

The University of Liverpool
Department of Social and Environmental Studies
School of Politics and Communication

Class: COMM 111 – Political Communication I: Media, State and Democracy

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Essay:

Taking one case study by the Glasgow Media Group, discuss the claim that their work is biased by the groups' political beliefs.

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There have very often been claims that the media, despite their constituted neutral role, are biased. The left-wing Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG), in their work 'Bad News' and 'More Bad News', examines the television's coverage of, initially, strikes, and later, the entire working class. It finds the media to be anti-liberal and anti-trade unionist, "clearly skewed against the interest of the working class and organised labour" and always "in favour of the managers of the industry."¹ However, there have also been claims about the GUMG research being biased and flawed by the group's own political beliefs. Especially the massive critique by Martin Harrison has been a major attack against the group's findings.

TV News, as the GUMG sees them, are an instrument of the ruling class to spread their ideology. TV News are anything but impartial and neutral, they are not 'reality-reflecting', and therefore, as the GUMG finds, contrary to the widely perceived trustworthiness people ascribe to it. TV news are rather a "cultural artefact"² in which our society's "cultural dominant assumptions"³ are being carried.

The crucial notion the GUMG refers to is the one of 'framing': "... 'facts' are situated in dominant story themes..., such themes build upon basic frames of reference – basic assumptions about society viewed in particular ways..."⁴ These frames, as they are eventually obscuring other possible readings of the text, "often hinder the full and proper coverage of the events in question".⁵ This 'preferred meaning' is finally what the text conveys, it sets the parameters of reading for the public and other readings are excluded.

The preferred reading is shaped by "contemporary cultural codes... [which generate] specific basic frames of reference. Such codes or routine handlings are not always easily revealed."⁶ But it is these codes that, the GUMG implies, allows the "ideology of news"⁷, the "hidden consensus"⁸, to shape the news.

However, the GUMG does not go as far as to infer a deliberate or conscious bias. The bias is rather concealed in the routines of journalistic and newsroom practice and in the ideological

¹ More Bad News, p. 400.

² Bad News, p. 1.

³ Bad News, p. 1.

⁴ Bad News, p. 9.

⁵ Bad News, p. 9.

⁶ Bad News, p. 10.

⁷ Bad News, p. 11.

⁸ Bad News, p. 12.

conventions of television news themselves⁹. They do not even deny bias: “Cultural bias is inevitable; however, its scope and direction are not.”¹⁰

Generally the group does have some problems with defining the notion of impartiality or neutrality. On the one hand they argue that there is not much reason to believe in the television network’s claim of neutrality, on the other hand they say that “the notion of cultural neutrality ... can never be achieved”¹¹ and “... we would not claim to exercise it ourselves.”¹² In fact, they would not even like to see the production of neutral news¹³. How this fits in with their massive critique is unfortunately not identifiable, as they never spell it out. They further admit that they have certain “attitudes and beliefs which can be attributed to us”¹⁴ but which would be irrelevant “given the weight of our findings.”¹⁵ Quite on the contrary is this the actual question related to the group’s work. If they find the TV news biased by a ‘hidden consensus’ their research might equally be flawed by their attitudes. It is this, what Harrison emphasizes: “What is of interest is whether their findings are in any sense product of their ‘ideological component’ ...”¹⁶ However, as the group finds that neutrality cannot be achieved, they finally come to a different decision of what they want to explore: “The central question thus becomes ‘does television news as presently constituted help explain, and clarify events in the real world or does it mystify and obscure them?’”¹⁷

As explained earlier, the GUMG finds ideological components hidden in the stylistics of the news conventions. To uncover and decode the code used in the news the group applied the following method: “We took other records of events in the real world apart from the television and we examined the linguistic and visual components of the television’s account.”¹⁸

To identify if the frequency of strike reporting was sufficient and fair the group compared their findings with the strike records in the Department of Employment (DE) statistics. In working with these facts the group wanted to avoid subjectivity and create an objective picture of what really happened. However, even at a short glance this tactic seems to be

⁹ Harrison 1985, p. 16.

¹⁰ Bad News, p. 17.

¹¹ Bad News, p. 10.

¹² More Bad News, p. 402.

¹³ More Bad News, p. 402.

¹⁴ More Bad News, p. 402.

¹⁵ More Bad News, p. 402.

¹⁶ Harrison 1985, p. 20.

¹⁷ Bad News, p. 19.

¹⁸ Bad News, p. 20.

insufficient and not in line with preceding statements in 'Bad News'. First of all, prior to this statement and in conjunction with statements about the journalistic code of practice the group always set facts in inverted commas: "... such objectivity assumes that the 'facts' exist outside of a frame of reference."¹⁹ Indeed, when talking about the statistics of the Department of Employment the group never uses the word 'fact' – maybe because they know that a few pages earlier they rejected every notion of something like that – but it is clear that it is facts what they are talking about. Secondly, when talking about how labour and management are contrasted the group finds that the labour side is looked at from the angle of events, i.e. picket lines or the like, while management is looked at from the angle of facts. These facts, they complain, are usually from official sources, which are trusted more by people than other sources, although, it can be inferred from the group's writings, this is not necessarily the case. But actually all the GUMG does then is taking the same Government officials and their numbers and statistics and use them as the group's evidence.

One of their major arguments regarding the discrepancy between the numbers of the DE and the strikes covered is "that there was no consistent relationship between the pattern of disputes and the pattern of reporting" and that the news "did not even cover all the disputes deemed to be of real significance by the Department of Employment."²⁰ The Department of Employment's yardstick for marking prominent stoppages of work is the loss of 5000 working days or more. Of the 20 stoppages the group demanded to be covered, nine were not.²¹ These, Harrison shows, were mostly strikes which started off in a smaller scale and, most importantly, did not have much further effects beyond the plants directly involved. Harrison concludes: "While ITN would not have been at fault if it had reported any of these stories, it is not easy to see on what grounds it is to be criticised for not doing so – and Bad News offers no argument beyond the implication that scale should command coverage."²²

The visual and linguistic analysis of the news items is probably the most important point of evidence the GUMG brings forth. The group does not say much about the visual analysis except explaining a couple of well known cinematic conventions. Also in their case studies there are not many mentions about this. Again the different angles can be found here. Workers are most often presented in an 'event' angle, resulting in visuals of strikers in picket lines or demonstrations, for instance, while the management tends to be looked at from the 'facts'

¹⁹ Bad News, p. 9.

²⁰ Bad News, p. 20.


²¹ Harrison 1985, p. 33.

²² Harrison 1985, p. 34.

angle with managers in their offices in nice suit and tie or being interviewed in the newsroom itself. “The danger here is that news coverage is often offering up what amounts to stereotypical images of working people.”²³

Their linguistic analysis bases on the ‘consistency rule’ discovered in conversational interaction, where one quality of something is being stated at the beginning of a sentence and is then, even if grammatical rules would not actually allow this, in the hearer’s mind distributed and then allocated to all the other items following. In the group’s words: “Hear it this way rather than another and do not notice the problems in using this category.”²⁴ Their first example for this is an extract from the BBC2 News of 19 January 1975:

The week had its share of unrest. Trouble in Glasgow with striking dustmen and ambulance controllers, short time in the car industry, no *Sunday Mirror* or *Sunday People* today and a fair amount of general trouble in Fleet Street and a continuing rumbling over the matter of two builders’ pickets jailed for conspiracy.

The GUMG comments this: “The preferred hearing is clearly that we see ... all of these as merely cases of ‘unrest’.”²⁵ One might argue that there *was* indeed ‘unrest’ – as strikes are certainly anything else but ‘rest’ – and therefore the word ‘unrest’ would have had its justification. And to state that with the above one would inevitable see all of this as “merely unrest” seems to be nowhere grounded except in the minds of the GUMG and further has nothing to do with the consistency rule. One other example the group gives is from 13 January on ITN: “*Still* in Glasgow, three hundred and fifty corporation dustcart drivers began a strike over a pay claim two months after a *similar* strike.”²⁶ The GUMG concludes from this: “The ideological glossing here ... really implies that strikes are directly caused by unreasonable pay claims.”²⁷ How this conclusion was derived by the above words is rather puzzling. Not only does the especially emphasized ‘still’ at the beginning of the text have nothing to do with the actual news item – it is rather  way of again saying which place they are talking about, as the previous item dealt with the Scottish ambulance controller’s strike²⁸ – but there is also nowhere in the cited text anything said about pays, and at the very least about

²³ Bad News, p. 26.

²⁴ Bad News, p. 24.

²⁵ Bad News, p. 23.

²⁶ Bad News, p. 24, see also Harrison 1985, p. 263. Emphasis by the GUMG.

²⁷ Bad News, p. 24.

²⁸ See the ITN news scripts in Harrison 1985, p. 263.

“unreasonable” ones. When reading the ITN news scripts one finds that the report goes on: “They want another 2.50 pounds a week to bring their pay into line with drivers in the private sector.”²⁹ Now here a pay claim is mentioned but to state that the news report implies an “unreasonable” one seems to be inappropriate. Again the conclusion derived apparently only in the groups’ minds and lacks any substance, *and* the presentation of the examined material is emphasized in an almost propagandistic way. It is not only not mentioned what “still in Glasgow” refers to, it is rather inferred that this is sort of a complaint by the reporters about all those strikers being still and again out and interfering with our lives. Which is not what it means. This is what Anderson and Sharrock call “producing significance”³⁰. They refer directly to the GUMG but they do, however, not condemn the conclusions directly: “We are not trying to argue that one *cannot* arrive at the kind of conclusions the media scholars draw. We argue only that these conclusions are not *necessarily* to be drawn from those materials, *and* that those conclusions are not the only ones which can legitimately be drawn from those same materials.”³¹ But they find that there is not as much a bias in the media itself but rather is “the significance and extent of bias ... produced by media scholars.”³² The two examples given above seem to underpin this judgement.

The GUMG gives two detailed case studies in ‘Bad News’. For Harrison this is another proof that their findings are inadmissible: “Given the authors’ frequent invocations of their ‘findings’ and ‘evidence’, and their damning conclusions, it comes as a surprise to find that they provide extended analysis of the coverage of only two strikes.”³³ I want to concentrate on the Glasgow dustcart drivers’ strike and compare the research by the GUMG with the challenge Harrison makes. As Harrison I will concentrate on the news reports on ITN, as there are news scripts available from them. All ITN coverage in the following paragraphs is taken from Harrison’s book.

The Glasgow dustcart drivers went on strike for the second time within a few months in January 1975 after the Glasgow Corporation employing them had in their view not stood to the promise to increase their wages. In March the Army was called in to clear the rubbish, which had until then piled up in the streets.

²⁹ Harrison 1985, p. 263.

³⁰ Anderson & Sharrock 1979, p. 368.

³¹ Anderson & Sharrock 1979, p. 367, original emphasis.

³² Anderson & Sharrock 1979, p. 368.

³³ Harrison 1985, p. 83.

The first major critique the GUMG brings forth is again one of framing and agenda-setting. “The characteristic inferential framework, used by television journalists in reporting disputes, is to utilise limited aspects of a dispute to create a dominant view.”³⁴ They say, that from the beginning of the reporting “the focus of the coverage became ... a health hazard.”³⁵ The first item ITN ran about the strike said: “The strike means that Glasgow faces another pile up of rubbish on the pavements...”, showing library film of rubbish on the street of the previous year. One BBC bulletin said: “the decision to stop work ... was bringing fears of a repeat of the situation last October when rubbish piled up in the streets causing a health hazard.”³⁶ While the GUMG states that ITN was “not so explicit in suggesting the hazard [as the BBC was]”³⁷ it is quite clear that ITN did actually not say anything about a health hazard at all. Maybe the group itself inferred that by the mentioning of the rubbish on the streets. Indeed did ITN not mention a health hazard until one month after the strike when they reported about a *professor* claiming that the strike might create a health hazard. Then there was only one report, eleven days later, within which ITN spoke about a health hazard up to the day when they reported about the probable decision to send in troops to clear up the rubbish, fourteen days later. Hence, to call the health hazard a ‘dominant frame’ is rather unjustified.

The accusation is, however, that the background of the strike was not sufficiently covered. Indeed, when looking at the news scripts one finds that ITN did not once talk about the causes of the strike. This also Harrison admits: “ITN is open to criticism for failing to explore the complicated background of this exceptionally protracted strike more thoroughly, and for not recalling the basic information about the dispute sufficiently frequently” but qualifies this at once by saying that “the extent to which it should have done this is a matter of legitimate challenge.”³⁸

The GUMG looks at the whole period of reporting about the incidents in Glasgow as one consistent theme. However, in looking at the news script one finds that the affair was actually split up in two, maybe even three parts, which have different foci and might therefore have been handled differently. The first part is dealing with the start of the strike and the fears about rubbish piling up. The second part is about the question of whether or not the army will be called to clean up the rubbish and then the actual reporting about the army doing so. And

³⁴ Bad News, p. 244.

³⁵ Bad News, p. 245.

³⁶ Bad News, p. 245.

³⁷ Bad News, p. 246.

³⁸ Harrison 1985, p. 88.

the third part reports the ‘surrender’ of the dustcart drivers and them going back to work. Indeed did all of these three parts relate to the strike, but especially the second one is rather about the army and not about the strike itself. Of course one might ask if ITN would not have had the obligation to report the causes of the strike in this relation, too, but ultimately the focus is on the army. However, even Harrison admits: “ITN’s preoccupation with the military angle led to the substance of the strike’s being pushed into the background...”³⁹ But to treat this reporting with the same criterion as the sole reporting about the strike seems to be inappropriate.

As mentioned earlier, the Glasgow Media Group’s opinion is that the reporting about strikes is in favour of the management and discriminates labour. In the dustcart driver’s case they find another evidence for this as they find that not one striker had been interviewed during the strike period. But equally, there had been no interviews of troubled Glaswegians, appalled by the rubbish piles and, furthermore, had the Glasgow Corporation not been given the chance to clarify their position. “Its position never emerged as clearly as that of the strikers”⁴⁰, Harrison concludes.

In conclusion of this case study one can find that ITN is to be blamed that it did not give a full account of all backgrounds and failed to recall basic information more frequently. But to see the whole incident as a specific discrimination of labour seems to be inappropriate. Again, one can only follow Anderson’s and Sharrock’s argumentation: It is clear that it is possible to arrive at the conclusions the GUMG arrives at. But, apparently, these are not the only conclusions, which can be drawn from the events. How one sees the events and the reporting seems to depend on the political position the observer has. As mentioned, there had been information omitted which goes in favour of the management, but also some that would have gone in favour of the workers. Which of this information one finds more important and therefore less appropriate to be omitted is rather a question of one’s own political position and can therefore skew the reception of the reports in either direction. But apparently the GUMG uses lots of (supposed) evidence, which can really only with a very left-wing view been seen as such. Probably not even then. Many of the linguistic evidences they bring forth are scarcely suitable for their goal; but nevertheless they use it as such. This is a real and major critique one can bring forth against the GUMG: Not using evidence correctly and skewing evidence

³⁹ Harrison 1985, p. 91.

⁴⁰ Harrison 1985, p. 90.

themselves. One gets the feeling that the group has arrived at their findings rather a priori than a posteriori and then tried to find evidence for their view by all means necessary.

The call by the GUMG for a more detailed background coverage of strikes and for clarifying, not obscuring, news is justified. But their direct connection to the striker's cases is exaggerated and in the execution sometimes unprofessional. Their accuses about bias in the news can only then been seen as fully substantiated when looking at the events from the group's own biased viewpoint. They claim that their ideology is not important in view of their evidence, but when looking at their conclusions and their sometimes very weird assumptions⁴¹, this has to be taken into account when judging the 'Bad News'.

⁴¹ One might even find that the group tries not even to hide their bias, even if it takes some close looks to uncover it. Already on the first page it seems evident that, contrary to their asseverations, they can never see the bias in TV news as unconscious and accidental: "At some common-sense level television news has to appear neutral or its credibility would evaporate."

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