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# Interpreting News

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# Interpreting News

*Also by Graham Meikle*

Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet (2002)

*For Fin, Rosie and Lola*

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# Introduction: News and Symbolic Power

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A news story should answer ‘w’ questions — who, what, where, when, how, and all too rarely, why. This book asks ‘w’ questions of news. It asks ‘who’ questions, of the roles of journalists, owners, sources and audiences. It asks ‘what’ questions, of the nature of news stories, news texts, of news values and narratives. It asks ‘where’ and ‘when’ questions, of the development of different news industries and forms. It asks ‘how’ questions, of the distribution and reception of news, from the printing press to SMS. And it asks ‘why’ a lot. This is not a book about putting news together, but about taking it apart.

Many readers of *Interpreting News* are likely to be undergraduate students, and yet I’m conscious that many such students aren’t all that interested in the news. I don’t mean that they’re uninterested in issues — I mean that they’re uninterested in the established news media. Newspapers, for example, struggle to appeal to teenagers and university students. In 2004 the *Washington Post* held focus groups to find out why they were having so much trouble attracting younger readers — those interviewed said that they didn’t like the thought of piles of old newspapers cluttering up the house, and that they wouldn’t be interested in a subscription to the paper even if it were free (*Wired News*, 24 November 2004). The *New York Times* reported similar findings, with one 22-year-old complaining that newspapers ‘are so clunky and big’ (22 January 2006, p. 1). One 2006 survey found that 27% of Americans under the age of 30 had got *no news at all* from TV, radio, newspapers or the Net on the day

before being interviewed (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2006: 9). Back in the 1980s leading scholars could write that news was 'high-status' (Fiske 1987: 281) and that it enjoyed 'a privileged and prestigious position in our culture's hierarchy of values' (Hartley 1982: 5). But in the early twenty-first century, as Graeme Turner suggests, the very idea of news 'looks increasingly old-fashioned' (2005: 13).

And yet this picture is a complicated one, with the traditional news media still far from being replaced by newer ones. For instance, students I talk to often say that they don't read the papers or watch the TV bulletins, but prefer to go online for news. But when I ask for details, this often turns out to mean they go to the websites of the main newspapers or TV news providers. Some students say they prefer the experience of blogging or participatory news networks such as Indymedia <<http://www.indymedia.org>> to that of consuming news — but here again the agenda for discussion is often that set by the traditional news media. Others are happier with the blend of news and entertainment and satirical commentary offered by a website like *The Onion* <<http://www.theonion.com>> or by an irreverent video blog like *Rocketboom* <<http://www.rocketboom.com>>. They may prefer TV shows such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* in the US (and beyond, with episodes widely shared online), *Have I Got News For You?* in the UK, or *The Chaser's War on Everything* in Australia. And yet here again, the content of these sites and shows — the menu of topics available to satirize — is often set by the current concerns of the traditional news media.

So this book starts from the claim that a thorough understanding of news remains central to an understanding of contemporary media, which is in turn central to an understanding of contemporary society and culture. News, notes McQuail, deserves particular attention in the study of media content, as it is 'one of the few original contributions of the mass media to the range of cultural forms of expression' (2000: 337). News deserves attention for many other reasons too. Being in the news business can confer a privileged legal and regulatory status upon media organizations. Moreover, news confers credibility and respectability upon media organizations (despite the success of *The Simpsons*, Rupert Murdoch is not the head of Cartoon Corporation but of News Corporation). And this credibility allows them to accumulate and exercise a particular form of power.

The mediascape is, as Castells argues, 'the social space where power is decided' (2007: 238). The media enable an arena for the defining of reality. James Carey once argued that reality is 'a scarce resource' (1989: 87). In this, the ability to define reality is also, as Carey puts it, a 'fundamental form of power' (p. 87). This 'fundamental form of power' is what Bourdieu calls *symbolic power* — 'Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality' (1991: 166). This is the ability 'to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms' (Thompson 1995: 17). Thompson distinguishes symbolic power from other dimensions of power — the coercive power of the military or the law, the political power of governments, and the economic power of corporations. Coercive power works through the use or threat of force; political power through the coordination and regulation of individuals and groups; economic power through productive activity, the transformation of raw material, the creation of services and goods (1995: 12–18).

What might we mean by a phrase like 'the production and transmission of symbolic forms'? We would mean the creation and distribution of ideas and images, stories and songs, information and entertainment. Institutions such as the media, universities, schools, government and religious organizations are all in the symbolic power business — they are, as Hartley has it, 'sites of knowledge-production and meaning-exchange' (1999: 6). The news media are central players in this. Their work is the exercise of symbolic power — the creation and distribution of symbolic content; the exchange of shaped information; the expression of cultural skills and values. Symbolic power, as Bourdieu puts it, is the power of 'making people see and believe' (1991: 170). In a society in which information is central, argues Melucci, 'the power of information is essentially the *power of naming*' (1996: 228, emphasis in original). Symbolic power is the power to name, to define, to endorse, to persuade. The news media are among the most important of those institutions that exercise such symbolic power. News matters.

Symbolic power is about defining reality. It's not separate from other forms of power, but bound up with them — political power generates resources of symbolic power; economic power can be expressed as symbolic power; coercive power can be demonstrated

through the exercise of symbolic power. Not everyone is able to exercise this power in the same kinds of way or with the same kinds of success. Certain types of institution, and certain individuals, have greater resources than others — schools and universities; churches, temples and mosques; and media organizations. These are the main centres of symbolic power — and each, as Hartley argues (1998, 1999), is built around *teaching*, a positive activity.

But all kinds of teaching are messy — the difference between what gets taught and what gets learned can be a big one. The exercise of symbolic power isn't a simple, one-way transaction — like all forms of power, it's expressed within relationships, and so is not entirely predictable; it is, as Foucault has it, 'exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations' (1978: 94). Audiences can respond in many ways. Communication of this sort is a dynamic process — even, in some accounts, a chaotic one (McNair 2006). News organizations may have far greater resources of symbolic power than you or me, but the news itself is a volatile process. We live in an increasingly global, digital, always-on media environment, in which the live broadcast of an event can change the outcome of that event (Friedland 1992, Wark 1994). We live in a mediascape where the people we somehow persist in calling audiences can now collaborate and intervene in the news agenda in new ways — ask former CBS anchor Dan Rather, who retired early with his credibility badly damaged, after bloggers mobilized to debunk a CBS story about George W. Bush's service record (Allan 2006: 94–8).

Is 'symbolic power' just another way of saying 'ideology'? No, although as part of the problem with the word 'ideology' is that it means very different things to different people, some overlap is not out of the question (Williams 1983, Thompson 1990, Eagleton 2007). Ideology has been a central concept in much media and cultural theory (such as Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1995a, 1995b, Hall *et al* 1978, Herman & Chomsky 1988). This is particularly the case for those working in the Marxist tradition, exploring whether control of the means of production is the same thing as control of the production of meaning (Gramsci 1971, Althusser 1984, Marx & Engels 2006). But this tradition of ideological analysis rather lost its way — 'in a sea of methodological doubt' as two leading scholars put it (Atton & Couldry 2003: 580; see also Curran 2002: 107–13). The influence of Foucault's approach to

power (1978, 1980, 2000) became more central, while post-modernist critics announced that 'grand narratives' were over (Lyotard 1984). For our present purposes, however, ideology and symbolic power should be distinguished: the key distinction to make is that ideology, as Thompson (1990) argues, is best seen as a subset of symbolic power relations — those concerned with *domination*. With this distinction made, symbolic power can be seen to describe a wider field of communication, some aspects of which may well be dominant or even repressive, but other aspects of which are not.

Do we need to be journalists to talk about the news with any authority? No — this book is about the social and cultural importance of news. News is central to the experience of all of us — not just those who work for companies that sell it. More importantly, the news and its creators need to be subjected to the same scrutiny to which they subject others. Reporters routinely demand access and answers in the name of the people, claim to speak on our behalf, and ask questions in the name of 'the public interest'. The news media claim for themselves formidable power to scrutinize everyone else's business. But those same news media are now themselves among the ranks of the powerful that they claim to scrutinize — and so they ought to be called to account too, in the same ways and on the same grounds. As Michael Schudson writes (1995: 3): 'Everyone in a democracy is a certified media critic, which is as it should be.' News is too important to be left only to journalists.

### What's going on

This book interprets the news — and the critical literature on news — in terms of symbolic power. As Couldry observes, the concept of symbolic power is 'surprisingly underdeveloped' (2003: 39); this book develops this concept by examining its relevance to the production, distribution and reception of news. It maps out the key kinds of actors who exercise symbolic power in and through the news, the principal contexts in which they do this, and the importance of particular media forms in enabling the exercise of symbolic power. It concentrates mainly on the UK, US and Australia, and emphasizes certain news forms (principally TV news, newspapers and the Net) over others (radio, news magazines, documentaries and current

affairs programming). The book can also be read as an introduction to the main ways in which news has been theorized and understood in the various traditions that converge as Media Studies. News matters, as I've said already, but so does the study of news, which has been approached from a wide range of traditions — textual analysis, critical theory, journalism history, medium theory, political economy and others. If the study of the media means the study of that-which-is-in-the-middle, it is a virtue of Media Studies that it too is in-the-middle, with much of the best work being done in the interstices between humanities and social sciences, between established traditions and new approaches. The study of media is by its very nature interdisciplinary (perhaps even anti-disciplinary) — Media Studies is less a discipline than it is an *undiscipline*. This makes some people uncomfortable, but it can also be a source of invention and creative energy.

If news is an arena and a vehicle for the exercise of symbolic power, who gets to exercise this power? *Interpreting News* identifies four kinds of groups or individuals who do this in various unequal ways. First, *media organizations and their owners* — this book discusses a number of key media organizations in detail, including News Corporation, Reuters, the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and Indymedia. Second, *journalists*, who are licenced by news organizations to exercise symbolic power and who draw their authority from those organizations. Third, those *sources* of information who have the capacity to influence and direct the news by providing (or withholding) high-status information — politicians and their staffers are central sources, although they do not only exercise symbolic power but are also vulnerable to its use by others (through scandal, leak, gaffe and smear, for example); other people with official status of some kind can also exploit their positions as sources of news. And fourth, *audiences* — readers, viewers and users of news, whose interpretations, responses to (or outright rejections of) the news are a fundamental daily dimension of symbolic power.

Chapter 1, 'Defining News', builds a definition of news that runs through the discussion in the rest of the book (an attempted exercise of symbolic power in itself, as is true of every definition — and every book). It argues that news has to be understood as both a particular kind of product or text, and also as particular kinds of processes of production, distribution and reception.



Chapter 2, 'Know Your Product', starts from the position that a basic truth of the news is that it is overwhelmingly produced and marketed by large media organizations. These organizations have symbolic power resources that are far greater and more concentrated than those of the other actors in the news processes. Indeed, their symbolic power is so great, their capacity to define reality so extensive, that we may take it for granted and not notice it (Bourdieu 1991, Couldry 2000, 2003) — which in turn increases their symbolic power still further. This chapter sets large commercial news organizations as the first context for a consideration of news and symbolic power, emphasizing those organizations' capacity to define reality by defining what counts as news. It also discusses the issues surrounding the increasingly concentrated ownership of news organizations (to complement this, public service broadcasters are discussed in Chapter 7, alternative news organizations in Chapter 8).

Chapter 3, 'True Stories', sets the preceding discussion in a wider cultural context. It examines some of the principal ways in which news is shaped by (and in turn shapes) our expectations of story-telling and of visual culture. It focuses first on print news stories, second on news photographs, and third on television (the Net is discussed in Chapters 4 and 8).

Chapter 4, 'From Coffee-House To Cyber-Café', focuses on journalists and their changing status. Journalists are licenced agents of symbolic power. Their social and cultural roles are underwritten by their claim to Fourth Estate status. This chapter traces the emergence of this and its current, most pressing, challenge from the opening up of the new media environment of blogging.

Chapter 5, 'Pay No Attention To That Man Behind The Curtain', turns to attempts to influence the news agenda. It discusses the roles of sources — powerful or official or otherwise established groups and individuals who are able to exercise symbolic power through the news media by having their concerns presented as news. This chapter discusses the staged pseudo-event, the tactics of spin, and the concept of moral panic.

Chapter 6, 'Here We Are, Now Entertain Us', introduces the fourth crucial set of actors in the processes of news — audiences, readers, viewers, and users of news. The chapter surveys the most important perspectives on media audiences, and places these