

Topic 3 - The selection and presentation of news and moral panics

03 November 2015 22:24

Chandler (1994) - suggests that the way television news is presented results in it being regarded as the most reliable source of news by its audiences.

- News readers are presented as neutral in the way they read the scripted news, dress appropriately and make eye contact
- The body language of the news readers is reduced by them sitting behind a desk or having a clipboard at hand
- The content of the news may not be pleasant but the manner of the news reader manner is always friendly, reliable and reassuring. Newsreaders is the viewer's trustworthy and reliable friend
- High tech studios where the news is presented shows the scientific lengths the broadcaster has gone to find the truth, this reinforces the image of formal and objective authority

Overall, the presentation of the news by TV appears to convey objective truth.

Buckingham (1996) - carried out research based on interviews and discussions with 12-15 year olds, concluded that the status and credibility of the news was never challenged by them. To them, the news was perceived to be an honest and trustworthy reflection of the real world.

- Critics argue that this is an illusion of credibility rather than reality

McQuail (1992) - argues that news is not objective or impartial because the news is actually a socially manufactured product because it is the end result of a selective process. Gatekeepers - people who have the power to let some news through and stop others such as editors, journalists and owners, make choices and judgements about what events are important and how to cover them.

Critics point out that the process of news selection is biased because it is generally dependent upon 3 influences:

1. Organisational constraints
2. News values held by media organisations
3. Ownership and ideology - set of ideas to justify inequality

Organisational Routines

News coverage is shaped by the routines and organisation of the companies themselves

The collection of news itself as well as its presentation might be then biased before it is even reported

The logistics of collecting news may bias what news is gathered, this can be shown in different ways:

- **Sources of news:** Many newspapers and TV news producers purchase most news from press agencies such as Press Association because they simply cannot afford hundreds of journalists.
- **Financial costs:** Sending reporters overseas can be expensive, this can result in news channels giving us news reports even if nothing much has happened, just to justify the costs. Organisations usually already have stations in other countries so they can report the stories.
- **Time + space:** The news is tailored for everyone e.g. BBC 9 O'clock news for 30 mins for when everyone gets up.
- **Deadlines:** TV has an advantage over newspapers because they can deliver news in real time whereas the newspapers usually have deadlines in the morning or at the end of the week.
- **Immediacy and actuality:** Events are more likely to be reported, especially on TV, if they can be accompanied by sounds/live footage. It adds dramatic actuality.
- **Audience:** The style and content of the news is done according to the audience who watches. Eg. 5 News is targeted at a younger audience and presents news in short and snappy ways. Whereas the Guardian Newspaper is aimed at middle class professionals.

Ownership, ideology and bias:

Neo-pluralism

Pluralists argue that journalists are professionals who are disinterested, impartial and objective pursuers of truth. **Neo-pluralists** suggest that, in the modern world of journalism, these goals are increasingly difficult to attain. **Davies (2008)** argues that modern day British journalism is characterised by what he calls **churnalism** - the uncritical over-reliance by journalists on 'facts' churned out by government spin doctors and public relations experts. He found that 80% of news stories in two national newspapers were sourced in this way over a two week period in 1997. Only 12% of stories were generated by journalists.

The power elite - Bagdikian (2004), in his critique of the American news media, suggests that almost all media owners in the USA are part of a wider **power elite** made up of a powerful industrial, financial and political establishment. Consequently, media owners ensure that the content of news is politically conservative and that their news outlets promote corporate values. Bagdikian notes how such values permeate news, e.g. most newspapers have sections dedicated to business news, but contain little on poverty or the growing gap between the rich and poor in the USA.

The propaganda model of the media:

Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that the media participate in propaganda campaigns helpful to elite interests. They suggest that media performance is largely shaped by market forces and that built into the capitalist system is a range of filters that work ceaselessly to shape media output, e.g. advertisers want their advertising to appear in a supportive selling environment whilst government can pressure the media with threats of withdrawal of TV licences and therefore control the flow of information.

Edwards and Cromwell (2006) argue that particular subjects, e.g. US/British government responsibility for genocide, vast corporate criminality and threats to the very existence of human life, are distorted, suppressed, marginalised and ignored by the British mass media. Leaders of developing countries of whom the West disapprove are uncritically demonised, whilst the USA is presented as the champion of democracy.

Marxist perspectives -

The Marxist Hall agrees that news is supportive of capitalist interests because those in powerful positions have better access to media institutions than the less powerful. Hall argues that this is a result of the **news values** employed by most journalists. In particular, most journalists rank the views of politicians, police officers, civil servants and business leaders (Hall calls these groups **primary definers**) as more important (or credible) than those of pressure groups, trade unionists or ordinary people. Hall calls this the **hierarchy of credibility**.

However, **Schlesinger (1990)** is critical of theories that focus on the power of elites or owners because the media do not always act in the interests of the powerful. Contemporary politicians are very careful about what they say to the media because they are very aware that the media can shape public perceptions of their policies and practices and perhaps influence voting behaviour, as well as putting them under considerable pressure to resign.

Media owners too are engaged in **competition** with each other, as illustrated by newspaper price wars and the fact that some media owners have engaged in some very public conflicts with each other over matters of media ownership. **Schlesinger** argues that this does not suggest a unified media.

The social background of media professionals:

GUMG (1981) argues that the way the news is gathered and presented has nothing to do with the powerful. They argue that the news is the product of the social backgrounds of the journalists who are usually white, middle class. The lifestyle of the journalists result them seeing very little wrong in the way society is presented, so they are rarely critical. The unconsciously side with the rich and the powerful because they have more in common with them.

Semiotic analysis:

The GUMG have studied news broadcasts and have used the technique called semiotic content analysis - involves detailed analysis of the language and images used by the media. They found that the language and images used by the media are more sympathetic to the interests of the powerful and often devalue the pov of the less powerful groups. E.g. news say that trade unions make demands but management says they make offers. The research shows that the media do not just reflect public opinion but also engage in agenda setting. (they provide the framework in which issues are discussed so that people think about the issues in a way that benefits the r/c).

CRITICISMS -

Pluralists would argue that the news contains many different povs, they note that certain views may dominate in particular situations, but the direction that bias takes it not consistent, and so there is no overall slant towards the rich and the powerful.

News Values

Spencer Thomas (2008) notes that news values - assumptions about what makes an event newsworthy, are guidelines or criteria that determine its 'newsworthiness'. This may differ between Channel 4 and BBC. News values are important as they will determine the success or failure of the paper.

Galtung and Ruge (1970) identified 10 sets of new value criteria used by journalists:

1. **Extraordinariness** - unexpected, rare, unpredictable and surprising events have more newsworthiness than routine events because they are out the ordinary. Eg. Tsunami /Bombing in Paris/ Diana's death.
2. **Threshold** - The bigger the size of the event, the more likely it will be nationally reported. Eg. Paris bombings had 24 hr coverage.
3. **Unambiguity** - events that are easy to grasp are more likely to be reported than those which are open to more than one interpretation. The most regular reason why stories don't appear is that they are too complicated for the average person.
4. **Reference to elite persons** - famous and powerful people at the top of the socio-economical hierarchy are seen as more newsworthy to the public than those who are regarded as ordinary. However, ethnic minority groups who are ordinary are likely to receive limited news coverage, unless they pose a threat to the core values of society.
5. **Reference to elite nations** - events happening in cultures different from our own will not be seen as inherently meaningful to audiences here. Eg. McLurg's Law: 1 dead Briton = 5 Frenchmen = 20 Egyptians = 500 Indians = 2000 Chinese.
6. **Personalisation** - events are reduced to conflicts between personalities because journalists and editors believe that
7. **Continuity** - Once a story has become important, it will continue to be covered for some time because news teams are ready to report, this can be the cause of MORAL PANICS. However, when views lose interest, the story dies.
8. **Narrative** - Journalists prefer to present news in the form of a story with heroes and villains. This makes it more interesting. The truth is much more complicated but the narrative doesn't show this because it's easier for audiences to understand.
9. **Negativity** - bad news is regarded by journalists as more exciting and dramatic than good news as it is seen as attracting a bigger audience. Stories about death and tragedy are always more interesting. The threshold for reporting bad news is lower than that of reporting good news because it usually incorporates other news values such as unambiguous, unexpected.
10. **Composition** - Most news outlets will attempt to balance the reporting of events. Eg. if there is an excess of gloomy news, some stories of positive nature will be added to create a balance.

Moral Panics

What is it?

Media reactions to particular social groups or particular activities which are defined as threatening societal values and consequently create anxiety amongst the general population.

Cohen's study of Mods and Rockers in the 60s - Folk Devils and Moral Panics

Stan Cohen wanted to research the social reaction to the Mods vs Rockers in 1964. In his book, he noted the front pages (wild ones, day of terror, rival gangs). However, Cohen could find very little evidence of the clash of the gangs.

Cohen argued that there were 3 distinctive elements in the media reporting of events:

1. Exaggeration and distortion - damage and violence over exaggerated
2. Prediction - they said that further trouble was on their way
3. Symbolisation - the symbols/characteristics (mods/rockers clothing styles) were all negatively labelled and associated with deviance

The media outrage sparked a series of responses:

- It aroused wider public, increased amount of arrests, this confirmed the validity of the reports
- New disturbances created more news coverage, caused even more police surveillance and more public concern

Cohen argued that groups for whatever reason could be labelled FOLK DEVILS and as a result become a SELF FULFILLING PROPHECY

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- **Weaknesses can be identified in Cohen's theory in terms of the structure/action debate.** Although Cohen takes an interactionist approach, the picture he presents of moral panics and deviance amplification seems to be very structural. This means that in practice, Cohen's explanation suggests that the mods and rockers have no freedom in their actions; they are portrayed as powerless victims in the face of media distortion and public outrage. Another aspect of the study, which shows a structural bias, is Cohen's assumptions of public reaction. Cohen seems to assume that the public will indeed all react in a particular way, and that this reaction is something that is directly caused by the media's reporting; it seems therefore to be an automatic response. This implies that the public have no free will to respond to media reporting and a 'moral panic' in any other way.

The stages of moral panics -

1. Media report on an activity/incident is over exaggerated in terms of language and headlines
2. Follow up articles label them as a problem group (folk devils). The media gives certain characteristics for the public to better identify them
3. Moral entrepreneurs such as politicians react to the reports and make statements condemning (attacking) the group, they insist that the government take action
4. Increased public concern over the behaviour of a certain group/incident.
5. Increased hostility towards the group, the public try to become like the police and tackle the problem themselves
6. A certain level of public opinion that agrees that there is a real threat that is caused by the group
7. Public concern is out of proportion to the real harm caused by the group
8. The group may react to the over policing and protest in a deviant way, more arrests occur, therefore fulfilling the initial media prophecy that the group was a social problem.

Contemporary examples of moral panics :

Refugees and asylum seekers

- In 2015, there was a moral panic on the number of refugees entering the EU from Syria. The press focused on the links between the refugees and terrorism to create public anxiety, especially because of the recent Paris and US attacks carried out by ISIS. The real reasons for why people were migrating was ignored.

Violence and sex in video games

- The Jamie Bulger case caused a moral panic about 'Video Game Nasties' which allegedly caused the two young boys to kidnap and torture the baby. It was said by the media that these violent films and games were causing youth delinquency and violence and that parents should be cautious about what they let their children watch. Caused movies to be banned in

the United Kingdom

Hoodies

- **Fawbert (2008)** examined newspaper reports about so called hoodies between 04-08. There was only one article that used the term hoodie to describe a young thug.

HIV and Gay people

- In the 1980s, a moral panic was created over AIDS/HIV. Some tabloid press nicknamed HIV as the 'gay plague'. By many, it was believed that the disease was caused by and passed on by the gay community. When it became clear that this wasn't the case, the moral panic moved on into another direction of the lad culture/lack of moral standards in young people.

Why do moral panics come about?

A reaction to rapid social change

- **FURED (1994)** - argues that moral panics arise when society fails to adapt to dramatic social change. It's felt that there is a loss of control, especially over the young. Moral panics are about the concerns that the older generation have about society today. They believe that things are out of control. They perceive that traditional norms and values are no longer relevant in their lives. People feel a sense of loss that is encouraged and worsened by the media moral panics.
- **Cohen and Young (1981)** - Journalists assume that the majority of people in society share common values of reality, so by reporting these issues, they are giving the public what they want.

A means of making a profit

- Some argue that the moral panics are simply the product of news values and the desire of journalists and editors to sell newspapers. Moral panics sell newspapers.
- When the news exhaust the cycle of newsworthiness, the journalists abandon interest in the panic, but the social problems don't disappear. They remain dormant till another journalist decides that they will be newsworthy again.

Serving ruling class ideology - Marxist view

- **Hall (1978)** - study on the media's coverage of black muggers - he concluded that it had an effect of labelling all young African Caribbean as criminals and the potential threat to white people. This served 3 ideological purposes of 1. Turning white w/c against the black w/c
- 2. Diverting attention away from the mismanagement of capitalism by the r/c
- 3. Justifying laws that repress and police the problem groups

A reflection of people's real fears

- **Left realists** argue that moral panics should not be dismissed as a product of r/c ideology. Moral panics actually have a real basis in reality. The media often identifies groups who real threats to those living in inner city areas.

https://getrevising.co.uk/revision-notes/using_material_from_item_c_and_elsewhere_assess

Using material from item C and elsewhere, assess the view that selection and presentation of the news 'is inevitably partial and biased'