

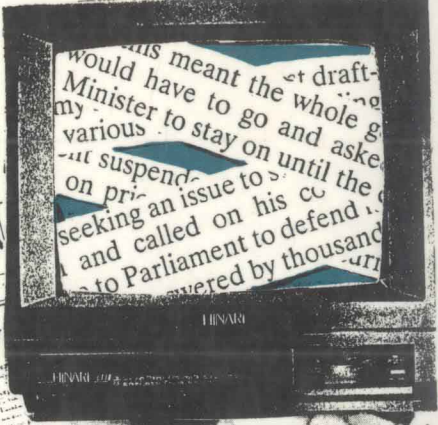
UNDERSTANDING NEWS

John Hartley



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UNDERSTANDING NEWS

John Hartley



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To DAFYDD ELIS-THOMAS, MP
in solidarity and in answer to a question:

If the relationship between intellectuals and people/nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation.

Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

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People whose names appear on the front pages of newspapers are rarely the sole authors of the actions they are credited with. And men who engage in 'their' work usually require the equally productive but invisible work of women in order to 'free' themselves for the task in hand. Those who actually produce the goods are relegated to the inside pages and supposedly 'non-productive' spheres – like the kitchen.

So it is with publishing. This book was cooked up between myself and, above all others, Carol Owen. It is my pleasure, then, to acknowledge her 'invisible' half of the work: most of the *jouissance* I've got out of this text comes from her part in it.

Thanks too to Roland Denning, of the Chapter Film Workshop, Cardiff, for valuable comments, and to Clare Richardson for more. To both her and Anna Patterson I owe thanks for permission to use extracts from their 'private collections' of old newspapers – I look forward to the next discoveries under the lino.

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J.H.

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

This series of books on different aspects of communication is designed to meet the needs of the growing number of students coming to study this subject for the first time. The authors are experienced teachers or lecturers who are committed to bridging the gap between the huge body of research available to the more advanced student, and what the new student actually needs to get him started on his studies.

Probably the most characteristic feature of communication is its diversity: it ranges from the mass media and popular culture, through language to individual and social behaviour. But it identifies links and a coherence within this diversity. The series will reflect the structure of its subject. Some books will be general, basic works that seek to establish theories and methods of study applicable to a wide range of material; others will apply these theories and methods to the study of one particular topic. But even these topic-centred books will relate to each other, as well as to the more general ones. One particular topic, such as advertising or news or language, can only be understood as an example of communication when it is related to, and differentiated from, all the other topics that go to make up this diverse subject.

The series, then, has two main aims, both closely connected. The first is to introduce readers to the most important results of contemporary research into communication together with the theories that seek to explain it. The second is to equip them with appropriate

methods of study and investigation which they will be able to apply directly to their everyday experience of communication.

If readers can write better essays, produce better projects and pass more exams as a result of reading these books I shall be very satisfied; but if they gain a new insight into how communication shapes and informs our social life, how it articulates and creates our experience of industrial society, then I shall be delighted. Communication is too often taken for granted when it should be taken to pieces.


John Fiske

**Western
Mail** 

**THORPE
TRIAL
SURPRISE
MOVE**

**THE
Sun**

**MICK
JAGGER
TALKS**




EXCLUSIVE!

**NEWS
OF THE
WORLD**

**BOGUS
COUNT'S
VICTIMS**

**EXPLOSION
OF VIOLENCE IN
CARDIFF STREET
-COURT
ALLEGATION**

IN TODAY'S 

Read all about it

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1 NEWS AS COMMUNICATION

But she only loves him because he's got a Cortina

The Lambrettas

In the beginning

When we learn to speak, we learn much more than words. From the very beginning we use language not just to name things, but, more importantly, to work out how to behave towards other people and the world 'out there'. For instance, together with the words 'biscuit' and 'dog' we may learn approval; similarly, together with the words 'hot' and 'dirty' we may learn not to touch the gas stove or that otherwise quite tempting object left behind by the cat. Even at this stage, we don't only rely on our own sensations but also on what we've learnt in language as the way of organizing the world around us into some semblance of order. So when a close and trusted grown-up says 'ah-hah, that's hot', we may well take our enquiring finger away from the teapot without actually feeling the heat. Likewise, we may not even notice many of the innumerable sensations that present themselves to our senses – preferring to concentrate on those we've learnt, or have been encouraged, to speak about.

Speech, then, is the means by which we select and organize our experiences, and it is the medium through which we learn how to behave, how to react, what to believe. Furthermore, speech isn't something over which we have individual control – it is supplied to us as a ready made tool by other people. We learn to find, explore and understand our own individuality within its terms. If you like, at the very moment when we begin to use language we enter the wider world of social relations – but at that same moment we have our first encounter with a form of social control. We learn to be

what we are through a language-system whose rules and conventions we can neither alter nor ignore.

However, most of us are able and happy to take this impersonal and unavoidable social force of speech as we find it. It seems quite natural, and it is very much in our own interests to go along with the rules and constraints for the sake of the benefits we gain from successful communication. If, as often happens, we can't express our thoughts, feelings or desires adequately with the linguistic resources at our command, we generally blame ourselves and seek to find a way to improve our performance. It doesn't occur to us to say that because language has failed us this time it is no good and we'll henceforth either abandon it or make up a new one. Should we be tempted to take such measures, there are plenty of people around us who will do their best to 'cure' us and bring us back into the speech community. Hence our submission to the social control of the language-system is usually both voluntary and taken for granted. Having submitted to the range of possibilities offered by language (including, remember, both values and a structuring system by which we order the perceptions of the world and our own inner sensations), we are free to go on to make sense of our selves and our lives, and to act creatively in society. But even as we speak, language speaks us.

As time goes on, our command of language increases. But it doesn't just grow like a shopping list with the simple addition of more and more items. Instead, we learn whole new sub-languages, as it were, which we encounter as our experience and circumstances develop. In other words, whenever we enter a new field of experience, we find our way by a process which resembles not simply learning, but rather the first experience of learning language. We're immersed in a whole set of new terms, rules or codes, and the conventions which govern how this particular sub-set of language operates. As with all speech, these terms, codes and conventions are the bearers of a structure of meanings and values, which we construct out of the linguistic raw materials as we use them in context. Often we put a good deal of effort into getting it right and take a good deal of pleasure in 'playing' (often, as with puns, banter and verbal games, well beyond the bounds of rational 'sense') with the language sub-set associated with a field of activity that we value. We identify strongly with certain language-systems, and seek to present ourselves in their terms. And often we can communicate

quite successfully within an area of language without necessarily having direct experience of its associated activities.

For instance, most people as they grow up are encouraged to get involved in activities which are somehow seen as appropriate to their gender. This process starts very early, with the differences between the kinds of toys seen as 'right' for boys and girls respectively; with the kinds of books, tastes and interests they are encouraged towards; and with the sorts of values and identifications they are expected to fulfil in themselves. By the time people reach their teens, this process has usually gone a long way, so there are quite specialized areas which separate still further the supposed distinctions between the sexes. Hence whilst it is apparently 'right' for boys to spend a lot of time learning about – and learning to *talk* about – cars, sport and the like, it is equally deemed 'right' for girls to learn the language of make-up, fashion, etc.

On the surface there's not much in common between cars and make-up. Indeed, the differences are often what is most valued by those who, respectively, enter 'cosmetics culture' and 'Cortina culture'. But the process by which these differences are achieved is much the same. Take the example of make-up. The skill required to choose, apply and combine the various types of skin care products and make-up is neither the first nor the most important thing to be learnt. There is a whole language or culture of cosmetics within which each person must find her own way of expressing her identity – as well as relating to others involved in the same culture. The language of cosmetics is learnt through the media of women's and girls' magazines, advertisements, the advice of parents or other older acquaintances, and by constant 'girl-talk' with school- or work-mates and friends. Along with ideas about colours, new products, and the relative merits of different lotions, there is an ordered world of meanings and values to which these practical activities give material expression. The 'symbolic order' offers an imaginative space for us to identify with – if we seem to fit that space, we'll take an interest in the products. More important, we'll be able to see and present our 'selves' with confidence in the recognized and accepted idiom of this linguistic system.

But while we are learning the specialized language-system of cosmetics culture (or Cortina culture), we are learning a lot more besides. For instance, it is obvious that much of this culture is promoted and directed by business and commercial interests – it is an

industry. At the very moment we seek to express our real and innermost essence as individuals through the medium of make-up and its associated values and range of meanings, we are simultaneously entering into bargains with impersonal social institutions like cosmetics firms, magazine publishers and high street retailers. We learn how to live within the frameworks given by these institutions. Without losing our fascination for the products and for the culture by which both they and part of our own 'sense of self' is defined, we learn to accept as natural the existence and personal relevance of the industrial framework.

And so the effect, or function, of our individual involvement with cosmetics is two-fold. We unwittingly reproduce social structures and relationships and our identity is produced *by ourselves* to fit in with these structures and relations. It follows that we put a lot of personal effort into subjecting ourselves to subordinate, dependent positions in society.

The way in which we learn to accept the social forces and institutions around us as natural is primarily through the medium of language-systems like the one associated with cosmetics which I've just outlined. There is a two-way process involved with all of these cultural sub-systems. We literally create or produce our own individual identity by means of the various overlapping systems we learn to speak; and conversely the social forces and institutions are themselves maintained and transmitted over time by means of the active reproduction of their meanings, values and routines in the speech and habits of us, their bearers or carriers.

In a society as complex and industrialized as that of the West, there are innumerable specialized meaning-systems or 'discourses' that can be identified. Everyone's identity can be seen partly as a result of the selection and involvement to which s/he has been exposed or has chosen. However, not all of these discourses are esteemed as equally important. For instance, the world of public affairs, politics and current events seems to enjoy a higher prestige than the more private world of domestic life, personal relationships, sexuality and emotions. There seems to be a social process at work in which certain facets of our overall culture 'count' more than others.

News-discourse

And so we come to the news. It is a social and cultural institution

among many others, and it shares their characteristics in important ways. It is, literally, made of words and pictures, so comprising a specially differentiated sub-system within language. Although many people don't take a detailed interest in it, especially until after they leave school, it nevertheless enjoys a privileged and prestigious position in our culture's hierarchy of values. And of course, the way we relate to it as individuals is actively to learn its particular language-system. We do this without needing to make any more or less of a deliberate effort than we expend on learning to speak for the first time. Just as learning ordinary language entails learning values and a range of selected and structured responses to what we see around us, so it is with news. News comes to us as the pre-existing discourse of an impersonal social institution which is also an industry. As we get used to its codes and conventions we will become 'news-literate' – not only able to follow the news and recognize its familiar cast of characters and events, but also spontaneously able to interpret the world at large in terms of the codes we have learnt from the news. Individually, we perceive and interpret the world in terms partly derived from classifications made familiar in the news; collectively, we make up 'reality' as we go along, perceiving it as meaningful to the extent that it can be made to resemble the expectations we bring to it from the ordered language-system of the news.

However, it must be said at once that the news, whether heard on radio, read in newspapers or seen on television, gains much of its 'shape' from the characteristics of the medium in which it appears. We shall explore later on in this book the extent to which TV news in particular promotes a similar view of the world as TV fiction, from soap opera to adventure series. In other words, the question arises as to how far news comprises an autonomous sub-system of language by itself, and how far it is merely one of the variations in a larger system.

In order to answer that question, we need to make a distinction between two of the terms I've been using almost interchangeably up till now. We must distinguish between a *language-system* and a *discourse*. A system is a structure of *elements* in a rule-governed set of *relations*. To understand it you have to be able to *identify* the different elements from each other, and show how they are selected and combined according to the rules or conventions appropriate to that system. In the case of language, for example, the system is the