nowhere*. p.64.)

acts as both a source on which the journalist may draw in arriving at understandings of phenomena, and a conservative constraint on the construction of stories, in that they provide 'ready-made' interpretations of new phenomena. (Chibnall,1977:35.)

Chibnall suggests that although these interpretations both draw on and sustain newspaper ideology, they are nonetheless part of a widely shared cultural belief system of understanding. With reference to how the widely shared cultural belief system comes to inform media significations, Stuart Hall has stated:

These maps of meanings give plausibility, order and coherence to discrete events by placing them within a common world of meanings. Culture is knitted together by these overlapping, partially closed, incomplete mappings of problematic social reality. Such "structures" tend to define and limit the range of possible new meanings which can be constructed to explain new and unfamiliar events. In part, such normative structures are historical constructs, already objectivated and available as informal social knowledge — "what everyone knows" about a social situation. (Hall,1974:229.)

Hall goes on to suggest that such normative definitions have a tendency to "see" events in certain ways. They tend to exclude other kinds of additional inferences. In this way, the common-sense world is 'classified out' in stereotypical ways which simplify and crystallize complex social processes in distinctive ways. (Hall, 1974:229.)

Chibnall argues that there are two basic components in the news that lead the press to "see" and structure events in distinctive ways. These two components enable a clearer understanding of the ideological work of the press. They are: (1) the framework of concepts and values implicit in news production and (2) the professional imperatives of journalism.

The framework of concepts and values

The framework of concepts and values serves two basic functions. First, it permits events to be classified into 'types' of stories — human interest, political, crime, etc.. Second, it shapes the meaning of events, implicitly defining ways in which they are to be understood. The framework of concepts and values is reflected in the language of the press. Terms such as "the national interest", "the rule of law" and "the silent majority", for example, become ideological cues which set the overall tone for ways in which issues and events are to be understood. Underlying media representations of reality is a belief in the essential justice and desirability of the present organization of society which, it is believed, is

characterized by a basic harmony of interests and consensus of values. (Hackett, et al.,1986:276.)

Chibnall identifies the dominant values of this ideology, which provide the criteria for evaluating existing and emergent forms of social behavior. He classifies the value system in terms of positive legitimating values, and negative illegitimate values. So, for instance, values such as 'legality', 'co-operation', 'peacefulness' and 'firmness' can also be understood in reference to their opposites — 'illegality', 'confrontation', 'violence', and 'weakness'. According to Chibnall, those who want their actions and beliefs signified as legitimate by the news media, contrive to associate themselves with positive legitimating values. Similarly, the legitimacy of emergent forms of behaviour is assessed according to criteria derived from positive values. (Chibnall,1977:22.)

Political social action can be identified by the media as "constructive or destructive, open or secret, rational or irrational, responsible or irresponsible and so on; while the means employed in pursuit of those aims can be identified as legal or illegal, moderate or extreme, violent or peaceful, fair or unfair, etc.." (Chibnall,1977:22.) He further suggests that this process of evaluation can only be accomplished by means of shared background assumptions concerning the meaning of 'fairness', 'violence', 'moderation' and so on, in any given context. The background assumptions, he argues, constitute the most unconscious part of any ideology system. They are part of a stock of common sense knowledge, accessible only when realized in concrete evaluations. (Chibnall,1977:22.)

Professional news imperatives of journalism

The professional imperatives of journalism roughly correspond to what is conventionally termed 'news values' — the criteria of relevance which guide reporters' choice and construction of newsworthy stories. News values are tacitly accepted by journalists and learnt through the process of informal professional socialization. News values are translated into conventions of the journalistic craft which constrain both the types of reality the reporters can accommodate in his accounts, and also what kind of sense he can make of acceptable accounts. Chibnall notes:

Thus, while it can be seen that news values are part of the *professional* stock of knowledge of an occupation ... they (also) operate in a distinct *political* fashion by systematically excluding large segments of the social world from representation and discussion of the news media. The effect of this is that public knowledge of those segments is impoverished. (Chibnall,1977:14.)

The operation of the framework of concepts and values, according to Chibnall, is ordered and controlled by at least eight professional imperatives which act as guides to the construction of news stories. They are: (1) Immediacy, (2) Dramatization, (3) Personalization, (4) Simplification, (5) Titillation, (6) Conventionalism, (7) Structured Access, and (8) Novelty. Chibnall suggests that the professional news imperatives listed above provide the necessary support for newspaper ideology: "They add to the plausibility of ideological accounts and representations through the provision of working definitions of news and practical rules for the accomplishment of rhetorical work." (Chibnall,1977:43.)

News consumers may utilize different criteria in judging the plausibility of news interpretations. What guides news consumers' criteria in judging news interpretations is rooted in common sense understandings of the social world. In particular, these "common sense understandings" are based in the power of newspaper interpretations to make events intelligible at a mundane, 'common sense' level.

Chibnall suggests that this process provides easy and convenient ways of understanding events:

This common sense mode of understanding trades off myth and stereotypes which provide simple, comfortable, ready-made pictures and explanations of things. It does this because it is grounded in everyday practical concerns which allows no time to probe beneath the surface of things. The interpretations of popular newspapers tend to fit admirably into the common sense world of everyday life because they make few intellectual demands on the reader... because the aspects selected are ones to which most readers can easily relate. (Chibnall,1977:44.)

Chibnall is quick to point out however, that readers are not necessarily credulous in their approach to news. He argues that suspicion of newspapers' accounts is firmly ingrained in our culture. The popular maxim "not to believe everything you read" is widespread in our society. Yet, he suggests, it is easier for most readers to reject the open, substantive (factual) content of newspaper accounts than the more latent and implicit interpretive schema in which that content is embedded.

This thesis will, in part, attempt to demonstrate that not only do charges of bias directed at the media take issue with only the more substantive content of newspapers (ignoring latent, interpretive schema) but also that the media institution itself actively seeks to ensure that criticisms do not extend beyond this realm.

Summary

Through an investigation of the normative claims of journalistic standards, it becomes apparent that the problem is not so much that the media are "biased", but that their very standards of "objectivity" reinforce dominant definitions of social reality. It is more fruitful then, to understand the media as *ideological*. The ideological work of the media however, does not arise through the intentional (or unintentional) deviations from "objective truths". Rather, the media achieves its ideological effectivity precisely through an adherence to the requirements of balance, neutrality, and impartiality. It is through an adherence to formal news practices, news values, and statutory requirements, that the ideological and reproductive work of the media is accomplished. The media is reproductive in that, while maintaining a position of "objectivity", such media practices reproduce accurately "the way in which 'public opinion' has already been formed in the primary domains of political and economic struggle." (Connell, 1983:140.) Commercial media practices then, reproduce the way in which public opinion has been 'structured in dominance' through the promotion and enhancement of common sense definitions of the social world.

The sharing of values and social meanings between the news and other social agencies however, should not be seen as an attempt by the powerful to dupe the public. Rather, the shared definitions and their consequences are the product of an historical process which "is deeply embedded in the discourses through which we learn to interact with the world...in which we make sense of it." (Hartley, 1982:62.) News therefore, is not the producer of ideological meanings, in the sense that they originate here. Rather, news reproduces dominant ideological discourse. Further, news is not a partisan ideology. The purpose of news ideology is not to choose one opinion over another, but to translate, to generalize. News naturalizes the terrain on which "different sectional ideologies can contend"; in so doing, it constantly

maps the limits of controversy. (Hartley, 1982:62.)

CHAPTER III

OBJECTIVITY

Objectivity as Strategic Ritual

As was demonstrated in the previous section on bias, there are a number of factors which prohibit journalists from being able to provide what some critical scholars would regard as a truly objective assessment of social reality. Yet, the term "bias" continues to hold currency among media practitioners and critics alike.

The first section of this chapter will examine the normative claims of objectivity, and the ways in which objectivity is understood and used by those working in the media. Drawing from the work of Gaye Tuchman, I will demonstrate how the notion of objectivity helps journalists to obtain and process "facts", as well as serves as a means of forestalling criticism. The second part of this chapter will explore the historic, economic and social factors which led to the emergence of the "penny press" of the 1830's, and with it, the rise of objective news practices. This chapter will conclude with assessing possible effects the use of the 'technical' angle in political news reporting might have on the public's perception of, and participation in political life.

Gaye Tuchman suggests that the term objectivity connotes a variety of meanings. It invokes notions of science, philosophy and ideas of professionalism. (Tuchman, 1972 :666.) Underlying each however, is a problem which is common to all; namely, what constitutes a social "fact", and how might such a "fact" be established given the active intervention of the social subject? Do value-free social "facts" exist? This issue was addressed in our previous discussion of bias. We saw how the nature of language, the formal processes and internal requirements of news organizations, the influence of recruitment and socialization, and the interdependency of news organizations with other social institutions, all conspire to render the notion of "objectivity" problematic.

Though most reporters view the commitment to objective reporting as serious and credible, many journalists concede that it is impossible for them to be truly objective (but believe it is an ideal worth striving towards). There are those on the other hand, who maintain that objectivity is impossible, and that all pretense therefore, should be abandoned. They argue that the subject/object distinction in the assessment of social reality (for example, in the social sciences) is not as clear cut as it is in the "hard" sciences. The proponents of this position then, advocate a highly individualistic style of reporting, where their own personal views are placed in the forefront of their reporting. Thus, "the New Journalism" became a popular style of news reporting in the early 1960's. Some critics claim that a more subtle form of this practice has invaded interpretive reporting, the mainstay of today's commercial press.¹

For the most part however, journalists and news organizations alike continue to defend their ability to present objective news accounts of the social, political, economic and cultural world. This is not surprising, as this defence is not particular to the journalistic enterprise alone. As Tuchman points out journalists, like both doctors and lawyers, "declare objectivity to be the appropriate stance towards their clients...(objectivity) stands as a bulwark between themselves and critics." (Tuchman,1972:660.) Understood in this way, we may begin to enquire into the nature of objectivity, not in the epistemological sense, but rather in the normative sense. Tuchman suggests that objectivity might more profitably be understood as a "strategic ritual" — a framework in which to understand how objective news practices serve as a method to accomplish given tasks. She notes that the "ritual" serves two functions: it aids journalists in the processing of "facts" about social reality, and it is used as a means of protecting news workers from the risks of libel. She argues that news workers must be able to evoke some concept of objectivity in order for them to process "facts" about social reality. It should be kept in mind that unlike the social scientist who has the time to engage in "reflexive epistemological examination", news workers must make snap decisions concerning the validity and "truth" in order to meet the problems imposed by deadlines. Further, Tuchman suggests that by adhering to the formal attributes listed below, news workers are able to argue that they have distinguished between what they think and what they report.

¹See, for instance, Mary Anne Comber and Robert S. Mayne's *The Newsmongers: How the Media Distort the Political News* 1986, pp.31-33.

Similarly, by adhering to these ritualistic strategies, news workers are able to deflect potential criticisms from their editors, news sources and the general public. The threat of libel for instance, permeates the journalistic environment; it is something journalists and news organizations wish to avoid. Let us examine these "ritual" strategies in more detail.

Journalists believe that in processing information through the following strategies, they are able to present "objective" accounts of the social world. These strategies include the following:

- (i) The presentation of conflicting possibilities related to truth claims;
- (ii) The presentation of supplementary evidence to support a "fact";
- (iii) The use of quotation marks (" ") to indicate that they are not making truth claims;
- (iv) The presentation of the most material "facts" first; and,
- (v) The careful separation of the "facts" from opinions by the use of structuring devices such as the label "news analysis".

The presentation of conflicting truth claims

As we have seen in the discussion of balance, the belief that an objective account of an issue or event is achieved by the presentation of "both sides" of the "story", is highly contentious. First, because journalists may not be in a position to judge the validity of truth-claims made by individual sources (and because undermining such truth-claims would breach the journalistic code of impartiality), they may present conflicting truth-claims from representatives from "both sides" of an issue in their news reports. In doing so, journalists may claim to be "objective", in that they have not favored one "side" over the other. For the reader, such practices would seem to suggest that the "truth" of an event or issue resides somewhere between the two conflicting truth-claims. By presenting conflicting truth-claims in this way, the "objective" reporter tacitly invites the news consumer to decide for themselves who is "telling the truth". As Tuchman points out,

a morass of conflicting truth-claims might more profitably be viewed as an invitation for news consumers to exercise selective perception ...indeed, the invitation to selective perception is most insistent, for each version of reality claims equal potential validity. (Tuchman, 1972:666.)

Furthermore, she argues, it would be difficult for news workers to claim that in presenting conflicting truth-claims they foster objectivity. As we have seen in the discussion of balance, the juxtaposition of truth-claims may, in the end, "serve to deflect the viewers attention from the question of why the issue is being cast in these terms...and why these individuals are accorded the right to define the issue."

(Hackett,1984:248.)

The presentation of supplementary evidence to support a fact

Here, Tuchman concedes that there are times when news workers can obtain evidence to support a truth-claim. However, supporting facts often consist of the locating and citing of additional "facts" "which are commonly accepted as 'truth'." (Tuchman,197 :667.) Once again, this raises issues that were previously addressed in the discussion of common sense. We saw how common sense understandings of the social world contained a wealth of ideological assumptions. It is through common sense descriptions and understandings of the social world that the ideological effectiveness of the media is most pronounced. However, within the context of the present discussion, I wish only to suggest that an accumulation of "facts" does not, in the end, constitute "truth". There is an underlying assumption here which suggests that by layering "fact" upon "fact", the "facts" will begin to speak for themselves. As was discussed in the previous chapter, "facts" do not speak for themselves. As David Altheide has noted, the recognition of a "fact" requires a great deal of prior knowledge and theory about a particular phenomenon.

The use of Quotation marks

Tuchman suggests that journalists use quotation marks to show that they are not making truth-claims. She points out that newswriters view quotations of other people's opinion as a form of supporting evidence. She also suggests that in using quotation marks in this way, journalists believe that they are removing themselves from direct participation in the story by letting others speak for the "facts". I have already addressed some of the problems associated with the term "fact". However, I want to address the assumption that by quoting others, the journalist remains detached from the news story. Upon reflection it becomes quite obvious that in deciding who to quote, what quotes are to be used and

how they will be used in the context in the framework s/he provides, the journalist, far from being a detached transmitter of "the facts", plays a very active role in the shaping of the issue and the outcome.

Tuchman believes that the use of quotation marks can also be used as a signaling device. We have just seen how they are used to signal that someone other than the reporter is making the statement, but quotation marks may also be used to undermine, that is, to indicate the "so-called". For instance, Tuchman uses the example of a reporter using quotation marks around the term "New Left". In doing so, the reporter is able to call into question the legitimacy of such a movement. It would appear then, that the journalist is able to cast doubt, to editorialize, to bring his/her judgement to bear on the validity of such a grouping by merely placing this signaling device around the term. This in itself should be enough to indicate that the reporter has breached his/her commitment to be impartial. More importantly, Tuchman believes, is the ease with which journalists can use quotation marks in such a way to "manipulate his superiors and interject ... his own views, by following a procedure they associate with objectivity." (Tuchman, 1972:669.)

Structuring information in an appropriate sequence

Tuchman claims that another way in which journalists may claim to have fulfilled the requirements for objectivity, is to claim to have presented information in an appropriate sequence. That is, they may claim to have presented the most material facts first, followed by all subsequent information arranged in order of decreasing importance. The structure of a news story then, resembles that of an inverted pyramid. Tuchman suggests that this is the most problematic formal aspect of objectivity for journalists. Unlike the three previous formal aspects that have been examined, the necessity for journalists to present the most material "facts" first, must rest on the decision of their own news judgement. They cannot therefore claim that the choice belongs to someone else, or that they are merely following formal procedural news practices. Invoking news judgement, Tuchman argues, is an inherently defensive stance because news judgement entails the "ability to choose 'objectively' between and among competing 'facts' and to decide which facts are more important or interesting." (Tuchman, 1972:670.) Yet, the

material facts of a story may not be conceived in the same way by all journalists. It is in the choice of the 'lead' that the subjectivities of the journalist are most readily apparent. With reference to news organizations as a whole, Tuchman notes that newspapers may differ in their choice of material "facts", and their news policies might be radically different, yet all would claim to be objective. The importance of this issue will be explored in more detail in the section on the "bias call" — an instance in which news judgement, common sense, and content all converge, and are appropriated in the defence of the organization when confronted with a bias claim.

The presentation of carefully separated 'facts' from opinions by using structuring devices such as the label 'news analysis'

Tuchman argues that, if news workers were to have trouble identifying "material facts" within the bounds of the newspaper's policy, they may describe instead the formal attributes of the newspaper itself. The daily newspaper is most often divided into sections. Generally, the first pages of the first section are reserved for the "straight objective" general stories, the current news items. The other sections contain the more specialized news, such as sports, business, entertainments, etc., and are clearly delineated as such. Tuchman points out that general stories that are not "objective" are placed either on the editorial page, or on the op. ed. page (the page opposite to the editorial page). She claims that there are only two exceptions to this rule — the feature story and the news analysis piece.² On some newspapers, this distinction is formalized. News analysis pieces are generally placed on the pages of the "straight objective" news pages, only if it is accompanied by the distinct formal label "news analysis". She suggests that this label is used for a number of reasons. First, it may be used to "place a barrier between the problematic story and the other stories on the general pages" (Tuchman, 1972:671.) Secondly, the insertion of the label "news analysis" tacitly suggests that the accompanying material neither "represents the opinion of the management, nor is necessarily 'true'." (Tuchman, 1972:671.) What appears under this heading is merely an interpretation of the "facts" by the journalist. In her two years of research,

²Although there are those who argue that the feature story is a news story, Tuchman points out that many journalists continue to distinguish between the two forms.

Tuchman found the question, "How is objective reporting different from news analysis?", the most difficult for her respondents to answer. One editor was able to muster this answer after many false starts:

News analysis implies value judgements, straight news has no value judgements whatsoever...you can't eliminate the label "news analysis" and say anything. No. I'd say an alarm goes off in the editors mind who thinks, this is loaded and I want to get off the hook. (Although) the reader thinks the label...(is) weighty and ponderous, the key point is the number and degree of value judgements undocumented at the time.(Tuchman,197 :672.)

Tuchman is able to glean some interesting observations from this answer. She notes for instance, that although the editor was able to delineate a formal technique to alert the reader, he could not say what determines the number and degree of value judgements undocumented at the time. (Tuchman,1972:672.) She also notes that the editor was able to recognize the discrepancy between "the reason for his action" (to include the label "news analysis") and the news consumers' interpretation of the action. Again, the defence mounted when faced with this contradiction is one that relies on the ideas of professional news judgement: experience and common sense enables the editor to assess "important" and "interesting facts".(Tuchman,1972:672.) She argues that news judgement is the special knowledge that news workers claim to possess which differentiates them from other people. As we will see in the discussion of the "bias call" -- news judgement is the sacred preserve of the profession. News workers will often use this "ability" as a defensive shield when criticised by their readers.

In each of these examples, we have seen how "objectivity" refers to the routine procedures (exemplified as formal attributes) which help journalists in the gathering and structuring of facts, and as a protection from the risks of their trade. Having examined the normative constraints and demands which sustain objective news practices, a more broadly based social and historical inquiry into the rise of objective news practices will now be undertaken.

Objectivity: Historical and Economic Determinants

In the last section, I explored the way in which the notion of objectivity is used by journalists both to aid in the processing of "facts" and as a means of deflecting possible criticisms. I will now briefly examine the historical, economic, and social conditions which led to the introduction of objective news reporting.

In his book, News: The Politics of Illusion, Lance Bennett suggests that though it may appear as though professional journalistic practices are the logical derivations of the norm of objectivity, these practices actually preceded the norm:

Journalism, like most professions, developed a set of business practices first, then endowed those practices with a set of impressive professional rationalizations, and finally proceeded to rewrite its history in ways that made the practices seem to emerge, as if through immaculate conception, from an inspiring set of professional ideals. (W.L. Bennett, 1984:80.)

In this sense, most modern journalistic practices (examined in the last section) can be traced to the social and economic conditions affecting the success of mass market news around the middle of the nineteenth century.

In the early days of the United States press (pre-1830), there were essentially two kinds of newspapers— some were of a strictly commercial nature, while others were of a political nature. The commercial press catered to the needs of a mercantile class and was primarily concerned with publishing information dealing with the movement of goods. Typical information to be found in these publications would include ship arrival and departure times, type of cargo and prices, as well as some advertisements.

The political press, or "party press" as it was sometimes called, was somewhat different. Though it too contained information dealing with the exchange of goods and services, its main concern was to address national political issues and promote certain partisan political positions. As Michael Schudson notes, there was nothing deceptive about this practice. These newspapers were, after all, "financed by political parties, factions of parties, or candidates for office who dictated editorial policy".

(Schudson,1978:15.) However, both the commercial press and the party press shared two important features. First, they were both expensive. Copies sold for six cents, at a time a time when the average daily wage for nonfarm labour was less than eighty-five cents. (Schudson.1978:15) Furthermore, the newspapers could be obtained only by subscription. Second, because they were expensive, circulation of the newspapers was low, and readership was therefore confined to political and mercantile elites.

The 1830's ushered in dramatic social, economic and political change. Schudson suggests that this was a turning point in American journalism which radically altered all facets of newspaper production, distribution and consumption. This was the time of the "commercial revolution" in the American press. The term refers to those newspapers which established the model on which today's newspapers are based. The "penny papers" were radically different from their predecessor in five distinct ways: their cost, distribution, large circulation, political independence, and advertising.

First, the cost of the penny paper was eminently affordable. Secondly, one need not subscribe; papers were hawked in the streets each day by newsboys. And third, their circulation was enormous compared to the six cent papers. The first penny paper, the New York Sun, appeared on the streets on September 3, 1833. Within a period of four months it had claimed a circulation of 5,000 a day, and tripled this figure within the next two years. (Schudson,1978:18.)

Fourth, unlike the party press, most of the penny papers claimed they were politically independent. For instance, the Evening Transcript in its inaugural issue claimed that so far as politics goes "we have none." In Boston, the Daily Times also claimed to be "neutral in politics". (Schudson,1978:20.) By not restricting themselves to targeting specific political audiences, the penny papers were able to attract a larger number of readers. Even though there were some, such as the New York Herald, that did cover politics, they did not, as Schudson notes, "identify their mission or their hopes with partisan politics; to

³ In June, 1835, the combined daily circulation of the three penny papers; the New York Sun, the Evening Transcript, and the New York Herald, was 44,000. When the Sun began in 1833, the combined circulation of all the city's eleven dailies had been only 26,000. (Willard G. Bleyer, *Main Currents in the History of American Journalism*. 1927,p.166.) As cited in Michael Schudson's, Discovering the News, 1978 p.18.

some extent the world of parties became just a part of a larger universe of news." (Schudson,1978:22.)

Fifth, unlike the commercial and party press, which were dependent on direct political contributions and high subscription rates for their survival, the penny press was able to flourish on the revenues gained through the selling of advertising space. The shift in dependence from political contributions to advertising revenues was to drastically alter the economic structure of the daily press:

The penny papers made their way in the world by seeking large circulation and the advertising it attracted, rather than by trusting to subscription fees and subsidies from political parties. This rationalized the economic structure of newspaper publishing. Sources of income that depended on social ties or political feeling were replaced by market-based income from advertising and sales.(Schudson,1978:18.)

The penny press' novelty was not restricted to its political stance and economic organization. Its content too displayed a marked difference from the commercial and penny papers. Consider for instance, the mainstay of today's press — "news". As Schudson notes, the penny press invented the modern concept of "news" — the newspaper in America "made it a regular practice to print political news, not just foreign but domestic, and not just national, but local; for the first time it printed reports from the police, from the courts, from the streets, and from private households." (Schudson,1978:22.)

The penny papers actively sought out information in a variety of areas. Reporters were hired for the first time to cover local events. It was the penny papers which made the 'human interest story' not only an important part of daily journalism, but its most characteristic feature. Verbatim reports of the courts, political speeches and similar kinds of information emanating from various official, bureaucratic institutions were regularly featured in these papers. And, where the six cent papers had depended on incoming ships for information from abroad, the penny papers were the first to station foreign correspondents in major cities of North America and Europe.

The penny press then, ushered in a new age of journalism. As I have shown, it had important distinctive features. First, because the penny press relied on the revenues from advertising and not on subscription, it sold cheaply and its distribution was more widespread. Furthermore, the penny press sold a product to a large general readership and simultaneously sold this readership to advertisers. Second, it

was politically distinctive in that it had no formal ties with any political party. Finally, it was substantively distinctive in two respects; first, in its creation and focus on news as opposed to the editorial, and second, through its emphasis on the "facts" over editorial opinion. (Schudson,1978:30.)

The changes that took place in journalism in the 1830's did not occur in a vacuum. These changes were closely connected to broad social, economic, and political change happening at that time, namely, the rise of the "democratic market society". Schudson claims that the growth of the American market economy in the 1820's and 1830's "integrated and rationalized" American economic life. More people and a greater range of goods participated in the marketplace. Furthermore, he suggests, the culture of the market became a more pervasive feature of human consciousness. The press of the 1830's then, both reflected and helped foster the expansion of the market economy, and with it, democratic culture. What effects were these developments to have on the insitutional practices of the press, and what might they tell us of the press' normative claim of objectivity?

To a large extent, the normative claims of objectivity can be understood as rationalizations of practices which, in the final analysis may be seen as economically motivated. For instance, the population shift to the cities created, for the first time, a "mass" audience for news. This mass audience coupled with the expansion of the American territories in the nineteenth century, the rapid developments in communication technologies, the rise of public education, and an increase in literacy, all led to tremendous changes in the press. With the formation of the Associated Press in 1848, the first major step in the ~~standardization~~ of news took place. News had become a commodity. By pooling reporters and then selling the same story to hundreds, and eventually thousands of newspapers, the 'wires' transformed the news into a profitable mass market commodity. (W.L.Bennett,1984:79.)

In order to sell this service to newspapers of all political persuasions (for a papers' politics could still be ascertained by its editorials), the news had to be stripped of its overtly political messages. Thus arose the documentary style of reporting — the *who, what, where, when* and *why* of an event provided the "perfect skeletal form" for transmitting information over the 'wires'. (W.L.Bennett,1978:79.)

Therefore, constructing news accounts along these lines enabled a cheap transmission and easy reconstruction on the other end. The 'objective' accounts provided by the 'wire' services to their members, in turn guaranteed a larger number of readers. By avoiding partisan political views in their news reports, the press was able to appeal to a larger, undifferentiated reading public.

As noted earlier, with the rise of the penny press, there had come to be a greater reliance on advertising revenues. The newspaper sold a product to a general readership and simultaneously, sold this readership to advertisers. Because the press had come to rely less on revenues generated by newspaper sales and more on advertising revenues, those papers which were able to deliver a larger number of readers to advertisers stood to gain a larger percentage of the market share. The implication of these and other developments were to radically alter the relationship between news, advertising and readers (a situation that will be explored in more detail in the next section).

Objectivity and the Positioning of the Public

The rise of the commercial mass media in the 1830's had paradoxical political consequences. As Daniel Hallin notes,

on the one hand it democratized the market for newspapers, but on the other it centralized the means of political communications in the hands of large corporations and caused atrophy of the mobilizing and advocacy roles previously fulfilled by the newspaper. (Hallin, 1985:128.)

The commercialization of the press then, both democratized the market for newspapers while at the same time centralizing the production of political information. What were the long term effects of this development?

First, Hallin suggests the rise of the commercial penny press ruptured the connection between the press and an active public. Newspapers prior to the 1830's were small and numerous. The press at this time was a "quintessential institution of the public sphere" which itself was restricted to a relatively small segment of the population. (Hallin, 1985:128.) However, access to those who required it was assured. With the rise of the commercial press, the public's ability to access the pages of the daily press was

curtailed. Second, the rise of the commercial mass media transformed not only the institutional structure of political communication, but the structure of the discourse itself. "Objective" journalism, with its penchant for "the facts", changed the standards for what needed to be said in a newspaper and how it should be said.

"Objective" news practices too had undergone changes. For instance, prior to the 1920's, though there had been an increasing commitment by journalists to "get the facts", they had not at this time, made the separation of "facts" from "values". It was possible, for instance, for a journalist to be a recorder of the facts and, at the same time, adopt a personal, political stance. By the early twentieth century however, the separation between fact and value had taken place. Schudson characterizes this transition as "a faith in the 'facts', a distrust of 'values', and a commitment to their segregation." (Schudson,1976:6.) This transition was to radically alter the journalist's participation in, and description of the political world. Journalists came to think of themselves "not as participants in a process of political discussion, even of a non-partisan character, but as professionals, standing above the political fray." (Hallin,1985:130.)

Hallin notes that from the period of World War II, through to the 1960's, not only did objectivity require a strict separation between "fact" and "value", but also between "fact" and "interpretation". This period, he suggests, was the heyday of straight objective journalism. The political conflicts and social unrests of the 1950's and 1960's however, shattered the "naive realism" of objective journalism. The clash of straight, objective news practices with the political climate of the 1960's and 1970's, "produced both a credibility gap (a questioning of traditional sources of political information) and a clash of interpretations unknown in the years of wartime and cold war consensus." (Hallin,1985:130.)

Out of the political atmosphere of the 1960's and 1970's then, journalists' began to provide audiences not only with the "facts" but with other elements as well. Journalists at this time began to explain the relevance of news issues, to put them in perspective. They began to interpret how the facts fit together, and what they meant. These changes in journalistic practices however, did not produce a questioning of objectivity itself. Schudson argues that it was precisely because the interpretation of reality

had become subject to political debate, that an adherence to "objectivity" remained paramount. The political debate over the nature of reality increased the journalists' and news organizations' need to appear strictly objective. This was a problem because journalists still had to provide analysis without appearing to depart from disinterested journalism. The best way to accomplish this, Hallin suggests, was for journalists to focus on questions of effectiveness, strategy and technique: questions that could be approached "with detached realism...which did not touch directly on conflicts of interest or clashes over the ends and values of public life." (Hallin,1985:130.) Thus, for instance, political reporting is repetitively framed in terms of the success and failures of certain policies, party strategies and tactics, and political "winners" and "losers". The tendency to frame and analyze events in these terms is, in Hallin's view, characteristic of modern day journalistic practices.

For example, political election coverage is routinely framed as a competition between party leaders, or presented as a strategic battle of wits. Discussion of party policy (which is seldom raised by the party leading in the polls) often gives way to coverage of leaders and their media performance. During the British Columbia elections of 1986 for example, one could not open the newspaper or turn on the television without being inundated with news items such as: "KICK-OFF 'BOBBLED'" (Vancouver Province, September 25,1986:5), or "SKELLY STUMBLES AGAIN". (Vancouver Province, October 17, 1986:4.) Even when Skelly's speeches went well, more emphasis was placed on the *way* he spoke rather than on *what* was said. "SKELLY SEEMS TO OVERCOME SPEECH DIFFICULTIES." (BCTV, October 19,1986.)

What are the implications of the use of the technical angle in news reporting? According to Hallin, the technical angle tends to convey the realm of politics as a spectator sport -- as something one watches on television, or reads about in the newspaper, rather than as an activity one participates in. As Connell also notes, the audience position contemporary political reporting constructs, "is separated out: the audience is constantly hailed as witness of, but not participant in, the struggle and argument over issues." (Connell,1981:139.) Furthermore, such news practices tend to portray politics as either "a matter of administration or as a more or less sordid struggle for power." (Hallin,1985:134.)

The rise of the commercial mass media, and professionalization in news reporting then, had significant effects on public perception of, and participation in, political life. These factors, transformed the newspaper as a medium for the dissemination of political information and discussion into a commodity whose survival in the marketplace depended on the success of selling audiences to advertisers. Furthermore, the 'technical' angle in news reporting, aided in changing the reader as a participant in political debate and action, into a consumer of an authoritative account of the state of the world.

Where for instance, in today's press, is one to find relatively direct public input in political discussion and debate? I suggest it can be found in two places: the 'op-ed' page, which often provides space for articles written by members of the public (usually 'experts' of one kind or another), and in the letters-to-the editor section of the paper. A brief examination of the latter will be undertaken in **chapter 4**. Such an examination will reveal the limitations and constraints this form of participation engenders.

CHAPTER IV

CONTENT ANALYSIS /SEMIOTICS /ENCODING-DECODING

Introduction

In the last chapter, two approaches in the investigation of objectivity were examined. First, we saw how the normative claims of objectivity both aided journalists in the processing of 'facts' and served as a means of forestalling criticism. Second, the historical examination of the press revealed how objective news practices aided the economic interests of the institution, and fundamentally altered the public's perception of, and participation in political life.

In this chapter I would like to once again turn to an investigation of bias. However, unlike chapter 1 which sought to critique the 'common sense' understandings and reveal the ideological undercurrents of 'objective' news practices, this chapter critically examines methodologies often used in the assessment of news media bias/ideology: content analysis and semiotic analysis. Through this examination two specific areas of concern will emerge: the way in which the concept of ideology is understood by each of these methods and the way in which the reader is conceptualized. After providing a critical assessment of these approaches, I will examine a model that more appropriately deals with the crucial role of the reader -- Stuart Hall's and Dave Morley's encoding / decoding model. In examining the methodologies in this sequence, a progressively clearer and more critical understanding of the role readers play in the creation of news messages meanings will emerge.

The problems and limitations of both content analysis and semiotics will become evident. Content analysis implicitly assumes that meaning is the property of the text, and that readers accept the proposed meanings generated by the text. Semiotics on the other hand, is more effective in analyzing the role of the reader. The reader that semiotics is concerned with however, is not the actual reader, but rather, the reader inscribed by the text. That is, through examining textual structures like point-of-view, and mode-of-address, semiotics investigates how (potential) readers are invited to make sense of the text.

The encoding / decoding model goes one step further. This model understands that actual readers need not adopt the position the text proposes. This method understands that actual readers bring to the text a set of preconceptions that are determined, to a large extent, by their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Using the theoretical model provided by Stuart Hall, Dave Morley attempts to understand how various reading publics produce either "preferred", "negotiated", or "oppositional" readings of the same text.

As we shall see, this model is not without its problems. It becomes clear for example, that though these categories are helpful in unpacking various reading positions, no direct causal link can be established between readers socio-economic status and the type of readings they make — "social position in no way directly, or unproblematically, correlates with decoding" (Morley,1983:117.)

After providing a critical examination of these methodologies, I will explore the similarities of the *negotiated* reading position and the bias call. I will then suggest that this group of readers (negotiated readers/bias callers) and the institutional structures in place to handle charges of bias, provides an arena in which the hegemonic power of the media may be examined.

What emerges from investigating the three methods in this sequence, is an attempt to arrive at a position in which actual readers and the meanings they generate in a negotiation with media institutions can be analyzed. Unlike semiotics and the encoding / decoding model which address the relationship between readers and the text (in an attempt to understand how ideology operates to position the reader), I want to explore the hegemonic character of the media at the level of the relationship between readers and the media institution.

Language and Ideology

Content analysis, semiotic analysis and the encoding/decoding model all share a common concern. They are all interested in the generation of meaning and its analysis through an examination of language.

For content analysis, we can say that language is understood strictly at the level of denotation. That is, language is conceived 'transparently' — words, images and utterances, and their referents, are understood to be synonymous. For semiotics and the encoding / decoding model however, language is understood as a signifying system with three basic characteristics: (1) meaning is understood "not as the result of the intrinsic properties of individual signs or words", but as "the systematic relations between the different elements"; (2) language is understood "not as an empirical thing" but as a "social capacity"; and (3) individuals are understood "not as the source of language but its product. Language always escapes the individual and even the social will." (O'Sullivan,1984:126-7.)

Here, we may begin to examine the relationship between language and ideology. As many theorists have pointed out, the study of language and the theory of ideology are two concerns which bear close resemblance. This is especially true when the concept of ideology retains its critical edge; that is, when ideology is understood as a process of sustaining or contesting asymmetrical relations of power. The analysis of ideology understood in this way is fundamentally concerned with language because language is the principle medium of meaning (signification) which serves to sustain relations of dominance. The study of ideology, according to Thompson,

is in a fundamental respect, the study of language in the social world, since it is primarily within language that meaning is mobilized in the interests of particular individuals and groups.(Thompson,1984:73.)

Language plays a central role in the study of ideology because it is both a **determiner** and a **determined**. As Halliday explains "...language is controlled by the social structure, and the social structure is maintained and transmitted through language." (Halliday, 1978:89.) An investigation of each of the methodologies cited above therefore, will reveal the way in which ideology is understood and the way in which the reader is conceptualized. I will now turn to an examination of content analysis.

Content Analysis

Content analysis may be understood as a method that is primarily concerned with systematically identifying and counting frequencies of items present in the manifest content of messages. It is a statistical method designed to produce measurable, verifiable and objective account of large bodies of works rather than individual items.

In this approach, the analyst's first step is to construct a set of analytical categories which are deemed applicable to the content and unproblematic in interpretation. That is, the units counted by the researcher can be anything s/he wishes, as long as they can be readily identifiable and occur frequently enough for valid statistical results. These conditions are said to constitute the method's objectivity and its systematic nature. Once the categories have been established the key operation of this method begins — the numerical quantification of "the extent to which the analytical categories appear in the content". (Berelson, 1966:22.)

An example will illustrate the method. Let us assume that we are interested in how a particular newspaper dealt with the firebombing of Red Hot Video (an actual occurrence which took place in Vancouver in 1983.) Let us imagine that part of our concern is to examine the way in which the notion of violence was addressed by the news stories. It would be necessary first to go through all the news items dealing with this issue and indicate the various ways in which the notion of violence was addressed. Once completed, we may end up with say, two categories: (1) the firebombing act as violent, (2) the act as a response to pornography's violence against women. We could then count and compare the total number of times each occur in the coverage of this incident. What we have done here is to describe the content in a particular way.

According to Basil Berelson, a major proponent of such a method, the object of content analysis is a "a body of meaning". But it soon becomes evident that it is only those meanings which are shared between the communicator, his/her audience and the analyst that are to be investigated. Given the nature

of how meaning is understood here, it is clear that content analysis is concerned with only the manifest content. Content analysis' methodology is founded on an empiricist epistemology which is premised on the belief that a universal, objective reality is available to study, and that it is possible to devise methods of studying this reality objectively. Furthermore, content analysis accepts the surface elements of messages as given. Because of these assumptions, there is a reliance on the denotative signifiers. Proponents of this method often believe that the intentions of the author are readily accessible through an investigation of the manifest content. It is for this reason that content analysis is thought to be a suitable method for those who conceive of bias as partisanship. It would seem then, that the basic assumption of content analysis is that a relationship exists between the frequency of certain items as they appear in a text, the interests or intention of the producer, and the response of the audience. (Dyer,1982:108.)

Having provided a brief description and indicated the basic assumptions of this approach, there is a need more critically to assess its shortcomings and address both its implicit and explicit conceptions of ideology. Before doing so however, I wish to bracket the following criticism by stating that I believe that content analysis may be useful when used in conjunction with informed social theories; that is, when the results it produces are used to illustrate why certain signifiers should exist in a discourse. Yet content analysis, in and of itself, has no theory of signification; it merely assumes that "significance exists in what it counts." (Sumner, 1979:69.) In other words content analysis assumes that signification is operative within the denotative level of the sign. As has been argued, signs are open to a number of readings on the connotative level. Content analysis looks no further than the denotative level, thereby suggesting that words (signs) are significant in and of themselves.¹

Three basic aspects inherent in content analysis will be examined here: (1) the intention of the communicator; (2) the creation of categories; and (3) the significance of repetition.

¹For an example of how content analysis may be used with an informed critical social theory see, W.Leiss, S.Kline, S. Jhally Social Communication in Advertising, Methuen, 1986.

The Intention of the Communicator

First, let us examine the proposition that the intention of the author can be assessed through the quantification of items present in the message. Such an assertion reflects the 'process' model of communication theory. This theory understands communication as simply a process whereby one person emits a message which is received and understood by another person. Communication here is perceived simply as an "interpersonal interactional process where meanings... are held to be created and affirmed (denied or negotiated) by reciprocal, conscious interpretive subjects." (Sumner, 1979:71.) Furthermore, the process model understands the message in terms of "what the sender puts into it by whatever means." (Fiske, 1982:3.) The grounding in the 'process' model of communication, according to Sumner, is content analysis' greatest flaw, because the question of ideological production becomes simply a question of conscious/unconscious bias on the part of prejudiced communicating subjects. As a consequence, those who adhere to such a method believe the identification of frequent themes will reflect that bias.

Because the 'process' model of communication is inherent within content analysis, proponents of this method often conflate ideology with personal bias — an alleged measurable phenomenon, apparent on the surface of propositional messages. For instance, in his discussion of ways in which content analysis may be helpful in the detection of ideological bias, T.F. Carney states: "A writer's actual words — adjectives for instance — often directly yield telltale clues to his evaluative ideological or moral viewpoint." (Carney, 1972:182.) The absence or presence of ideology as far as content analysis is concerned, is understood to be in the consciousness of the communicator. Furthermore, it is believed that the counting of the selective denotative signs in the text will produce evidence of the communicator's ideology. But as Sumner convincingly argues, ideologies and prejudices are not invented by individuals: "such signs and corresponding psychological, socially located communicators may use and purvey certain ideologies, but they themselves do not invent those ideologies or their corresponding psychological states." (Sumner, 1979:71.)

Personal bias and its alleged quantitative indicators are, according to Sumner, only "superficial points of focus" because such a method cannot begin to address how "ideology structures the message". (Hackett, 1984:241.) Content analysis only assumes that ideology is in what it counts — observable units of alleged conscious or unconscious items of repetitive 'telltale' distortion. The procedure of counting the appearances of denotative signifiers then, is justified in this approach by the alleged "shared, universal nature of denotated signification". (Sumner, 1979:68.)

The Creation of Categories

In the method of content analysis, the creation of the categories is the first step taken in the assessment of the material under examination. Proponents of this method claim that their categories are intrinsic to the body of material they are investigating. That is, the categories are not arbitrarily created, but are generated by observable items within the content itself. This procedure, it is claimed, constitutes its objectivity. But, texts can be categorized in an infinite number of ways. The selection of categories deemed to be significant, invariably calls for value judgements to be made — a precondition the method (ironically) opposes. Sumner suggests that the categories are nothing more than the "practical arm of the undeveloped concept of denotation" (Sumner, 1979:70.) He argues that the categories are not simply intrinsic to the selected signs of the discourse, but rather arise out of the primacy given to the denotative signifiers which, he claims, are themselves linked to an understanding of ideology as a 'perversion' of truth. Content analysis' concept of denotation and ideology is then, "transformed into a 'neutral', objective technique", thereby claiming the selections from the discursive material as "obviously significant denotative units" (Sumner, 1979:70.):

What begins as a vague concept of ideology, as a distortion of truth or genuine discourse, finally ends its life as a method of arbitrary selection. The ideology inscribed in the practice of content analysis is thus embodied in the method of category selection and disappears, so enabling the conclusion that the method or practice is objective or scientific. (Sumner, 1979:70-71.)

The analyst then, is unable to abandon his/her conception of ideology as distortion which, in a fundamental way, informs the categories set up to gauge content. Furthermore, the motivations of the analyst are never raised, suggesting that the desire to 'discover' bias springs naturally from the discourse

itself.

The Significance of Repetition

As we have seen from the example cited earlier, the next step in this approach involves the counting the frequency of significant items. As I have suggested above, because content analysis does not have any theory of signification, it is unable to address the way in which "ideology structures the message". Instead, content analysis conflates ideology with 'distortion of truth' which, it claims, can be ascertained at the level of the manifest content.

There is however, another problem that arises out of the practice of counting the frequencies of selected items. Content analysis holds that the repetition of the selected items is significant. Yet, as has been demonstrated, content analysis has no theory of signs or of signification and therefore can provide "no knowledge of the significance of what is repeated." (Sumner, 1979:69.) As I have suggested, this method merely assumes that significance exists in what it counts. As Sumner explains,

Repetition itself is insignificant...It is not the significance of repetition that is important but rather the repetition of significance...However much a message is repeated, if the receiver cannot give it meaning then it is not communicated to him. (Sumner, 1979:68-9.)

The reader and reading practices are of no concern to the proponents of this method. Readers, as far as content analysis is concerned, are posited as nothing more than mere receptors of the communicators propositional messages. As will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter, meaning does not reside in the text proper; rather, meaning is the result of the interaction between actual readers and the text.

Having critically investigated the assumptions that ground the methodology of content analysis and examined the limited manner in which ideology is understood, I will proceed with an investigation of a more sophisticated method; one that deals more effectively with the thorny problems of meaning and ideology.

Semiotics

A theoretical approach, semiotics is concerned with the social production of meaning through the investigation of the sign system. While content analysis is concerned with the analysis of the message system at the level of *what* is said — semiotics is concerned with revealing and analysing *how* meanings are produced "out of the structural relations that exist within any sign system." (O'Sullivan, et al., 1983:210.) This approach borrows tools and concepts of analysis from structural linguistics "which attempts to uncover the internal relationships which give different languages their form and function." (Dyer,1982:115.) Although language, both written and spoken, is the object of study for structural linguists, semiotics extends its inquiry into 'any system of signs', be they visual, aural, verbal or a combination of signs. Semiotic analysis is concerned with the analysis of 'systems of significance' as they appear in a variety of forms: drama, comedy, news items, cinema, architecture and advertising, to name only a few.

Unlike structural linguistics which looks at the relationship of signs within a system — semiotics extends its inquiry through the area of semantics (the way in which words refer to external reality) to examine how signs work in a culture. Semiotics then, inserts the dimension of cultural values at the level of signification. (Fiske,1982:78.)

Semiotics analyzes a "structured set of relationships which enables a message to signify something." (Fiske,1982:42.) It is a text-centred enterprise, interested in how meaning systems produce meanings via texts. Because it is interested in investigating the "systems of relations" as they operate in structures like the text, this approach has been criticized for its lack of historical grounding, and for its abstraction, and formalism. (O'Sullivan,et al., 1983:210.) Semiotics however, is also concerned with the social production of meaning, and has sought to relate this production to other kinds of production and to social relations. Unlike content analysis which claims meaning is the product of the text and the intention of the author, semiotics sees meaning as the result of the interaction of the texts and readers, made possible through shared cultural codes.

The basic unit of analysis in semiotics is the sign. It contains three key elements; (1) it is something perceivable by the senses, (2) it refers to something other than itself, (3) it must be recognized and used by people as a sign. In order to examine this method in greater detail, it will be broken up into five subsections; signification, denotation, connotation, myth, and signification/ideology.

Signification

Roland Barthes' theory of the "two orders of signification" can be seen as an attempt to understand how signs relate to the reader and his/her socio-cultural position. Barthes' concern was twofold: he wanted to understand both how signs in the text interact with the personal and cultural experiences of the user, and the way in which the conventions in the texts mesh with the conventions expected and experienced by the reader. (Fiske, 1982:90.) To this end, Barthes devised two analytical categories in an attempt to understand how signs operated within a given socio-cultural context: the denotative and the connotative signifiers.

Denotation

The "first order of signification"—denotation, is the order of signification concerned with the relationship between the signifiers and the signifieds operative within the sign. Denotated signification refers to the relationship between the physical form of the sign, perceived through the senses (signifier), and the mental concept of what that sign refers to (signified). Denotation refers to the common-sense meaning of the sign — its literal meaning.

Connotation

The "second order signification" — connotation, is concerned with how the denotative meanings of the sign comes to stand for the "value system of the culture or the person using it." (O'Sullivan, et al., 1983:216.) Meaning here, moves towards the intersubjective: "when the interpretant is influenced as much by the interpreter as by the ~~object~~ or the sign." The term is used to describe the interaction that occurs when "the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the user and the values of his/her culture."

(Fiske,1982:91.)

According to Barthes, the connotative levels of signification have a close connection with knowledge, culture, and history....and "it is through them that the environmental world invades the linguistic and semantic system. They are, if you like, the fragments of ideology." (Barthes, 1967:33.) Other theorists were later to qualify the distinction between the denotative and connotative orders of signification by arguing that the distinction is valid for analytical purposes only: "analytical distinctions must not be confused with distinctions in the real world." (Hall,1980:133)-

Myth: Second order signification.

Barthes employs the term "myth" in an anthropological sense. For him, myth describes widely shared cultural values used to explain and conceptualize beliefs of a culture. It is the means by which the members of a culture "conceptualize or understand a particular topic or part of their social experience." (O'Sullivan, et al., 1983:216.) In Barthes' concept, myth works along a chain of related concepts. To use an example provided by O'Sullivan:

A typical twentieth-century advertisement shows a family picnicking in a meadow beside a stream, with their car parked in the background. The mother is preparing the meal, the father and son are kicking a football, and the daughter is picking flowers. (O'Sullivan et al.,1983:216.)

The advertisement here, works in such a way that it is able to activate our myths of family, sex-roles, countryside, work-and-leisure, and so on. In order to make sense of this ad, we, the reading audience, inject our preconceptions, our way of conceptualizing these elements presented to us in the text. If we were of a culture that did not share these myths, then the advertisement would mean little or nothing to us.

The sign then, is no longer seen simply as an independent entity, but has shifted to the realm of the subjective or more specifically, to the level of inter-subjective responses. Responses are inter-subjective in that they are shared with members of a similar culture or background. Even though responses occur in the individual, they are not individual in nature. As John Fiske and John Hartley note,

This intersubjectivity is culturally determined, and is one of the ways in which cultural influences affect the individuals in any culture, and through which cultural membership is expressed. (Fiske, Hartley, 1978:46.)

Signification and Ideology: Third order of signification

John Fiske and John Hartley extend Barthes' second level of signification to include a third level—one that links the dynamic interaction of connotation and myth to ideology. These authors argue that "the connotations and myths of a culture are the manifest signs of its ideology." (O'Sullivan, et al., 1983:217.) They suggest that the way in which connotation and myth fit together to create sense of wholeness is evidence of an underlying, invisible principle — ideology.

The Reader in Semiotics

As I have suggested earlier, semiotics is a text-centred enterprise, concerned with analysing how meaning systems provide meanings via texts. However, unlike content analysis which makes no mention of the reader, semiotics acknowledges the crucial role the reader plays in the meaning making process. The reader that semiotics is concerned with however, is not the active, actual reader, but the "reader" inscribed by the text. That is, through examining textual structures such as point-of-view and mode of address, semiotics may begin to see how actual readers are positioned, or invited to create a sense of the text. This position or 'space' provided by the text for the actual reader may be understood as the positioning of the subject within the text or, as I have already suggested, as the *inscribed* reader.

The subject positioning the text proposes however, may not necessarily be taken up by actual readers. It became evident that actual readers need not adopt the reading proposed by the text, as the text itself is still open to a number of potential readings. It was this realization which led to the examination of the way in which actual readers and texts come together in social processes to produce interpretations.

Encoding / Decoding

Realizing that audiences may interpret the messages of the text in ways not intended by the communicators, Dave Morley (borrowing from the theoretical model of Stuart Hall) was concerned with demonstrating how members of different classes and groups interpret the same message differently. Unlike those theories which attempt to explain interpretation in terms of individual, idiosyncratic processes (e.g. selective perception), the encoding / decoding model conceives of interpretation in broader terms. This model rests upon a theory which understands reading as "the generation of meaning that occurs when the structure of the text meet with the socially located meaning system or discourse of the reader." (O'Sullivan et al., 1983:179.)

The premises of the encoding/decoding approach can be outlined briefly in the following manner. First, the production of a meaningful message in the media text (be it television or the press) is always a problematic 'work'— the same event can be encoded in any number of ways. The prime concern for this approach then, is "how and why certain production practices and structures tend to produce certain messages, which embody their meanings in certain recurring forms." (Morley,1980:10.) Second, the message is always complex in form and structure. Messages always contain more than one potential reading. Media messages may prefer certain readings over others but they cannot be closed off around one reading. Reading then remains polysemic. Third, the activity of 'getting meaning' or decoding messages is also a problematic practice. Regardless of how natural or transparent messages may seem, they can be decoded in ways that are different from their encoding.

This model attempts to steer a path between what Morley feels are two unsatisfactory positions taken in relation to the messages of the media text. The first position as advanced by Screen theorists, adheres to the notion of what has been characterized as the 'closed' text. Sharing similarities with some of the concerns raised in the discussion of semiotics, these theorists suggest that actual readers are positioned by the inscribed space of the text in such a way as to be manipulated by the text. From this perspective, actual readers and inscribed readers are conflated so as to render actual readers passive to the

texts preferred meaning. The text here, is understood as containing or imposing one fixed meaning.

The other position taken in relation to the power of the text over the direction of meaning, can be seen in those theorists who grant "the reader the power to determine his/her own reading." (Wren-Lewis,1983:183.) This position goes to the other extreme, in that it conceives the messages of the text as being potentially 'open' to all interpretation. In this theory (such as uses and gratification theory) "any notion of particular forms of textual organization as constraints on the production of meaning disappear entirely." (Morley,1981:5.)

As mentioned above, the encoding/decoding model attempts to bridge these positions. On the one hand, it grants that productive work does take place on the part of the reader, but suggests that the reader is nonetheless bounded by the parameters inscribed by the encoded moment: "audiences produce meaning, but have to work on material which has been preselected and organized in particular ways by producers". (Morley,1981:5.) This model then, conceives of the media message as a complex sign in which a preferred reading has been inscribed, but which retains the potential of communicating a different meaning. Although meanings of the text can never be totally fixed or 'closed', all meanings do not exist equally in the message. As we have seen in Chapter 1, media signifying practices are 'structured in dominance'. (Morley,1980:10.)

Morley then, wanted to understand how different sub-cultural structures and formations within the audience, and the sharing of different classes and groups "determine the decoding of the message for the different sections of the audience". (Morley,1980:14-15.) It is important to note however, that Morley is aware of the complexity of audience responses. He argues therefore, that textual decodings cannot be 'read off' from class/gender/ethnic/sub-cultural positions anymore than 'meaning' can be 'read off' from textual characteristics: "The fundamental point (is) that social position in no way directly, or unproblematically, correlates with decoding." (Morley,1983:109-110.) Rather, specific readings are produced both by readers' social positions and particular discourse positions.

The problematic proposed here does not attempt to derive decodings directly from social class position or reduce them to it; it is always a question of how social position *plus*

particular discourse positions produce specific readings; readings which are structured because the structure of access to different discourses is determined by social position. (Morley,1980:134.)

In an attempt to understand how these concerns operated within the media environment, Morley investigated audience responses to a British television programme called Nationwide. Here, he examined the reaction of 29 socially and culturally diverse groups, to the show's coverage of the government's new budget. He then plotted their reactions within a schemata of three basic reading positions: the "preferred" or "dominant" reading position, the "negotiated" reading position, and the "oppositional" reading position.² Let us examine these positions in more detail.

The Dominant code

A reader/viewer is operating within the dominant code when s/he accepts the connoted meanings provided by the media text as it was encoded. In other words, in the decoding of the message within the dominant code, the reader/viewer accepts the message as it was intended. Here, we can say that a perfectly 'transparent' communication has been achieved: meanings given by the encoder are the same as meanings made by the decoder. Another way of saying this is to say that the reader has accepted, and is decoding within the 'preferred reading'.

As I have stated above, in this reading position, the reader accepts the denoted meanings as presented. It is important to note however, that Hall and Morley understand the function of this analytical category differently than conceived by traditional semiotics. As we have seen in the discussion of semiotics, the splitting of the sign into two distinct realms was proposed by Roland Barthes. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of the sign. Connotation refers to the more associative meanings the sign generates. Hall and Morley argue that this distinction is only valid for analytical purposes;

²In his later work, "The Nationwide Audience' — A Critical Postscript", Morley suggests the need to expand the number of decoding positions, claiming it is necessary to first establish how the reader/viewer feels about the text as a particular cultural form: "do they enjoy it, feel bored by it, recognize it as relevant to their concerns? These questions ...need to be asked before exploring whether or not they agree, disagree or partly agree with the ideological propositions of the text." (Morley,1981:10.)

"analytical distinctions must not be confused with distinctions in the real world." (Hall,1980:133.)

Furthermore, because connotative aspects of the sign generate broad, associative meanings, the connotative level of signification was understood as an area in which the active intervention of ideologies was most pronounced. Though this notion may be true, Hall and Morley suggest that the denotative aspects of the sign does not operate outside of ideology. On the contrary, it is within the denotative level of signification that ideological value can be said to be more sedimented. "This does not mean that the denotative or 'literal' meaning is outside ideology. Indeed, we could say that its ideological value is strongly fixed — because it has become so fully universal and 'natural'." (Hall,1980:133.) Decoding within the dominant code then, may entail the acceptance of both the propositional message of the text as well as the sedimented ideological premises from which they spring.

The Negotiated Code

Readers/viewers operating within the negotiated code acknowledge the legitimacy of the dominant code and, at the same time, modify their reading according to their own situational context. In other words, in the negotiated reading, decoders may take meaning broadly as encoded, but by relating the message to their own situation and interests, they may modify or partly inflect the meanings.

Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations...while at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules — it operates within exceptions to the rule. (Hall,1980:137.)

The similarities of the 'negotiated' reading position and the 'bias call' will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. As we will see, an examination of the "bias call" within the framework of the negotiated code, provides revealing theoretical implications.

The Oppositional Code

Readers/viewers operating within the oppositional code may understand both the connotative and literal inflection of the message, but decode it in a totally contrary way. Here, the decoder recognizes the dominant encoding, or preferred reading, but interprets the message in an oppositional manner. For

instance, a news report on the B.C. government's proposed changes to the labour code is framed by the government and the media alike in terms of "democracy in the workplace". An oppositional reading would reject both the literal and connotative meaning and read instead, "union busting". A negotiated reading may be suspicious of the underlying motives for changes in the labour code, but accept the notion of "democratization" as desirable and beneficial. A dominant reading would understand both the literal and connotative meanings and accept them wholeheartedly.

Only a cursory examination of the encoding/decoding model has been provided. Yet, its heuristic value, for our purposes here, is evident in two significant ways. First, as we have seen, the encoding/decoding model goes one step further than a semiotic analysis with respect to its concern for *actual* (as opposed to *inscribed*) readers and their relationship to the media text. At the same time, the encoding/decoding model may be used as a stepping-stone to approach a broader concern, namely -- an investigation of actual readers and their relationship to the media institution. That is, the encoding/decoding model, with its concern for actual readers in relation to the media text, will give way to an examination of the relationship of actual readers and the media institution. Second, as already touched upon and to be developed in more detail in the following chapter, the similarity of the "negotiated" reading position and the "bias call" will provide the groundwork for a more critical understanding of the notion of bias.

These two elements -- the similarity of the "bias call" with the "negotiated" reading, and the concern with the reader - media institution relationship -- will be combined. This will be accomplished through an investigation of the negotiation which takes place between those readers charging bias (which I will demonstrate, are operating within the "negotiated" code), and the institutional, bureaucratic structures and guidelines of the press and the press council in place to deal with such charges.

Hegemony

Our discussion of the ideological power of the media has been addressed in terms of how journalistic practices often tend to reproduce the definitions of the powerful, and consistently map the limits in which issues are to be understood. As Gitlin has noted, the mass media at times generate, and at other times legitimate discourses that will shape the public's definition of any given situation. It is not so much that the media tell us *what* to think, but rather, encourages us to think of issues in particular ways. They present frameworks for *how* we should think about issues and events. Yet, to posit the workings of ideology strictly in terms of journalistic practices and their consequences, is to overlook how such practices are accepted as legitimate by the general public. We cannot speak simply in terms of an ideological production (as though it was a phenomenon 'imposed from above', unwittingly accepted by passive dupes) without addressing the way in which readers/viewers come to accept as legitimate media definitions of the social world. The concept of hegemony proves to be a useful tool for an understanding of this process.

Hegemony may be understood as the tendency and process by which dominant groups and classes exercise political and cultural power — through the shaping of popular consent. Popular consent is "won" through ideological means — for example, in the creation of a naturalized and legitimized sense of the world in the images of popular culture. Hegemony is used to describe a situation in which dominant groups are able to win the consent of those subordinate groups in terms of perceptions of the world, human nature and social relations. It refers to a situation in which our consent is actively sought, and encourages us to make sense of the world in ways that are congruent with the interests of the powerful. Raymond Williams suggests that the notion of hegemony can be understood as "a whole body of practices and expectations which constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society." Hegemony naturalizes dominant ideology and renders it into a form of common sense. (Gitlin,1980:10.)

Hegemony then, is not mechanically 'determining', but more actively constituted. It unites "persuasion from above with consent from below...operating through a complex web of social activities and institutional procedures." (Gitlin,1980:10.) Hegemony is exerted by the dominant and collaborated

in by the dominated. In this way, our active participation in understanding ourselves, our social relations and the world at large, results in our complicity to our own subordination.

Through the investigation of the institutional, bureaucratic structures and guidelines in place to deal with charges of bias, and the ensuing 'negotiation' which takes place between the institution and individuals charging bias, I hope to illustrate an instance of the hegemonic process at work. I will argue that the hegemonic power of the media is achieved, in part, through the institutions ability to absorb and contain criticisms of its definitions of social reality.

CHAPTER V

HISTORY OF PRESS COUNCILS/CASE STUDY

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with how the bias call is dealt with by the press and the press council. Bias calls can be understood as those claims made by individuals and/or groups who disagree with the media's representation of particular and/or overall issues and/or events. It must be clear however, that neither the alleged bias of the media nor the readers perception of bias are at issue here. That is, through an examination of the case study in the next section, I will not be concerned with whether or not the press had been biased in their representation of the event. Nor will I be concerned with evaluating the readers' perceptions of bias. Both conceptions are static and do not begin to deal with the complexity of the situation. The former position suggests that meaning (in this case 'bias') is the property of the text alone (in reference to its depiction of an actual event or discussion of an issue). This perspective overlooks the role readers play in the meaning-making process. The latter position is similarly flawed in that it gives precedence to individuals' idiosyncratic readings. It does not acknowledge the fact that meanings are socially generated and, as such, can generally elicit only a limited range of responses.

This chapter will attempt to deal with this dilemma by stripping the term bias of all its evaluative connotations. In other words, I suggest that the term be used not as a benchmark to gauge the validity of media messages, but rather, be examined as part of the discourse of the press itself. By press discourse I not only mean the newspaper content, but also the elements of familiar codes, genres, conventions and styles of the mainstream press. Press discourse includes the professional practices and textual devices and strategies we learn to identify and expect. (O'Sullivan, et al.,1983:74.) Press discourse includes an enormous body of sensemaking representations "that have been established as the available modes by which our watching or 'reading' ... is fixed, directed, regulated and encouraged along particular lines." (O'Sullivan, et al.,1983:75.) In an effort to demonstrate how conventional, or literal notions of bias are

also "fixed, directed, regulated and encouraged along particular lines". I propose to explore the notion of bias within the broad framework of press discourse and to examine the way in which the media institution (through the press council and letters-to-the-editor) deal with charges of bias made against it. Though exploratory in nature, I believe such an attempt may begin to provide a heuristic model in which to more critically understand the hegemonic power of the media.

As we have seen, semiotics posits the *inscribed* reader within the text to show the ideological positioning of the reader. The encoding/decoding model extends this equation by looking at how actual readers are positioned by the text and their social situation to produce *preferred*, *negotiated*, or *oppositional* readings. As I have indicated, I wish to go one step further and to look at actual readers, but not in relation to the media text. Rather, I want to explore the relationship between actual readers and the institutional structures set up to deal with their complaints and show how the bias call is a negotiated reading. The analysis here suggests that this 'negotiated' intervention into the media's signifying practices may, in the end, serve to legitimize the power of the press in constructing, maintaining and reproducing world views. This chapter then, can be seen as an attempt to operationalize the concept of the hegemonic power of the press through a critical examination of the following:

- (i) the 'impartial' institutional structures of the press council, its rules and procedures one need follow in order to gain a hearing;
- (ii) the letters-to-the editor section of the paper; and,
- (iii) the active, consensual participation of actual readers entering into a structured negotiation with the institution.

In the first part of the chapter, I will provide a brief history and description of press councils in Canada, and a very brief description of the British Columbia Press Council. Part two of this chapter will be a case study. Here, an examination of how the Vancouver Sun and the B.C. Press Council dealt with charges of bias arising out of the paper's coverage of the Solidarity Coalition march of October 1983 will be investigated. In this section the following documents will be examined.

- (i) The British Columbia Press Council's complaints procedure;

(ii) The written correspondence between Dr. Roger Boshier (who took his charge of bias to the B.C. Press Council) the Sun's publisher, Bruce Larsen, and Gordon Purver, Executive Secretary of the B.C. Press Council; and,

(iii) the 16 letters also charging the Sun with bias.

Press Councils in Canada

Press councils have existed in Ontario since 1972 and in Quebec since 1973. The Ontario press council has served as a model for other Canadian press councils. A non-judicial review board, the press council was established to provide a public forum to hear complaints and resolve disputes between the public and member newspapers. Their broad mandate is to preserve "the established freedom of the press." Press Councils in Canada have no connection with government and claim to operate autonomously from member newspapers, except as their source of funding.

Canadian press councils are self-regulated and operate on a voluntary basis. Membership too is voluntary. Until 1983, there were only three press councils in Canada, Ontario, Quebec and Alberta, representing less than one-third of the 117 daily newspapers. There are now eight press councils operating in Canada.

After the Royal Commission Enquiry into Newspaper Concentration brought forth its proposal to establish mandatory membership in a Daily Newspaper Advisory Council, (The Kent Commission of 1981), newspapers from across the country began to join existing voluntary press councils and to establish press councils where none had existed before. (Bildwell, 1985:68.) The creation of press councils after 1983 and the speed with which other newspapers became members of existing councils can be seen as a conscious effort on the part of the industry to forestall government intervention in the operations of the press.

Aside from the Quebec Press Council (Le Conseil de presse du Quebec), Canada's press councils will only hear complaints about newspapers and not other media. Furthermore, press councils, again excluding the Quebec Council, are reactive bodies — they do not initiate discussion of matters affecting the press. It has been noted that press councils throughout Canada have failed to take a stand on general issues affecting the profession "or to formulate guidelines for the profession, aside from what could be inferred from their adjudications." (Salter,1985:50.)

With reference to the public, press councils have not encouraged research that would provide the public with information regarding the press in this country. As Mr. Jean Claude Bertrand of the University of Paris, speaking at the first meeting of the Council of Canadian Press Councils in 1983 noted:

Complaints are few and far between and often quite futile regarding the true sins of the press; the sins of omission and distortion. The quality of media professional training, research, the concentration of ownership and the unbridled commercialism of the media unfortunately are not often subjects of concern to the Councils. Their influence is not great and their noteworthy success is very limited. Generally speaking, they have been disappointing and there is no country where their presence has contributed to appreciably improving the media. (Conseil de Presse du Quebec, Conference of the Canadian Press Councils,1983:3.)

Canadian press councils overall have very little clout. If a council should rule in favor of a complainant, all that is required by the newspaper charged is the publication of the councils ruling on the case. The same is true if the councils should rule against the complainant. Furthermore, few press councils permit appeals of their decisions. One aspect of the press council's power then, can be seen as providing only a moral corrective.

The British Columbia Press Council

The British Columbia Press Council was created in June 1983. All eighteen dailies in British Columbia are members of the council. The council is made up of eight directors, a chairman who is also a director, and an Executive Secretary. There are four directors representing the public and four representing the industry. Formed at the initiative of the newspaper publishers in British Columbia, the

B.C. Press Council is funded by contributions from member newspapers, yet claims it is "a wholly independent and unbiased body." (B.C. Press Council brochure, 1983.)

Since its inception, the B.C. Press Council has received 122 written complaints, adjudicating on only eighteen. Most of these complaints were for "perceived" inaccuracies and "perceived" biases.¹ Of the 18, approximately half were ruled in favor of the complainant. None of these however, were for those cases that charged bias.

Case Study

In June 1983 the Social Credit government of British Columbia introduced legislation which was to seriously alter the political climate in the province. The newly re-elected government of Bill Bennett introduced this legislation under the banner of "restraint". As a result, a large and diverse coalition of individuals and organizations opposed a government which was restructuring human rights, social services and educational funding. The organized response took form in rallies, community meetings, petitions, and work stoppages — ultimately bringing the entire province to the edge of a general strike. This movement became known as the Solidarity Coalition.

On Saturday, October 15, 1983, one of many marches took place in which 50,000 to 70,000 people representing a broad cross-section of individuals and interest groups in British Columbia marched in downtown Vancouver. The following Monday, the Vancouver Sun printed a story and photograph of the march. The coverage of this event by the Sun struck a responsive chord in a large number of readers (evident in the over 60 letters it received claiming that they had been biased). The story and the picture appeared on the upper left hand corner of page A 16., two days after the march. The photo showed a group of marchers carrying placards which read: "Bennett must Go... Communist Party of Canada". On Saturday, October 22, eighteen letters appeared in the editorial page accompanied by four small

¹The quotation marks are used to indicate what the Executive Secretary wanted to make very clear to me: that in many of the cases, complaints had arisen out of a *perception* of inaccuracies and/or biases.

photographs that had been taken at the march. All but two of these letters claimed the Sun had been biased in their presentation of the event.² Most of the letters had claimed that the choice of the photograph was an attempt to undermine the credibility of the movement.

If I were looking for a photograph to subtly influence the politically unaware concerning Solidarity, I would be hard pressed to find a better one. There were more than 50,000 participants in the rally and you chose to print a tightly cropped photograph in which 11 of the 12 placards represented the Communist Party of Canada. Come on Sun, where's your objectivity. Lynda Olsen (*Vancouver Sun*, October 22, 1983: A5.)

Others felt both the photograph and the manner in which the story was buried on page A 16, were indications of a conscious red-baiting campaign mounted by the Sun.

Is this your very obvious attempt to link supporters of Solidarity with Communism? For shame. Lucinda Taylor (*Vancouver Sun*, October 22, 1983: A5.)

Your treatment of the march was appalling. The picture presents a complete distortion... To add fire to an already critical situation is irresponsible. Kenneth Smith (*Vancouver Sun*, October 22, 1983: A5.)

The march was noteworthy enough to receive exposure on the front page of the *Globe and Mail* yet... the Sun deemed it to be of less interest than a score of assorted human interest stories. Kevin O'Keefe (*Vancouver Sun*, October 22, 1983: A5.)

It is interesting to note that all letters — both those that claim the newspaper had presented a biased (or distorted) view, and those who wrote that the photo used was indeed representative of all the marchers — shared in the implicit belief that the Communist Party was a pariah to be shunned.

Another letter appeared on the 27th of October, written by the Provincial leader of the Communist Party of Canada, it stated in part:

Your reportage, your placing of the story, and your selection of the Communist Party contingent as representative of the march, showed highly biased reporting. The Sun ignores most of the public activities of the Communist Party, so we were very surprised that you chose to show a photograph of the Communist Party as representative of a public protest... We recognize that we are a small part of that movement, but we do not like being used by the media to further their political objectives.... Maurice Rush (*Vancouver Sun*, October 27, 1983: A5.)

²The 16/2 ratio of letters against and in support of the coverage was representative of all letters received.

Letters-to-the-Editor Genre

Before going on to examine the way in which this issue was dealt with by the B.C. Press Council, some of the general characteristics of the letters-to-the-editor genre should be examined.

First, the form of this genre is similar to a dialogue. Readers are invited to write in with their opinions and criticisms. The letters are usually a response to what has previously appeared in the pages of the newspaper. Rarely, however, do the letters initiate discussion. Furthermore, this particular type of dialogue is not an exchange among equals. The power of the editor to select, change, highlight, affix headlines and photographs indicates that the letter writer is always being granted the permission to speak. As Ruggles has suggested, despite this imbalance, the location of the letters on the same page of the unsigned editorials underlines the close and privileged relationship between the paper and its readers.

Why would newspapers offer readers this sort of access to its pages? Ruggles explains,

Letter columns are one of the most-read parts of any daily... it's popular with the readers, attracts them to the paper; it's cheaper than paying journalists — the paper gets a selection of free editorial copy and gets to choose the best written; the letters columns reinforce a paper's claim to representing various points of view, to being balanced in its comments and coverage, and to being open-minded and liberal, even when editorials (may) display plainly conservative views; the opportunity to see other readers negotiate interpretations of events is insurance against the loss of readers due to political disagreement. (Ruggles, 1986:6.)

Furthermore, there appears to be a reductive process that takes place when letters enter into a "dialogue" with the media institution. Criticism of the media's signifying practices for instance, may be reduced or translated into mere difference while at the same time, genuine public concern of political issues may be reduced to individual personal opinion. Whether this process is particular to media institutions alone, or if all contemporary bureaucracies have this leveling potential, is still an open question.

Having examined both the general characteristics of the 'letters' page and the letters sent in response to the Solidarity march, I will now examine the negotiated process of the bias charge. This examination involves a consideration of the letters of correspondence between a reader claiming bias, the managing editor of the Sun, and the executive secretary of the B.C. Press Council. Reference will also be

made to the B.C. Press Council's Rules and Regulations.

The negotiation of Bias

Professor Roger Boshier of the Adult Education Program at the University of British Columbia decided to take his complaint, charging the Sun with bias, to the newly formed British Columbia Press Council. Before the Council will hear any complaint however, it is necessary to first go through a number of procedures. First, the complainant must write a letter to the publisher and the Press Council, detailing their complaint. If the complainant is not satisfied with the publisher's response, s/he may then apply for a hearing before the Council.

The council may deal with a complaint against a member newspaper only if the complainant has given the newspaper an opportunity to satisfy the complainant. If whatever action the newspaper takes does not satisfy the complainant, the council will then arrange to hear the complaint. (B.C. Press Council Annual Report, 1983:31.)

Following this procedural requirement, Boshier sent a letter to both Bruce Larsen, managing editor of the Vancouver Sun and to Gordon Purver, Executive Secretary of the B.C. Press Council, stating his dissatisfaction with the Sun's coverage.

Please regard this as a complaint concerning the *Vancouver Sun's* shameful and unprofessional coverage of the October 15th Solidarity march... the march was well organized, purposeful and totally peaceful. It was relegated to page 16 of the 'A' section of the *Sun* on October 17th... Moreover, from the dozens of available photographs available the *Sun* chose to run one that prominently featured the logo of the Communist Party of Canada... this attempt to apply a "red-smear" to the entire march has been noticed and, in my view, was crude, unfair and displayed extraordinary bias. (Boshier, 1983:1.)

Bruce Larsen responded:

We strongly dispute your complaint that the *Sun's* coverage was "shameful and unprofessional". Your complaint seems to centre more on the news judgement shown by the *Sun* editors in the display of our story rather than the actual content. The positioning (of the story and photograph) decisions made for our October 17 editions were made on news judgement. The material selected for p.1 that day was a photograph with wide appeal that was taken at a Sunday event. Valid news judgement was made on the stories chosen for p.1... The positioning of the material was an editorial judgement based mainly on the timeliness of the event. I do not think our reporters, photographers or editors owe anyone an apology. (Larsen, 1983:1-2.)

This defence is revealing in light of Tuchman's suggestion that reporters typically invoke professionalism and news judgements when questioned on their choice of leads. She states:

Invoking news judgement (professional acumen) is an inherently defensive stance, for "news judgement" is the ability to choose "objectively" between and among competing "facts", to decide which "facts" are more "important" or "interesting". "Important" and "interesting" denote content. In other words, discussing the structuring of information the newsman must relate his notion of "important" or "interesting" content. (Tuchman,1978:670.)

It would seem that Larsen attempted to suggest that news judgement and content can somehow be separated. Yet, as Tuchman argues, "'important' and 'interesting' (the bedrock of news judgement / news sense) denote content". Like Tuchman, Boshier too adopts a similar position when attempting to argue that "news sense" and "content" are linked.

I am informed that criticisms concerning "news sense" do not fall within the ambit of the Press Council but allegations of bias are relevant. In this instance it is not possible to address the bias ("communist" photo) issue without examining the *Sun's* news sense (the page 16 issue) because in the defence mounted by the editor (see above) the two are inextricably linked. (Boshier,1983:6.)

By drawing from Larsen's defence, Boshier attempted to provide a direct link between "news sense" exercised and "content" displayed by Sun decision makers. If Larsen's defence (that the issue here, was simply a matter of news judgement) had been accepted by the press council, Boshier's complaint would never have had gained a hearing. Accordingly, if for some reason the Sun decided not to cover the Solidarity march, criticism of its decision would not be accepted at the press council: "The complainant should define the complaint precisely, and provide pertinent evidence such as newspaper clippings or tearsheets." (B.C. Press Council Annual Report, 1983:31.)

Larsen's defense underlies the problem conventional approaches of the media have fallen into, by suggesting that one should look no further than the surface propositions of media messages. The council then, is willing and able to deal only with those issues that speak directly to what appeared in the news *product*, while the possibly more pertinent issue of editorial judgements that are subsumed within the news *process* remains out of bounds. That is, the institution is willing to defend itself on the basis of specific significations, while the more pertinent issue of its power to signify, and the manner in which it uses this power in constructing "world views" through routine practices, news values, etc., remains a non-issue.

In a similar fashion, "balance" too is adopted as a defensive position when the bias call is made. As such, an adherence to "balance" may, in the end, justify any representation the media should chose to adopt. In his letter to Boshier, Larsen explains:

We have some callers suggest we have given more attention to the pro-Solidarity case than the antiSolidarity case. When we hear complaints from both sides, we have to think we are getting the balance we always seek. (Larsen,1983:2.)

This defence would seem to place the media institution in a 'no-lose' situation. As long as the media's representations of a particular event is unproblematic for the audience at large -- that is, when a *transparent* communication appears to have been achieved -- the press may claim to have simply 'reflected' the 'real'. However, when a representation becomes problematic for one of the sides (Larsen suggests there are only two sides) the institution may then cite responses from individuals or groups that hold opposing views and claim it has simply adhered to balance.

As has been noted, the Press Council is a non-judicial review board. So what happens if one is to "win" a case presented to the council?

After a hearing, the Council agrees on an adjudication. This is announced in a press release that names the complainant and newspaper. The newspaper involved is under an obligation to publish the adjudication. (B.C. Press Council Annual Report,1983:32.)

The power of the Council then, rests simply in its ability to have the adjudication published, whether it be in favor or against the complainant. The gatekeeping function and the routine practices of the press which have led to the complaint remain intact.

With reference to the legal aspects involved for complaints heard at the press council, Liora Salter and Pete Andersen have noted:

Lawyers are usually barred from the press council process; cross-examination is precluded; no formal record of the proceedings is kept; the evidence is submitted to the administratively-oriented council only. It has been argued by the councils themselves that neither their proceedings nor their decisions can be used in the court of law. (Salter,1985:49.)

Furthermore, another stipulation of the Council's *Complaints Procedure* states: "Every complainant shall sign a waiver agreeing not to take legal action on any complaint heard by the directors for which the directors make a decision." (B.C. Press Council Annual Report,1983:31.) This provision can be seen as

either an attempt by the council to ward-off potential complaints, or to discourage those who do decide to take their complaint to the council from taking any further legal action. If the complainant should decide to go to the council, s/he forfeits his/ her "rights before the law" for the privilege of obtaining a hearing before a council that can guarantee only the publication of its ruling.

In the case of Boshier vs. the Sun, this was the council's decision:

The council dismisses the complaint of Dr. Boshier, that the Sun attempted to apply a red-smear to the entire march. Council also rejects his allegations of extraordinary bias. However, the Council points out that the Sun's subsequent display of other pictures available (along with numerous letters of criticism regarding the selection of the pictures) shows that something more broadly representative of the Solidarity march could have been used. (B.C. Press Council Press Release, 1984:1-2.)

It is interesting to note here that along with the four subsequent photographs the Sun ran with the letters, as noted above, a note was written by the letters-to-the-editor editor which stated that Sun photographers had taken 247 other photographs of the march. Jack Ramsey, the editor of this section of the editorial page, claims that when Larsen saw the proof of this page, just prior to its printing, "he hit the roof". As managing editor at that time, Larsen had no control over the contents of this page, and Ramsey refused Larsen's request to delete the revealing (not to mention embarrassing) figure.

The Bias Call Revisited

In this section I will show how the *negotiated* reading position of the encoding / decoding model provides revealing theoretical implications for a more critical understanding of the bias call.⁹ In recalling the negotiated reading position, we saw that it contained both adaptive and oppositional elements. Negotiated readings are those readings which fall in between complete acceptance of dominant hegemonic definitions and oppositional rejection of them. This reading position both acknowledges the legitimacy of the dominant code and, on the more restricted level, adapts itself to the specific social condition of the reader. As Morley points out, in the *negotiated* reading "decoders may take the meaning broadly as encoded, but by relating the message to some concrete, located or situational context which reflects their

position and interests, they may modify or partly inflect the meaning." (Morley,1980:78.)

Similarly, the bias call too contains both adaptive and oppositional elements. Bias calls are negotiated interventions in that, though specific representations are challenged, there is nonetheless an underlying acceptance of the routines and norms of conventional journalistic professionalism. Furthermore, challenges to media significations at this level, not only tacitly accept the media's right to maintain a monopoly over the signification of public life, but in fact legitimize and encourage it to continue to do so — as long as they do it "objectively". Adherence to norms of objectivity then, is precisely the means by which the media retain the consent of audiences. Indeed, charges of bias against particular media reports are given a hearing, and even encouraged, through such manageable avenues as letters to the editor and complaints to the Press Council. This is because the example of the media's own occasional departures from the norms of objectivity highlights and legitimizes the "objectivity" of the majority of their reports. (Hackett, et al., 1986:279.) Bias calls bring attention to the occasional (perceived) violation of journalistic standards of objectivity by which news is routinely constructed, rather than the ideological consequences of those standards themselves. Paradoxically, the legitimacy of objective news practices is sustained in part, by those who claim bias.

We have explored the bias call here as one example of how news organizations deal with challenges to the legitimacy of their significations of political events. In the press councils, groups of newspapers use their own procedures for the establishment of objective representations as the standard against which individual reports are measured and judged. For those attempting to mobilize around the bias issue, they have not only accepted the rules and regulations of the press council as legitimate but, more importantly, have accepted and reconfirmed as valid those objective practices which, as revealed in Chapter 1, are themselves ideological.

Summary

As I hope to have demonstrated, the notion of bias can more fruitfully be explored within the framework of the hegemonic structure. I have argued that the rules and procedures of the press council set the parameters in which criticisms against media representations are contained. Although the press council claims to be a "wholly independent and unbiased body", it is apparent that journalistic standards of what is to be considered legitimate criticism have been tacitly adopted by the press council. As I have already indicated, in the press council, groups of newspapers use their own procedures for the establishment of objective representations as the standards against which individual reports are measured and judged. Furthermore, those entering into a 'negotiation' with the institution not only tacitly accept the rules and procedures of the press council as legitimate, but also endow the institution with its own legitimacy.

As we have seen, charges of bias against particular media reports are given a hearing, and even encouraged, through such manageable avenues as letters-to-the-editor, and complaints to the Press Council. These avenues exist because the example of the media's own occasional departures from the norms of objectivity highlights and legitimizes the "objectivity" of the majority of their reports. (Hackett, et al., 1986:278.) Paradoxically, those who mobilize around the bias issue, encourage the continuation of objective news practices which, as argued in Chapter 1, themselves reproduce ideological accounts of the social world. By systematically mapping the limits within which issues and events are to be understood, the media tend to reproduce status quo definitions of social reality. In framing the issue in this way, a clearer understanding of 'bias', and of the hegemonic power of the media has been demonstrated.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have argued that the concept of the hegemonic power of the media can be understood and operationalized through an investigation of the negotiation which takes place between readers who claim bias, and the institutional assumptions, structures and guidelines in place to deal with such charges. Yet the term hegemony is used not only to describe a situation in which dominant interests prevail, through the winning of consent of the subordinate groups, but also to describe a situation in which the definitions of the powerful are contested by counter-hegemonic practices. That is, the concept of hegemony also includes those practices which resist and challenge attempts to naturalize dominant meanings. Hegemony can never be total as there are always "emergent forms of consciousness and representations which may be mobilized in opposition to the hegemonic order." (O'Sullivan, et al., 1983:104.) Hegemony then, can be understood as the process in which the "struggle over meaning" takes place.

If, as I have argued, media's signifying practices are ineffectively challenged by the "bias call" as it has been described here, on what grounds can they be challenged? Where can the counter-hegemonic process of resistance be exercised with respect to media's signifying practices?

I believe there are a number of avenues open to more effectively challenge and critique those practices which, as we have seen in chapter 1, have the tendency to reproduce the definitions of the powerful, and frame issues in particular ways. The few suggestions outlined below are by no means exhaustive. They do however, point to a variety of counter-hegemonic practices by which to challenge dominant meanings and to create new emergent ones.

First, a more effective type of "bias call" may be achieved if one were to focus not at criticisms aimed at specific, perceived misrepresentations of the media (for example, criticisms based on departures from 'objectivity', 'neutrality' and 'balance'), but rather on those issues which more generally address questions of news values and news judgements. That is not to suggest that the more blatant forms of

distortion should go unchecked. Rather, by consistently focusing on the departures from objective news practices, the more insidious forms of news logic, values and judgements which give rise to the pervasive ideological framing of issues, are tacitly accepted and inadvertently encouraged. By calling into question news imperatives from which political news stories are routinely constructed, and news values in which they are cast, one may be able to more critically assess and hold up to scrutiny the assumptions of news logic which sustain status-quo definitions of political/social reality.

Second, as I have indicated in Chapter 3, with the advent of the penny press and the decline of the party press, the economics of news production shifted from a dependence on direct political contributions and subscriptions, to a reliance on revenues generated by the selling of advertising space. This development, coupled with the introduction of the wire services, were the first steps in turning the news into a commodity. By avoiding partisan views in the reporting of political issues, news could now be sold to more and more subscribing newspapers which, in turn, enabled advertisers to address larger, undifferentiated body of consumers. As we have seen, these developments were to lead to a substantial shift in the presentation of, and participation in political life.

In order to regain more accessible forms of communication, "readers" might become "speakers" through participation in media outside the mainstream. Through the involvement in community radio and press for instance, individuals may become actively involved in political debate and discussion, rather than remain spectators of political events.

Third, audiences may form lobby or pressure groups to sponsor debates on questions of media structure and orientation. Similar kinds of citizens groups have formed to pressure governments to intervene into some of the commercial practices of the media, especially in the area of television advertising. These groups have called for stricter measures in the regulation of advertising (in the matter of advertising directed towards children in Quebec, for instance), or have demanded the withdrawal of certain commodities from various media (tobacco and liquor are prime examples). There have been those, on the other hand, who advocate the boycotting of advertisers' products as a means of voicing their


opposition to television programs.

Those working within the commercial media itself can also exercise counter-hegemonic practices. The media are not monolithic. There are situations in which the media may be challenged from within. In our discussion of the photo incident at the Vancouver Sun for example, the public was made aware of the fact that 247 other photos of the demonstration had been available. This fact would not have been revealed had it not been for the 'letters' editor's perseverance in the face of hostility from the managing editor. These examples illustrate only a few instances in which the power of the media may be contested. They demonstrate the various avenues open to counter-hegemonic practices which may prove more effective than the "bias call" when confronting media's signifying practices.

In this thesis I have attempted to investigate the notion of bias, not as it is traditionally used, as an evaluator of news media messages, but as an object of study itself -- to investigate it as part of news media discourse. My primary concern was to retain the everyday, common sense understanding of the term (as distortion, or partisan) and at the same time acknowledge the more pervasive ideological power the media exercise in constructing, maintaining and reproducing 'world views'. I feel that critics who suggest we abandon the investigation of bias and instead focus on the ideological power the media exercise have, to quote a well-worn phrase, "thrown the baby out with the bath water." By retaining and investigating reader/audience assumptions of bias, and the institutional structures, assumptions and guidelines in place to deal with such charges, we are able to trace the audiences' complicity in the ideological, reproductive work of the media.

As we have seen in the discussion of hegemony -- one of its key characteristics is the complicity of subordinate groups to their own subordination. In a similar vein, those who challenge media significations at the level of the bias call by focusing their criticism on the substantive, factual content of media messages, overlook and tacitly accept the more latent and interpretive schema in which that content is embedded. It is this interpretive schema itself which defines the boundaries of debate and sets the limits to what is to be considered legitimate. If, as I have argued in Chapter 1, objectivity, balance and

neutrality are the means by which the ideological power of the media is exercised by mapping the limits to how issues, political action and debate are to be understood, then it might also be argued that those criticisms of media's signifying practices which focus on the media's failure to comply with 'objective' news practices actually serve to sustain relations of dominance.



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