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THE STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION OF EVENTS

by

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THE 'STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION' OF EVENTS

Paper for: Obstacles To Communication Symposium

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In this paper, I am dealing exclusively with the 'public' forms of social communication, more especially with the broadcasting systems (radio and television).

In what sense can we speak of 'obstacles to communication' in the broadcasting media? Let us turn the question around: can we conceive of a publicly-organised mass media system in which there were no obstacles to communication? I suggest that, the moment we put the question in this form, we have to admit that the ideal of 'perfectly transparent communication' in broadcasting is, for the foreseeable future, an unattainable and impossible ambition. There are many reasons for this. Some have to do with the technical nature of the 'media' themselves which mediate public communication.⁽¹⁾ Some have to do with the character of the internal and external or 'framing' institutions within which public communication is organized.⁽²⁾ Some, indeed, stem from the fact that we are not dealing with static communications systems, with fixed goals, which can be progressively realized along some linear continuum. Broadcasting systems are dynamic structures which breed their own, further, needs and uses even as they satisfy existing ones. So, even if broadcasters could now, technically, reach all the existing audiences they can identify, and transmit perfectly to them whatever information they desire, the very overcoming of present obstacles which such a development would signal would, in its turn, suggest new, further kinds of communication, new potential uses for the technical means, new types of content, and mobilize new, unrealised demands and needs for communication in the audiences. In the British situation it has certainly been the case that, as television has come into unchallenged dominance as the medium of public communications, and as many of the technical limitations of the medium have been ironed out, so new demands have been made on the broadcasting institutions, both from within their own professional ranks, and from the publics they serve, and from their political masters who put them to use within a context of legislation and practice. Each new, significant, development in British television - the growth of television documentary, the development of problem-centred current affairs journalism, the explorations in television satire, etc - has mobilized new, unexpected audiences, which have, in their turn, framed new demands on the broadcasters. In broadcasting, as in other areas of modern production, the satisfaction of existing

communications 'needs' inevitably leads to the framing of new needs, and "this production of new needs is the first historical act" (as Marx once observed) which initiates an unending dialectic, whose outcome cannot be predicted.

Let us begin, then, from the opposite end. All public communication systems are subject to systematic constraints, systematic limitations. The overt censorship of media content is only one, limited case of such constraint - and, in our view, not characteristically the most significant obstacles to 'freer communication'; though no system that we know of in the 'Western' liberal class-democracies is entirely free of censorship. All public-social communication is a form of 'systematically distorted communication'. The distortions are not always the same: they are not fixed. So it is worth our while - as we attempt to do below - to examine some aspects of the structural constraints within which public communication operates, in order to see what changes can be effected which might eliminate or weaken some of the present obstacles. Communication systems in different societies certainly exhibit greater or lesser degrees of 'distortion', and can be shown to be moving towards or away from greater 'communicative transparency' in their practices. These tendencies are crucial. But the ideal-norm of 'perfect transparency' is an empirical impossibility. The reason is clear the moment we examine the social and historical foundations of these communications systems. Hans Dreitzel⁽³⁾ in a volume devoted to "Patterns of Communicative Behaviour", has recently reminded us that,

In fact communicative behaviour rests on work and power relations as well as on language; and if we comprehend the typification schemes of language as the most fundamental basic rules of everyday life, we also have to notice that even language is subject to distortions caused by the conditions of our life.. the social world is not only structured by language but also by the modes and forces of material production and by the systems of domination.

Of course, there must be some degree of reciprocity between the encoding and decoding ends of the communicative chain, or else, literally, audiences would not understand what the broadcasters were talking about, and social incomprehension would reign. This is clearly not the case. However, we have already advanced a little when we recognise that public communication between broadcasters and their audiences requires two linked but separate acts: the act of 'encoding' the television or radio

message, and the act of 'decoding' and interpreting it.⁽⁴⁾ These are linked, but not 'immediately identical' moments in the communication process. The 'encoding' process is very largely performed by the professional broadcasting elites, with their own social formation, their own selective recruitment, their own social position, their own connections to and perspective on power, their own professional competences and routines, their own professional ideologies. The 'decoding' process is performed by the heterogeneous, complexly-structured 'mass audiences', standing in their own relation to the unequal distribution of social, economic and cultural power, with their own connections to and perspectives on the system of power as a whole. 'Cultural power', we will remember, includes the differential acquisition by the different strata of the population of the competence to speak, transmit, verbalize and comprehend - a form of 'power' directly relevant to the capacity to 'communicate', and fundamentally shaped and distributed, in our kinds of society, by the education system.

The notion, then, that we are all 'free and equal' members of the communicative structures, with an equal competence of 'speech', and an equal 'right of access' is a mystification. Of course, in the liberal mass democracies, the structured gaps between those who dominate in the public communications systems, and those who receive are not as wide as they were in previous historical epochs. In the feudal period, the great majority exercised the right, acquired the competence and had the power to 'speak' almost exclusively to those small, intimate 'publics' which composed their immediate, face-to-face communities: 'public' communications, in our sense - whether in the form of royal proclamations, papal bulls, legislative enactments or sermons - were exclusively the preserve of very small elites. What has altered this situation is not simply, a growth in the technology of communications. Fundamentally, wider and wider sections of the population have gradually, and through struggle, won their way into the framework of civil and political society: and thus, gradually, the new technical means have been adapted to this changed balance of power. The communicators, in a modern society, are more explicitly mediators than they were in feudal societies: they must draw their materials, their events, their concerns, in part from the audiences which they address - they 'play back' the experiences of the audience: to the audience, in addition to their other functions, such as bringing news about one audience to another, or

providing the spectacle of entertainment for audiences as a whole. In this sense, as Phillip Elliott⁽⁵⁾ has recently demonstrated, the audience progressively plays the role, in modern communications, both of source and receiver. But this is still not the same thing as the audience 'communicating'. The process must still pass through the mediating structures of broadcasting itself: the broadcasters must select (and reject), transform into 'messages' (encode), develop formats, shape contents for the communicative circuit to be completed from audience to audience. Thus, though the 'production' and 'consumption' of media content are linked, and each is required for the production of the other, they are linked, in the manner of mediations: ipra process. The opposite ends of the communicative process "require an intermediary in order to form a unity, and the effectiveness of this intermediary (and hence the maintenance of the whole) is dependent on certain conditions which may or may not be present."⁽⁶⁾ It is in and through that mediation - crucially, for our purpose, the originating functions of the broadcasters in initiating the circle of communications - that systematic distortions enter the chain.

Thus, when Habermas,⁽⁷⁾ in formulating certain criteria for 'normal communication', says that "Normal communication conforms to intersubjectively recognizable rules", we can agree. The television message conforms to the norms of ordinary language, which, as we know, is impossible without the operation of codes which are shared between those who produce and those who interpret messages. But when he adds that "The communicated meanings are identical for all members of the language community", we must ask how the term, "identical" there is to be understood. It may refer, in a common-sense way, to the matter of most audiences, most of the time, "for all practical purposes", sharing a set of codes with the communicators, which enable them, denotatively, to recognize and interpret the lexical and visual items which constitute the message. Even here, total identity does not exist. There is empirical evidence to suggest that audiences, literally, do not comprehend everything that is said or shown to them, even at the denotative level. And we should not be surprised by that finding. Recent work on the language of the classroom powerfully suggests the different types of coding and registration which operate, even in the intimate situation of the teaching situation, between teachers and pupils.⁽⁸⁾ We know that the 'competence' to speak is quite unequally distributed as

between different classes and groups in the population. How much more so will this mis-match between 'encoding' and 'decoding' be the case in the situation of mass communications. What is more, it is clear that social communications almost never functions at the 'denotative' level alone. In social communication, every act of literal identification is also an act of social identification. Radio or television communication cannot literally signify a theme, topic or event without at the same time, explicitly or implicitly, assigning it to its context, giving it a position within the range of social and cultural identifications which help us to 'map out the world' in comprehensible terms. "Once we name our object under some description, then in so denoting that we point to the qualities and properties which they have and which they may exemplify", Cicourel (9) has recently reminded us that,

The reciprocity of perspectives rule or interpretive procedure cannot operate unless additional rules or sub-routines accompany its use. One sub-routine consists of the actor's ability to treat a given lexical item category or phrase as an index of larger network of meaning, as in normative developments of disease categories, colour categories and kinship terms. The appearance of a particular lexical item presumes the speaker intended a larger set, and assumes the hearer 'fills in' the larger set when deciding its meaning.

At this level of contextual or 'connotative' interpretation, where the operation of what Cicourel has called "the et cetera rule" is absolutely crucial, the ideal of 'perfect reciprocity' recedes even further. Indeed, it is masked, even in Cicourel's formulation, by the deceptive use of the term "normative". In what sense are the categories of disease, colour or kinship "normative"? We certainly know that they are subject to enormous cultural variation, as between one society and another. Within any one culture, the colour spectrum or (less certainly) kinship categories may command very wide, perhaps near-universal, consensus. A television play can identify two actors as representing 'mother' and 'son' with a fair degree of certainty that anyone watching will 'understand' what kinship system is here invoked. However, the viewer of a more specialist kind of television programme, say about a tribal society, in which the presenter uses the term "mother's brother" would be instantly at sea, unless further, contextual elaboration were provided. For this term 'indexes' kinship systems, which employ some of

the same terms as those with which we are familiar, but where the terms have quite a different significance: and a whole specialized language and debate, in which only some ethnologists are at all 'competent', is required before the lay-audience can comprehend what is being said and shown. And this is a relatively simple example, where the boundary between what will be known and what is reasonably clear.

News, documentary and current affairs programmes on television and radio, for example, which constantly signify complex political situations with which the audience is not familiar in any detail, deal with far more shaded and ambiguous areas, where the line between 'full comprehension', 'partial comprehension' and 'in-comprehension' is extremely hard to draw. Even the categories of 'disease' are not as clear-cut or 'normative' as Cicourel supposes. In the skilled medical fraternity, the basic categories of disease may be fairly firmly established; but a very long apprenticeship is required before young internees acquire the 'competence' to assign medical symptoms to their proper category. Both the skilled practice of diagnosis, and the doctor-patient interview (the communicative foundation of general medical practice) consist of the 'interpretative work' required to assign the 'incompetent' patients' groans, moans, pains and grimaces to their 'normative category': and what we might call 'category mistakes' are crucial! It has sometimes been said that doctors present themselves to their patients in a gruff and professional manner, in order to set the patient's mind at rest, while 'covering' for the inevitably hit-and-miss procedures of which a great deal of diagnosis consists. Goffman⁽¹⁰⁾ has remarked something similar of the 'joking relationships' and ironic distance which characteristically accompanies the work of the surgeon in the operating theatre. Alternatively, we may think of the enormous discrepancies which currently exist between the medically-defined categories of 'cancer', and the general audience's understanding of (and deep fears about) the term. Or of the way the distorted syntactic structures of the speech of certain patients labelled 'mentally ill' have been assigned to the disease category, 'schizophrenia'; and of the major controversies, within the psychotherapeutic community and the general public, which this normative assignment has stirred up. So, once we have brought the connotative and contextualizing aspects of social communication into view, it becomes more and more difficult to assume any degree of 'perfect

reciprocity' between the communicators and the audiences.

Things, of course, can be clarified, explained: broadcasters themselves can take some responsibility for 'de-contextualizing' their own content on behalf of their publics. But then, this is precisely where some of the 'systematic distortions' we referred to earlier begin to arise. For television or radio's "mode of identifying social reality" is not and cannot be a wholly neutral and objective process. We have to decide what the sources are of the contextual interpretations and identifications which television or radio regularly employs (an analysis which leads us from language proper into structures, power and ideologies), and whether such contexts are indeed wholly symmetrical with those employed by their audiences, before communication without distortion can become an operational (rather than an ideological) concept. We must bear in mind that, in the sphere of political, social and current affairs broadcasting, the media are constantly and regularly dealing with 'problematic situations' whose 'meaning' is not at all clear-cut, even to the experts, and about which there is, rarely, if ever, one, clear, unequivocal and unproblematic context or explanation. The media do not, in their general programming, deal with categories and contexts as defined or wellbounded as those of the colour spectrum. It is one thing for a news broadcast to show pictures of a military coup against a constitutional government, including the bombing of, say, the House of Assembly. It is quite another question for the foreign affairs correspondent to assign that event, those pictures, to some contextual category of explanation, along the lines of "A strong government intervened today to correct the country's inflationary spiral".

Yet, of course, once we have been offered the witnessed account of that day's event, precisely what is at issue is: in what framework of understanding can these events be understood? What factors led up to them? What unseen forces prepared it? What logic of events produced the bombing-as-an-event? And what consequences lead from it? Does it affect the balance of political power in the continent? The future of constitutionally elected governments? The possibilities of peaceful as against armed revolutionary change in societies of this type? In fact, the brief, apparently 'factual', report in the tele-cast, indexes these further contexts, points to them as the necessary 'deep-structure'

of the event. The 'meaning' of the event is not accessible to the viewer without that deep-structure. Indeed, not only will such questions appear naturally to 'follow on': some provisional, implicit answers to them will already be present, already embedded, in the limited signification which the event had achieved in the headline news. To note that one kind of regime has ended, and another replaced it, in the manner shown, is to signify a number of possible contexts in which such a sequence of events 'makes sense'. It is precisely to signify the event, to identify it, to 'make it mean' something, socially and historically. Every news event is already, if incompletely, assigned to a context which 'explains it'. The broadcaster, or his reporter and camera-man in the field, must already have such a context in mind in order to know what to film, which to select and send back to the editor, which to include in the broadcast. As more becomes known, such contexts may be expanded and refined: they may even be modified. But no primary signification can occur without them. In short, where social communication is concerned, it is impossible to proceed without 'interpretive work', without the operation of indexical or 'et cetera' rules. The very choice of one set of images over another to signify 'what happened there yesterday' involves the use of interpretive codes. (II)

II

News, current affairs and documentary broadcasting, on radio and television, represent, taken together, a massive area of public broadcasting. Together with the national press, these media, organized as public communications systems, crucially intersect, on the one side, with politics, government, power and the state, and on the other side, with what we might call the 'public discourse' amongst the audience at large about questions of national and international significance. Major broadcasting resources, in terms of personnel, economic and technical resources, programme production and transmission time are devoted to this broadcasting domain. In political terms, it represents the pivotal sector of social communications. It is the point at which the broadcasters and their institutions mediate - hold the pass, command the communicative channels - between the elites of power (social, economic, political, cultural) and the mass audience. This mediation is exercised in different ways, and in different formats. The news brings the audience the raw and truncated signification of 'events', at home and abroad: it is limited, largely, to foreground accounts, and to a very short time span. In current affairs broadcasting, the experts and the major personal and institutional participants in those events appear in more extended form: giving more detailed, expert, 'background' accounts, or arguing and contesting the meaning and significance of the events which the news has reported. In the documentary area, the broadcasting professionals take the responsibility for compiling accounts or 'filmed investigations' of events and problems which have either already surfaced in the news, or which are judged by them to be potential 'news-events', or edging into news visibility. Foreground accounts: background reports and investigations: organized controversy, and discussion: broadly speaking, these are the three structures to public broadcasting which sustain the domain of 'political broadcasting'. (Particular formats, of course, differ and vary widely from channel to channel, programme to programme).

Now in all these areas of social communication, a fundamental a-symmetry exists between those who shape events, participate actively in them, those who have skilled and expert knowledge about events, and those who have 'privileged access' to events and participants in order to report on and communicate about them: and, on the other hand, the great majorities and minorities of the 'mass audience', who do not directly participate

in events (even when they are directly affected by them), who have no expert knowledge about them, and who have no privileged right of access to information and personnel. In this domain, the broadcasters are responsible for initiating communication about events: they select the events on which they report or around which they organize discussion: they select the institutional persons and the experts who speak about or speak to an issue: they define the agenda of 'significant issues': they 'encode' those events in appropriate formats: they help to define the terms in which the events will be presented or debated: and they transmit.

Now the events which constitute the 'subject-matter' of broadcasting in this domain are usually new, dramatic, often unexpected and unpredicted events, events of a 'problematic' kind, which breach or disturb our common-sense expectations about the social order, our 'taken-for-granted' sense of 'how the world is'.⁽¹²⁾ In a sense, these are the category-requirements of the whole area of news, and its subordinate areas (current affairs, documentary, etc): it is news because it is new; because it fundamentally, dramatically, disturbs or has the potential to disturb the on-going social order (local, national or inter-national). News can breach our 'normal' expectations about the world in different ways. It can represent an event in the world the like of which we have never seen before (the first moon landing): it can represent a new and unexpected turn in events (the sudden renewal of Israel-Arab hostilities): it can represent a slight modification or development in an on-going process of change (the latest phase in a government's anti-inflation policy): it can bring us 'news' about everyday events in one part of the world which are, however, 'news to us' (reports of tribal life in New Guinea). What is common to all these kinds of events is the fact that they are to some degree 'problematic', and therefore their 'meaning' is not transparently given in them. No matter how much 'coverage' we are given, we always need more information if we are to understand 'fully' what is going on. If the event is shown or reported on at first hand, we also need to know whether it is an isolated or general development, whether its outcome has been resolved or is still in doubt. If the event is part of an unfolding chain of events, we need to know what that long-term process is, what are the deep-structures which have brought it about, what its indirect consequences, long-term, will be. If the event is wholly unexpected, we need to know why we were not led to expect it, what

unforeseen and unpredicted or unreported factors had been, all the while, preparing its eventuality. If it is really new or really strange, we will need a great deal of contextual information before we can say we 'really understand' what is happening. And all news-events, of whatever kind, require to be 'set in context' (an event, like a term in a discourse, cannot signify on its own), and presume or entail 'an explanation'. Of course, the hostilities in the Middle East are part of the larger, longer struggle between... Of course, the attack was made there, or then, because.. The whole process of social communication, we would argue, implies an interpretive, contextualizing discourse. But this is especially true of the whole domain of news and 'political communications' in general. The discourses by means of which the broadcasters translate historical events in the 'real world' into 'communicative events' (messages of one kind or another) are, fundamentally, indexical discourses in Cicourel's sense. They depend on the use of connotative codes, by means of which "larger networks of meaning" are indexed; and on the interpretive work which broadcasters must do to resolve events which seem intrinsically 'meaningless' (or whose 'meaning' is incomplete), into categories, explanatory contexts which 'make them mean something' in more than a merely-literal sense. Likewise, the viewer must either already understand the context in which the event is being signified, or must be offered some 'explanatory context' so that he, too, can 'resolve' the event meaningfully. If the media can be said to shape the public debate, to mould popular consciousness about issues, it is not only because they have become the major, and most credible source, of literal information about the world. It is because they also exercise the function of connecting discrete events with one another: they build or 'map' events into larger, wider, frameworks of meaning, so that viewers come, not simply to 'know what is happening', but to construct from that knowledge "pictures of the world", scenarios of action. (13)

The choice of frameworks and categories, the initial 'definitions of the situation', are, of course, principally initiated by, and rest with the broadcasters. The activity of comprehending and 'decoding' by the audience is conducted on terrain which the broadcasters first define and delimit. In so far as audiences do not question the framework of assumptions within which these primary significations are made, they 'interpret' within the hegemonic 'definitions of the situation' which

the broadcasters provide. In other cases, they may relate the 'global' definitions which the media provide to their own, more situated position: or they may try to 'make sense' of the media significations, while recognizing that 'things look somewhat different' if one is an ordinary member of the public and not one of the experts or history-makers. In that case, they can be said to 'negotiate meanings', within the outer determinations of the hegemonic definitions they have been offered. It is also possible for audiences to fully comprehend how and why media professionals, experts and accredited witnesses see an event that way, but nevertheless, refuse that 'reading' of events, and resolve meanings in a contradictory way. In that case, they refuse or refute the 'definitions of the situation' with which they are provided, and bring their own de-coding codes into play. These we may call 'oppositional' readings.⁽¹⁴⁾ Because the 'encoding' and 'decoding' moments in the communicative chain are not identical, but differentiated moments in a complexly unified process, the 'perfect transmission' of meanings from broadcasting source to audience is, or can potentially be, subject to further systematic skewing. It would not be correct to conceive of these simply as 'obstacles to communication': kinks in the communication chain, which ought to be straightened out. For these differential 'readings' arise from the fact that events are interpretable in more than one framework or context: different groups and classes of people will bring different explanatory frameworks to bear, depending on their social position, their interests, place in the hierarchy of power, and so on. If we were to remove 'obstacles to communication' of this kind, all that this would ensure would be that the hegemonic definitions of events by the powerful and the privileged would reign tout court. And this would entail the premise that the views of the world provided by the powerful elites are always correct: that, in relation to events, all the different groups and classes in society have or ought to have only one viewpoint. It would mean, in short, that only the dominant ideology should prevail. If the military coup referred to above is interpreted by a friendly government as 'legitimate and necessary', and the media - taking the impress of elite opinion signifies the events of the coup in that way, then it is a positive virtue of the system (not a weakness or obstacle) that some groups, at least, should have the residual right to give those events an alternative, oppositional reading. Otherwise, the communications system would

function in a unilateral and uncontested way, merely to reproduce the hegemonic ideology, as an instrument to pacify structural conflict. In such a situation, a 'perfect communications system' - one without obstacles - would itself become the greatest obstacle to communication.

We know of no mass communications systems which are 'perfectly transparent' in this way. Mass media systems have to deal with a variety of topics and events, and have to reflect something more than the 'dominant viewpoint', so that they generally display characteristics of what Enzenberger has called "leaky systems". Moreover, as we shall see below, there are few systems in which the definitions of the powerful pass, without any qualification or modification or challenge, straight into the media and are simply reproduced by its professionals. The connections which the media form with the elites of power are extremely complex, and contradictions - of interest, outlook and interpretation - frequently arise between them. Further, media professionals work within conflicting criteria: if, on the one side, they must be sensitive to the way the powerful are defining events, they also have, and recognize, a duty to 'inform the public', to try to get to the 'truth' about events, even when this conflicts with the official signification of them. Although there is rarely anything so simple as the 'objective truth' about a historical event, the requirement to be 'objective' is a useful 'operational fiction', which tends to open gaps between the accounts which the professionals offer and the interpretations which politicians or administrators hope will prevail. Further, the media systems we are describing operate within the political structure of a formal democracy. So the obligation to reflect, even within those limited terms, the viewpoint of critics or 'the opposition', as well as the viewpoint of those in power, is not merely at their discretion: it is usually formally enshrined in their terms of reference - the requirement that there should be 'balance' in the viewpoints expressed when a topic is controversial. There are, then, various structural features of these systems which prevent them from unilaterally reproducing, without contradiction, the hegemonic ideology. Perfectly transparent, unilateral, communication can only exist in the (extremely rare) limiting case of the perfectly censored medium. (15)

It would be wrong, however, to interpret this as producing a state of perfect pluralism where the dominant mass media systems are concerned. If the hegemonic viewpoint does not, unilaterally, have its way at all times, this does not mean that the media serve all viewpoints equally: there is no 'perfect competition' in the market of public opinions, where each individual member of the audience has an equally open chance of structuring the public discourse. 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 audiences - crucially define. The commitment of the media to the reflection of 'more than one viewpoint' does not in any way contradict the media's overall tendency to "reproduce the hegemonic ideology, with all its contradictions."⁽¹⁶⁾ For the hegemonic ideology, in the terms in which we are discussing it, is, precisely, the ideology of liberal class-societies: that is to say, one in which the 'national interest' is identified with, and is seen to proceed via, the structured 'clash' of opposing viewpoints. These opposing viewpoints are, of course, at another level, precisely united in their fundamental loyalty to the structures of constraint - the rule of law, constitutional legality, the two-party parliamentary structure, etc - which permit them to 'oppose'. So that media systems which thrive on controversy, the clash of opposing viewpoints, 'open discussion', free debate, and so on, may nevertheless be said, at another level, to be substantiating and reproducing the 'mode of reality' of the State, without these two things standing in any kind of open contradiction. In the British broadcasting system, for example, the two television channels are required, both by practice and by their governing charters, to give 'equal time' to the viewpoints of the two major political parties on any topic which is controversial. But this clash of opposing opinions is framed by the two party-system itself, by the political structure of Her Majesty's Government/Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, by the rule of law and constitutional precedent, as well as by a whole number of working definitions as to what does and what does not constitute 'politics'. A point of view which arises outside the framework of discussion defined by the two major parliamentary parties has far less 'right of

access' to time and to debate on the media: indeed, if such a point of view is one which challenges the very terms which Government and Opposition have agreed to operate, it has a difficult time getting the media to recognize its viewpoint as 'political' at all. The flow of communications in the society is thus structured, not only by the explanatory frameworks within which the media signify events, but at the previous stage: the stage at which events and topics become visible to the media at all, the stage at which an event is defined as 'signifiable'. Indeed, the two types of structuring - the one when the message arises, and the one when the message is transmitted - are deeply interconnected, because the media will tend to take-over, from the political elites, a way of perceiving an event, as well as a way of explaining or contextualizing it.

III

Let us try to draw together the points we have been making, and attempt to elaborate them in terms of a model and an example. The example chosen is the recent British legislation, in the form of an Industrial Relations Bill, which delimits the recourse to strike action in industrial disputes between employers and employees or unions, institutionalizes an enforced 'cooling off' period in any dispute before industrial action can be taken, and brings into play for the first time in British industrial relations an Industrial Court with wide-ranging powers. The model developed below is based on a detailed study of the media coverage of the introduction and immediate consequences of this piece of controversial legislation, but no attempt has been made here to refer to particular programmes. Instead, the aim is to try to establish the various stages in the 'public signification' of this set of events, and thus to pin-point the characteristic manner in which 'communication' about an event of this order is structured.

The passage of the Industrial Relations Bill was not, of course, a one-off event. It arose within a prolonged debate, which has racked and divided the society for nearly ten years, about the need for some fundamental change in the structure of industrial relations in Britain: an argument which pin-pointed the so-called 'uncontrolled' level of wage-demands by the unions, and the number of working days lost through strikes as two of the principal factors producing an inflationary spiral in the economy, and generally weakening Britain's economic position. The Labour Government itself proposed to legislate in a rather similar manner, and this plan was only abandoned at the last moment in return for a pledge by the unions to exercise their own 'voluntary' restraints: it provoked widespread debate in itself, and serious conflicts of opinion between the Labour Government and the unions, as well as in the country at large. We cannot deal with this 'background' in our model. But it is important to bear in mind that events of the kind we will try to take into account, stemming from the introduction of legislation by the Conservative Government, already have a complex pre-history: they enter a highly structured field of discourse, in which opinions, of both an expert and lay kind, have already been mobilized and polarised. We should note, however, that what forms the background to the process we

shall attempt to detail, is in no sense a set of 'neutral facts', but a set of highly-contradictory interpretations. There may be 'further facts', constituting some neutral, informational ground, which the media - in their search for an 'objective' standpoint - could try to occupy; but, it would be virtually impossible to reconstruct the public debate about the issue around them, even if they could be found. Already, we are dealing with fundamentally contradictory explanatory frameworks. For example, is British post-war inflation due to a 'wages-push', or have wages simply allowed working people to keep up with inflation? Does Britain lose more days in strikes than other industrial nations, and, if so, is this a structural or an incidental factor in her post-war economic performance?

The issue of the Government's Industrial Relations Bill (IRB), then, does not arise 'cold'. The debate has already been, to some degree, pre-structured. However, we can, for analytic purposes, bracket these for the moment, and consider the position once the preliminary stages are over and legislation is introduced.

A. It is, of course, 'decisions' of this precise and clear-cut kind, which meet the first requirements of news. The topicality of the issue, its wide-ranging significance for the society, its short and long term consequences, the 'drama' connected with the event - these meet the criteria of 'news worthiness', and make the event visible, first, to the media via the structure of 'news values'. That is to say, the decision clearly commands the attention of the newsmen and news editors, and thus, time in the news bulletins, so to speak, from the outside. Its position in the day's agenda of issues is determined by the political elites and governmental institutions who take the decision and act, in the first place. It passes straight into the media, and acquires there its first media visibility, not essentially because newsmen have views, one way or another, about industrial relations, but because newsmen do their work within the framework of the professional routines and values of 'news making': it is the professional criteria and practices of news-making, not the political beliefs of news-men, which frame the crucial passage of the event from the political to the broadcasting domains. The media take over and reproduce the 'agenda of issues' established by the political elites as a consequence of the structural

nexus which binds broadcasting to politics and power, not as a consequence of the personal inclinations and biases of media personnel.

The connections between broadcasting and the political elites are not all of this 'extrinsic' kind. The IRB has been promulgated in Parliament, by major political speeches, and by official Cabinet or Government announcements. These are, of course, the regular sources of political information and of unofficial 'briefings' for those media professionals and correspondents who regularly report on the political affairs of the nation. The 'information' thus becomes accessible to the media along 'channels' already well worn with use. But further, the Government will not propose legislation of this far-reaching and controversial a kind 'neutrally'. Its spokesmen will marshal the case for legislation with all the skill at their command. For example, they will take up interpretations of the economic situation favourable to legislation (i.e. wages do because inflation, strikes do weaken the economy), and build them into their 'case'. So that, from the very moment that the decision is made and legislation introduced, the fact of legislation and the 'definitions of the powerful' are already in play. It is the fact of legislation, together with the favourable promulgation or interpretation of that fact, which constitutes the 'event' for the media newsmen. Typically, in the first television newscast, there will be a 'report' by the news reader prepared by the newsroom; a brief extract of an interview with the Prime Minister after the decision has been announced to the House; in which, inevitably, he will 'present the bare bones of the case for' the way the Government has acted. This will be 'balanced' by a brief extract from an interview with, say, the Leader of the Opposition, containing a resume of the terms in which the Opposition will oppose the legislation: and, probably, an 'expert' assessment of its immediate consequences by the media's political correspondent. In short, the media reproduce the event, already presignified: and they do this because they obey the requirement on them to report 'impartially' what the decision-makers say and do, and because the structure of news values orient them, in certain predictable and practised ways, to these privileged sources of action and information. A persuasive account of this piece of legislation is now in the public domain: so are the dominant terms in which it is to be opposed within the framework of parliamentary opposition. This constitutes the delimited terrain, the first and primary signification of the event. All other, and further

significations of the event, within and outside the media, will constitute reproductions of, modifications of, extensions of, attempts to change the terms-of-reference of, that primary signification. Let us note that, so far, the only function of the media in the process of public signification has been to be scrupulously 'objective', 'impartial', 'balanced', 'neutral' and 'informed'.

B. The event now has a 'news life' within the media. Later bulletins will amplify the event-as-news, and report on new developments. Given the extensive function of news coverage provided by the media, this continuing news coverage will form a continuing ground-base to the signification of the event so far as the public is concerned. It can only be displaced (a) if significant new developments in the same issue gradually change the terms of the coverage: or if (b) it is displaced by 'other news' of a different and more dramatic kind.

But we must pass to the second stage. The media do not only report the event. They have the duty to organize the public debate about the issue. There are two sides to this, one passive or reflective, one more active. The new legislation is now actively debated in different political forums: in Parliament, in political circles, in the unions, and the employers organizations, and by academic and intellectual experts. In its reports, the media will continue to reflect the passage of the event within these defined circles. But the media have also become responsible for organizing their own debate about the issue. And here the IRB passes from the keeping of the newsroom and its attendant 'news values' into what is normally defined as 'current affairs'. How will a 'current affairs' discussion on the media on this question be constructed? By law, practice and custom, the Government, which has taken the initiative in the matter, have a right to the debate: to put their point of view and marshal the argument. Here, we might say, the Government is absolutely accessed: it is unthinkable that a Government spokesman should not appear. He is, of course, also subject to be interviewed and questioned. Here the media professional - interviewers, chairmen of discussion, etc - are no longer performing the strictly neutral role of the 'reporter': he is the skilled questioner, with a right to put questions (i.e. initiative debate) and seek answers. His 'right' to do so rests fundamentally on the premise that all

political decisions in this society are open to responsible question (he will be both questioning and responsible). But the role of 'tough interviewer' is, finally, legitimated because viewers - the general public - cannot, (given the restricted nature of the medium) put questions themselves; so that the professional interviewers must perform a role on behalf of the public. He invokes the lack of access by the public, and his role as mediator between power and 'the people', to legitimate his otherwise awkward role.

He can only perform a really critical task vis-a-vis his interviewee, an official, spokesman, by tacitly invoking the 'common sense' viewpoint of the 'ordinary viewer'. He puts to the Cabinet Minister questions he supposes the man-in-the-street would have put to him, had he had the chance. This is indeed an active mediating role: and it is perhaps here that the media first, in any substantial way, begin to interpose their own definitions of the situation on those definitions which the political elites have already signified, and which the media have faithfully and accurately 'reported'. But we must note that, in passing from the legitimate right to 'report' fully and accurately, to the legitimate right to 'enter into a controlled debate' with the politicians, the media interviewer is constrained in at least three different ways: (a) he must elicit the Minister's view of the situation first, before he can probe it: to some degree, he too, operates from a base-line within the pre-definitions of the question; (b) he cannot roam too far outside the kinds of questions 'everyone' will clearly see to be those which 'ordinary people' would have wanted to put: otherwise, he will be accused of partisanship. Though the viewer is not actually present, a certain typification of the viewer - as an 'ordinary bloke, with a lot of common sense questions, but not an extremist' - serves to modulate the interviewers performance of his role; (c) he is governed by the 'rules of conduct' of polite and rational debate: he cannot lose his temper, employ debating tricks, take too much advantage of his interviewee's discomfiture, etc. In short, the media now begin to amplify and expand the 'definitions of the situation' which structure the topic: but they do so by operating within the terrain largely defined by the dominant institutions, though they function 'critically' in relation to that terrain. The media interviewer will more frequently follow a point made by the Minister, by a question critical of that point, then he will initiate a line of

questions altogether outside the limits in which his interviewee is operating. Indeed, his legitimacy to be 'tough' is regulated to some degree by the degree of toughness with which the Minister puts his point of view. The logics-in-use which govern interviews of this type appear to be wide open, but in fact they are very tightly constructed. They tend, overall, to push the interviewer towards what we might call the 'test of pragmatic effectiveness'. His strongest criticism (without overstepping the boundaries of his role) can be mounted from the 'common-sense' position, "will it work"? Pragmatic reality of this order, naturally, operates within the framework of a higher rationality, which hardly ever surfaces. It produces an interviewing practice which is extremely 'tough', within its limits: and creates the strong impression that 'the Minister was not allowed to get away with anything'. This crucial practice in media signification of public events is so little studied that it is worth illustrating, in syllogistic form:

A. "To have had to act against strikes in the national interest"

Q. "Yes, but are you sure this legislation won't lead to even more strikes?"

(Premise: 'everyone agrees it is right to halt strikes: the question is, 'how?')

A. "If we can control the rising level of wages, then we can begin to get prices down"

Q. "But how long can you expect a virtual freeze on wages?"

or

Q. "But how can you ensure that retailers will hold prices at their current level?"

(Premise: price inflation is due to immoderate wage demands)

(Premise: since we are all consumers, if you could control prices then everyone would support your policy)

We must note that all these hypothetical exchanges, contain, as their necessary deep-structure, some pre-embedded definitions of the situation, quite apart from the specific 'Premises' we have indicated. Thus, for example, all of them assume that 'we' are united, in an equal way, as a nation and as consumers, and will judge the legislation from that position, in terms of its effectiveness in securing a 'national interest' whose content we all know and subscribe to, and have an equal share in. They tacitly rule out the alternative assumption: that we are divided, as a nation, between those who employ and those who sell their labour, and thus have a differential relation to 'the national interest', which tends to operate more in

the interest of some than of others. The political spokesman will frame his case within the premise of 'the national interest', because it allows him to make the widest possible appeal for support, and to build coalitions of support across classes and parties. The interviewer has 'taken over' this ideological signification as the 'operational' premise of his conversation with power. The passage of the hegemonic definitions continues to operate, so to speak, via the structures and the logics, but 'behind men's backs'.

C. But here a new criterion enters: that of 'balance'. If the Minister has the 'right of debate' on the media, the criterion of 'balance' ensures that his Opposition Shadow Minister has the 'right of reply'. Not only will 'the two sides' be represented, but they will tend to be represented by spokesman of more or less equal political weight. The Shadow Minister, too, may be subject to 'questioning' (see above), before the discussion becomes more open. The sequence here is not random but structured. 'Debate' in the media requires two sides and a 'neutral' chairman or interviewer: political debate of this order requires, at least, Government, Opposition and professional Chairman (who, apart from the professional tasks of 'keeping the discussion moving', 'covering the topics', 'putting supplementary questions', also has the formal role of holding the ring for the debate to unfold: the rules of rational argument, fair allocation of time to each side, the reasonableness of the exchanges, and the other tasks of studio management). In a debate of this importance, the operation of the criterion of 'balance' ensures the presence, not only of political spokesman from the Parties, but of 'institutional spokesmen', from the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry. The representatives of these institutions have structured access here, as accredited spokesmen, not only because the specific issue of the IRB directly affects their position, but because, on a whole range of issues, the media consider that the public debate must be shared between the dominant major institutions in the national life. Outside of the formal political representatives of the majority, the media acknowledge that, in complex, class democracies, the major institutional organizations wield critical and massive social power, and shape decisions in ways not open to 'ordinary people'. So, progressively, the institutional spokesmen have gained a 'right to participate in the debate' when the media

organize the discussion, though this is largely by practice and custom rather than (as is the case with political matters) by law.

The topic has now been structured: the 'debate' can begin. The major participants have been 'produced', so to speak, by the complex processes which link the media to the major sources of power in the society, and this link is mediated, specifically, by what we might call the legitimate structure of access. Access is not - as has sometimes seemed to be the case in recent debates - a matter of minority participation in broadcasting, or the extension of some right to participate to groups and individuals who do not regularly appear. It is, first and foremost, the existing, regular, systematic structure of access: the institutions, groups, personnel who regularly and of right appear and define, the groups who cannot be left out. It is only then, and more residually, a question of the subordinate 'rights' of those who have been 'left out', or of those who can 'win their way, by consent or struggle', into visibility. Thus we must know what the structure of access is and the 'informal rules' by which it is operated: and then, what this structure of access does to the structuring of the topic as a communicative event: before we can bring into view the limited efforts and successes of those outside the consensus of access to modify the structure in some way. The demands of those 'without access' must be understood, first, in terms of its 'absent' opposite: the systematic 'over-accessing' of certain groups in the society. Only then can the structuring of communications be adequately produced as an object of study, reflection and action.

Let us observe certain features of the structuring of the topic as we have outlined it so far. The structures ensure that more than one viewpoint will be present in the public debate in the media. They also ensure what range of voices and viewpoints, what institutional weightings, will be present in the signification of any controversial topic. They ensure the terms in which the topic will be elaborated, and the terrain across which the 'debate' will range. No single set of terms will unilaterally prevail: but the dominantly defined terms and limits within which controversy is engendered are not infinite - they remain 'structured in dominance'.

By ensuring that certain positions must be visible, the media also tend to ensure that certain positions will remain basically invisible. For example, since the Labour Government also had their own plans for industrial legislation, they are unlikely to argue root and branch against any need for legislation whatsoever. The acceptance of some sort of legislation then becomes common ground between the two major opposing positions, in the initial signification of the topic. As the interviewer's questions probe the pragmatic underpinnings of these two positions, so they become, between them, the two defined limiting positions in the 'reasonable and realistic' case for and against the Bill. This ground now forms the basis for any further discussion of the topic. Positions which fall outside this structured controversy not only have difficulty in winning a hearing: they quickly appear 'unreasonable and unrealistic' when set off against the 'reasonable' case for-and-against the Bill. Thus, new participants to the debate are also constrained by the manner in which it has been signified. For example, if the Unions, through their accredited spokesmen, make a case against the Bill within the existing 'terms of reference', they can be argued with or opposed, but they will be understood as acting 'reasonably' within the established rules of controversy and opposition. But if a Union spokesman were to introduce a new premise - such as, for example, the view that the 'right to strike' is a fundamental freedom, won after prolonged struggle, and should not be lightly cast aside - this immediately appears as an 'extreme' view: it does not require another participant to signify its proposer as 'an extremist' - simply by taking a position which runs counter to the on-going 'terms of reference', he will signify his own extremism.

D. Two other kinds of groups may gain, at a later stage, a degree of 'access' to the debate. The first consists of 'expert witnesses' who are professionally knowledgeable about industrial relations. Experts are, of course, by definition, defined as speaking to a controversial issue in neutral, impartial, non-partisan terms. Individual experts may have loyalties to one or other side in a controversy, but their right to contribute to the definition of an issue depends on their expressing an informed, uncommitted view. Their contribution may thus consist of 'filling out' and amplifying the topic in terms of additional information, skilled or shrewd

assessments. It is only very occasionally that an expert can so forcefully put a point of view in an already structured debate in such a way as to alter, fundamentally, the basic terms of its signification.

The other 'group' is 'the general public itself'. But the 'general public' is not one of the active participants or principal actors in the event: they cannot speak as institutional spokesmen or as experts: they are not organised in ways which are visible to the medium. Their views, then, will enter the debate in a mediated and subordinate form. What 'the general public thinks' will be reported on by journalists or invoked by one side or the other in the controversy. Or reports on the passage of the topic will avail themselves of random items of 'vox pop' interviews - a sort of instant sampling of men and women-in-the-street, in brief snippets, where the point of the exercise is, precisely, that 'there are many different views', and that they are equally inexpert. Occasionally, some 'current affairs discussion' time will be given over to a studio discussion including (typically) large numbers of, say, rank-and-file trade unionists who, under the prod of a media chairman, stimulate a 'lively exchange' at a somewhat more grass-roots level than in the more regular studio discussion of the issue. Here too the producer is required to ensure a degree of 'balance', at a lower level, between those who are 'for' and those who are 'against' legislation. Whereas accredited witnesses and institutional spokesmen appear, of right, in their representative person or, and are given time to develop an argument, the participants to 'studio discussions' always appear in large numbers, 'impersonally', have to make their points rapidly in the cut and thrust of debate. They clearly serve the function of a studio cross-section of the 'general public', given a brief chance to air their views, odd and cranky or unrepresentative as they may be. This is not a position from which a structured counter-argument or counter-definitions of the situation can be launched.

In the passage of the structured topic through the media, the broadcasting institutions may take further opportunities to develop and amplify the topic as it has been constituted. This may take the form of a 'documentary' background treatment of the issue,

for which the media themselves take editorial responsibility. Here, the facts relevant to the terms of the issue can be resumed: the professionals can make 'pragmatic' assessments of 'how successful' the Government or Opposition is in furthering/checking legislation. They cannot, however, express a point of view editorially which favours one side or the other. Instead, they must also resume the arguments of the main protagonists, giving the initial definers a second or third opportunity to express a point of view.

The 'common ground' provides the basic terms in which the topic will be elaborated. But it also becomes, in real terms, the terrain on which bargains can be struck and compromises made. The media frequently play a role in, and have a vested interest in, this process of institutionalised bargaining. They share, with the political and institutional elites, the notion that 'politics is the art of the possible', and that, to achieve the possible, each side must concede something so that conflict can be resolved. Part of the 'impartial reporting' by media newsmen is, then, to try to predict when bargains are imminent, and what their terms will be, even when the accredited spokesmen deny that negotiations are in fact in progress. Another part of their function is to preside over studio discussions, again between accredited spokesmen and experts, in which the possible terms of negotiation and compromise are hypothetically rehearsed, and each side to the controversy probed for its willingness to negotiate. The media thus develop a structured interest in the institutional resolution of conflict: a position which is 'neutral' so far as the two sides in the structured controversy is concerned, but not 'neutral' in relation to the political system as a whole. It makes the media the unwitting accomplices of conflict-resolution.

E. The structuring of the topic is unlikely to be breached, either in media or in political terms, from within that structure. In the case of the IRB, there was little or no further movement until the terms of the debate were rudely shattered by militant, 'unofficial' action by groups with a more intransigent view of the legislation than had anywhere so far achieved visibility in the media. Once again, the structure of definitions is broken by events which occur outside the media, and to which the media must respond.

Militant shop stewards bring sections of workers out on strike against a ruling of the Court: their action is made official by their Union: the Union is then summoned by the Court, is judged to be acting illegally (either for what it is doing, or for failing to recognize the Court), and sanctioned: there are clashes between pickets and police at the factory gates. At these levels, and in these events, new, potential 'definitions of the situation' come into play. The case against legislation which these events signify fall right outside the boundaries which the previous definitions have helped to erect. What they point to is a definition of the IRB as a kind of class legislation, an attack on basic working class institutions. It is unlikely, however, that this viewpoint will now enter the signification of the issue as a legitimate ground for opposition. The previous, pro/con signification of the event is already in operation: and the new, dramatic events will tend to be 'mapped' into that structure. They will be debated in terms of how they breach, extend, modify, affect that on-going definition. Thus, strikes, militant action, clashes between pickets and police are signified in terms of the consequences they have - making the Government (whose case we have heard) take a 'tougher line' by standing behind the Court: or forcing the Opposition and the Unions into a 'more intransigent position' (than that which they earlier expressed in reasoned debate). Strikers and pickets do not have the power to redefine an issue in the media. They can only be signified as 'justified' or 'unjustified', 'illegal' and therefore 'illegitimate', 'unreasonable and irrational' - against the background of legality, legitimacy, reasonableness and rationality which already commands the debate. It is, indeed, their 'illegitimacy', not their 'definition of the situation', which commands the news coverage. The original definers of the situation now have access again, to assist in the amplified definition of the strikes and the pickets. The latter are easily cast in the role of 'folk devils': they are 'extremists', a 'handful of militants', 'agitators': their leaders are 'anxious to be martyrs'. The media do, of course, give these militant leaders a chance to 'put their point of view' - they gain a temporary and limited access (though, once the strikes die down, and the immediate confrontation is resolved, they will pass once again into invisibility, and their case with them). But

they do not, and are not invited to, command the redefinition of the situation, or to extend the terms of the controversy. They must justify their actions and appearance, apologize, as it were, for appearing on the stage at all as participants, and explain the illegitimacy of their actions. If they enter, at length, an argument of a reasoned kind, they must come to terms with the pro-con structure of debate already established: they move on defined terrain, and are trapped by its terms. If they stand outside the 'reasonable case', for or against, they appear to be sloganizing, and their very militancy signifies their extremism. It is extremely difficult for them to evade their own stigmatization. They achieve access, then: but only on terms already pre-established. What is at issue is not their view of the IRB, but their militancy against it, their violence, their illegality, their marginality, their unrepresentativeness. They, too, will be 'balanced'. Other shop floor workers will be found to say that their militant brothers have 'gone too far', ought to have kept their opposition within the framework of the law. It is difficult in these structured conditions to get a hearing for the view that it is precisely the question of whether there should be a law or not, which is at issue. It is even more difficult for spokesmen who, having never been legitimated participants in the regular distribution of access, have few of the 'skills and competences' of reasoned debate at their command. Thus, though they have fractured, temporarily, the structure of definitions of the situation, their intervention has simply served to shift the terms of the debate to another level: one where even deeper pre-suppositions are in play, and where the sacred nature of the social order itself can be mobilized against them. There may be many who oppose an IRB: there will be fewer who will defend actions which are signified as 'illegal' or 'violent', since illegality threatens the 'rule of law' which is part of the 'common ground' on which all reasonable parties take their stand, and 'violence' represents a threat to social order itself. If the Government cannot 'win' a debate about legislation, it can certainly command a debate which is signified as being about 'law and order'. This displacement of the issue to a more primordial ideological level strengthens the existing terms of the issue. And the displacement occur at more than one level in the media.

For the militant spokesmen have been preceded by pictures of pickets and police locked in struggle. And though these struggles are really instances of the structural conflict between Government and organised labour, they will have been signified in the news as belonging essentially to the 'law and order' category. In allowing the militants to appear and speak, the media, once again, demonstrate their flexibility, their balance and impartiality. The structure of access is temporarily broken. The underlying logic of the situation, however, is unbreakable.

There are more 'obstacles to communication' than are dreamt of in any conspiracy theory. We have not been discussing censorship - either editorial censorship by the media institutions, nor self-censorship by the media professionals, nor external censorship of the media institutions by government or State. All these do, also, exist: but they have not been the subject of our consideration. Nor have we been discussing the personal and overt biases of media personnel. What we have been pointing to is the manner in which the actions of individual men, with a plurality of viewpoints, are constrained by the structures in which they operate. What has commanded our attention is the defined way in which the structures of power and the structures of broadcasting are articulated with one another. In part, this is a matter of institutional connections. In part, these institutional links are framed by structures of understanding, by a 'reciprocity of perspectives', which is no less dominant in its final consequences because it is, also, complex.

Let us now try to sum the argument up in terms rather different from those so far employed. Since the right of universal adult suffrage was won, formally, every adult is a member of 'political society'. He votes at regular intervals for his parliamentary representative: he elects local representatives. In addition, he may belong to various kinds of voluntary or professional associations, which enable the citizen to voice an opinion or contribute something to the way the major decisions which affect our lives are defined and taken. This formal process of democratization was not given as a right but won in a struggle. But, having been won, it has become enshrined in law, legislation and in institutions: it has also become the corner-stone of the dominant democratic ideology. In fact, however, this formal democratization has not led to a massive increase in the degree of participation by ordinary citizens in the pivotal decisions. Society has grown technically and socially more complex. More significantly, the major social decisions remain concentrated within the great institutional complexes - public and private - which compose the modern state. These are in no 'direct' sense subject to public scrutiny or accountability, and they do not

in fact submit themselves to the public very often in more than a formal way. They have, in fact, become more ramified in their operations and structures, and function largely as closed or semi-closed bureaucracies. The growth in formal democracy has not been accompanied by a break-up of the great power centres of society. In fact, quite the opposite: as political society has grown, formally, more universal, so business, government, administration, technology, the legal system, welfare etc. have expanded their operations as semi-private institutions, in the manner of empires within the state. This is not the place to develop an account of the modern state. In general terms, the power of these semi-closed institutions is absolutely massive when set beside the power which ordinary citizens (including those who work for and service the great institutions, when acting in their capacity as ordinary citizens) can mobilize. Power, then, remains largely within this complex of institutions. Between them they define what passes for reality in the State as a whole. Those who have access to power are limited in number, and wield power via the institutions which form the complex of power. They are, however rich, educated, cultivated in individual terms, essentially powerful because they are institutional persons: they 'personify' the system of power.

However, because these centres of power, and the powerful elites within them, function within a formal democracy, they must appear to operate in a manner which 'wins the consent' - even if that consent is passive - of the majority. So, in societies like ours, which remain societies of deep inequality, but where formal democracy prevails, the shaping and winning of consent, the exercise of social and cultural hegemony, is a necessary condition for the continuing exercise of power. The dominant classes cannot and do not rule by consent alone. All societies depend, ultimately, on the sanctions of coercion to reinforce and stabilize the giving and taking of consent. But stable societies can, in one sense, be defined by the degree to which, in them, open coercion gives way to the management of consent. Consent is the process by which the relatively powerless and un-organized grant to the powerful and organized the right, the legitimacy, to act on their behalf. In organized societies of our type, the management of legitimacy, the shaping of a favourable consensus,

and the exercise of hegemony are the pivotal mechanisms, the 'operators', of the system.

Many institutions contribute to the development and maintenance of hegemonic domination: but, of these, the mass media systems are probably (along with the schools) the critical ones. Technically sophisticated systems of communication have developed everywhere, parallel to the growth of corporate class societies of the type I have been describing. Internally, these systems show a tendency to function rather like the other institutions of the state. But they also have an additional, external function, which the other institutions of the state perform only residually. They 'connect' the centres of power with the dispersed publics: they mediate the public discourse between elites and the governed. Thus they become, pivotally, the site and terrain on which the making and shaping of consent is exercised, and, to some degree, contested. They are key institutions in the operation of cultural hegemony. ⁽¹⁷⁾

The dominant systems of power are paralleled by the dominant systems of public communication: for the power to rule and govern is paralleled by the power to shape the consensus in favour of the powerful. Political and economic power is shadowed by what we may call the unequal distribution of cultural power. Cultural power consists, essentially, of the command over certain crucial processes: (a) the power to define which issues will enter the circuit of public communications; (b) the power to define the terms in which the issue will be debated; (c) the power to define who will speak to the issues and the terms; (d) the power to manage the debate itself in the media.

The mass media systems are, then, differentially linked to the centres of power and authority in our society, and to the general public. They, too, operate in 'formal democracies', and they are required to serve wide publics in widely differing ways. No such communications system can afford to 'ignore' the audience, the public. But the public, while occupying the mind of the broadcaster continuously as the ideal-typical recipient of his message, does not and cannot stand in the same position, where the exercise of cultural power is concerned, as the elites. The media therefore reproduce the structure of domination/subordination which elsewhere

characterizes the system as a whole. In addition, the communications institutions have their own complex articulation with power, their own 'relative autonomy'. They have a great deal of day-to-day autonomy over programme production. They are not, except residually, directly in the day-to-day command of the political and economic power elites. Conflicts of interest clearly can, and do, arise between them. The less smooth is the exercise of hegemony, the less mutual will be the relations between, say, the politicians and the media professionals. Even at the best of times, the media are required to give the government in power, and other institutional spokesmen the privileged right of access, because the media must also reflect alternative viewpoints. Although the media have a right and duty to reflect the viewpoints of the dominant sectors, and are closely, regularly, and continuously dependent on them as sources, they also have some counter-vailing obligation to 'seek out' issues and 'inform the public' on issues which those in power would prefer to keep silent. Journalists and editors, who have a professional duty to be 'well-informed', also have a professional reputation to defend as 'fearless', 'independent of power'. If, then, overall, the media serve to reproduce the hegemonic definitions, together with their contradictions, it is not because there is an open conspiracy or collusion to defraud the public, or to 'sell' the consent of the masses to the dominant classes. Nor, however, does it mean that the media stand outside the complex of power and hegemony, and are neutral in relation to it. They are both 'relatively autonomous' institutions of the power nexus, and yet also 'articulated in dominance' with those institutions. It is the complex articulation of structures which regulates this relation 'in dominance'. The shaping and making of consent functions, not in spite of, but via those structures. And, as the messages and programmes which the media systems produce negotiate and pass through those structures, so, inevitably, they cease to be random messages about the social world, given and taken in some 'free market of the word', and become instead elements in a structured communication process.

An institution like the BBC is famous for its 'relative independence of power', its balance and impartiality. The alternative commercial television channel, though privately

owned, is hedged about with conditions which impose many of the same requirements on it. One of the moments at which that 'independence' was most severely tested was in the General Strike of 1926. There was a strong section of the Cabinet which wanted to commandeer the BBC for the Government, once the strike had begun. Lord Reith, the Director-General, argued powerfully and persuasively that it should and must remain independent. His reasoning is worth recapitulating. Once the strike had been declared illegal in the Courts, (a 'reading of the situation since contested'), Reith argued that "there could be no question about our (the BBC) supporting the Government in general".⁽¹⁸⁾ Anything "contrary to the spirit of the judgement", and which might prolong the strike, was unacceptable. Official communiques "would have been expected and demanded irrespective of its political complexion". On the other hand, Reith's view was that, once the Government directly commandeered the BBC, the BBC would lose its reputation for impartiality, its credibility, its "considerable measure of independence", and thus its position as "a national institution and a national asset". It is important to remember that this "battle for the independence of the BBC was something more than a battle for the neutrality of the medium". As Professor Asa Briggs⁽¹⁹⁾ has remarked, Reith "had a standpoint of his own":

"He had no sympathy with the coal owners, but he had little sympathy with organized labour either and disliked the very idea of a general strike. He preferred mediation to showdown".

Reith, then, laid a double injunction on the BBC in its moment of crisis. To be "for the Government in the crisis", and to "be allowed to define its position in the country". It is summed up in one of the most delicate of formulations ever put on paper by a broadcaster:

"But, on the other hand, since the BBC was a national institution, and since the Government in this crisis were acting for the people, the BBC was for the Government in the crisis too."

When the relationship of communications to power is framed by so subtle and complex a negotiation, it seems crude and vulgar to speak of 'Obstacles'.

Stuart Hall

Footnotes & References

1. Cf: Stuart Hall, Innovation & Decline In Cultural Programming Part IV, for a discussion of the role of the 'technology'. Report to UNESCO. Centre for Cultural Studies (Stencilled). Birmingham: 1971.
2. Cf: Stuart Hall, "The External/Internal Dialectic In Broadcasting". In Fourth Symposium On Broadcasting, Dept. of Extra-Mural Studies, University of Manchester. Proceedings. Manchester: 1972, p.93-105.
3. Hans Dreitzel, "Introduction", to Recent Sociology 2. Ed, Dreitzel. Collier-Macmillan. London: 1970.
4. Cf: Stuart Hall, "Encoding And Decoding In The Television Discourse". Paper for the Council of Europe Colloquy, held at the Centre for Mass Communication Research (Stencilled). Leicester: 1973. See, also, Umberto Eco, "Towards A Semiotic Enquiry Into The Television Message". Working Papers In Cultural Studies, 3. University of Birmingham: 1972, p. 89-102.
5. In The Making Of A Television Programme. Constable. London: 1972.
6. Martin Nicolaus, "Introduction" to K. Mark, Grundrisse. Penguin. London: 1973.
7. Jurgen Habermas, "Toward A Theory Of Communicative Competence", in Dreitzel, op.cit.
8. I am thinking particularly here of work, inspired by Basil Bernstein: Cf, inter alia, Class, Codes And Control, vols. I, II. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London: 1971, 1973. And William Labov, "The Logic Of Non-Standard English", in Tinker, Tailor: The Myth Of Cultural Deprivation, ed. Nell Keddie. Penguin Education. Harmondsworth: 1973.
9. Asron Cicourel, "Basic and Normative Rules In the Negotiation Of Status And Role". In, Dreitzel, op.cit.
10. Erving Goffman, Encounters. Bobbs-Merril. Indianapolis: 1961.
11. Cf, Stuart Hall, "Determinations Of the News Photograph". In Working Papers In Cultural Studies 3. Centre for Cultural Studies. Birmingham: 1972. p53-88.

12. For the relation of the 'problematic', the 'taken-for-granted', and news, Cf: Stuart Hall, ibid., and "Deviance, Politics And The Media", in Deviance, Protest and Social Control, ed McIntosh and Rock. Tavistock (forthcoming).
13. Cf: James Halloran, "The Social Effects Of Television", in The Effects Of Television, ed Halloran. Panther. London: 1970.
14. Cf: Stuart Hall, "Encoding And Decoding In The Television Discourse", op.cit. The scheme applies to the decoding of television messages a typology of class 'meaning systems' developed in Frank Parkin, Class Inequality And Political Order. McGibbon & Kee. London: 1971.
15. Cf: Louis Althusser, "Ideological State Apparatuses", in Lenin And Philosophy, And Other Essays. New Left Books. London: 1971. And Nicos Foulantzas, Political Power And Social Classes, New Left Books. London: 1973.
16. Cf: "External/Internal Dialectic In Broadcasting", Stuart Hall: op.cit.
17. The concept of 'hegemonic domination' here is adapted from Gramsci: Cf: Selections From The Prison Notebooks. Lawrence & Wishart, London: 1971.
18. Lord Reith, quoted in Briggs, The Birth Of Broadcasting: History of Broadcasting In The UK, vol. I. Oxford University Press. London: 1961.
19. Asa Briggs, ibid.