

**PART III: TELEVISION NEWSWORTHINESS  
AND PRODUCTION CULTURE:**

**NEWS ORGANISATION AND NEWS  
PROGRAMME SIMILARITIES AND  
DIFFERENCES**

Part III of this thesis comprises three parts. Chapter 6 provides a detailed analysis of the similarities in news content and news production exhibited by different television programmes and Chapter 7 provides an analysis of the differences in content and production shown by those same news programmes. Chapter 8 is a detailed case study of television news coverage of the ending and aftermath of the Waco siege in Texas, USA in April 1993. The analysis in Part III draws upon the research data from Part II and the theoretical insights in Part I

A central concern of Part III of this thesis is the role of the mass media in their potential public interest capacity. I have argued earlier that television news should make a contribution to the welfare of society and has a social responsibility to provide news which has useful informational content. Such a role is vital if the television news organisations are to fulfil their remit as institutions which embody citizenship and which aim to empower citizens to act more competently in the public sphere. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 and in the Concluding chapter, I closely examine and assess whether the television news media can fulfil such a role in Britain in the 1990s.

First, in Chapter 6 we turn to the similarities inherent in television news production, selection and content output which also helps us to assess the broad cultural and professional values and norms present in all television newsrooms. This helps us to identify the similarities in newsworthiness and public interest values which underpin all television news production and content in terrestrial television news in Britain in the 1990s.

## CHAPTER 6: NEWS ORGANISATION AND NEWS PROGRAMME SIMILARITIES:

### SHARED CULTURE AND VALUES

#### a) Introduction

This chapter analyses the similarities in news production and content exhibited by the different television news programmes and different television news organisations. Such similarity is grounded in the sharing by all journalists of a set of extant formulas, practices and normative values as well as a journalistic mythology which is passed down to new generations of journalists.

#### b) Shared Extant Formulas, Practices and Normative Values

Any journalist, regardless of where he or she works will already have, or have to acquire a notion of what is newsworthy. This perception of newsworthiness is intrinsic to being a journalist. Although all journalists, and the indeed the general public, would recognise that the death of Labour leader, John Smith was newsworthy, it is claimed that in general only a seasoned journalist has “a nose” for sniffing out the newsworthy from the plethora of events and issues crowding into every working day. This acquisition of the knowledge of what constitutes newsworthiness, the ability to identify the newsworthy story and the skill to cover it, are the factors which allow trainee or would-be journalists to “join the club” and which keeps the observer or the critic of journalism out. This mystique of the journalistic role is something which permeates all aspects of journalism.

Journalistic practices require great expertise and precision and the acquisition of skills which allow a journalist to quickly master a brief, to

not only understand the complex array of facts and issues he or she may be facing, but to quickly, succinctly and correctly convert them into a package which will be meaningful to the audience, and acceptable to his peers. Such skill is sometimes underestimated by some academic analyses which dismiss it as being simply a formulaic response to a set of demands. In fact all the journalists working in national and regional television newsrooms have to reconcile contradictory pressures of good intention and creativity (particularly at the BBC), with the more prosaic time and cost constraints, contractual obligations and commercial imperatives. Many are pretty good at analysing some of the shortfalls of their own profession, and of course some are not!

Newsroom study and observation of journalists at work, especially in particular national newsrooms, highlights the complexities involved in describing journalistic culture and practice. For example, whilst it is apparent from reading academic accounts of the processes and output of journalism that they often conflict with journalistic accounts of their role, it is a myth to claim that journalists reject all academic accounts of their work. In the BBC newsrooms, in particular, many of the journalists were studying for master's degrees, and were particularly well versed in the general academic texts which would be recommended for any Media, Culture and Society Course in a Sociology Department in a British University. Some of these journalists felt they had, to some extent, been enlightened about their role and practices, whilst others dismissed it as being all right in theory but not in practice. It would obviously be far too elementary to attempt to explain journalistic rejection or ignorance of academic texts as a rejection of all things academic. All the journalists I met were fascinated by the question I was attempting to address and apart from the odd sarcastic comment such as 'it's obvious, you could define that in five minutes', or 'well be sure to let *us* know if *you* find out', they



were generally very supportive of my efforts. In fact many of the journalists I met were genuinely interested in analysing their profession, claiming that they would love to find out why they do what they do.

Furthermore newsroom observation highlights that in order to study the production of television news from within a newsroom, one must immediately dispel any notion that it is possible to explain the production or selection processes simply in terms of monolithic issues such as the influence of government or owners, or in terms of the routine nature of journalism, in terms of news factors, or simply via the measurement of television news output. Newsrooms are dynamic and sometimes frenzied, they are replete with tensions and pressures and, in common with all organisations and institutions, they have their own codes and conventions.

Regardless of the complexities of the news process, I will show, however, that there are still some broad similarities in all television newsrooms and news products. Identification and discussion of these is not intended to be a method of simplification of the complexities of the concept of newsworthiness, but aim to point out that newsworthiness is, in part, grounded in a set of very similar procedures and beliefs operating in all television newsrooms (see Chapter 5) and which are therefore subsequently manifest in the television news content itself (see Chapter 4).

Other comparative studies have pointed to similarities in news processes and output. However, most of these studies have either concentrated on news output only, using content analysis or have simply analysed one or two newsrooms. There have been no in-depth studies of a variety of newsrooms and therefore the following claims to similarity are added here within that context.

Bell (1990) identifies similarity in the format of all news stories, and writes generally about the similarity of the use of “the lead” or the “lead paragraph” and its structure, the use of headlines, the use of news sources and journalistic devices such as the who, what, when, where, why and how, which ensure that all news stories basically contain a certain type of information. Also the reliance on facts and figures which all journalists use to illustrate and supplement the story all go some way towards some uniformity of structure and content of broadcast journalism (Tuchman, 1978).

Similarly, Chibnall pointed out, it is true that 'you can put six reporters in court and they can sit through six hours of court verbiage and they'll come out with the same story'. Journalists, however, would prefer to see this as a claim to objective reporting rather than the 'triumph of formulaic narrative construction' (Chibnall, 1980:86). Therefore rhetorical, structural and format devices which pepper the practice of journalism are often rejected as such by journalists who prefer to see them as a method to ensure that accurate, fair, impartial (and objective) information is conveyed as efficiently as possible. (See Chapter 1 for an analysis of journalistic objectivity as an ideal and as a practical professional practice. Such practice underpins the concept of newsworthiness in all television newsrooms).

Different studies of individual television newsrooms have highlighted similar types of procedures, structures, routines, pressures and constraints (Burns, 1969; Epstein, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Schlesinger, 1987), empirical studies of television news output have also pointed to similarities in news content, research in the United States of news editors' judging patterns, were shown to be nearly unanimous (Buckalew, 1969;

Clyde and Buckalew, 1969). Similarly news selection patterns among daily newspapers in Iowa were interpreted by researchers as either representing similarity of news judgements or showing a pattern of emphasis of the wire service (Gold and Simmons, 1965).

Whittaker (1981) argues that news in Britain is disturbingly similar in content and structure, leading towards a common set of assumptions which are taken-for-granted by the media. Such assumptions create a uniformity of discourse in the media.

It is possible to observe the similarity of format and structural devices at work in all newsrooms. For example if a big story occurs, such as a major air crash, or five policeman shot dead in the Orkney Islands, the Input or Newsgathering news editors would know straight-away that these were good stories and that the programme editors would want them for their particular programmes (i.e. *they* would “know” their market, just as the programme editors “know” their audience). Camera crews would be despatched to location X or location Y, programme editors might intervene at this point and ask if a crew could be despatched to location Z. Subject to logistics and resources this would be done, but it is implicitly understood in all newsrooms that Input and Newsgathering editors have to be able to judge a newsworthy event and to react with speed in order to allocate crews and as such cannot afford to waste time negotiating with each other. Similarly both Newsgathering, Intake and Output programme editors would be able to discount the potential news story which cannot be covered due to logistical difficulties but which is not worth specifically sending a crew out to. For example twenty journalists all agreed that the three policemen who were accidentally injured on the Isle of Mann whilst watching TT races were not worth allocating a crew for, but if a crew had

already been there then the accident would have been covered (ITN's *12.30pm News* 8/6/94).

Where this process becomes less clear-cut in all newsrooms is when the story is not so obviously newsworthy, (and is a mid-ranking story) and is of interest to some programme editors and not others. For example ITN's *5.40pm News* wanted to cover a story about some children being attacked and burnt by a man with a flame-thrower whilst in school. *News at Ten* did not want to cover that story (ITN 17/6/94). In Chapter 7, I develop this theme further, challenging the view that all news output and process is so similar, arguing that the fragmentation of the news genre has resulted in a plethora of possible combinations of different news sub-genres, which in turn allow a variety of news programmes to emerge all of which do show diversity in their assessment of newsworthiness (see Figure 1, Introduction and pages 20-21). Through study of the diversity and fragmentation of the news genre into numerous news sub-genres it is possible to identify the public interest priorities of a particular news programme or news organisation by examining which news sub-genres constitute particular programmes. (See Chapter 1 for an analysis of the relationship between newsworthiness and the public interest role of the news organisation and Chapter 7 for how this perception differs between different television news organisations and different television news programmes).

In this chapter, however, I address the similarities and uniformities of the process and content of television news, by considering the similarities in journalistic practices, constraints, myths, values and lore existing in all television newsrooms. It is the claim to similarity of process and content, in particular, by researchers which contradicts the assertion by journalists working on different news programmes, that their programme has a

specific programme identity and is different from other television news programmes. Over the next two chapters, and in the case study in Chapter 8, I aim to reconcile the nature of this claim to difference with the similarities of practice and content identified by academic research. This allows for the consideration of whether the journalistic claim to news diversity is in fact simply an indication of superficial format constructions and production techniques or whether there is truly a wide spectrum of television news available on British television in the 1990s. This issue has to be addressed in order for the implications for the concept of newsworthiness and assumptions of a unitary journalistic practice in a multi-news programme environment to be analysed.

#### I) Journalistic Training (and Training on the Job)

Philip Gaunt (1990) argues that journalistic images are in large part the result of journalistic traditions which are shaped by history. In his comparative analysis of journalism in France, Britain and the United States, he argues that traditions are created and developed in accordance with the laws, economic constraints, political pressures and social dynamics of the culture in which they exist, as well as technological developments. He believes that the stereotype image of the journalist in each country is different, in France for example, the journalist is often seen as a tough intellectual who is often politically motivated. In contrast, Gaunt's version of the American journalist is the stereotype produced by 'Humphrey Bogart's newspaper reporter in Deadline USA, a shirt-sleeved hero with typing fingers like meathooks, eager to fight corruption in high places and defend the cause of TRUTH' (Gaunt, 1990:20). In Britain, Gaunt argues that it is Evelyn Waugh's novel Scoop which portrays 'the London reporter as an unscrupulous news hound in pursuit of a good "story", or as a nail-bitten, nicotine-stained fingered

hack bashing out his scoop on a battered old typewriter, which is most accurate. Whatever the true image is of the British journalist, it is interesting to note, in fiction at least, that it is very different in tradition and style from his/her French and American counterparts.

Sparks (1991) laments the loss of the hard news reporter symbolised by Hildy Johnson. Hildy Johnson's great triumph was to expose a corrupt city administration and to save the life of a rather deranged murderer, whilst losing the chance to marry his fiancée. Although Hildy Johnson worked for a newspaper in the United States, he elicits an attractive journalistic image of the investigative and tenacious journalist. In Britain, journalists are heavily constrained by the Official Secrets Act, and by their adherence to the strict rules and regulations of the Lobby system. However, the role of a Hildy Johnson-type journalist is often equated with debates about citizenship, which consider the impossibility of there being an enlightened citizenry if the press and the broadcast media simply report what they are spoon-fed by the government and other authorities. Hildy, therefore has become a metaphor for press and broadcasting freedom, as Sparks sadly remarks however, the modern Hildy Johnson

'no longer dreams of bringing down the mayor or the government in the wake of a great scandal. That only happens in the movies' (Sparks, 1991:72).

In Britain, the image of journalism variously as a trade or as a profession has been related in part to its education/training and to the different routes into journalism, via university, college or up through the ranks starting in the regional press, usually reflect the type of work the journalist will undertake. Most journalism training is industry driven in the sense that journalists are expected to acquire certain skills will which enable them to

identify newsworthy facts so they are able to produce a newsworthy story.

The National Council for the Training of Journalists, for example, usually produces reporters who will work on regional or weekly papers, who often move on to the national newspapers later in their career. The NCTJ course is very formulaic, journalists must complete six examinations, a shorthand test, and a final proficiency test in order to pass, studying subjects such as law and public administration as well as learning how to write a news story. The acquisition of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), and on the job training is therefore one route into journalism, which stresses the practice of journalism, and its status as a trade.

Other courses which attempt to reconcile such skills with an academic grounding in the issues and dilemmas facing journalists, have emerged once again in universities. In the same way that the BBC encourages its home-grown graduate trainees to become “thinking” journalists, higher education is similarly encouraging would be journalists to critically evaluate both the profession and the role of journalism. This route into journalism, is more common in broadcast journalism, where the emphasis appears to be on journalism as a profession.

The current editor of ITN's *5.40pm News*, however, is a veteran newspaper man, from the *Daily Mirror*. The skills, practices and news values he brings to his programme are notorious to the rest of the ITN broadcast journalists. The editor himself, prefers to think of himself as a “born” journalist, one who came up the hard way, and who really understands news values. The “soft” college boys and girls who come in via the graduate training scheme are seen by him as often struggling against a very real disability - not being able to recognise what is

newsworthy. There is undoubtedly a very strong Oxbridge influence in the newsrooms at both ITN and the BBC, although it is much more noticeable at the latter. Although at ITN there were still a good many Oxbridge graduates, several people remarked on the fact that people from different universities were now coming in and breaking the monopoly.

Once the trainee journalist has entered the newsroom, then a further learning process begins. Assuming that at this point all journalists have acquired the rudimentary skills of their trade, through whatever means, they will now be faced with the daunting task of putting them into practice. New recruits have also got to learn about the organisation and newsroom for which they are working. Often this occurs through assimilation of newsroom mythology which is communicated down by experienced journalists who often make assertive statements about their profession which no one can prove to be correct or incorrect, but which can be incredibly confusing to a novice or an observer. One such example occurred in the *Look North News* newsroom. A female correspondent complained that a rape which occurred in broad daylight had not been covered because it happened in Cleethorpes and not in Leeds. Whilst this claim may have some basis in truth, story coverage also depends on many other variables. This seeming cathartic admission of a knowledge of the shortcomings of BBC journalism is a common feature of BBC newsrooms where journalists are over-sensitized to criticisms levelled at them by academic research and journalists in other organisations. The problem is that the internalisation of such criticism can then become a catch-all explanation for non-coverage of stories. All senior or experienced journalists issue a wide variety of such polemics from time to time about the inadequacy of the organisation, apocryphal tales of stories which were missed or handled badly, examples of really



great moments, criticism of bad journalists and so, the junior recruits watch, listen and absorb, and mythologies are continued.

In every newsroom I visited there were several new journalists. In all cases they were young, ambitious and had faced a good deal of competition to get to their position. Similarly in all cases there was an inherent desire to please the senior journalists, not to rebel and shock, but to conform and contribute. All the new journalists are quickly schooled into understanding that investigative journalism is basically a myth and that their success is strongly related to their accuracy and skill in applying journalistic techniques and formulas. At the BBC inexperienced journalists are treated quite harshly and are given the least exciting stories and left to muddle through. The routine of any newsroom is one of spasmodic hyper-activity and when an exciting news story breaks or the closer it gets to transmission time, the young journalist often finds that he or she is ignored. Senior staff appear impatient and tense, making it difficult for the trainee to ask questions or to get guidance at particular times of the day. If he or she has been pushed into the situation where they must meet a deadline, but everyone is far too busy to help them, then they must very quickly learn how to cope. All newsrooms are full of these tense, stressed inexperienced journalists. Those who survive the pressure, are by the nature of their work environment simply schooled into a (best) way of doing things which is in total accord with the rest of the news programme or news organisation. In effect this results in a conformity of production and selection.

Primary in the new journalist's mind is survival (similar perhaps to Peter Wood's (1986) survival strategy of teachers), whereas the other more experienced journalists appeared to have other concerns, such as beating the opposition, making sure that their news report and coverage is better

than the rival company's, as well as being "across the subject". In all newsrooms, but especially in a forum such as *Channel Four News*, *Newsnight* or BBC1's *Nine O'clock News*, a journalist who has not thought a subject out thoroughly or is not able to express a degree of cynicism or lateral thought about an event or issue is often humiliated by the other journalists who know better. Some journalists cope with this by becoming "news junkies" totally immersed in news and current affairs, whilst others who take it less seriously never move on. A journalist would probably defend such immersion as a professional tactic to ensure that the public gets the best possible news coverage, but it is also an expedient way of avoiding embarrassment or humiliation. In other words the demands of the newsroom and other journalists requires that a journalist is able to discuss intelligently, or to critique existing or potential news stories, with fellow journalists. On listening in to such a conversation one will always hear them expressing doubt or looking for an angle, or saying 'there's something odd about this killing' (correspondent, ITN's *News at Ten* 21/6/94).

Once a journalist gains experience of the demands and pressures of journalistic culture, he or she can move beyond simply surviving the newsday and be more able to contribute to the ebb and flow of newsroom discourse, humour and journalistic analysis of the stories and events covered. By that time (s)he will have learnt the nuances and techniques of news selection and production according to the particular journalistic culture and values in operation in the particular television newsroom.

Some values permeate all newsrooms and are the same wherever a journalist works. For example, all journalists are inherently driven by the quest for the good story, the telling of which will impart some

information to the audience (although the definition of “a good story” may differ from newsroom to newsroom, it is nonetheless a guiding principal of every newsday). A journalist who cannot identify what is newsworthy, whether it is the identification of certain newsworthy facts to complete or update an existing story or the recognition of a new newsworthy issue or event (according to the criteria the programme uses) will strive to learn. A journalist who repeatedly suggests stories which are not newsworthy will not be humoured for long. Secondly, a journalist must learn how to work to deadlines and other format constraints, which the journalist must respect and obey (again this requirement is the same in all newsrooms even though the specification may be different). Thirdly, a journalist must learn to be part of an effective team. So much depends on clear and precise communication, often in journalistic jargon or other codes, that a journalist must learn the value of trust in fellow team members and learn to be an efficient and reliable member of that team. In all newsrooms journalists talked in terms of having to trust their fellow news personnel and it is one of the key values of every newsroom.

Therefore, the three values one would find in any television newsroom can be summarised as, awareness, acceptance and trust; that is awareness of what constitutes newsworthiness, even if a journalist cannot articulate it in other way than “a gut feeling”, or as “having a nose” for a good story, secondly, acceptance of the logistical, legal and political constraints of news selection and production and thirdly, trustworthiness, being able to be trusted oneself and being able to trust one's colleagues. Any journalist who fails to acquire these values will have a very difficult time surviving in any broadcast newsroom.

What does this tell us about conceptions of newsworthiness in different television newsrooms? Undoubtedly, journalists are all schooled to

develop a good news sense. Furthermore, television news does concentrate to some extent on the same news story, illustrating the “me too” aspect of journalistic practice, where journalists follow stories because their competitors are also following the story. However, the diversification of news programmes is, as I argue in Chapter 7, to some extent allowing television news journalists to escape the straight-jacket of copying the opposition. I argue this point with the cautionary note that in the case of most news programmes this commitment to diversity really only applies to a percentage of the news stories broadcast. As always in any form of journalism, big news stories, such as the Lockerbie plane crash, the death of John Smith, election results, major government reshuffles or the ending of the Waco siege in Texas, result in a “feeding frenzy” of all types of media.

## II) Editorial Policy and Formal Meetings

At the BBC, both in London and Leeds, the euphemism of “guidance” was still used in 1994, to refer to policy decisions regarding the content of television news output (Schlesinger, 1987). At ITN and *Calendar News*, such euphemisms were deemed less necessary and most policy decisions were communicated down to staff via bulletins or meetings. The difference culture can to some extent be accounted for by the sheer size of the organisation. At ITN and Yorkshire Tyne-Tee’s *Calendar News* the senior management are much physically closer to the news production and selection process on a day-to-day basis. Therefore they can intervene or “see” problems and communicate them to the staff rather informally. Furthermore, the strong commercial imperative which dominates at *Calendar News* and ITN make it much more like any corporate body which operates a simple line-management system. BBC in contrast attempts to appear to be more democratic with horizontal lines of

communication. In practice, however, the BBC actually uses hierarchical practices which it appears to feel the need to mask.

In common with Schlesinger, I also found that many news personnel (at both ITN and at the BBC, and to a lesser extent at the regional newsrooms) did not consider themselves to be under such control. Programme editors in particular appear to see their freedom from daily constraints as intrinsic to their role as the creator of a news programme and the arbiter of the newsworthy. The younger, less experienced editors for the day would acquiesce more willingly to the obvious increase in supervision and control imposed on them by senior news editors when they were editing the programme.

For example, at the BBC the Editor, TV News Programmes, would spend more time at the output desk when a younger less experienced editor was in charge. At ITN's *News at Ten* is generally edited by two senior, seasoned editors. On 24 June 1995 when a younger editor was editor for the day, it was obvious that the Head of News and his Deputy were in much more close contact with the programme's progress on that day than was usual. The young editor himself commented to me before we went into the 6.10pm meeting, where the structure of the programme is finalised, that he did not expect it to remain the same, whereas the other editors 'knew more clearly what the programme should look like'. The 6.10pm meeting is always attended by the Head of ITN Programmes, his deputy and the presenter, and on this occasion they duly switched two or three of his stories around, and they also issued one or two firm instructions about the inclusion of film.

All the senior programme editors, however, have a different explanation of editorial control. As they have learnt what is appropriate and

acceptable, it seems that they have more autonomy and control, when in fact they have simply begun to subscribe to the corporate view. However, according to several programme editors, there is a mechanism of control which operates which ensures that non-newsworthy pieces which are simply 'hobby horses' of the senior editorial staff, do not feature high in the programme's agenda or do not get on at all. Conversely, senior editorial staff may over-rule programme editors, and insist that a news item be moved higher up the running order or added into the programme. Control by the latter appeared to be much more common than effective resistance by the former.

Younger journalists who resist editorial directives can acquire labels or damage their careers by mishandling stories and at both institutions there were several examples of journalists who were "unpromotable", or were on some kind of probation. One editor gave me a couple of examples of correspondents he had to watch telling me that 'that correspondent can never be relied upon to return a piece the right length'; or 'that one never manages to get a decent interview, we always have to redo it' (editor for the day, BBC's *One O'clock News* 27/4/94); or 'I've got to watch her because she always goes over the top about women's rights' (programme editor, ITN's *5.40pm News* 14/6/94). The programme editor will also request certain journalists for certain stories, for example 'don't send Sally\* on that, she'll cock it up - I want John'; (programme editor, ITN's *12.30pm News*, 7/6/94 \*name changed) or he will caution journalists as he assigns them 'don't do another Benson and Hedges on me' (programme editor, ITN's *News at Ten* 22/6/94). The shorthand code used by the programme editor is incredibly specific, although to an observer it is sometimes nearly unintelligible. Obviously a journalist who has made a mistake must work on probation, proving that he can master an editorial brief and produce pleasing goods and gain or re-gain the programme

editor's trust. All programme editors supervise the untrustworthy or inexperienced journalists far more closely than the reliable ones, who are often left almost entirely to their own devices. At the BBC in particular the very senior specialist correspondents would not expect to have a young fresh-faced editor for the day watching over them.

Real control over the news product in the television newsroom therefore is concentrated in few hands. Although all news personnel and journalists are working towards a common goal, many just work on their allocated parts of the news programme. Senior editors and programme editors, have the most control, and only they have a very real overview of the whole programme. Although the presenters need to see the shape of the programme they do not become involved in the editorial process and may only disagree or comment on small aspects of its overall structure or content. Editorial staff ensure that control of production of the final news product is only devolved into the hands of responsible correspondents and producers who will act as controllers of the disparate sections of the newsroom. Therefore, although a cameraman, particularly an experienced one, will have a much better idea of the best way of filming an event, (s)he will still be working subject to a correspondent's directions and specifications. Similarly a video tape editor's skills are vital to the editing process, but (s)he would work in accordance with the wishes of the producer and the correspondent who are writing the story. Any dissent has to be reconciled within the context of the correspondent's overview of the whole story. Any issues which cannot be reconciled are always then referred back to the editor.

All activities in the newsroom are inferior to the primary one of making news. Therefore those people who have the most control of this process, namely the editors, producers and correspondents, are all able to demand

compliance from the other newsroom personnel, such as video-tape editors, cameramen, graphics engineers, production staff and so on. These demands always increase and intensify the closer the programme gets to transmission time, and once in the gallery, the programme editor has supreme control of all the newsroom personnel, who will react immediately to his every demand. At this point there is no dissent whatsoever.

However, in contrast to Schlesinger (1987), this current analysis did not find much evidence of dissenting journalists whiling their days away filing or working in the archives. This is probably because since 1977 there has been enormous technological change and a good deal of the clerical and routine jobs have been replaced by computer systems. Furthermore, the reduction in staff, at ITN, in particular, ensures that no one can get away with doing very little or not being allocated stories as a punishment. Exile in a television newsroom in 1995 might be to the Forward Planning Desk, Newsgathering or an early morning programme, but it would still involve the journalist working directly in the news production process.

Editorial control is further reinforced by the numerous meetings which structure every newsworld. Higher level policy meetings occur in every news organisation and are attended by the senior editorial staff (see Chapter 5 for an account of the meetings held at the different news organisations). At such meetings, policy issues such as the manner in which the organisation will handle Northern Ireland, elections or forthcoming leadership elections will be discussed and a formula agreed. The formula then becomes part of the common currency of the newsroom until it is a taken-for-granted response. For example, at both the BBC and at ITN there was acknowledgement that the organisations were not



impartial about acts of terrorism or racism, and that there were certain procedures to be followed when reporting elections. Sometimes such decisions or the opinions of senior editorial staff are passed down to the newsroom journalists in a positive manner. For example, at the BBC, the staff were told that the violence policy of the BBC had been adhered to and the journalists got the “thumbs-up” from above. Or more negatively, they were told that there was concern expressed by senior management about a left bias in a piece by a senior correspondent in South Africa.

Although it is evident that such procedures are actually policy directives which will shape and set precedents for all subsequent reporting on those or related issues, most news personnel subscribed to the editorial ideology of autonomy, refusing to see beyond the programme editor for any real mediation of control.

As news personnel do not attend the policy meetings chaired by the very senior news personnel, such as the Managing Director, News and Current Affairs at the BBC or the Editor-in-Chief at ITN, they are not aware of the extent to which higher decisions are passed down to the programme editors. When the programme editor returns back to his programme and holds the next meeting with his staff, he does not claim that he is following a particular line because he has just been told to do so. The only time he will admit to being told to do something is when he has been instructed to do something which contradicts the journalistic ethos in the newsroom. In such cases an editor will claim 'we've got to do a story on Arafat today because the Editor-in-Chief has got a bee in his bonnet about it'. (A case of the “hobby horse” syndrome described earlier). In this way, by openly illustrating the more perverse examples of senior editorial control in a pejorative manner he is often able to intimate that control

over his actions by senior editorial policy on a day to day basis is mythical, weak and sometimes ill-informed.

The programme editor may accumulate myths about his or her newsworthy preferences, whereupon it can follow that his staff may try to second-guess his or her choices. (This in fact happened in a much larger and important way to John Birt, where the mythology of Birtism pervaded newsrooms in 1987, before he became Director-General of the BBC and the BBC News staff tried to put into practice his theoretical version of good news coverage). At *Channel Four News* a myth was circulated that Liz Forgan, former Editor of Channel Four Programmes, had a hatred of sports news, royalty and crime news. However, this directive had come straight from the contractor at Channel Four who did not want the news programme to move down market by covering these potentially light or serious human interest and crime stories in a trivial manner.

Such comments about senior editorial and editorial staff made by journalists do tend to overplay the romantic notion of editorial idiosyncrasy, which nevertheless is often credited with being the sole reason a story has got onto the running order in the first place. In reality the programme editor, or indeed the senior editors can really only influence the choice of one or two news stories which would not otherwise have been chosen. In the case of the senior editors it is viewed as being a “bee in his bonnet”, and often such stories are regarded by journalists as not being particularly newsworthy. Programme editors actually have devices for burying such stories in their news programme and actually have allocated slots or positions which they tell me they use for such inherited stories. Programme editors’ choices of unusual stories, again in reality are restricted to one or two lesser stories which they may pick out from the wires or from the papers. These generally are viewed

by the journalists working on the programme as being newsworthy “because the editor says they are”, whereas senior editorial choices are often derided by the programme editor for not being newsworthy. In effect the notion of newsworthiness here is actually being determined by newsroom politics and the fact that the programme editor will prefer to be the arbiter of what is newsworthy, and not senior editorial staff who no longer get their hands dirty in the newsroom itself. Therefore newsroom mythology tends to support the programme editor's choices above those of the senior editor's and it becomes a mythology that newsworthiness really is “what my editor says it”. Thus mythologies abound about how journalists watching a news programme from home can tell that ‘Phil edited it because it had a story about a dog in it’, or that ‘story number three came from “the suits”’ (correspondent, ITN's *5.40pm News*, 15/6/94).

In reality, the structured nature of the organisation ensures that the real power is located at the top of the hierarchical pyramid. For example the Editor-in-Chief at ITN told me quite unequivocally that he directly intervened in the coverage of Rwanda in order to increase the impact of the story. Furthermore, such a visible medium as television news ensures that the senior staff can tune in at any time to watch their company's product. The journalists know that the “top man” might be watching at anytime and whilst this probably does encourage conformity there is no doubt that the journalists working on a particular programme believe they are working to the programme editor's vision.

In summary, editorial control is present in every television newsroom, journalists in the main conform to this control and dissent is rarely expressed in any way which could be damaging to their career. Editors and their staff still subscribe to the editorial ideology of autonomy,

arguing that their programme is the programme editor's and that it is not shaped by the upper echelons of the organisation they work for. Finally, editorial control at the BBC, ITN and Yorkshire Television is pushed down the system via structural procedures and conformities producing a journalistic orthodoxy which news personnel simply regard as being the true nature of journalism itself. Therefore although the journalist's zone of operation must be defined to a large extent by the particular structures and practices of the organisation they work for, there is also a general sense in which the mediation of control via the editorial system, its hidden power and the subscription to the ideology of editorial autonomy is a common feature of any television newsroom.

This leads to the question of whether this similarity of practice and structural control leads to similarities in the television news product. The data from my content analysis does confirm to some extent this assertion of sameness. There is no doubt that common journalistic practices, routines, schedules and training do result in a compatible notion of what is newsworthy. As I show in the case study in Chapter 8, for example, there was near unanimous agreement by all news organisations that the story about the ending of the siege in Waco, Texas was undoubtedly newsworthy. Furthermore, all the news programmes studied initially handled the news story in the same way, concentrating on the destruction of the Branch Davidian headquarters and the attempted rescue operation.

### III) Broadcasting Law

Unlike the United States, Britain does not have a First Amendment to protect press and broadcasting freedom and as such the British media are in constant danger of losing its freedoms from increasing government intervention. As such, any journalist in Britain must be aware of the

constraints imposed upon his reporting activities and as such must become *au fait* with the bizarre and complex array of laws relating to the media, particularly as many of those laws are not always specifically media laws. Indeed as Tunstall (1983:4) noted, 'Britain has less legislation specifically about the media than does almost any other country'. All formal journalistic training courses, degrees or in-house training courses offer courses in law so that the journalist can then quickly participate in the newsroom shorthand code 'we can't do that because of the RPA' (producer, BBC 23/5/94) for what is or is not allowed for any particular story.

According to Ericson et al (1991), any government aims to retain political security, social order and control. The most obvious way for the state to exercise control is via legislation, but control can also be exercised by threat of punishment or prosecution. Control of the BBC and ITV system by the government is exercised by existing statutory arrangements, such as Acts of Parliament directly relating to broadcasting companies, for example the BBC's Royal Charter and Licence and Agreement, and the Broadcasting Act 1990 (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, see also Chapter 1 for an analysis of the regulation of television news). Control is also exercised through agreements established by precedent which are directly related to the broadcasting companies, such as the D-Notice system (1). Finally, control is exercised by general laws which directly affect the working journalist (2).

Between 1979 and 1992, there have been several changes to other laws which have an impact on the practice of journalism. Several of the changes made under the Thatcher government have now become infamous and well-documented in most journalism text-books. The most notorious examples of legislation or government action are as follows.

Many of the 1979-1990 Conservative Government's amendments to existing legislation was made under to guise of the "Law of Confidentiality", that is the keeping of State secrets. For example the Official Secrets Act 1911, contains provisions about spying, but was amended in 1989, replacing Section 2 of the 1911 Act with a "catch all" section, which is extremely complicated and creates twelve new offences. The journalist working under the 1989 Official Secrets Act is more constrained than previously, restrictions having been placed on the amount of confidential information a journalist can receive. For example it is now a crime to report the number of cups of tea drunk per week in a Government Department (Ewing and Gearty, 1990; Robertson and Nicol, 1990; Greenwood and Welsh, 1994).

Fortunately the directives which were issued by the Home Secretary in December 1990 under Section 29(3) of the Broadcasting Act 1981 and Section 10 of the Broadcasting Act 1990 requiring broadcasters to provide a voice over for words spoken by members of certain Northern Ireland organisations have been rescinded although guidelines still exist about reporting and use of material likely to stir up hatred (Reville, 1991).

Journalists can also be called by government to reveal their sources in a court of law, if it is considered that the information is confidential or damaging to the state. If the company refuses it is charged with Contempt of Court which is costly. In 1980, Granada Television was ordered to reveal a "mole" who passed on confidential information. In 1983, *The Guardian* was ordered to name the source, Sarah Tisdall, who passed on Ministry of Defence documents revealing the strategy for handling the arrival of Cruise missiles into Britain. In 1992, Channel Four was

ordered to name the individual who passed on information used in a Channel Four programme *The Committee*, made by Box Productions.

All journalists are subject to the constraints of British law. In particular the broadcast media and telecommunications have been dealt with as 'businesses affected with a public interest and subjected to special treatment under law and government policy' (Melody, 1990:18). As discussed in Chapter 1 regulation of the ITV system via the 1990 Broadcasting Act (through the ITC) and regulation of the BBC through the Charter and Licence and Agreement is grounded in the notion of serving the public. In Britain, public interest has been delivered both via the public service broadcasting system and via the regulated market. It follows therefore that changes in the politics of regulation of the media and market affect the public interest idea of the broadcast media. Direct laws which censor the broadcast media challenge the notion of freedom of speech and can prevent the media working in the public interest. Indeed, all television newsrooms in recent years have undergone changes in policy in relation to government intervention. All journalists are duty bound to obey certain regulatory rules and laws to avoid prosecution or embarrassment for their media organisation. However, as we saw in the 1980s, due to the lack of a written Constitution in Britain there is a very fine balance between regulating and controlling the media in the public interest and the introduction of media censorship.

#### IV) Audience Measurement

Currently all television news organisations commission audience research which has increased over the last ten years due to a number of factors such as changing technology, deregulation, new sources of demand, increased viewing and listening opportunities, audience fragmentation all

of which lead to increasing competition in the broadcasting industry (Kent, (Ed.), 1994).

Whilst free-market philosophy has been a minor theme of British television broadcasting since the creation of the ITV system in the 1950s, the balance of state policy was weighted against it through regulation and support for the BBC. However, in the 1980s and 1990s this balance was changed and is now weighted in favour of the application of a free-market philosophy to the whole broadcasting industry. Such a change has initiated a broad debate about the future role of public service broadcasting in Britain and threatened its future security (Barnett and Curry, 1994).

At ITN in particular the maintenance of audience ratings is deemed to be crucial to the future security of the news business in the face of such broad and sweeping developments, because it is the audience which the company sells to the advertisers. Crucially the BBC has had to enter into this commercial maelstrom due to the continuous debate about the validity of its licence fee. The initial argument here is why should everyone pay a licence fee for the BBC when it attracts only a small (and declining) share of the audience. The pressure, therefore is on all television news broadcasters to attract and keep a good audience rating. Such developments however, have also highlighted key concerns which centre upon the nature of the public sphere, public interest and public opinion as well as the relationship between television news and democracy.

This kind of research, upon which ITN, in particular relies upon, as a day to day indicator of the success of their programmes, and as a determinate of their assessment of newsworthiness and public interest, is in fact a very



poor indicator indeed of the nature of the audience. Audience ratings give a general indication of audience size and audience composition (in demographic terms). They do not indicate what audiences think or feel about programmes.

In contrast to the view of the audience held by the “organisation” as a whole, as a statistically determined entity, all journalists I encountered shared the common practice of envisaging their own audience. Whenever I asked any individual journalist how (s)he saw his/her audience, (s)he, unlike the senior management, would never respond with a statistical analysis of the audience as being “three million” or “4.6% higher than the BBC's”. For him/her the audience was much more organic and emotional. I variously heard the audience described as, 'its like my mother, you know, just got in from work, wants a cup of tea and her feet up, she doesn't want to watch anything too boring' (correspondent, ITN's *5.40pm News* 23/5/94). 'I always think of someone a bit like me, you know, been to university, and doesn't want to be patronised, wants a bit more information' (correspondent, *Channel Four News*, 25/6/94). 'Well, I always think of my wife really, if I can find a story which will make her say “Oh Really!” then I think it will be an interesting programme' (editor, ITN's *5.40pm News*, 21/6/94).

What is clear from analysis of the attempt by all news organisations to measure their audience ratings is that it does not have a high impact on the programme journalist's definition of the audience. What journalists have in common is that they all work to their own particular definition of the audience when selecting and producing television news stories, but are still able to adapt and change their audience visualisation to meet the requirements of different television news programmes. Therefore a migration from ITN's *5.40pm News* to *Channel Four News* would not

necessarily be a problem for the journalist. However, although the journalist's personal and private view of the audience must, of course, conform to the remit of the programme, the personalisation of journalistic activity (freedom to envisage the audience) is a mythical freedom. In the same way that a journalist working on a programme will adhere to the myth of editorial autonomy, he or she will also acquire their own mythical relationship to the audience. Such activity helps to compound the view in the newsroom that journalists and editors have a greater independence from senior editorial directives than is the case.

#### V) Technology and the Electronic Newsroom

Technological change in television newsrooms was probably at its most marked in the 1980s. Indeed, the '1980s may be best remembered as the decade that news communications technology began making a real impact on the traditional news media' (Willis, 1990:159). Although Willis writes particularly about newspapers and electronic publishing 'and other wonders', his observation is also applicable to the national television newsrooms. Indeed, it is notable that Burns (1965); Epstein (1972); Tuchman (1978) and Schlesinger (1987), all completed their observations of newsrooms prior to the evolution of electronic newsgathering and computer links to agency copy, instead analysing news production in terms of agency tape and teleprinters (3).

In the early 1980s, several important developments in technology were helping to transform television news. The advent of satellite links facilitated the invention of live two-ways, where "our own correspondent" could provide on the spot news from far off places. Electronic news gathering (ENG) speeded up the whole process of newsgathering, changing the priorities of newsrooms, and increasing the orientation towards the use of film and television newsrooms were computerised.

During the 1980s, the increase in news output, with the advent of twenty-four hour competitors such as Sky, the introduction of breakfast news programmes, *Channel Four News*, has elevated the status of news in terms of resourcing and budgets towards a level only previously enjoyed by the current affairs programmes (Tunstall, 1993). At the BBC in particular the merging of news and current affairs is illustrative of the increasing status of television news during John Birt's early period as Deputy Director-General and Director-General.

However, in the 1990s technological developments are continuing with the proliferation of cable channels, the growth of the Internet, the plan for the introduction of new multiplex licences, the merging of technologies and the advent of Channel 5. All in principle have led to a much greater access to information and a massive growth in outlets requiring information. At the same time the investment in television news is being reduced at the BBC. The high investment of the early 1990s has now been stabilised and the News and Current Affairs Directorate has to compete more fairly in the internal BBC market (Media Guide, 1996). Such a development is of concern as greater access to information does not necessarily correlate with a more knowledgeable and informed public and may even have the negative effect of obscuring information by exceeding the interpretative capacity of the subject (Baudrillard, 1993 in Stevenson, 1994). Journalism in the 1990s therefore has an important and constructive role in interpreting the information blizzard in a meaningful and useful way for the audience. Only when editors and journalists recognise that the image and information blizzard unleashed by technology requires analysis and should not simply be passed on, can journalism or television news in particular, provide information to enhance and enable citizen participation in the public sphere.

The debate about the impact or importance of technology, is outlined by Williams (1975) who identified two theoretical distinctions between technological determinism and symptomatic technology, and their relationship to social change. Technological determinism views the discovery of new technology, by research and development, as setting the conditions for social change and progress. In effect, technology has created the modern world. In contrast, the second view of technological change sees particular technologies as symptoms of change, so a particular new technology is a kind of by-product of a social process which is determined by other factors. Both of these views, as Williams points out, are inadequate in the sense that they tend to abstract technology from society, assuming that either technology is created in some kind of vacuum but then goes on to change society or human condition or that research and development are self-generating and isolated from society. Williams was quick to oppose the conjunction of technological determinism with cultural pessimism (Eldridge, 1994) which somehow assumes that technology is invented in a vacuum and there is nothing we can do about it. Indeed, in its most extreme formulation McLuhan's (1964) phrase 'the medium is the message' is interpreted to mean that the content of the communication results entirely from the technological characteristics of the communications medium. From this extreme perspective we would have to argue that the format of the television news programme actually determined the content, and therefore what is subsequently deemed to be newsworthy.

If one considers technological change from a less extreme perspective, however, it is an important reminder that there are probably interactions between the nature and content of the message being conveyed (that is what is deemed to be newsworthy) and the nature of the medium which is communicating the message (Neuman, 1991). Indeed, observation of

journalists at work in the electronic television newsroom elicits certain key maxims which are of concern in relation to the important role of the journalist as interpreter of vast information flows, especially his/her capacity to make such information blizzards intelligible and useful to the citizen.

In all national television newsrooms one of the main sources of news are the national and international news agencies or “wires” as they are commonly known. The sole domestic national news agency is the Press Association (PA). International news is covered largely by two agencies, Reuters and Associated Press (AP), although the BBC also subscribes to Agence France Presse (AFP) and United Press International (UPI). The news agency TASS has now been replaced by a very diminished Interfax and ITAR which neither the BBC nor ITN subscribe to. There are also separate wires covering economic and sports news, and *Look North News* for example receives Reuters, Press Association (PA) and Associated Press (AP) and a plethora of local wire services under Mercury, a local news agency. There are also keywords built into the system so that the word “Yorkshire” for example can be used as a filter system. In this way the option of newsworthy stories is predetermined by the news agencies and the filter system.

Each agency has an extensive network of correspondents who aim to provide a comprehensive coverage for a subscription fee paid by the subscribing organisation. In the 1990s such information is sent to every newsroom computer terminal so in effect every single journalist is party to all the events which their organisation may consider to be newsworthy. The copy taster in modern television newsrooms no longer occupies the same pivotal position as all journalists are able to perform the task of sifting for newsworthy stories. Neither *Look North News* or *Calendar*

*News* had a designated copy taster in their newsrooms, the task of watching the “wires” was shared by all the staff. Criticisms can be levelled at such a system of newsgathering. First, many of the reporters at news agencies are young and inexperienced, often moving on to work for television news organisations once they are adequately qualified. Secondly, news agencies which are effectively unaccountable are setting the agenda for news.

Furthermore, the history of news agencies is instructive. Smith (1980) argues that it is impossible to examine the global news agencies without considering their relation to capitalism. The news agencies are large commercial empires, built on the backs of colonial information systems, and the British news agency, Reuters, in particular was oriented towards promoting national interests in Britain's various colonies and promoting British interests world-wide (Lorimer, 1994; Read, 1992).

The news organisations willingly accept and appear to unquestioningly pay for the service, and most journalists defend the journalistic integrity of the agencies. In fact as one *Channel Four News* producer pointed out

'there is a mystical or even mythical quality about them. This is particularly so with the Press Association, which is revered throughout the industry as one of the best training-grounds for keen young journalists' (Producer, *Channel Four News*, 25/6/94).

In most television newsrooms the news personnel therefore can be removed from “the sharp end” of the event but do not really contest the accuracy of the bulk of agency material. Obviously journalists check the different agency versions of the same story to ensure there are no major discrepancies, but they still have to rely on the agency perspective of that

event. ITN in particular has to rely on international agency material more than BBC, as it has less overseas bureaux.

Overseas news agency material (Eurovision and Asiavision) is available to members of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Both the BBC and ITN are members of this union and are entitled to ring in and request film of events occurring in different countries. There is a Eurovision/Asiavision conference six times per day, plus a special relationship which exists between the BBC and ABC News in the United States and ITN and WTN. These facilities enable journalists to acquire film of almost any major event in the world. Occasions when British film is requested are usually following major events such as John Smith's death, large scale accidents and disasters such as the plane crash at Lockerbie, or bomb explosions in Northern Ireland. It is interesting to note that the perception that other countries will get of British news is that it is full of violence, disaster or death. The content analysis in Chapter 4 has already shown that this is similar to the types of international news British television news covers regarding other countries.

The *Channel Four News* producer also expressed further concerns regarding specific instances of technological failure and the resulting effect this has on the notion of newsworthiness of the story, which he outlined these in a short paper he wrote in 1991 (4).

Although improvements in technology can work very positively to increase the possible range of news stories covered, to speed up the time it takes for an event to be reported to the public, and to facilitate live-links to the place where the event is actually occurring, there is also a negative side to the equation. Situations can arise where a story is only partially, and perhaps misleadingly covered because a satellite-link breakdown

results in an event having to be missed or the informative nature of the transmission compromised. In the past, film of events often took several days to reach the news organisation, but this was an accepted part of news coverage. Today, a story often has to be covered immediately or the news organisation will have “missed it”. The need for immediacy and speed of coverage, directly relating to improvements and abilities of new technologies, have superseded the inherent content or informational quality of the event or issue as a criteria of newsworthiness.

One can also argue that journalists are becoming too reliant and unquestioning about the capabilities of new technology. Sometimes reporters and correspondents write a story without even leaving the building and are able to accompany this with film supplied, either by a freelance cameraman, or through the Eurovision network or via associate picture agencies, such as World-wide Television News (WTN), which are similar to picture versions of the “wires”. In part this changing role of the journalist in Britain of the 1990s can be explained by the increased number of outlets each journalist's report has to service. At the BBC a report may be used by *Breakfast News*, and then updated and changed for the *One O'clock News*, *Six O'clock News* and *Nine O'clock News* programmes, and at ITN for the *12.30pm News*, *5.40pm News* and *News at Ten*. At *Look North News*, journalists routinely have to produce reports which are bi-media, so that they can be used for both television and radio. The skills and time consumed attempting to meet such greedy demands for their work ensures that many journalists spend a good deal of their time in editing suites and in front of their computer terminals. Twenty-four hour rolling news is an even more greedy and demanding taskmaster. As John Tusa noted



'It is, of course, a problem that has not crept up on us suddenly. Recently, a senior BBC correspondent said to me: "We're not correspondents any more. We're scarcely even reporters. We have become re-processors. There is no time for digging up the news"' (Tusa, James Cameron Memorial Lecture, 14/6/94).

Another concern regarding technological developments was identified by a *Channel Four News* editor, who believes that technology has had an unusual and often unnoticed effect on newsgathering which has, in turn, resulted in a faster turnover of news stories. He argues, and unfortunately it is difficult to prove, that a story is dropped a lot more quickly than in the past. A few years ago a news story would have been told one day and then analysed the next. In the late 1980s, the BBC began the precedent of trying to do both things in the same programme with their twin packs (story followed by analysis or backgrounder). *Channel Four News* have now gone one stage further and try to analyse and tell the story in the same package which results in the story becoming old news even more quickly. Usually stories which have been reported and analysed are dropped the next day and so news is becoming even more decontextualised and ahistorical and less useful in an informational sense. Indeed it would be entirely possible for the audience to miss significant events simply by missing one day's television news. Perhaps society is becoming more and more impatient by nature, the increase in consumption of fast food and convenience food could be analogous to the consumption of news. Is television news becoming like convenience food, brightly packaged, quick, convenient and briefly satisfying with no nutrition? The question to address is whether new technology is aiding the transference of information or knowledge or whether it is converting the experience of news into Postman's (1989) nightmare.

## VI) Logistics of News Selection and Production

All newsrooms in all news organisations are constrained by cost, time and space. Schlesinger (1987) argues that journalists operate in a “stop watch culture”, the concept of which is an important part of a journalist's occupational ideology. As outlined above, great emphasis is placed on the need for immediacy and speed and the structuring of journalistic practice around this concept has resulted in a direct link between the journalist's time-perspective and the demands created by the nature of the work itself. The marrying of the routines of the newsday and the journalists' creative ability as news producers has created a unique culture. Everything the journalists do has to be subordinated to the programme deadline, and so the notion of effective reporting includes a mixture of priorities, accuracy, impartiality and some creativity, as well as deadlines and time restrictions. As Schlesinger (1987:105) goes on to note, with regard to journalists' relationship with time. 'It is a form of fetishism in which to be obsessional about time is to be professional in a way which newsmen have made peculiarly their own'.

It is due to this particular set of contradictory professional criteria that journalists must learn to select, record and package their product in a way which practice and experience has taught them is the best possible way for them to cope with the constraints they must work within. The specific content of television news changes every day, but as my content analysis illustrated (see Chapter 4) there is a tendency for programmes to use similar types of devices and structures to pass the message to the audience each day. Routine utilisation of graphics, film, live two-ways, studio guest panels, “discos” (studio discussions) presenter-led introductions and so on can become farcical when the content does not fit. For example, during my observation period at both the BBC and ITN in May/June 1994, there were several rail strikes. The first two or three strikes were

all covered by the news organisations, relating tales of commuter inconvenience, stranded passengers and so on. All the news programmes initially used similar techniques and formats to cover the stories, via live two-way links showing the novelty of stationary trains and empty stations as well as showing alternative methods used by commuters to travel to work and coverage of all the stages of the negotiations between RailTrack and RMT. However, by the time the television programmes were covering the seventh or eighth strike, these methods were quite inappropriate. As the nature of news content is usually so changeable, use of the same format procedures are not always so noticeable, as they too can give the illusion of change, but when neither the content nor the format structures change, the news becomes very dull indeed. In this case the repetitive and uninformative nature of television news was exposed due to repetition of the content. However, most news stories are not similarly repeated and therefore their trivial content can be masked to some extent by the illusion of importance created by the newness of the story and the variety of entertaining format devices used.

News processes therefore are regularly subverted to the constraints of time and costs and adhere to rigid format structures and techniques of the news medium itself (they must be “television-worthy”). They are also logistically constrained in terms of technological application as outlined above. Therefore it is often the case that certain actors in a newsroom, ostensibly journalists, will appear to have little interest in the content of the news itself, but be totally concerned with the logistics of covering the story, or trying to ensure that an event can be covered successfully by the television medium. This adherence to the practical and the logistical aspects of journalism could be interpreted as being all that journalism is about, indeed to watch the activities in Newsgathering at the BBC or in Intake at ITN, one would immediately come to the conclusion that

journalism is simply the product of the routinised organisation of the newsroom, or the adherence to logistics.

However, in the Output side of the operation there is an impression of creativity and craft, where the programme editor has a vision of the news programme, early in the newsday, which he does not want to be subverted to logistics and routinisation. However, much of this is simply an illusion, the conversations, the intellectual debate and the agonising over newsworthy priorities, at the end of the day have to be logistically possible and are constrained by logistics (5). At the BBC in particular there are many good intentions to analyse issues or to go into something in more depth, but in reality this is often not possible due to time constraints or pressure of other work. Indeed, all the journalists in any newsroom appear to feel that the sudden or the unexpected (supposedly the bread and butter of news) can be a nuisance and inconvenient. One programme editor admitted to me that the nearer it gets to transmission time, the more he hopes nothing new happens! This is admitted at *Channel Four News* more freely than in any other newsroom, as it is there that most planning ahead has to occur. In television newsrooms there is, as outlined earlier in this chapter contradictory pressures, those of the creativity, intelligence and the wish to be more analytical contrasted with those of the constraints of time, routine and costs.

## VII) Planning

An important part of any newsroom routine is the planning process. As noted by Schlesinger (1987), there is a heavy reliance on a planning structure which provides a reliable agenda of stories at the start of any newsday (see also Epstein (1973) and Golding and Elliott (1976)). All the newsrooms I visited placed great importance on this procedure. In all

cases the structure of news organisation was remarkably similar. In all newsrooms there is a weekly "Lookahead", a planning meeting which is attended by some senior editorial staff, the programme editors, the Intake/Newsgathering editors from both the Foreign and Home Desks and a some of the senior correspondents and producers. The numbers attending the meeting varied at different organisations, but this is only a reflection on the actual number of staff employed and not on differing attitudes to the notion of the importance of planning per se. At the meeting, the Intake/Newsgathering editors "sell" news story ideas to the programme editors, this process is supervised by the Head of News or his equivalent who interjects with his own wishes at various points in the discussion. From this transaction, it is possible to ascertain that the journalists themselves feel there to be a very real diversity in the range and type news programmes. This is illustrated by comments such as 'that's a *Six O'clock News* story' (editor for the day, BBC's *One O'clock News*, 26/4/94).

Once a rudimentary commitment to certain stories or forthcoming events has been established, Newsgathering/Intake can go ahead and continue to arrange for camera crews, to book lines and to allocate journalists. These confirmed stories are then put into the appropriate day's Prospects. One problem with this degree of planning ahead is that sometimes on-the-day events can supersede the coverage already planned which can be very expensive. The *Channel Four News* format dictates that it, like *Newsnight*, has to plan carefully and well in advance as it must fill five minute story slots. At *Channel Four News*, there is an obvious inflexibility built into the programme structure, and therefore due to format and cost constraints the programme editors cannot really afford to drop a pre-planned story unless it can be run the next day.

Each national newsroom has a group (or in the regional newsrooms, often just one person) of planners. They occupy the Weekly Forward Planning desk in the Intake/Newsgathering section of the operation and are usually situated the furthest away from the news output desks, signifying their distance from on-the-day news. The possible stories enter the newsroom in a variety of ways. Many come in via press releases from Government and Opposition ministries, the police, universities, quangos and other large-scale institutions. The increase in public relations exercises by such organisations in the 1980s and 1990s has resulted in a vast amount of literature, and most mainstream news programmes are afraid to go out on a limb and ignore a Government presser in favour of a piece on East Timor. As such most of these routine press releases contain information relating to future events and these are entered into Basys in date order. When the date comes along, it is usually the case that the routines of the planning mechanism have ensured that there is a camera crew and a correspondent allocated to the event. Many such events, which Boorstin (1964) termed "pseudo-events" are often staged specifically for the media, and due to the tendency for all the media to use the same techniques of newsgathering and planning most of the news media will attend. The Press Association on the "wires" also releases advance notice of forthcoming events and the planners scan the "wires" for such information. All television newsrooms routinely receive court lists and information from the specialist correspondents which has not gone on general release. Finally there is the odd telephone call tipping the newsroom off about an event which will occur.

On the day before the event, the daily Forward Planning Desk will look at the events available the next day and in liaison with the Intake/Newsgathering desk and programme editors, and on the basis of commitments made at the weekly Lookahead meeting, start to arrange for

the appropriate crews and equipment to cover the story. When the Prospects appear at the beginning of the newscast, the list of the day's events are also accompanied by brief details about the arrangements for the day (6).

The Prospects generally contain about ten or twelve possible leads to follow during the day. Some journalists are already at work on the stories which have been planned and advertised in advance. The communality of the planning procedure in all television newsrooms is very indicative of the nature of the television news product itself. The newsworthiness of a story or event of course does not depend on the unexpected or the sudden, but can be anticipated and designed well in advanced, although once the event itself is happening the priority then becomes immediacy. Immediacy, or "recency" (Bell, 1990), means that the best news is something which has only just happened. This notion as I indicated earlier, has always been a priority of journalism, but the concept has always been at the mercy of technological process. Today it is possible to convey a story as it happens. Twenty-four hour news coverage by news organisations such as CNN leave the cameras rolling so the audience can watch events as they occur. As argued above, technological process has augmented the importance of immediacy as a criterion of newsworthiness, whereby immediate can often mean "instantaneous" instead of "as soon as possible". Within the context of such high competition, technological proficiency and journalistic sophistication, there is an obvious requirement for excellent planning and control to ensure that all the disparate parts of the newsgathering and newsplanning operation are geared up to cover the forthcoming story as efficiently and effectively as their competitors.

Extra reliance on planning and preparation may affect what can be considered to be newsworthy by the news organisation. If resources have already been committed to events which are known of in advance and journalists themselves are relying increasingly on the “wires” for information about the world, then it follows that the rest of the news stories competing for a place on the programme must exhibit more newsworthiness enhancing factors than if planning did not take precedence and journalists were out searching for stories. This is particularly noticeable on *Channel Four News* and BBC2’s *Newsnight*, where a large commitment is made to pre-planned stories at the expense of covering on-the-day occurrences well, or sometimes not even covering them at all.

Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news factor, “unpredictability”, is actually being increasingly compromised due to the rigid format structures of news programmes and the progression of the planning process. There is no question that the editorial staff at *Channel Four News* in particular, and to a large extent at ITN’s Channel Three recognise that many of the stories they cover are diary stories. However, at the BBC, editors still talk in terms of the ad hoc nature of the news gathering process. This in large part is due to the extra resources available at the BBC which allows editors to have stories prepared in advance and in reserve, but to drop three or four of them during a news bulletin in favour of newer or more important stories. At ITN due to the greater financial constraints within which the new operation is conducted it is much rarer for stories to be dropped, indeed when Intake at ITN has over-committed resources to a story which is not actually particularly newsworthy they will then try to oversell it to the programme editors to try to justify the expenditure. One programme editor likened this to the technique of “ankle tapping” in a



football match, where the news editors try to psyche out the programme editors into believing the story is newsworthy.

In summary I argue that technological improvements in all newsrooms and cost constraints at ITN in particular, have augmented the need for pre-planning, where the onus is on making sure the coverage is as fast and extensive as the competitor's.

### VIII) Informal Organisational Processes

Compliance or resistance in any organisation is two sided. On the one hand it consists of the control structures employed. These can be defined in terms of the authority structure which attempts to ensure that obedience is obtained. This structural aspect of the organisational control system relates to the formal managerial command power structures operating in the organisation to enforce compliance on its members. Such command structures result in job descriptions, specified procedures for doing things, division of labour and a hierarchy of authority and supervisors. These bureaucratic devices are designed specifically to curb the whims of its members by controlling their behaviour.

The second form of compliance is based on the degree to which the staff of the organisation are actually committed to its aims and purposes. It is argued that the more an individual is committed to these organisational goals, the less formal control mechanisms are needed (Etzioni, 1985). This theme will be developed further in Chapter 7 in relation to the changes at the BBC in particular.

Etzioni (1985) identifies three types of power according to which organisations can be classified. Coercive power, where physical means

are used to ensure compliance, such as concentration camps and mental hospitals; remunerative or utilitarian power, which rests on the manipulation of material resources, through a system of salaries and wages, such as business organisations; normative or identitive power comes from the manipulation and allocation of symbols such as love, affection or prestige, such as religious organisations, universities and voluntary bodies.

All the newsrooms I visited were controlled to a great extent by remunerative or utilitarian power. The BBC journalists went on strike in May 1994, directly as a result of pay-related issues; *Calendar News* personnel held a strike in December 1994, over pay cuts. ITN journalists constantly talked about the fact that they had not had a pay rise for two years and how half the staff had been made redundant. In all cases remuneration was the topic of anger and feelings of betrayal. However, organisations such as the BBC, and to a lesser extent ITN also command great loyalty and love, as well as according great prestige to those who work there, and the journalists working for these organisations share the same informal desire to see the organisations survive the brutal managerial control imposed from above. Although all journalists comply with the formal rules and regulations of the organisations, as these are often written into their contracts, there is also a very strong informal culture of independence and resistance, particularly amongst some senior journalists at the BBC.

These informal dynamics of a television newsroom and a television news organisation are important as they are in many ways as least as illustrative of the nature of journalistic culture and decisions about newsworthiness as are the formal directives made by the news contractor. At the BBC in particular understanding of the organisation helps to explain the pragmatic

shift in newsroom culture back towards a slightly less worthy news philosophy towards something which will at least have some interest for the journalists and the audience.

c) Common Journalistic Lores and Myths, Shared Common-Sense Values

1) Journalistic Language and Humour

Technical Language and Newsroom Codes

A common feature of all television newsrooms is use of journalistic jargon and code. Not only are there a great many technical terms for newsroom practice and operations (see the Glossary), there are also many shorthand ways of conveying information amongst themselves in the most efficient manner (7). Because of the nature and structure of the television news day, and its inevitable rush at the end, journalists need to be able to communicate quickly and effectively with each other. Thirty minutes before the broadcast, the editor is often holding two or three conversations at once, relaying information and absorbing it at an accelerated rate punctuated by a constant stream of telephone calls which become shorter and shorter.

This need for a rapid communication system has resulted in a newsroom language which can be almost unintelligible to a visitor. Vast amounts of facts and information are conveyed in short terse phrases, such as 'you'll have to oov it, twenty seconds' (editor for the day, BBC's *Six O'clock News* 3/5/94) which means, change the existing piece which contains film and a reporter's voice-over to pictures only and the presenter will talk over the film on air. The film must be reduced in size to fill twenty seconds of airtime. When these terms are linked together into a stream they require translation. For example a briefing by a programme editor ran as follows.

Intake editor: 'If it slips a bit it could be very sick couldn't it'.

Programme editor: 'It's going to be terrible ..... it's going to be shit'.

Intake editor: 'It's all right if we've got links there, if the worse comes to worst and the judgement is at twelve forty-five'.

Programme editor: 'No it's twelve o'clock it says here. From 12 O'clock and you know that British judges always give the punch line at the end'.

Intake editor: 'Yeah, but it'll be OK they like to go for lunch' (programme editor, ITN's *12.30pm News*, 9/6/94).

On the basis of this discussion which lasted twelve seconds the court case was included in the news programme as a newsworthy story. One of the major criteria which ITN's *12.30pm News* and BBC's *One O'clock News* have to use to determine the newsworthiness of a story is if the event happens in *their time*. The rush to fill these programmes with adequately prepared news stories is one of the most tense periods in any television newsroom, because the editors have a great deal of difficulty getting enough information through on time. Discussions with other staff are, by the nature of the time constraints even more terse and tense than on other news programmes where there is much longer time to prepare.

### Use of Irony

#### About what they do themselves

Often there are short witty exchanges between correspondents and editors such as, 'the art of television news is to simplify', (editor), 'surely - you mean to trivialise and simplify'. 'Will that do it then?' (correspondent) (the editor watches the correspondent's piece, which is just what he wants, and replies). 'Yes yes the cheque is in the post' (programme editor, ITN's *5.40pm News*, 15/6/94).

Journalists sometime deliberately use symbolic images which are cliched, but will also make a joke or an ironic comment about what they have done. In other words they admit the artifice to fellow colleagues. For example, a news editor told me that when there has been an aircrash the camera crew will look for a damaged doll on the ground, similarly after a house fire there is often a lingering shot of a burnt toy symbolising the tragedy. When *Channel Four News* covered the Amsterdam plane crash the previous year, the news editor openly admitted that the camera crew looked for a damaged push bike so that they could get a shot of the broken wheel spinning round in the wind. Such pictorial symbols of disasters can be made very poignant, particularly when accompanied by music or a strong narrative. Indeed, John Birt himself referred disparagingly to this type of news making being based upon the “movie model” of news where the instinct is to make the film first and write the words to suit the pictures (Birt and Jay, *The Times* 28/2/75).

#### **Comments about what other programmes do**

BBC journalists and ITN journalists also sometimes take bets on what each other will lead with. If ITN's *5.40pm News* is particularly sensationalist there will be guffaws of laughter around the BBC newsroom. Similarly, ITN will deride some of BBC's choices as being too “worthy” or really boring. Journalists from both organisations tell apocryphal stories about when the opposition had gone with the wrong lead. In the case of the BBC, ITN judged as ill-advised the choice to cover the State Opening of Parliament instead of a coach crash on the M11, which killed a lot of children, arguing it was a sign of them putting their inclination to “worthiness” before an important newsworthy human interest story. The BBC on the other hand relate the story of the day that ITN led with Prince Charles' speech about spanking children and the BBC led with the atrocities and genocide in Rwanda. In spite of all this

friendly rivalry there is a great deal of interest paid by both organisations to each other's output, and a mirror image of this scenario is played out by *Look North News* and *Calendar News* in Leeds. Although the regional news programmes do not regard themselves to be in direct competition with each other, they nonetheless watch the news programmes with interest. Journalists cannot resist commenting on instances of what they believe to be a mistake on a judgement of newsworthiness, or on overt instances of the programme excessively pandering to its extremes of its remit. For example, at *Calendar News* this might be a very silly and trivial story about a man who makes models of pigs; at the BBC it might be an extremely worthy story about the German political system or at *Channel Four News* a story about the political status of Eritrea. These examples of journalism are judged by other journalists working on different news programmes as not being newsworthy.

### **Humour about the News Content**

Journalists are often humorous about the news itself. For example Prince Charles' attack on political correctness and his support for smacking children, led to many comments about his hypocrisy in trying to advise the rest of us. One editor came across and joked that she wanted to find a trendy woman "expert" who says you can breast feed until you are fifty to reply to Charles.

### **Callous Jokes**

When Walter Byrne, the News Editor in Billy Wilder's screen adaptation of The Front Page said 'forget the Nicaraguan earth quake, I don't care if there are a hundred thousand dead', he was simply articulating McLurg's Law. Philip Schlesinger (1987:117) also came across the concept when he was observing at the BBC, expressed to him as 'one European is worth

twenty-eight Chinese, or perhaps two Welsh miners worth one thousand Pakistanis'. McLurg's Law also relates to Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news factor regarding "cultural proximity", where a story is newsworthy if relates to the British people. For example, twenty-two dead British at Waco was enough to render the story newsworthy (see Chapter 8). It is treated as a joke however, by journalists themselves, as they are all aware of their obvious bias in this area. Often they will say 'there are not enough dead' (correspondent, ITN's *News at Ten* 22/6/94), or as I had it explained to me in colloquial terms at the BBC -'one dead in London is worth seven dead in Sheffield!' (Bulletins producer 20/5/94).

Sarcasm, cynicism and irony are common currency in any newsroom situation, this is probably due a variety of common features to be found in all television newsrooms such as high pressure, and a concentration of highly intelligent, knowledgeable and articulate people. The seemingly callous nature of some of their comments do not reflect their real feelings with relation to death and destruction, but is, rather like the humour exhibited by the medical profession, a strategy of coping with situations which are sometimes harrowing and at best nerve-wracking. Emotions can be hidden by humour, and the culture of journalism demands that people do not give in to time-consuming and inconvenient emotion.

### **Broadcast Language and Humour**

Broadcasting language and humour used during the transmission itself is much more careful not to offend the public who do not understand and are not made aware of the journalists' informal modes of communication.

### **Use of Politically Correct Language - the Formal Broadcast**

Political correctness has crept into all television news reports. Journalists make every effort not to offend the audience by being sexist or racist. At

the BBC it was noticeable that there was much more discussion about politically correct issues and more debate than at ITN about whether or not scripts should be changed to make them more suitable than at ITN. The BBC has provided all its national and regional journalists with a *Style Guide* which opens with the reminder that 'staff should seek innovation and originality, transcending "clichéd thinking" (*BBC Style Guide*, 1993:2). This coupled with *The Producer Guidelines* attempts to ensure that the BBC speaks with one politically correct voice. In contrast the journalists at ITN and at *Calendar News* are not provided with such a prescriptive set of instructions and guidelines, and different news programmes adopt their own particular styles and rules. For example, a producer of ITN's *12.30pm News* asked the editor 'do we like the "House of Horrors" phrase?' about a piece he was writing referring to the house of mass murderer, Frederick West. The editor replied 'no, we don't but the 5.40 do' (ITN's *12.30pm News* 8/6/94).

### **Use of Metaphor and Myth and Common Sense Language**

However, in spite of all this care and attention to writing and political correctness, there is a frame of "natural" images from which television news is selected and produced. The frame is created via the use of myths and metaphors in the news which we all understand, creating a common sense language with which many of us tend to agree.

When a metaphor is used, a word is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable, for example an owl becomes "wise", or New York "the Big Apple" (Fiske and Hartley, 1990). Often metaphors exist, but are not always recognised, Mumby and Spitzack (1985) made a study of the language of television news in six political stories on three United States networks and found a total of one hundred and sixty five metaphors. Using the metaphor of drama, for example, makes sense of,



'politics as a "stage" upon which talented individuals "perform" as stars' (Fiske, 1990:291).

A myth is a legend or fable which is created and in turn, creates "reality". The mythic quality of television news is, like metaphor and common sense, grounded in news language. The news language carries with it cultural meanings rather than just representational ones. As such the mythology surrounding a fictional hero was applied to Oliver North during the Irangate crisis in the United States. Similarly, the mythology of a villain was applied to Colonel Gadafy ("mad dog", "tyrant", "deranged ruler") (Fowler, 1991), to Saddam Hussein (Chomsky, 1989) and to the Branch Davidian leader, David Koresh in 1993.

Common sense explanations of the world are based on "individualistic" or "naturalistic" assumptions. Often an event can be understood simply through individual behaviour, or common sense world views can be very societally determinist and can reference social forces in certain ways. For example through comments such as "you can't stop progress". A "naturalistic" explanation would assume that certain things are "natural" reasons for behaviour, such as it is "natural" for people to fall in love, get married and raise a family, but it is not "natural" to believe that the Branch Davidian leader, David Koresh could have a positive motive, or indeed be a prophet.

Common sense assumptions have long been embedded in television news. For example, the importance of the family unit, the sovereignty of the Royal Family (although this has been shaken recently by the unprecedented actions of its younger members), the importance and authority of elites (via the use of expert sources and stories about famous people doing ordinary things), the role of women, explanations of

poverty, industrial conflict (always called “strikes” in the news, and the assumption is always that they are bad for the nation) and so on. The case study in Chapter 8 shows how common-sense values about the nature of “cult” activity pervaded the reporting of the ending of the Waco siege in Texas in April 1993. If we are to understand newsworthiness then, it is necessary to be aware of the inherent common sense values embedded in the news product itself as these are a good indicator of the criteria news organisations consider when choosing a news story.

### **Funny Stories in the News**

“*And Finally...*”, humorous stories do become news stories, particularly when they are unusual enough to interest people. As such there is a proliferation of light human interest stories in most news programmes, but as the content analysis in Chapter 4 illustrates they are most common in the regional programmes and children's programmes. ITN's *News at Ten's* famous “and finally.....”, piece is used as a mechanism to end the programme on a high note, and is seen by some more “serious” journalists and commentators as evidence that the programme is going down-market and pandering to commercial values. However, even BBC's *Nine O'clock News* has been known to transmit the odd light story (a story about horses, for example, in May 1994). This slight change of practice at the BBC is seen by some journalists as an example of the resistance to Birtist philosophy and the over-concentration on worthy stories. Jay Blumler also believes that the BBC is responding more to audience wishes than ever before and this is manifest in the inclusion of more domestic stories and human interest stories (8).

### **II) The Known Myths of Objectivity and Investigative Journalism**

As shown in Chapter 1 most journalists are well aware of the problematic nature of the concept of “objectivity”, striving to do their best by being as

accurate and as fair as possible. Regardless of such problems and difficulties with the nature of the concept, objectivity and impartiality are the cornerstones of all broadcast journalistic practices. Such an embedded commitment to something which can not be achieved is a compromise which all journalists must come to terms with early in their careers. Furthermore, a young news journalist entering the television newsroom is very quickly debunked of the idea that he or she will be undertaking any real or prolonged investigation of events or issues.

If broadcast journalism cannot be truly objective or impartial, but similarly does not seek to challenge undemocratic practices, one has to ask what is its role in a democratic society. Furthermore it is of note that so-called gurus of this type of “bias against understanding”, such as John Birt, will criticise challenging or over-bearing interviewers 'who sneer disdainfully at their interviewees' (Birt, *The Times*, 4/2/95:2). Birt appears to be contradicting himself, because the criticism of interviewers and journalists who confront and challenge politicians makes the future for broadcast journalism look increasingly bleak in terms of its already thwarted mission to inform and educate the audience. If all journalists can do is to provide anodyne, unchallenged information, which is virtually spoon-fed to them by politicians, or sensational entertainment to retain the audience, then it follows that such values will permeate notions of newsworthiness in television newsrooms in Britain in the 1990s. This has a negative impact upon the role of television news and its ability to interpret information in a meaningful and useful way for the audience.

### III) The Myth of the Audience

Gans (1980) argues that journalists (in the United States) are deliberately ignorant of the audience and as outlined earlier, my experience in all

television newsrooms supports his view. Either broadcast journalists have little no interest in their audience or they create one stereotypical character whom they carry around in their heads wherever they go adapting him or her to suit the particular programme they are working on. Similarly the audience may simply be judged in terms of which newspapers it reads. For example, the *5.40pm News* programme editor at ITN aims his programme at people who read the quality popular newspapers such as the *Daily Telegraph* at the top end of the spectrum and the *Daily Mail* and *Express* at the other. *News at Ten* aims its programme at the readers of the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, BBC1's *Nine O'clock News* viewers are conceived of as *Financial Times* readers. Schlesinger (1987:116) pointed to a "missing link" between news producers and the audience.

News personnel usually refer to their news judgement as saying they select something that is either important or interesting to the audience. However, I would also argue that both ITN and the BBC try to reconcile both of these values in an attempt to marry the principles of public service broadcasting and the commercial imperative. Therefore, news organisations select news according to a variety of guiding principles: "is the story interesting?", "is the story important?", "can something interesting be important?", and "can something important be made interesting?". For example, at the BBC, newsroom personnel were discussing the logistics of covering the results of the local elections in May 1994, in the hope that the figures could be presented so that they could be *understood* by the audience. This was a rare conversation because discussion of the audience tends to assume the "audience" is generally more of a concept than a real force (Blumler, 1969). However, it was noticeable that any discussion about the potential for audience involvement or interaction were neglected criteria. It may be that,

'...programme-makers in particular will always deny themselves the full extent of audience research findings because they need to retain the creative mystique which allows a programme to be made which apparently goes against the grain of audience acceptance' (Madge, 1989:98).

The BBC and *Channel Four News* tend to aim for the value of importance, and try to make it interesting. ITN's Channel 3 aims for stories which are interesting, arguing (perhaps defensively) that interesting stories can be important. *Calendar News*, *Big Breakfast News* and *GMTV News* aim for stories which interest and entertain the audience. Stories which are important will be covered if they can be made interesting.

d) Summary

The myth of the journalistic mystique underpins and confuses much of the structural and formal processes of journalism which can be found in every television newsroom. Journalists do not appear to view their roles as being bureaucratic and formulaic in nature unless they are working in the newsgathering or planning part of the newsroom process. Some of the journalists working on the output process of the news product will admit that a high percentage of what constitutes news is already pre-planned, but all talk in terms of the ad hoc nature of the news process. All newsrooms adhere to the myth of editorial autonomy, whereupon the role of the programme editor is seen as sacrosanct, provided he or she is experienced enough to be accorded such status. Junior editors often bow to senior editorial advice, but the older programme editors appear to resent such interference in their news judgement. However, in reality, the more senior and experienced a programme editor becomes, the less "interference" in his programme occurs, because he is now working in

accordance with the senior editorial vision, although this analysis would probably be denied in the newsroom.

Journalists in all newsrooms share some of the same extant formulas, practices and normative assumptions, as well as the constraints of law and regulation and a shared journalistic mythology which is passed down to new generations of journalists. Given that all television newsrooms in principle operate along the same lines, it follows that the concept of newsworthiness must operate to a large extent within similar constraints in all newsrooms. Such constraints or pressures upon journalistic practice are largely grounded in journalistic training and law but are being exacerbated by technological, transnational and commercial developments. These vectors of change, identified in Chapter 1, are affecting television news journalism in similar ways. In all television newsrooms there is a tendency for the television medium to change its relationship to political process by responding to a variety of pressures to move from a public service broadcasting model towards a market model (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). The BBC and the ITV system are under pressure to adapt and change in order to meet new pressures and demands. In all television news outlets the commercialization of the broadcasting system is disrupting and disturbing many of the public interest assumptions and justifications relating to television programming generally and television news in particular. Such developments have important implications for the public sphere and the relation of television news to a democracy.

In the next section I go on to examine how consideration of television news values and newsworthiness is further complicated by the changing nature of television news. The television news genre has fragmented and diversified into a number of different television news programmes, each

constituted by a number of different news sub-genres, where different concepts of newsworthiness are evident. Such diversification indicates that different notions of public interest journalism are currently operating in different television newsrooms in the 1990s.

## **CHAPTER 7: NEWS ORGANISATION AND NEWS PROGRAMME DIFFERENCES:**

### **DIFFERENT CULTURAL NORMS**

#### **a) Introduction**

This chapter analyses the differences in news production and content exhibited by the different television news programmes and different television news organisations. Such diversity is grounded in the different organisational structures and origins of the news organisations which have resulted in the evolution of different organisational news philosophies and news values. Also due to the fragmentation of the television news genre itself an increasing diversity of news programmes constituted from different news sub-genres is emerging, resulting in a diversity of approaches to news production, selection and the content of television news programmes. I show in this chapter how different television news programmes have different epistemologies and how these different epistemologies are resulting in different notions of public interest journalism in different television news organisations and newsrooms. In the 1990s it is apparent that different news programmes have a different commitment to provide useful information than others in terms of a particular type of news content (see Chapter 1 for a definition of information “useful” to a citizen as being political, economic and identification and analysis of anti-social behaviour and see Chapter 4 for an analysis of programme content). For the BBC, the issue appears to be relatively straight-forward. It has set an historical precedent for the coverage of “worthy” and important news stories stressing the serious side of life and events. In contrast, ITN has to reconcile a serious minded approach (ITC regulations ensure that news coverage is of a certain standard) with the maintenance of high ratings. The apparent dichotomy



between the two organisations is not so clear-cut when we consider the type and range of news programmes that ITN provides. *Channel Four News* is produced commercially and yet provides “worthy” in-depth stories omitted from BBC1 and Channel 3 news coverage. In contrast the BBC is reducing its investment in World Service news, is introducing the odd human interest story into its programmes and has abandoned its old format of four or five in-depth stories per programme in favour of ten or eleven shorter stories. However, in spite of such developments, ITN clearly still has a greater commitment than the BBC to economic stories told from a “consumer affairs” angle (people-centred), health stories and human interest stories. The dilemma is whether or not such information provided by outlets such as ITN’s Channel 3 news programmes, *GMTV News* and *Calendar News*. is useful and empowering or merely interesting and entertaining, or both.

In this chapter I now go on to discuss in detail how the BBC, ITN, *GMTV News* and Yorkshire Tyne-Tees Television news programmes have different organisational criteria which influence output and selection but also now have increasingly divergent television newsroom epistemologies. Each television newsroom is committed to selecting and producing a particular type of news programme. Each news programme has different informational content and therefore it follows, a different value in helping and empowering a citizen to be competent in the public sphere. First I go on to consider how newsroom epistemologies are grounded in organisational culture and history.

## b) Different Organisational Structures and Origins

### 1) The History and Culture of the BBC

Far more has been written about the origins, ideology, aims and so-called demise of the BBC than about ITN. This is in large part due to the central role the BBC is deemed to play in British cultural life. Although there is an ever-expanding plethora of books and articles devoted to the BBC at large, it is necessary for the purposes of my own analysis of newsworthiness to include a brief historical account of the birth, growth and development of both the BBC and Independent Television, as much of what occurs today in television newsrooms is grounded in their history and complex multi-causal origins.

Indeed many of the tensions which exist between the BBC and government, which reached their zenith during the Thatcher Governments from 1979-1990, have been embedded in the relationship since the British Broadcasting Company was set up in 1922 (O'Malley, 1994). The British Broadcasting Company was a consortium of wireless manufacturers and was set up by the Post Office in 1922, as an expedient way of reconciling a number of technical and organisational problems, so that the commercial company which emerged, only four years after the First World War, was a product of the particular social, political and cultural climate of the country at that time (Burns, 1977). The monopoly system which emerged was a solution to the "chaos of the ether", manifest by the American experience (Schlesinger, 1987). Broadcasting was initially to be funded by a tariff on the sets (to satisfy the set manufacturers) and partly by a licence fee, but these sources were not adequate and in 1923 the Sykes Committee recommended that a blanket licence fee should support the service (Briggs, 1961).

BBC News broadcasts were viewed by the press as being in direct competition with their own interests and regulations were placed upon the quantity of news which could be broadcast. The "Seven O'clock Rule" ensured that BBC news could only be broadcast between 7pm and 1am. The news which was broadcast during this period was provided by, and attributed to, the news agencies and was not gathered or produced by BBC journalists.

Schlesinger (1987) argues that this arrangement set a precedent for the selection and production of broadcast news and initiated the acceptance of the news agency definition of news value which still continues to dominate today. News agencies are purely commercial organisations (Read, 1992) and it follows that their news values are grounded in this commercial ethic. However, an expedient relationship has been established between the purely commercially motivated provision of "accurate and impartial" news by news agencies (partisan news provision would not find such a wide audience) and the public service broadcasting ethos of broadcasting the same information as "true and impartial" news.

The General Strike of 1926, also shaped the future of the BBC. John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, had strong and powerful views regarding the importance of the institution (McIntyre, 1993). His own origins and his deep religious beliefs were brought to bear upon the role and future of the BBC. When the General Strike affected the newspaper industry, the Seven O'clock Rule was lifted and the BBC had a chance to broadcast for more hours each day. The history of the General Strike, and the relationship of the BBC with the Baldwin government is well documented elsewhere (Briggs, 1961, Tracey, 1975), but there is no real agreement regarding the degree of independence John Reith managed to retain from the government of the day, especially as there,

'.....was also an ideological consonance between the views of Reith and those of the "moderate" members of Baldwin's Cabinet. Reith, like the government, took the view that the Strike was a threat to the Constitution' (Schlesinger, 1987:17).

The BBC, however, initiated a new role for itself as an important organisation in the British Constitution. Indeed in 1926, a further public enquiry was conducted by the Crawford Committee, which recommended that the private company be replaced by a public corporation acting as a trustee for the national interest (Crawford Committee of Enquiry, 1926). The British Broadcasting Corporation was then created by Royal Charter, with a Licence from the Post Office. The Licence details the terms and conditions of the BBC's operation and outlines government powers to take over the BBC's transmitters in the name of "public interest" in a state of emergency (The Media Guide, 1995:117). John Reith became the Director General, the Board of Directors became the Board of Governors and the shareholders became trustees of the public interest. The impact of this transformation has informed the Corporation's ethos and rationale as well as a variety of tense and damaging relationships with subsequent governments.

John Reith, however, was already managing the BBC as though it was a public corporation (Schlesinger, 1987). He believed it should not be governed by the profit motive and that it should produce what the public needed not what it wanted (Briggs, 1961). Williams called this style of control, "paternalism" (Williams, 1971). Schlesinger (1987:20) argues that this had an important impact on the development of BBC news, as it became 'part of a service for the nation, and its form and content were substantially influenced by this'. Following the General Strike a newly formed relationship with the government was established where the BBC

showed itself to be an 'organisation which operated within the Constitution' (Ibid, 1987:20). The Crawford Committee set constraints upon the notion of BBC "impartiality" in news broadcasts. Therefore, even though the news did not become its own department until 1934, its format and content had already been substantially established.

Indeed the BBC had already shown that it wished to avoid sensationalism in the early radio broadcasts. In 1924, for example, it received a stream of complaints for its reporting of the Nuneaton bus disaster ("Seven Lives Lost in Blazing Bus"). There was great sensitivity to the fact that what was fit to be read might not be fit to hear, and the concern with the power of the news medium was sacrosanct in forming early BBC philosophy and a concern with the avoidance of the hurtful and the harmful in the news (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). The BBC set up a "controversy committee" of top officials and as Schlesinger (1987) shows, such institutionalised caution still persisted in 1977.

As I indicate later in this chapter, the BBC's coverage of atrocities in Bosnia and the coverage of the death of MP Stephen Milligan reflected exactly the same paternalistic and cautionary concerns. Traditionally the BBC has occupied an important cultural location in defining a particular type of national identity. Throughout its entirety the BBC has clung to a sense of national identity that was the embodiment of a particular set of (English) political and cultural values instantly recognisable and internationally desirable and exportable.

For example, in the 1930s, BBC radio, followed by BBC television, began to broadcast royal events such as anniversaries, visits, births, deaths and marriages, and the Christmas message from the Monarch. The cultivation of a particular type of national identity was enhanced by the

formulation of a set of precedents for reporting events deemed to be in the “national interest”.

In the 1930s and 1940s, there were more important breakthroughs in the history of news reporting. Richard Dimbleby established a precedent for “on-the-spot” reporting with his coverage of the fire at Crystal Palace in November 1936. The Ullswater Committee of 1935 reported that the BBC needed greater freedom in its news broadcasting. International news coverage increased and was a way of supporting the “national interest” in the British Empire (Briggs, 1965), and the volume of news reporting increased due to the Second World War, as 'the BBC was a key part of Britain's war effort' (Schlesinger, 1987:26). The special function of BBC broadcasts in helping to develop a national self-image of cheerful patriotism during the Second World War ensured a nostalgic role for the BBC which was broadcast all over the world.

Because the BBC saw itself as serving the national interest, and as playing an important part in the war effort, the question of its freedom from the government was not really questioned and its normative assumptions were established. The BBC News Department increased in size during the War and the prominence and importance of news during a national crisis was compounded. Citizens were asked to learn to recognise the voices of the anonymous announcers, whose words were to become symbols of freedom and national security to the whole nation. Indeed, the BBC had become far more than a paternalistic Broadcasting outlet, it had become an icon of all things that were good and strong about Britain. The affection and loyalty which exists for the BBC today, is grounded in much of its own historical patriotic servitude to the nation state.

After the Second World War, the evolution of BBC broadcast news was dominated by two main forces, the development of television, which quickly became the primary information source for the British public, and the breaking of the broadcasting monopoly by the creation of commercial television in the form of the Independent Television system (ITV). Both developments had an impact on the form and content of BBC news. Television obviously introduced a visual dimension to news broadcasts which, with the exception of newsreel films shown at the cinema, had always been concentrated upon the descriptive skills of the news makers rather than the pictorial. Secondly, the introduction of a broadcasting competitor initiated a battle for ratings which is even more cogent today. The BBC therefore has progressed through several stages in its development, from the era of Reithian conceptions of broadcasting, where the concentration was on what was good for the audience, whether they liked it or not, through a neo-Reithian post-war recognition that a stratified audience with different tastes and needs existed, into an era of competition and rivalry where the audience tended to be viewed in terms of statistics and ratings.

The growth and development of BBC News, the development of a second television channel, BBC2, in 1964 and further radio stations in 1967, preceded a long debate in the 1970s about the system's lack of accountability and diversity. Much of this criticism came from the political left, but in the 1980s, the same arguments were taken up by the political right, and a period of reform began for the BBC. When Margaret Thatcher took up office in 1979, she did so in the context of a deep economic recession, an unprecedented development of new technology, a right-wing ideology which championed the free-market economy and enterprise, as well as a deep and personal hatred for the Establishment and the media. Margaret Thatcher never liked television; and television

did not like her' (Horrie and Clarke, 1994:3). In 1979, the government and the BBC had clashed over the filming of an IRA roadblock at Carrickmore and for the broadcast of an interview with an INLA member (who had earlier claimed to have assassinated Airey Neave). Thatcher began a trend which she was to continually over-use, the appointment of known Conservative party sympathisers to the BBC's Board of Governors and to the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). The power of patronage served her well, and by ensuring that key power holders were "one of us", she began to stamp out resistance in many areas of public life.

The 1981 Broadcasting Act created Channel 4 Television in a form which was in harmony with Conservative ideology. The new television station used independent programme-makers, was a low cost production sector, but still managed to provide programming serving interests not serviced by the existing ITV companies. Its success was used by some to justify the policies which led to staff reductions and a reduction of funding at both ITN and the BBC (O'Malley, 1994). *Channel Four News* also helped to transform British television journalism, offering, for the first time, fifty minutes of news. Breakfast news quickly followed in the form of BBC's *Breakfast News* and *TV-am* in 1983 (Tunstall, 1993), substantially increasing the amount of television news broadcast during the week.

In 1984 there was a year long press attack on the BBC, mainly by the Murdoch papers, culminating in a scorching attack in *The Times*.

'The BBC should not survive this Parliament at its present size, in its present form .....Television is probably best at providing relaxation, undemanding entertainment and information that needs illustration with pictures' (*The Times* in Horrie and Clarke 1994:33).



The BBC's miss-timed announcement in 1984 that it wished to see an increase in the television licence fee, resulted in it being granted a compromise figure and a Committee of Inquiry into BBC finances led by Professor Alan Peacock, was set up. Thatcher's wish to introduce advertising to the BBC was well known, but the Peacock Report of 1986 rejected the replacement of the licence fee with advertising. In 1988, however, the licence fee was linked directly to the retail price index (RPI), meaning that the BBC's real income diminished.

In January 1987, Thatcher's appointee, Marmaduke Hussey, dismissed Alisdair Milne, after a series of well publicised clashes between the Government and the BBC, and he was replaced by Michael Checkland. The early replacement of Michael Checkland with John Birt, (causing a furore in the BBC, especially as public service broadcasting gurus such as John Tusa were not even approached by Hussey) in 1992 heralded a new era at the BBC. Birt and Hussey brought in a management team from the private sector and began to reduce staff numbers and to import private sector values into the system (O'Malley, 1994).

In 1992 the Government published a consultation document in response to the conflicting attitudes and political debate which had emerged on the future of the BBC. The debate centred around the issue of whether the BBC should continue to be funded from the licence fee or whether the BBC should become a commercial body with a reduced public role. In response to Government scrutiny of the BBC, John Birt set about reforming the whole culture of the BBC and aimed to persuade the Government that the BBC's Charter should be renewed in 1996, and that the licence fee should remain the main form of funding. The power of the new Director-General, on the face of it, seemed to be unprecedented,

especially as Tunstall (1983) has argued that the real power lies outside the BBC in the political/policy sphere and inside, with the upper and upper middle echelons of producer managers. Birt and Hussey's remodelling of the BBC was centred upon the wish to ensure that the Conservative Government would recognise that the BBC was becoming an institution which it could support. What this meant in practice, of course, was that Birt would push the BBC as far as it could go as a public service broadcaster into the realm of commercialism in order to close the gap between its past inflexibility and inefficiency and the commercial vision of some of the members of the Conservative Government.

'The BBC began a review of the entire range of BBC activities, "thinking the unthinkable", so that the Corporation would be ready for any questions the Government might throw at it' (Horrie and Clarke, 1994:203).

The transformation of the BBC was particularly symbolised by John Birt's introduction of Americanised management-speak, Producer Choice, and a commitment to push the BBC even further towards news and current affairs at the expense of sport and light entertainment. The period 1991-94 is well documented by the press and by The BBC Charter Review Series, as Birt tried to reconcile the need for diversity and quality of programming with efficiency and effectiveness. Before and during this period, one of Birt's relentless missions was to reclaim the "High Ground" in news and current affairs in order to ensure that BBC News was far superior to any of its competitors. His vision had begun in the mid 1970s when he and Peter Jay wrote a series of articles bemoaning the state of news reporting on British television (1).

Birt and Jay's important contribution to the news values of the BBC have revolved around the Birt-Jay thesis, which became the blue-print for

wholesale changes in BBC journalism (Barnett and Curry, 1994). These changes have centred around two main priorities, first to provide intelligent news analysis as there,

'is no such thing as pure fact which can be separated from "comment" this is one of the myths of journalism', (*The Times*, 3/9/76).

Secondly to break with the two main antecedents of television journalism which they identify as traditional newspaper operations (the newsroom model) and documentary film making (the movie model).

Application of the Birt-Jay thesis and other new management techniques, however, did not result in an immediate response from the Conservative Government. In the end Birt and the BBC had to wait for almost two years before the Government issued a White Paper on the future of the BBC. The BBC was granted a continuation of both the licence fee and a Charter renewal, the national press considered that the BBC had had to pay a price for such a victory.

'John Birt has saved the BBC from the Tories....Mr Birt may have had to chop off the maiden's legs in order to snatch her from the jaws of the neo-Thatcherite dragons, but her escape is complete' (*The Times*, 7/7/94).

'The government's new-found confidence in the BBC stems from the tough reforms and 5,000 job cuts bulldozed through by Mr Birt and his team of managers' (*Independent*, 7/7/94).

BBC news in particular has had to continually absorb and adapt to the changing culture of the organisation, and also to the Birtian vision of television which has resulted in far reaching changes in the organisation and rationale of the newsroom. News and Current Affairs have been

drawn together in the name of analytic news and television and radio news have been joined in the name of efficiency and effectiveness. Journalists working within such a changing environment, sometimes quite naturally feel insecure and cynical about the future of BBC news.

In summary, news at the BBC has developed as a result of several historical phases and sequences, and has retained some elements from each transitory period. The Reithian mission to give the public what they need and not necessarily what they want, is echoed to some extent by the Birt-Jay thesis with regard to News and Current Affairs, except that this has now had to be contextualised within an unprecedented commercially-oriented environment, where the audience is viewed in terms of ratings, ITN and *Sky News* are competitors, and the BBC has commercial arrangements with companies such as Pearson plc. The neo-Reithian ethic of recognising that audiences have diverse views and needs, is adhered to at least in the Birtian philosophy of diversity and choice, although the motivation for such rhetoric is entirely different from that of the 1940s and early 1950s. News and Current Affairs at the BBC therefore has complex origins and values. Similarly, this complexity is brought to bear upon any attempt to analyse what constitutes newsworthiness and public interest journalism in such a cultural maelstrom.

## II) The Structure of the BBC

As noted in the previous chapter, it is vitally important to understand that all organisations have both formal and informal structures and hierarchical arrangements. The BBC's formal structure is large and complex. There are two network television channels, BBC1 and BBC2, five network radio services and eighteen regional television services.

Overseas radio broadcasts for many years were made by the World Service. Its radio audience was the biggest for any international station in the world. World Service Television (WSTV), incorporated in 1994 into the New Directorate, BBC Worldwide, began broadcasting in 1991. At the beginning of 1995 BBC World (formerly World Service Television) and BBC Prime (an entertainment channel) went into Europe (via satellite transmission) through a partnership with Pearson and Cox Communications. BBC Enterprises Limited is a separate commercial part of the BBC, selling programmes, books, videos and other BBC memorabilia around the world. The BBC is controlled by a Board of Governors whose twelve members are officially appointed by the Queen, which in reality is the Prime Minister. As outlined above, any Prime Minister who abuses the power of patronage can ensure the Board is composed of government sympathisers which can have very serious implications for the so-called "impartiality" of the BBC's news operation. The Governors' responsibility for the BBC is shared in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland with National Broadcasting Councils, whose members are appointed by the Governors. The Governors also appoint the General Advisory Council, regional advisory councils in England and local radio advisory councils.

The Board of Management, in practice makes many of the important decisions at the BBC. It has thirteen members consisting of the Director General, Deputy Director General, Advisor to the Director General and the heads of most of the BBC's directorates. The directorates form three groups, the output directorates, which make programmes (news and current affairs is part of this directorate), the second directorate supplies services to the output directorates and is controlled by the Deputy Director General, and the third directorate consists of the corporate directorates and policy directorates. The BBC owns several buildings in

central London and White City. News and Current Affairs is housed in Television Centre at White City.

News and Current Affairs is controlled by its directorate head, the Managing Director who is also a member of the Board of Management and therefore actively involved in BBC policy decisions. Below him are a variety of middle managers who control the administrative affairs of the department, and the senior editorial staff who head up various parts of the television news process. There is an Editor, TV News Programmes, a Head of Newsgathering, individual programme editors and Heads of Special Units, beneath these people are a stream of more junior editors, senior producers, producers, correspondents and technical staff. For example the programme editors of the *One O'clock News*, *Six O'clock News* and *Nine O'clock News* at the BBC rank immediately above the editor of the day, who is classed as a senior producer. Therefore, as is characteristic of any hierarchical structure, one finds that their roles can be distinguished by their different goals. The programme editors have long term goals with regard their programme's objectives and play a more managerial role with a long term view in planning and organisation, in contrast the editor of the day is mainly concerned with the programme output for that lunch-time or evening (see Figure 5.2, Chapter 5).

Radio news is currently housed separately at Broadcasting House in central London, but the policy of a bi-media News and Current Affairs Department had already been instituted during my observation period and all members of staff were trying to reconcile the problems of having two parallel command structures. One journalist working in Newsgathering told me he now had eight immediate bosses in the middle management (not counting the Managing Director and above). One of John Birt's main policies has been to convert the already huge news operation into an even

bigger one by first marrying the News Department with the Current Affairs Department and then secondly merging radio and television news. BBC radio news staff are currently incensed at a plan to move them out of central London to White City and morale is deemed to be at an all time low at the BBC (Culf, *Media Guardian*, 19/6/95).

Another recent change which has taken place in the BBC newsroom is the greater separation of the newsgathering operation of the news department from the output processes. Newsgathering, formerly known as Intake, provides the "core" stories which most of the BBC news programmes will cover, these are paid for out of the Newsgathering budget. Senior members of Newsgathering hold weekly Lookahead meetings to go through the Prospects and decide which forthcoming events will be covered. Immediately following the meeting the Foreign News desk contacts the foreign BBC Bureaux to let them know if coverage is required. This tends to result in a uniformity of coverage, as the *One O'clock News*, *Six O'clock News* and *Nine O'clock News* will tend to cover most of these stories (although the *Six O'clock News* takes fewer international stories than the *One O'clock News* and the *Nine O'clock News*). However, if a programme editor wants to cover a story which Newsgathering does not intend to cover, (s)he can commission the story. As the *Nine O'clock News* programme has the biggest budget, the programme editor is in the best position to diversify his programme from those of the *One O'clock News* and the *Six O'clock News*.

In 1990, there was a shift in the balance of the relationship between what was then Intake and Output. New programme editors were appointed, and individual programme budgets were allocated. This resulted in more freedom for the programme editors who could then begin to pick and choose a little more from the Newsgathering menu. Ironically, this

decision to give greater freedom to the hand-picked new recruits has in effect diluted the original Birtian expression of news at the BBC. From 1987 until 1990, the BBC had tended to cover only about four or five news stories in depth, usually in the form of the “twin pack” (see Chapter 5). The new programme editors began, however, to commission a more diverse range of coverage, doubling the amount of news stories in each bulletin. The change in the relationship between Output and Newsgathering has resulted in quite strong tensions existing between the two sections of the newsroom, particularly when programme editors routinely drop two or three stories during or just before a news broadcast.

One of the main problems which was identified by numerous BBC staff was the slow and ponderous way that decisions were made by the BBC. One producer drew the analogy of the BBC being like a huge oil tanker that would take ten miles just to stop. Certainly this view that the size of an organisation affects its internal structure is confirmed in organisation theory (Handy, 1993). When an organisation is as large as the BBC it must also have a clearly defined hierarchical structure to provide careful controls for consistency, news accuracy and decision-making. One of the main ways control is maintained at the BBC, is through the translation of abstract public service ideals into written guidelines (*the Producer Guidelines*) in order to attempt to construct a consensus of aims and goals in the absence of the profit-motive. Indeed,

**'Public service broadcasters put a great deal of energy into translating the abstract principles of public service philosophy into concrete guide-lines, schemes and criteria to be used in decisions about programming policy. The formulation of programming policy, in other words, is a normative issue for public service broadcasting....this need to construct institutional consensus in normative terms is one of the reasons why public service organisations have exhibited such bureaucratic tendencies' (Ang, 1991:105).**



One particularly apocryphal tale illustrating the BBC's difficulty in making fast decisions were brought to my attention whilst I was observing. This concerned the reporting of the death of Stephen Milligan MP. Stephen Milligan was found in "strange circumstances" at his home on 7 February, 1994. ITN led with the story that evening and all the next day, whereas the BBC placed the story fourth in its running order on the 7 February, but led with it on Saturday. ITN had had no problems at all in choosing the Milligan story as the lead, because as a BBC producer pointed out to me, 'they tend to go for the sensational stuff, we don't' (producer, BBC's *Nine O'clock News*, 23/5/94). ITN's justification for leading with story on the other hand was that '..it was a mystery and potentially damaging to the Government' (producer, ITN's *News at Ten*, 25/6/94). The main difference between the two organisations was that there was a good deal of doubt at the BBC about whether the story was important enough to justify it becoming a lead on the day it broke, or whether a story about Bosnia was more important (producer, BBC1's *Six O'clock News*, 22/5/94), whereas at ITN there was agreement on it being the lead story followed by discussion about how the story would then best be dealt with (correspondent, ITN's *12.30pm News*, 6/6/94).

A further problem which the BBC journalists faced in their deliberations about the death of Stephen Milligan was compounded when during the day, further details about the circumstances of his death began to emerge. At the BBC a "policy ruling" was issued on what was to be the content and wording of the story. The deliberations were held by senior News and Current Affairs staff and a statement was issued outlining exactly what could be reported and how (BBC editor, 25/5/94). It was these deliberations which also delayed the reporting of the story, so whilst ITN had gone with the story, effortlessly agreeing to a corporate line on taste

and decency, 'the BBC top-brass couldn't make up their minds' (BBC senior producer, 22/5/94). The major cause of the deliberations concerning taste and decency was in reference to whether there should be mention of the orange found in Stephen Milligan's mouth and whether there could be any mention of the circumstances in which he was found. It was eventually decided that there could be one mention of "women's underwear, the flex and the bag", and there was to be no mention of the "orange", although the *Nine O'clock News* was allowed to mention "stockings". At ITN, reference was made to the circumstances of his death, but at the usual Prospects meeting on 8 February, the Editor of ITV programmes simply requested that there be a restraint on the reporting of all the details and that the orange need not be mentioned.

The differences in the news priorities of the two institutions is very instructive. At the BBC, Stephen Milligan's death was the source of newsroom conflict and disagreement in relation to the BBC's primary news values. Some journalists argued that his death, whilst having some significance, was not as important as further atrocities occurring in Bosnia, and that the only reason it had become so newsworthy in other newsrooms was because of the salacious and smutty details surrounding his death. In contrast, some other BBC journalists argued, in the same vein as ITN's journalists, that Stephen Milligan's death was of public interest and should be reported. That this divide exists between the two news organisations and within the BBC itself, reflects some of the differences in television news philosophies.

The relationship of the regional news centres to the BBC in London is one which is based on control and some tension. There is a great deal of referral upwards from the regions. For example, a correspondent who was unsure whether it was appropriate to interview a fourteen year old

boy following a stabbing in a school in July 1994 first referred to the programme editor; the programme editor then referred to the Editor of News and Current Affairs. At this stage he can either then refer to the Head of Broadcasting for the North, or to the Head of Editorial Policy in London. When asked about the regularity of the referral-up process, the Head of News and Current Affairs at *Look North News* replied,

'Frequency of referral, it depends. If you're talking about formal referral processes or the informal process which happens all the time' (Head of News and Current Affairs, BBC's *Look North News*, 2/8/94).

A further mechanism of control of the regions is by the scrutiny and review of mistakes by the centre. For example, *Look North News* was heavily criticised and reviewed for reconstructing a crime scene in a manner which was considered an inappropriate way for the BBC to report crime, as well as being unsuitable for the time it was broadcast. Furthermore the editorial policy controllers visit the regions and hold seminars where the reporting of crime or other producer guidelines are discussed and the BBC central view on this is communicated to the regions. Finally, all journalists working in the regions have a copy of the Producer Guidelines, which is referred to on a regular basis. As Schlesinger (1987) noted, the notion of referral-up being an indicator of editorial autonomy is actually a fictitious ideal. Indeed the frequency of referral-up from the editorial staff at the BBC's *Look North News*, on an "informal" basis further compounds the view of voluntary compliance, when in fact there is an obvious power relation in operation, where the regions seek constant confirmation that they are not breaking BBC rules and guidelines.

### III) The History and Culture of ITN

Seymour-Ure (1991) describes the introduction of a second television network in 1955 as a great challenge to the public service principle, as it broke the monopoly of the BBC and directly competed for the audience. However, Independent Television was compelled by the new Act of Parliament to “inform, educate and entertain”, and was accompanied by the formation of a separate news provider, Independent Television News, which was jointly owned by all the new television news channels. The Beveridge Committee which reported in 1951, made no direct recommendation for commercial television (Davidson, 1994), but saw no conflict between the principles of advertising in a public service system. Furthermore, the Independent Television Authority was established to supervise and regulate the new television companies by ensuring that the priorities of revenue from advertising did not override the need for quality content of programming. The model for the ITA was based upon the structure of the BBC's Board of Governors and was a public corporation. Unlike the BBC Board, the ITA selected applicants from different would-be television companies and awarded seven-year franchises, subject to their compliance with ITA regulations.

Therefore, although Independent Television was set up as a direct competitor to the BBC, and was able to sell advertising in order to acquire revenue, it was nevertheless set up upon some of the same public service broadcasting principles as the BBC, to be a provider of quality, high standard programmes, which served to inform, entertain and educate the audience. The possibilities of the excesses of market forces were further tempered by a strong and powerful regulatory body to regulate in the public interest (see Chapter 1), which, unlike the current regulatory body (the ITC) could view and condemn programming in advance.

Furthermore, Independent Television offered regional programming, a supposedly distinctive feature of the new system. In principle this was deemed to enhance the public service values of the ITV system. In practice however, this principle was diluted by the forces of the market place as Independent Television came to be dominated by four and later five large regional companies (Seymoure-Ure, 1991).

Although Independent Television was initially set up as a commercial competitor to the BBC, it later came to be recognised as enhancing and complementing the programme output and quality on British television, and the two channels slowly were perceived 'as part of a *single* public service system' (Seymoure-Ure, 1991:69).

Technological developments, transnational influences, deregulation and increasing commercialization in the 1980s began a trend which was irrevocably to challenge the public service principle which existed in Britain in the form of a benign duopoly. One of the first challenges was when further competition was introduced into the ether when Rupert Murdoch's Sky Channel, the first satellite television programme channel in Britain began transmission in 1984 and the debate began about the implications for the future of quality television in this country. It was quickly realised that regulation of a huge number of news television channels, which were transmitted from Luxembourg would not be easy. Furthermore the increasing proliferation of cable and satellite channels has resulted in their being exempt from some of the regulatory programme requirements which the terrestrial companies have to meet. Cable and satellite therefore only have to adhere to consumer protection requirements such as taste and decency and rules on due impartiality. The notion of "quality" is usually absent from cable licence requirements and notably the current Broadcasting Bill passing through the House of

Commons contains no “quality” requirement in respect of the new terrestrial multiplex agreements.

Fortunately for the quality of BBC programming, the Peacock Committee in 1985 reflected that one main broadcasting organisation should continue to be funded by the licence fee so that broadcasting could continue to be structured around the principle of good quality programming rather than around the principle of seeking audience numbers (Broadcasting Research Unit, 1985). However, the publication of a Broadcasting White Paper in 1988 did challenge the principles of good quality programming in the independent terrestrial sector. The White Paper which caused such a furore proposed the replacement of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, which had replaced the Independent Television Authority in 1972, with a “lighter touch” Independent Television Commission (2), and the award of Independent Television franchises by competitive tender.

The reaction to this recommendation is well documented in newspapers as the broadcasters successfully lobbied Government to tone down the radical aspects of the White Paper. Finally quality safeguards were introduced into the proposed legislation to ensure that franchises were not simply sold to the highest bidder. The 1990 Broadcasting Act included competitive tendering as a principle of licence application, but also introduced a quality threshold which included an obligation for prospective broadcasters to provide certain types of programming. The selection process of applications and the subsequent award of licences is well-covered by Davidson (1994), but the losers in the new process were either those licensees who were refused a renewal of their licences, such as Thames Television, TVS, TSW and TV-am, replaced by Carlton, Meridian, Westcountry and Sunrise, or those existing licensees who overbid, such as Yorkshire Television.

The post-1990 Broadcasting Act era has been one where the original public service orientated ethos of Independent Television has been consistently diluted in the face of increasing competition and deregulation. Indeed, one of the main principles of regionalism has been compromised by the introduction of a central network which controls and allocates network programmes to the regional companies (*The Guardian*, 3/8/92 and 5/10/92). The ITV Network Centre, which was established to meet the requirements of the 1990 Broadcasting Act is owned by the ITV companies. Its role is to commission, purchase and schedule the programmes which are shown across the whole ITV network taking the power of scheduling away from the regions. Also the subsequent take-overs of smaller television companies by larger companies in 1994 has compounded concerns for the future of regional television with the concentration of power in the hands of fewer and fewer large television companies (Carlton has taken over Central Television and Meridian has merged with Anglia Television, although the latter was to all intents and purposes, a take-over). In September 1995 the newly merged Carlton and Central Television companies were restructured resulting in the loss of one hundred and eighty jobs, prompting further concern that regional ITV is in jeopardy.

This brief history of Independent Television, and particularly events since 1990, sets the context of the current role and commercially-orientated remit of the news provider, Independent Television News (ITN). Much concern has already been expressed about the impact of competition on broadcast news (Allen and Miller, 1993).

When Independent Television was first formed in 1955, ITN was nominated the sole news provider and was owned by all the regional

television companies. After the 1990 Broadcasting Act, the role and security of ITN was placed into some jeopardy especially during a period when the ITC considered whether it would nominate ITN again as the sole news provider to the television companies. During 1990, the ITV companies also began to consider the implications of a radical restructuring of ITN, to protect their own interests from government policy which meant in future they would only be able to own forty-nine percent of ITN. The rest of which would be owned by private shareholders. In the end, due to a consortium take-over by a variety of ITV companies and Reuters, the ITC decided to nominate ITN the sole news provider for the ITV companies for ten years from 1993, but also built in the proviso that the television companies could reconsider ITN as their news provider in 1998.

ITN suffered from several financial difficulties in the early 1990s. Its move to a purpose-built headquarters at Grays Inn Road proved problematic when ITN found it could not find tenants to help to pay the extortionate costs of the building. ITN also allied itself with the unsuccessful bidders for the new teletext and breakfast TV licences. Coverage of major world events such as the Gulf War and the capsizing of the car ferry at Zeebrugge cost ITN a great deal of money, and the banks refused to lend the company money before the ITC had selected ITN as the sole news provider. Also the ITV companies were reluctant to pour more money into a company which they would no longer be allowed to fully own. ITN finally had to make four hundred staff redundant in 1991/92, in an effort to claw back a deficit of ten million pounds. ITN also had to renegotiate another five-year contract with the ITV companies to supply news at a cheaper rate, make cuts to its number of international bureaux and aim to become profit-making by 1993 (ITC Press Releases, 1993). On 31 December 1992, ITN was taken over by a consortium



comprising Carlton Communications, LWT Holdings, Reuters and Central Independent Television and was later joined by Granada Group, Anglia Television and Scottish Television, and a new contract with the ITV companies was agreed (Media Guide, 1994). Each company owned 18% of the shares except for Anglia and Scottish Television which owned 5% each. In 1995 ITN made £15 million profit for its shareholders. Mergers/take-overs between Carlton and Central Television and Granada and LWT resulted in shareholders Carlton and Granada owning 36% of ITN each and obviously profited substantially from ITN. Under the terms of the 1990 Broadcasting Act no single shareholder was allowed to have more than a 20% share in ITN beyond the end of 1994. Currently the Government is considering a variety of cross-media ownership issues in the Broadcasting Bill which is going through the House of Commons. However, the system is coming under pressure from those ITV companies who are no longer shareholders but which have to pay a high price for the ITN product. Although the ITC favourably reviewed ITN in December 1995 it is unlikely that ITN will be able to maintain the current rate it charges the ITV companies for its product (assuming that ITN is successful in its next bid for the contract to serve all ITV companies with television news). Such a reduction in ITN income could affect its news production quality, although ITN have pledged to reduce profits first and foremost rather than investment in the news as the news production process has already been thoroughly streamlined and rationalised in the early 1990s (personal communication with Editor, ITN programmes on ITV).

Clearly a more commercially-orientated and profit-making ITN has been born and one which is supposed to attract outside investors and to fight to retain its contract with the regional television companies. ITN's culture has also had to change. Previously it had been considered a centre of

journalistic excellence, run by journalists for journalists, but the cuts in resources, staff and international bureaux, must compromise the amount and type of news it can cover. A stream of older presenters was dismissed and a fresh team of younger news presenters was imported. The image of ITN news was changed to become more slick, commercial and visually appealing, with its primary aim to attract audiences, to provide news for its contractors (not its audience) and to make a profit, rather than to rely on money being poured into it by the television companies. The impact of these changes on the selection and presentation of television news has been covered to some extent in Chapters 4 and 6, but as I will show later in this chapter and in the case study in Chapter 8, the need to make a profit, and to attract large audiences has an effect on the news values of the organisation and therefore upon what is deemed to be newsworthy at ITN.

#### IV) The Structure of ITN

ITN provides national and international news to several contractors. Its most important contracts currently exist with the regional television companies to provide several short news summaries during the day and three network news programmes, the *12.30pm News*, the *5.40pm News* and *News at Ten*. ITN also holds a contract with Channel Four News to provide *Channel Four News*, with Planet 24 to produce *Big Breakfast News* as well as a contract with Independent Radio News. It has recently won the contract to produce *Channel 5 News*, a twenty minute populist news programme at eight o'clock in the evening (*Media Guardian* 15/4/96) and lost to Reuters an opportunity to provide *Sky News*.

ITN comprises several departments, ITV Programming (which produces the three Channel Three news programmes, and houses the production of

*Big Breakfast News*); Channel Four Programming, (which produces *Channel Four News*), Central Resources, Engineering, Finance, Marketing, Public Affairs and Personnel. Each department has a Head of Department, who, along with the Chief Executive, Editor-in-Chief and the Commercial Director, form the Committee Executive of ITN (see Figure 5.4, Chapter 5).

The structure of ITN is much more stream-lined than the one at the BBC. The need to reduce staff numbers by almost half and to become profit-making and efficient with less resources in the 1990s, has produced a company which is run along the same lines as any other commercial enterprise. The cultures at ITN and the BBC are markedly different, because although the latter is being reshaped to work more efficiently and effectively, it has far more personnel and resources than ITN. The relationship between Intake and Output at ITN Channel 3 and Channel 4 is very close and is much more integrated than at the BBC. This close relationship is in large part due to the financial constraints. ITN Intake journalists have to be completely sure a story is required by the programme editors before a correspondent and camera crew is committed to it.

'There is more consensus at ITN early in the day than at the BBC, and more integration between Intake and Output' (Editor-in-Chief, ITN, 18/8/94).

Journalists working for Channel 3 in particular at ITN do not spend a great deal of time considering whether a story is serving the public interest or not, but rather rely on their experience and expertise as journalists to tell them what is newsworthy and what is interesting enough to prevent the audience from switching off their television sets.

At ITN journalists do not complain that they have eight bosses and do not know if their priority is radio or television, as ITN's hierarchical structure is simple to understand and follow. Furthermore, the Editor-in-Chief is situated on the floor above the newsroom and can regularly be seen through the glass walls talking to senior editorial staff or other visitors. The culture at ITN seems much more open and the senior journalists appear to have more access to the senior managerial staff.

c) The Commercial Imperative versus PSB

As already outlined, ITN is unashamedly commercially orientated in its remit to be a news provider. An interview with the Editor-in-Chief of ITN compared with the Managing Director of News at the BBC illustrates differences in their remit. The former is geared to an improvement of audience ratings and a good relationship with ITN's customers (the contractors) and the latter is committed to the principles of building a BBC consensus around a mission to broaden the news agenda and to analyse issues.

'It is necessary to continue to change the news at the BBC, to broaden the agenda, to cover parts of the world which are not currently been covered' (Managing Director, BBC News and Current Affairs, 18/8/94).

'Our priority is to our audience and our audience is the ITV company or the contractor of the programme, not the viewer out there' (Editor-in-Chief, ITN, 18/8/94).

As I have included the concept "public service broadcasting" (PSB) in this section it necessary at this stage to outline some of the main problems involved in using such a term. Although space will prevent any detailed discussion of the concept, my aim here is to simply outline a few of the main interpretations of the term. Consistently legislators have illustrated a lack of clarity regarding what PSB or its purpose actually is. Most

research, and legislation, as well as myself earlier in this chapter are guilty of taking the concept of PSB as somehow “given” without actually trying to define it. As I have shown, it is possible to use the term in connection with the Independent Television system as well as when describing the BBC's ideals. At the BBC, the notion of PSB has become a set of conventions or a code which guides programme makers and journalists to work to a formula imbued with certain values and ethical constraints.

The Broadcasting Research Unit, which provided evidence for the Peacock Committee on the financing of the BBC identified eight basic principles of PSB: geographic universality; catering for all tastes and interests; catering for minorities; concern for “national identity and community”; detachment from vested interests and government; one broadcasting system should be directly funded by the body of users (that is via a licence fee system); competition should be in relationship to good programming rather than in increasing audience numbers and guidelines should be followed which liberate programme makers rather than restrict them (Broadcasting Research Unit, 1985/6). In contrast, John Reith had conceived of public service broadcasting as having four facets. First, it should be protected from purely commercial pressures, secondly, the whole nation should be served, thirdly, there should be unified control (public service broadcasting should be organised as a monopoly) and fourthly, there should be high programme standards (McDonnell, 1991). Obviously, one of the major problems therefore in trying to use such a complicated concept is that it can be redefined at almost any juncture to suit any purpose or belief. The Independent Television system obviously broke the Reithian vision of PSB, by breaking the monopoly held by the BBC of British broadcasting, nevertheless, the ITV system was set up along most of the PSB principles outlined above.

If PSB then is a term which can be hijacked by any vested interests, how would I define it here in the context of a comparison between the BBC and ITV in the 1990s, and how does this apply to or affect their news provision, and their news values?

First of all, I must obviously reject any notion of monopoly applying to the current broadcasting system in Britain. However, other principles may still be applicable. I will now run through a brief analysis of the ways in which commercial pressures have corrupted some of the principles of PSB, both at the BBC and at ITN and consider the consequences of this for the structure and content of television news.

The principles of geographic universality and of catering for all tastes and interests and for minorities should in principle still apply to the existing system of British broadcasting, as the requirement is written into an annexe attached to the BBC Licence in 1964. It sets out the requirement in broad terms that the BBC should put on as wide range of programmes as possible to appeal to all tastes (Media Guide, 1995). Under its powers derived from the Broadcasting Act 1990, the ITC issues guidelines for licensees which seek to ensure that

'a wide range of services is available throughout the UK and that, taken as a whole, the services are of high quality and appeal to a variety of tastes and interests' (*ITC Annual Report*, 1993/94; *ITC Factfile*, 1995).

Both the BBC and ITV system still have regional outlets or companies situated around Britain, which should in principle be catering for a variety of tastes and geographical distinctions. Indeed the ITV network consisted of sixteen companies in addition to Channel Four and Teletext licensed by

the ITC to provide broadcasting services in 1991. However, three of these companies, Anglia, Central and London Weekend Television have been taken over by Meridian, Carlton and Granada. Yorkshire Television purchased Tyne-Tees Television in June 1992, although the latter has kept its separate legal identity and therefore its licence. In effect therefore the concept of regional coverage may already be compromised by the threat of mergers and take-overs and there are fears that such changes will bring about a loss of regional identity and distinctive programming (Media Guide, 1994). As outlined earlier job losses caused by a restructuring of Carlton/Central already indicates a different commitment to funding for regional companies in the more financially stringent commercial environment. The commitment of the BBC to the regions is not clear-cut. The BBC is often criticised for being too oriented to the South East, especially in news coverage, a problem to which the journalists themselves frequently allude. The BBC's real attitude to regional coverage is confusing and contradictory. In 1988, BBC cuts reduced output from the regions more than from London and currently BBC radio is bearing the brunt of BBC rationalisation of its regional outlets. But in contrast centres of excellence were set up in 1992 in Manchester, Bristol and Birmingham. However, critics still argue that this does not show a particular commitment to regional programming, although it did result in almost two hundred jobs being created in the regions. Recent research by the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU) has shown that non-London programme-making for the television network is far less than ten years ago despite BBC management announcements of further and continued regional initiatives (Media Guide, 1996). As such, both the BBC and ITV have a questionable commitment to the principles of catering for all tastes.

The chase for ratings, particularly by ITV is also diluting the principle of catering for all tastes by marginalising minority-interest programmes to parts of the schedules which will not affect advertising revenues. Before the 1990 Broadcasting Act, for example, ITN's *News at Ten* was basically an immovable object, even though the only requirement of the franchise holders was to broadcast a news programme some time between 6.30pm and 10.30pm. However, in the increasingly competitive climate of commercial broadcasting, pressure to move *News at Ten* to an earlier or later time in the evening has been a regular ingredient of a heated debate. Those who complain that *News at Ten* interrupts films or spoils the continuity of the evening schedule have come head to head with impassioned resistance from politicians and even the Prime Minister. A dire warning was issued by Sir David Nicholas,

'I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that moving *News at Ten* means the end of serious commercial television' (*Independent*, 29/6/93)

In April 1994, the so-called "battle of the soaps" occurred when Channel Four's *Brookside*, ITV's *Coronation Street* and BBC1's *East Enders* met in a three-way scheduling clash. In 1992 the Director of Programmes at Carlton caused a stir in 1992 when he stated that,

'if current affairs didn't deliver 6-8 million he would cut it, even if they did get the Birmingham Six out of jail' (*Media Guardian*, 7/9/92).

This blatant admission of broadcasting priorities is substantiated to a great extent by the commitment of other ITV current affairs programmes, such as Granada Television's *World in Action* to attract audiences of about eight million, whilst BBC's *Panorama* regularly only gets audiences of four million or less (the exclusive interview with the Princess of Wales in 1995 being the exception). The former has undoubtedly chosen subjects



which will draw an audience whereas the BBC has generally continued to rely on issue-led analytic programming and therefore struggles to retain audience interest.

A key PSB principle of retaining one broadcasting system which is directly funded by the licence fee system has been protected, and income from the licence fee is now guaranteed until 2001, with a Charter extension promised in 1996 to the year 2000 (White Paper 1994). However, it is still the case that the BBC will increasingly have to justify charging a licence fee as its audience share drops. The BBC's 1993/94 Report and Accounts admits that the BBC's share of viewers and listeners fell in 1993/94 by 2% to 48% audience share. The former Chief Executive of ITN, David Gordon argued on *Newsnight*, however, that the BBC

'has its cake and eats it with a licence fee and commercialism' (*Newsnight*, 6/7/94).

This contrasts very heavily with the kind of adaptation to commercial pressures that ITN had to undergo in the 1990s. Indeed, BBC News and Current Affairs has also been spared the worst internal market pressures at the BBC by being continually well resourced, in order to meet John Birt's demand for news programming which 'reports, analyses and debates the main *issues* of the day' (Extending Choice, 1993:83) (my italics). However, in 1995 a rein was put on News and Current Affairs expenditure and plans to launch a twenty-four hour television news channel have been deferred until Autumn 1996 and may be abandoned altogether. Nevertheless the BBC's News and Current Affairs Directorate still has staff budgets unmatched elsewhere in the media. Whilst the BBC may have to abandon some of its higher aims and principles in the new financial climate, ITN has no such pretence to such grandiose ambitions

and is now motivated more by giving highest priority to producing and scheduling news programmes in order to make a profit. These different principles of public service broadcasting and commercialism, or the compromise between some of the competing aspects of both of these, result in different television news philosophies and news values, and therefore what is deemed to be newsworthy and in the public interest differs in different television newsrooms.

d) Different Organisational News Philosophies and News Values

In Chapter 1, discussed newsworthiness and how it relates to the notion of the public interest, arguing, along Joshua Halberstam's (1992) lines that newsworthiness may be analysed in a variety of ways. For the purpose of my discussion here, I should like to continue the themes relating to newsworthiness as "interest" and newsworthiness as "importance" as I think the distinctions between these two concepts are pertinent to the comparison I am making here between the different organisational news philosophies to be found in different news organisations (and as I will show below, even in different newsrooms and different news programmes within the same organisation) and the different notions of what is in the public interest. The key differences between the various news organisations and news programmes will be outlined illustrating how an entertainment or populist orientated notion which leads to the definition of news as "interest" leads to news of a poor information quality. In the concluding chapter I show how the different epistemological influences at work in different television newsrooms and news organisations result in a different set of priorities for each news programme(3). Such influences affect the criteria of news selection and production and therefore determine what is considered to be newsworthy and what is agreed to be in the public interest in different television newsrooms and organisations.

News can be broadly determined therefore, as “importance”; “importance plus some interest”; “interest plus some importance” or as “interest and entertainment” (see Introduction pages 20-21).

BBC journalists tend to talk about news in terms of “importance”,

'In 1987 and 1988, in response to the Birtian views on news, a recruitment drive occurred which recruited individuals to be custodians of the BBC vision - those people have since recruited and the culture of the BBC has changed. Not everyone agrees with each other, there is still some dissent, thank goodness. What this has meant for newsworthiness at the BBC, is that importance and significance are stressed as news values and the interesting but not significant is played down. For example the “BBC's consensus” on this would involve me knocking a trivial human interest story off the programme editor's running order I thought it was not suitable, this happens about six times a year' (BBC Editor, TV News Programmes, 18/8/94).

At ITN, Channel 3, journalists tend to talk in terms of what is “interesting” or notable,

'We try to find stories which will interest the audience, I mean they have just got in from work, want to put their feet up. They don't want to be bored to death. That's not to say we don't cover big stories which the BBC go for, but we do try to make them interesting too' (ITN Producer, 26/6/94).

'We aim to be distinctive, to stand out from the crowd and to be talked about' (Editor of ITN Programmes on ITV, 30/4/96).

Generally the priorities of ITN's Channel 3 programmes are to be accessible to a wide range of people, to be lively and interesting and to cover a broad news agenda. Unlike the BBC, ITN also tries to ensure that

the audience “gets to know the correspondent” by ensuring that the same correspondents appear in news programmes over and over again (Editor of ITN Programmes on ITV, personal communication, April 1996).

The Editor-in-Chief at ITN had much more difficulty in defining news than the journalists in the newsroom because he believed that the output is now so diverse that there is not one single news philosophy at work.

'If pushed I would have to say that ITN's news philosophy is accessibility, which comes across in our writing style, a sense of humour and a sense of adventure' (ITN Editor-in-Chief, 18/8/94).

At Channel 4 journalists talk in terms of a mixture of what is both interesting and important to them as providers of a very different type of news and highlight their aim to marry the two concepts together.

'We try to put the narrative and the analysis together, because sometimes the background is actually not very interesting because it's simply historical. We are not educationalists but we're there to give people the information with which they can form their own judgement....' (ITN Editor, Channel Four Programmes, 27/6/94).

Of course, one problem with asking journalists about what they see their remit to be, or the priority of their news organisation, is that it is not entirely clear what they mean by the words “important” or “interesting”. It is therefore useful here to have a brief look at the concepts and attempt to analyse how they apply to the concept of newsworthiness at ITN and the BBC.

Roget's Thesaurus associates with importance words such as “consequence”, “significance”, “weight”, “gravity” “seriousness”, and “solemnity”. If we make the assumption that BBC journalists are rationalising what they do in such a way then it follows that their news values, and what constitutes newsworthiness at the BBC is shaped by such values. A brief look at the BBC News schedules during the week which I analysed during my content analysis in April 1993, and the five weeks I spent at Television Centre does not challenge such an assumption (3) and these examples show quite clearly the commitment to certain types of news stories by the different television news organisations and news programmes. As I also later in this chapter and in the case study in Chapter 8, there are different methods of handling what ostensibly appears to be the same content category by the different news programmes.

“Interest”, on the other hand is associated with words such as “attention” “to notice”, whereby the core feature of the concept is not so much with the serious nature of the event or issue but rather with the amount of attention it attracts.

There are problems with the notion of importance as a concept which describes newsworthiness. As Halberstam (1994) notes there are difficulties in deciding at what point a story or an event becomes important enough to warrant its telling, and questions whether an important event should therefore be told regardless of the actual public interest in those consequences. For example, if importance is taken as the most significant news value it must follow that the discovery of an event showing that the planet will be destroyed in seven billion years must be newsworthy because it is of such human significance. What is curious about this position however, is that the consequences of that event for

ourselves and our future relatives, is actually not particularly significant, unless we wish to worry about events seven billion years ahead and therefore the story is not newsworthy other than as a scientific quirk. It follows therefore that the notion of importance must be qualified to include the proviso that the event must be important to us, here and now, or in the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, the reporting of stories which are deemed to be important for their own sake such as an obscure decision by the House of Lords, or a breakthrough in a particular mathematical calculation may be reported, again under the guise that such information must be important to someone. However, such information would be incredibly boring to everyone else and would not be deemed to be newsworthy. A further qualification then of the notion of importance is that it must be important to a large number of people.

If newsworthiness is analysed purely in terms of what is interesting, one finds again that there are certain problems with the concept. Assuming that anything that occurs in the world might be of interest to someone, then it is obviously not possible to include all such events in the news under the guise of them being interesting. The concept of interest, in common with the concept of importance, must therefore apply to a large number of people.

However, we encounter a problem if we try to rationalise either important or interesting events purely in terms of numbers. If we were to say that because lots of people are interested in stories about “skateboarding ducks” or “the Royal Family” then they should be included in the news every night, but this would be to pander simply to the wants of the people. If, however, journalists were to argue that the state of the economy or

religious services are important to many people and therefore should be included in the news every night, this would also distort news values and also provide the audience with something they were perceived to need and choice would not be a criterion.

Therefore a compromise between these two extremes of newsworthiness as a feature of what is deemed to be important and newsworthiness as a feature of what is interesting must be occurring in all newsrooms in the country. What nature does this compromise take and why?

At the BBC, as illustrated in the examples above, the compromise which takes place between what the BBC deems to be important and what is seen to be interesting, is primarily motivated by the journalists themselves as would-be viewers, but also by the consensus of values which has been built up via the recruitment practices of the BBC over the last ten years and the history, culture and values of the organisation itself. BBC journalists steer themselves away from becoming too boring by being ironic about their role and analysing their own boredom threshold in relation to the news stories they are covering. Complaints about stories which are simply “worthy” and not newsworthy do proliferate the newsroom. The journalists at the BBC, however, also have to work in the knowledge that the Managing Director of News and Current Affairs, like the Director General dislikes,

“media created” or hyped up stories which are like “sand devils” which are caused by a storm which whips up lots of sand, it looks impressive, it blows in everyone's faces and then suddenly it is gone’ (BBC Managing Director of News and Current Affairs, 18/8/94).

To some extent the compromise to which I refer has already been played out in the early 1990s when the original notion of what Birtian journalism

must stand for resulted in a phenomenon called the “twin-pack”, described in Chapter 6. As already outlined in this chapter, BBC television news output between 1987 and 1992 had a different format structure, until the programme editors began to ensure that a more diverse range of stories was offered, resulting in a greater number of news stories per bulletin. Even the *Nine O'clock News*, which is the flagship news programme of the BBC, is now including animal stories in its running order. In May and June 1994 this programme covered stories about koala bears surviving bush fires, the Galapagos tortoises, and a story about rabbits. After the latter story, which was the final story of the programme, the camera focused on a very cute shot of a rabbit scratching his whiskers, this indulgent wallowing in the light and trivial was compounded by the presenter Peter Sissons, who ended the programme by saying 'its goodnight from me and its goodnight from him!'. It was very clear that many journalists at the BBC believed that the method of analysing news events used by the BBC in the late 1980s was boring and unpopular with the audience 'who were turning off from the *Nine O'clock News* in particular in droves', (BBC Editor, *Nine O'clock News*, 22/5/94). *Look North News* in the region however, still adheres grimly to the policy of twin pack journalism for its first story. It also appears that John Birt has begun to mourn the loss of aspects of his pure Birtian philosophy. Indeed in recent speech in Dublin he astounded many in the media industry when he levelled criticism at the current practice of journalism, criticising the overbearing and sensational tone of reporting of political news, arguing that,

'Sometimes the print media, broadcasting and Parliament all combine together and offer the spectacle of a feeding frenzy - a lather of indignation, fury and hyperbole - in which it is difficult to exercise cool and measured judgement' (*The Times*, 4/2/94).



Television news journalism at the BBC has, without doubt, made pragmatic and gradual adjustments back to more familiar and popular methods of reporting and selecting the news. As a BBC correspondent confided,

'There is a contradiction between *Extending Choice* which was "dropped" as soon as it was publicly launched and the reality of Yentob's programme schedules which became fact, with programmes like *999* and more *East Enders*. At the same time the drastic changes made in news have made a pragmatic shift back towards a slightly more populist approach, particularly the *Six*. Birt does identify the problem himself - he knows it is very unlikely that a programme can be distinctive, different and popular' (BBC correspondent, 25/5/94).

At ITN, *GMTV News* and *Calendar News*, a different type of compromise is taking place, between the desire to be so interesting that the audience are entertained into watching the news programme from start to finish, and journalistic news values relating to the significance of certain events to the regional or national citizen. The method which is often used in such cases is one which makes the important event interesting, thus stories are personalised, in the tradition of Pulitzer (Weaver, 1994) where they are told through recourse to the effect of an event or issue on an ordinary person. For example, disasters are often retold by an eyewitness, or the human interest aspects of stories are drawn out and emphasised, or as John Birt complained, stories about the budget are told in relation to pints of beer.

This describes the main trends of the different types of news organisations in regard to their concepts of news values and their main priorities in terms of what constitutes newsworthiness and public interest journalism. However, sometimes the organisations seem to break free from the stereotypes I have just described. For example, the *Nine O'clock News* at

the BBC covered the story about rabbits, told in a sentimental tone in May 1994, accompanied by oohs and aaahs of the BBC journalists when it was broadcast. *News at Ten* routinely covers important votes live in the House of Commons (although it would not be able to do this if it was moved to a different time in the schedule). All the national news programmes will cover major news stories which are of national interest, such as John Smith's death, the Lockerbie air crash, the Gulf War, the suffering in Rwanda or Bosnia, but as I show in the case study in Chapter 8, choice of a news subject does not necessarily mean that the same story or storyline will emerge.

In summary the news philosophy of the BBC was clearly indicated by Tony Hall, the Managing Director of News and Current Affairs who argued that:

'It is necessary to continue to change news at the BBC, we don't want any American style features, but we do want to broaden the agenda. There are a lot of areas in the world which are not being covered. Therefore in order to get journalists to address these more untraditional news values, we need to get journalists out of the newsroom more and away from the newsroom culture. We need more specialist correspondents who can "create" stories and analyse them' (BBC Managing Director, News and Current Affairs, 18/8/94)

And at ITN by its Editor-in-Chief,

'news is all about diversity at ITN. We produce a wide range of news programmes. Also the notion of newsworthiness is changing even further with innovations such as the IBM Desk top. Soon we will all be able to select news which means that individuals and companies will decide what is newsworthy' (ITN Editor-in-Chief, 18/8/94).

And by an ITN correspondent,

'because ITN is so flexible in terms of its news output, I'm not sure any longer what the central core values of ITN News are any more' (ITN correspondent, 20/6/94).

And by an ITN programme editor,

'ITN is either a bespoke tailor or a cheap tart - it will produce whatever is required for the customer' (ITN programme editor, 14/6/94).

At the BBC, the head of news is talking in terms of controlling and changing the nature of what is news by training journalists to understand a different BBC-version of what constitutes newsworthiness, where the audience will be force-fed a diet of diversity and variety as defined by the BBC, and at ITN the head of news is talking about technological changes which will force the journalist to simply work to contractual demands and to supply what is wanted in a market-driven environment. What is significant is that both, talk in terms of changing news values and changing definitions of newsworthiness. Also, it is apparent that despite the BBC's mission to serve, and to occupy the high ground in terms of news values such as solemnity, significance and importance, it consistently gives in to the urge to compete with ITN. Indeed as Cashmore (1994:197) argues, 'market forces ..... ultimately drive all television, even those ostensibly committed to other ambitions. One way of thinking of the BBC's position in all this is by imaging an enfeebled old lady battling stubbornly with her umbrella against a ferocious storm'.

An example of the BBC trying to reconcile its need to provide accurate and reliable news with its need to beat the competition occurred in May 1994. John Smith had died of a heart attack the day before and all

national news outlets had covered the story. At the Morning Conference on 13 May 1994, it was noted that *Sky News* had been the first to break the news of his death, followed by ITN and then by the BBC. The Head of Newsgathering at the BBC was unapologetic for this as he argued that they had quite properly waited for the source of the information to be verified and the three minutes which were lost to the competition during this time were actually immaterial in relation to the historical significance of what had occurred. The Editor of Television News, however, disagreed. He argued instead, that in the current competitive climate it was really important that the BBC had not lost viewers and feared that it was quite possible that being late with the news may have lost them viewers who saw the announcement on another channel first. Although both *Sky News* and ITN have previously made mistakes by rushing to get the news on the air first (the former wrongly announced the death of the Queen Mother and the latter announced incorrect ballot results) the strong belief at the BBC is that it would never be forgiven for such errors, which would cause "a stain to its culture". At the BBC such unprecedented risk-taking now has to be reconciled with the culture and ethos of the organisation in the face of the increasingly competitive external environment within which it operates.

For the BBC in particular it is apparent that the introduction of such intense competition has challenged its existing news culture in two ways. First by forcing the BBC to try to get on the air quicker it causes a problem for BBC journalists and can challenge their sense of news value. Speculation is not encouraged at the BBC and is alien to its news culture, so it is caught between the need to be competitive and the need to be accurate. Secondly, the lowering the newsworthiness threshold of what might make an acceptable news flash by commercial news providers such as *Sky News* and ITN, may result in many more less newsworthy events

being treated with the same sense of urgency and excitement traditionally reserved for very big news events. This would mean that the BBC might have to reconsider its policy towards what is sufficiently newsworthy to warrant a news flash and to reassess its own perception of newsworthiness, importance and the public interest.

Therefore core features of television newsworthiness are being driven by the television companies and the external environment themselves. At the BBC, newsworthiness is ostensibly operating according to the principles of “worthiness”, “analysis”, “broadening the news agenda” and “diversification” and is contextualised within the struggle it has with its need to reconcile these principles with competition from ITN in particular. At ITN's Channel 3 and at *GMTV News*, *Big Breakfast News* and *Calendar News* newsworthiness is ostensibly driven by market-forces and a need to interest and entertain the audience. For them the move towards diversification of the news product therefore is not driven by PSB values but as a result of demands made upon it by its contractors. At *Channel Four News* and *Newsnight*, such pressures are less obvious as it is accepted that they serve minority audiences. However, at *Channel Four News* in particular there are strong budget constraints and strong contractual obligations which shape its news values. At *Newsnight*, the remit to be different and to take more calculated risks sometimes pushes it into the obscure.

e) Different News Programme Epistemologies

*The Use of Content and Format by different Television News Programmes*

1) Domestic News

i) Parliamentary Politics

In many ways ITN's *5.40pm News*, BBC's *Six O'clock News*, *GMTV News*, *Big Breakfast News* and *Children's Newsround* reflect the attitude articulated by *The Sun* newspaper when television cameras first began broadcasting the House of Commons. 'Commons TV voted Big Yawn!' (Hetherington and Weaver 1992).

Indeed, the programme editor of the BBC's *Six O'clock News* does not like political stories as audience research has shown that it is likely to lose viewers. If he has to cover a political story he prefers it if one of his correspondents does it rather than the Westminster Office as the latter does 'lots of boring interviews with boring politicians' (BBC1 programme editor, 29/4/94).

Similarly, the programme editor of ITN's *5.40pm News* will only show a politics story if it 'involves a good "punch up" at PMQs!' This attitude to coverage of politics is echoed at *Calendar News*, but not by the lunch time news bulletins at ITN or at the BBC which have to take anything that is ready in time.

Election results on the other hand seems to herald the opportunity for lots of technological wizardry. This is most extreme at the BBC where attention to the graphics resulted in a very stylised presentation of the European election results, by Peter Snow, but was actually still fairly complicated and difficult to understand. ITN's attempt to explain the results in graphics form was less complicated and did not rely on the use

of a person and graphics interacting and so was less complex. As Table 4.7 (see Chapter 4) shows BBC1's *Nine O'clock News* and BBC2's *Newsnight* use more graphics as a matter of course than the *One O'clock News* and *Six O'clock News*. (The higher figure for BBC1's *Breakfast News* however, is due to different use of graphics, such as regular updates on city news, travel information and weather and sports results). ITN's *News at Ten*, also relies on graphics more heavily than the *5.40pm News* which tends to avoid them or only uses them for extreme simplification purposes. This accords with the journalists' own perception regarding political stories that,

'The *12.30pm* will take anything as long as its ready, the *5.40pm* will take anything as long as it is one minute ten seconds and *News at Ten* will take anything as long as it has a graphic in it!' (ITN producer, 20/6/94).

The political correspondents at ITN's Channel 3 and *Channel Four News* and at BBC News and Current Affairs are members of the "Lobby". The ITN correspondents share a small smoke-filled room in the Press Gallery with journalists from the *Evening Standard* and *The Sun*. The BBC correspondents occupy a separate room to themselves nearby. Twice a day the Prime Minister's Press Secretary holds a press conference of fifteen to thirty minutes. The skill of the Press Secretary is paramount, and as Bernard Ingham's autobiography testifies, can also serve as a mechanism of misinformation (Harris, 1990). A weaker Press Secretary, such as Gus O'Donnell, who served John Major, would often crack under questioning and contradict himself, 'giving away a nugget' (ITN, Political Correspondent, *Channel Four News*, 26/6/94).

In addition Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) is routinely recorded by all national television newsrooms. This is often a heavily staged affair and the media generally only stay in the Gallery for about twenty minutes.

The programme editors of the national news programmes automatically build in a “slot” for a piece from PMQs just in case anything interesting is said or happens, and often this will supplement an existing political story. In all cases, the Prime Minister is filmed leaving Number Ten, each week, just in case the correspondent who is covering the story needs to have the film available. (Often the audience will notice a lack of continuity in the tie, or shirt the Prime Minister is wearing if the broadcasters attempt to use a piece of archive film of the Prime Minister leaving Number Ten and marry it up with the PMQ film).

Only two hundred Lobby correspondents hold pass number 28A which allows them to “lurk” in the Lobby. The system is very rule governed and they abide by the book of rules which is issued to each correspondent, not wishing to lose their privileged access to the sources of parliamentary power (4). One senior political correspondent admitted that an event such as a Cabinet reshuffle did not really, in the scheme of things, mean very much at all, but that all the media would become involved in a feeding frenzy and play out the game on the day the reshuffle occurred. Furthermore, as Tunstall (1993) noted, television producers know that politicians and public relations personnel are always trying to obtain “soft” media coverage. He cites the example of Margaret Thatcher’s impromptu press statements outside 10 Downing Street. This practice, like the White House Rose Garden routine in the United States, allowed the Prime Minister to issue a short soundbite and then exit (off stage). However, as Tunstall also points out, news values are double-edged. The government may be able to demand more “soft” news stories by staging “pseudo-events” (Boorstin, 1964), but in trying to control the media the government and its members can also fall victims of it when the government is so placed in the lime-light that negative news values



(Galtung and Ruge, 1965) such as the government in trouble, will be emphasised.

Just occasionally a correspondent may find out something unusual. If it is a possible scandal or infidelity which the broadcast media would not cover then they may give it away to *The Sun* correspondent, knowing that this “trade” will result in a similar return deal. A major “scoop”, however would always be kept under wraps.

Sometimes senior political correspondents may take politicians to lunch, but even though a journalist and a politician may have known each other for years the conversation obviously has to be guarded. Indeed, whilst I was observing the Press Gallery, Michael Brunson of ITN had just returned from lunch with Tony Blair. This was prior to the latter being elected leader of the Labour Party but speculation was rife that it would be Blair who would win the leadership battle. Michael Brunson received a call almost immediately following lunch from Blair's PR man, Peter Mandelson, who wished to “clarify a few things”. However, he admitted that even if he was to do a piece on Tony Blair which did not follow the mainstream line, then the “suits” at ITN would block it as they would not wish to alienate the Labour Party or Tony Blair. It is obvious therefore that a very careful relationship indeed operates between the politicians and the media and *vice-versa*.

## ii) The Economy

Both BBC News and Current Affairs and ITN in London have an Economics Correspondent. At the BBC it is Peter Jay and Ruth Lee at ITN. Both of these have come from non-journalistic backgrounds. Their origins may explain some of the problems of reconciling economic stories with journalism. In every national newsroom economic stories were

perceived of as being even more boring than political stories. As Tables 4.16 to 4.19 (see Chapter 4) show, “hard” economic stories falling into the category “economics and government” are relatively rarely broadcast, although BBC2 *Newsnight* has a higher percentage of stories falling into this category than BBC1, ITN or Channel Four. Indeed as Table 4.20 (see Chapter 4) shows, even BBC1’s *Breakfast News*, with its *Business Breakfast* hour, concentrates mainly on industrial stories and avoids any pure economic analysis. BBC1’s *Children’s Newsround* avoids this category completely, and rather surprisingly ITN’s *5.40pm News* devoted 4.4% of its programming to the category, and *News at Ten*, 4.7% in the week recorded, (see Tables 4.26 and 4.32, Chapter 4). This, however was almost entirely due to a drop in unemployment figures announced on 22 April 1993 which was analysed from a political/economic perspective by the political correspondent Michael Brunson. This type of analysis, where an economic story is angled into a political story is a typical practice of the *5.40pm News* and *News at Ten*. In contrast BBC News and Current Affairs used the economics correspondent, Peter Jay to analyse the story from an economic perspective. However, in June 1994, ITN acquired a news economics correspondent, Ruth Lee, who was previously an economist at the investment bank, Lehman Brothers. It is interesting to note that since June 1994 she often performs live two-ways, as ITN’s economist, and analyses business closures and government figures from a much more economic perspective than was the case during my content analysis period.

However, it is only when industrial stories, such as strikes or business news are included in the category that many editors really begin to consider it a story, and cease to try and “dilute” it by turning it into a marginally less boring political story. This is because stories about strikes or factory closures can be told in a people-oriented way. Stories about

strikes consistently revolve around the inconvenience to the public and the damage to industry (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; 1980). In contrast, stories which are purely about the economy tend to be much more intellectually demanding, so the audience has to grasp concepts such as the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (PSBR), trade deficits and inflation. In many cases such stories are illustrated by graphics, or by an attempt to explain such concepts in terms of the effect they will have on the individual. Indeed the Budget is always explained in such terms. However, as noted earlier in this chapter, John Birt dislikes this type of journalism where inflation is explained in terms of beer prices and the BBC journalists are consistently in a dilemma, trying to reconcile maintaining the audience interest with the higher priorities of Birtian journalism.

The coverage of the BBC strike in June 1994 illustrated the differences between ITN and BBC news. The latter, with an obvious personal interest in the strike, reported it straight and showed how the management were managing to put news programmes out, in spite of the disruptive influence of the strikers. ITN in contrast looked for a “people” angle, covering the possibility that the Wimbledon Tennis competition may not be televised and the fact that a well-known supporter of the unions, Peter Snow had crossed the picket lines and went into work in order to cover the local elections.

### iii) Education

Many recent education stories have been related to the rejection by teachers of government directives. Thus education stories often showed conflict from 1993 to 1994.

iv) Law, Order and Crime

The coverage of crime by the BBC is very carefully considered and their priority is to avoid causing panic or fear in the population by distorting facts or giving a false impression of the frequency of criminal acts. Many journalists at BBC News and Current are aware of the danger of creating moral panics or of blaming certain groups for the subversion of cultural mores. Therefore there is a great deal of discussion at all BBC meetings when they have to consider covering any kind of crime story,

'We're not into straightforward reports on crime events which don't tell you anything about the state of England, we want to be analytical, look at the issue and in trend setting terms, not like ITN which just takes a nasty incident and does it straight' (BBC programme editor, 5/5/94).

For example at one meeting it was decided that a good "peg" might be the next set of crime figures, upon which journalists could use to "hang" an analytic piece on. This piece would try to explain why crime figures had risen or fallen (this was of course very ambitious for a three minute slot but the good intention was undoubtedly there).

Similarly this attitude to crime reporting is reflected in the BBC regional centres. For example on 25th July 1994, a woman was shot and killed by her partner in a pub garden. At the morning meeting at *Look North News*, it was implicitly understood that this story would not simply be reported straight, but an issue must be linked to it. In this case the issue was "obsession", and the news story was later supplemented by a BBC Radio Leeds "phone-in" on the subject later that evening. However, this principle of finding an issue behind an event proved to very problematic for the *Look North News* team when a shooting occurred in Sheffield. At the morning meeting it was decided that the issue behind this lead story

would be the increase in armed crime. However, having committed a lot of resources to covering the story it turned out that the “gun” actually had been a riveting gun. As one journalist quipped 'we can't do a piece on the increase in riveting gun crime!' Both *Calendar News* and *Look North News* cover a high percentage of crime related stories (see Tables 4.27 and 4.29, Chapter 4). *Calendar News* devoted 9.3% of its programme to stories about violent crime and 17.3% covering court cases and inquests. Similarly BBC1's *Look North News*, devoted 10.9% of its total coverage to stories about violent crime and 23.4% to court cases and inquests. As such, it is not surprising that the latter needs to be carefully monitored by the centre to ensure that its coverage of a plethora of crimes in a small regional locality does not become distorted. *Calendar News* has no such censorship, but the nature of the programme itself is more orientated to light and trivial stories. Therefore the majority of stories about violent crime appear in the short news belts during the opt outs. The list of deaths and crimes reads like a shopping list, and could be particularly alarming to people as the news in this part of the programming is much more localised (often just relating to one main city and two or three towns). There is no attempt to analyse or explain the context of the crimes or violent occurrences. After having observed in the *Calendar News* newsroom (Hetherington, 1989:61) also commented on this phenomenon.

'There are days when *Calendar* seems to depend too much on short news items, with a bias towards crime, misfortune and catastrophe'.

However, some regional events such as the disappearance of a young girl (June 1994), for example, are often reported in more depth from the studio. This is because a human interest angle can be taken from the tragedy. *Calendar News* in particular stayed with this story and regularly

did up-dates and appeals for help. Recently both *Calendar News* and *Look North News* used the same “peg”, the missing girl's fourteenth birthday, to go over the story again.

A further example of the BBC attempting to analyse crime occurred on 28 April 1994 when there were two more shootings in Northern Ireland overnight. The editor of the BBC1's *Six O'clock News* believed they should do more than just a straight story about two more killings because it was a sign that the war was back on. But he was worried about the oxygen of publicity perspective. He agonised all day, but was determined to ensure the story was not simply covered straight, although it had to be covered because,

'Northern Ireland a long-running story and developments in it need to be marked' (BBC1 programme editor, 28/4/94).

v) Human Interest

Michael Schudson (1978) argues that there is a connection between the information mode of news and the educated middle classes and between the story model and the less well educated working classes. It would certainly appear from examination of the content and format of television news stories and the social class of the majority of a programme's audience, that *GMTV News*, *Big Breakfast News*, *Calendar News* and ITN's *5.40pm News* and to some extent *News at Ten* are aiming to entertain and “tell a story” to the audience. The format of these programmes is one of friendly interaction and accessibility between the presenter and the audience, the stories are often of a human interest content and the audience is entertained, made emotional or “cheered up”.

The majority of human interest stories in the regional news are about ordinary persons doing extraordinary things, 'Somalians protesting to the Housing Association about racism' (*Calendar News*, 19/4/93). Or are about ordinary people becoming victims, 'Baby who will die if falls asleep is one today' (*Calendar News* 20/4/94); or 'gift of life, two Yorkshire boys who died in a fire last week, give their organs to a baby' (*Look North News*, 20/4/93).

Human interest can also be provided by the famous, as noted by Galtung and Ruge (1965) an elite person can increase the chance of a story becoming news. This was certainly borne out,

'Human interest stories are very difficult to define, but a sex scandal wouldn't be covered by the Early Evening News for its own sake unless it had other ingredients in it like a politician! Therefore Chris de Burg's infidelities were not newsworthy enough last week because he's not big enough, but Michael Barrymore drying out or Michael Jackson's troubles are, because the people are very famous and are household names' (programme editor, ITN's *5.40pm News*, 15/6/94).

As discussed above, when, on 4 May, 1994 Prince Charles made comments about smacking children being a good idea, the BBC journalists were amused to see that ITN had led with story and placed the story about mass genocide in Rwanda second. The BBC journalists mused amongst themselves why it was that smacking children in Britain was seen to be more important than massacring thousands of them in Rwanda

ITN's *5.40pm News* obviously has a higher commitment to human interest stories than all the other mainstream news programmes with the exception of *GMTV News* and *Calendar News* and the two children's programmes,

BBC1's *Children's Newsround* and *Big Breakfast News*. However, it often appears that this commitment is derided by other journalists. For example on 6 May 1994, ITN's *5.40pm News* ran a story about Richard Gere and Cindy Crawford not getting divorced. This elicited a lot of sarcastic comments in the BBC newsroom, especially as it was a European election day.

ITN's *News at Ten* has a different attitude to the human interest story from the *5.40pm News* and often does not take a lot of the stories for its bulletin. However, the re-instatement of its light "and finally....." piece has attracted criticism from many sources,

ITN's *News at Ten* is reintroducing its "And finally" end piece, "traditionally devoted to animals, children and royalty". After footage from Sarajevo, we'll be treated, for example, to the sight of some loveable ducks on a surfboard. The ducks are there not just to cheer us up but to reach those subliminal zones of ourselves which long to believe that the horror of Sarajevo is just so much nasty make-believe' (*The Observer*, 19/7/92).

In contrast to the ITN approach, BBC News and Current Affairs, although housing a specialist unit called Social Affairs, which covers health, social security, education, urban affairs, the media, the arts, religion, science, sport, and home affairs, tends to have a different commitment to human interest stories (although as outlined above they are starting to creep onto the running orders). In spite of this however, the head of the Social Affairs Unit, Polly Toynbee, complained (in 1994) that she always needed a "fat peg" in order to beat the heavy competition and get onto the news programmes. In other words, at the BBC, the harder stories covering politics and the economy, or international news tended to push out softer domestic pieces, even if they were well researched by a specialist unit.



vi) Health

The editor of ITN's *5.40pm News* always tries to cover a health stories because he knows the audience likes them through audience research. However, there are not always many good health stories around, as my content analysis will testify. Therefore, when stories relating to the so-called “killer bug”, necrotising fasciitis were extensively reported in June 1994, first by the press and then by the broadcasting media ITN's *5.40pm News* and *News at Ten* covered the gruesome tale at some length. *News at Ten* actually led with it. *Channel Four News* and BBC2's *Newsnight* took a higher stance than the rest of the broadcast media and attempted to analyse the media's reaction to the scare. BBC1's news programmes took a similar line to ITN on the subject, but omitted the worst pieces of film showing huge scars and amputations on the victims of the disease. The newsworthy value of such a story came from several factors, first all the media had seized upon the story and as such there was literally a “feeding frenzy”, where the same four or five victims appeared on most news programmes (see the “me too tendency” (Bell, 1991)). Secondly, there were several victims all willing to show the devastating results of the disease by bearing amputated limbs and gaping wounds for the cameras, providing good visuals (Tunstall, 1991). Thirdly, the story was of a negative nature (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Fourthly, it was easy to simplify the story for the audience, although there remained a mystery about the cause of the disease, the matter of fact displaying of the results of it could not be simpler to film or digest. As Postman (1989), argues, simple visual thrills entertain the audience, and certainly both ITN's *5.40pm News* and *News at Ten* have some commitment to that.

Although the “killer bug” scare had significance for the audience, the journalists themselves became interested in the phenomenon, which is

often a good indicator that the story will be covered. The different approaches to the story taken by the different news programmes reflects the differences in their conceptions of what is newsworthy and what is in the public interest.

vii) Environment

The environment is usually very poorly covered. BBC1's *Children's Newsround* had the highest commitment to stories about the environment, devoting 12.5% of its programme to stories about conservation (Table 4.25, Chapter 4). Most other news programmes did not cover any environmentally-related stories. Often stories about the environment are converted to other content categories, and this tendency is also reflected by the press (5).

viii) Disasters and Accidents

In spite of the claims by many journalists that news is of an unpredictable or ad hoc nature, there are relatively few accidents and disasters appearing in the television news on a regular basis. However, major accidents are very well covered and become part of the national psyche, such as the Hillsborough disaster, the sinking of the *Herald of Free Enterprise*, the air crash at Lockerbie and so on. When a major accident occurs, the newsroom atmosphere changes. The whole news operation is devoted to ensuring that its particular programme(s) gets the best coverage. The air of excitement and anticipation in the newsroom sometimes contrasts rather sharply with the death and destruction which has just occurred. Journalists are often accused of being unfeeling or parasitic at such times but there is no doubt that journalists feel very strongly about what they are witnessing and become involved in the disaster (Deppa, 1993).

Therefore there is a curious contradiction at work. Journalists talk in terms of hoping for a disaster,

'there's a test firing of a Trident Missile today from a Royal Navy Sub - it will have to be covered. If it's successful it will be boring, but if it goes wrong, now that's a good story' (BBC1 programme editor, 19/5/94).

They can also seem to callously reject the "ordinary" accident in favour of something more interesting.

'Surely the fire at the Scarborough Hostel is only a story if it is arson or abuse of safety regulations. If it's just another unfortunate accident it isn't worth marking' (BBC1 Editor, TV News Programmes, 5/5/94).

'Death has to be different, four killed in a car crash would not be a story because it happens all the time. But a mother and three young children, or four people on the way to a wedding, or the best man and the groom would be covered (ITN, programme editor, 22/6/94).

A somewhat different approach to a disaster was made by *Channel Four News* which, in a quest to be distinctive, invested time and resources in the long-term coverage of the aftermath of the sinking of "The Derbyshire", a cargo ship. The ship lost all hands, including several British sailors. The families of the sailors spent months campaigning for an investigation into the cause of the accident. *Channel Four News* followed the underwater search, which discovered the ship had broken into three main pieces but that the central one looked as if it had exploded. During my observation period at *Channel Four News*, the correspondent and producer concerned were busy preparing a package to be shown the following week. As one Channel Four journalist cynically remarked however,

'it's only because it had a few Brits on, no one gives a stuff when it's full of Filipinos' (producer, ITN *Channel Four News*, 29/6/94).

This cynical awareness of their own news values sometimes appears to upset some journalists who feel that professionally they must cover a story, which they think personally is for the wrong reasons.

The regional newsroom journalists are usually the first journalists at a disaster scene if it happens in their area. If the disaster is networked by the London news organisations then the regional journalist may spend much of his/her time feeding the London machine. This can be difficult for the regional editors who then have to try to tell the same story in a different way. However, long after the national network news has dropped the story, the regions will continue to cover it. For example, the *Look North News* correspondent who covered the Hillsborough disaster in April 1989 spent two or three years covering the aftermath of the event. Regional correspondents covered such issues as the collection of donations, the myriad of ceremonies for the victims, up-dates on the condition of victims such as Tony Bland, who was left in a coma, the counselling process and so on. The correspondent believed this fulfilled an important long-term function in the region and, unlike the initial national television news media coverage, supported and helped people to come to terms with the Hillsborough disaster. This highlights one of the valuable and important roles of local television news in providing people with useful and relevant information about their own region, covering issues and events, providing an historical context and continuity neglected by national television newsrooms.

## II) International News

### i) International Politics

The coverage of foreign news is very expensive. In 1994 it cost £2,500 for a ten minute satellite feed from Johannesburg, and £300 for ten minutes from Brussels. Also the logistics of covering foreign news are much more problematic than covering a national story. Therefore most international political stories appear to be diary stories, such as the coverage of the South African elections, the Italian Referendum, the elections in India, or activities in the White House. International television news coverage also reflects the location of the overseas bureaux and the historical relationship of Britain to those countries. It is therefore, very rare that political activities in South America or North, West or East Africa are covered unless there is another dimension to them such as a coup.

Again *Channel Four News* showed its commitment to offer a different type of political news coverage, when on 1 July 1994 it committed a good deal of its resources to the coverage of Yasser Arafat returning to Jericho, following the signing of the Peace Accord. Although the other news programmes covered the latter event, they then dropped the story. Similarly on 30 June 1994, the Editor, Channel Four News Programmes bemoaned that a lack of resources was preventing him from covering the story emerging from Italy, where the whole board of RAI, a publicly-owned television organisation competing with Berlusconi's three commercial networks, had just resigned. This, he said, was a *Channel Four News* story, full of issues and one which no one else was covering it in the broadcast media at the time.

I also illustrate in the case study in Chapter 8, how an international media event, occurring in the United States is simply translated as a big news

story for the British media. Also I show clearly how the priorities of the news media converged upon the British angle of the story, and that there were also differences in coverage of the events in Waco, Texas, by different television news programmes. The differences in style and content illustrated in the coverage of the events at Waco also compound the findings of this chapter.

ii) International Law and Order

BBC News and Current Affairs applies the same rules to coverage of international law and order or crime stories as it does to coverage of domestic stories. For example, on 19 May 1994, Matt Frei, the Italian Correspondent, offered a story about the “Monster of Florence”, who had come to trial, having spent several years murdering courting couples. The story was huge in Italy but the programme editors and the Newsgathering editors rejected this story because it was too salacious. In contrast, however, on the same day they accepted a piece from another BBC correspondent on the terror and torture of political prisoners regime in China, where twelve hundred people await a trial for crimes against humanity.

There is little coverage of news stories falling into this category, but as Table 4.30 (see Chapter 4) shows, *Channel Four News* tends to cover stories which receive little attention from the other television news programmes: for example, it alone did a piece on the trial of marines in the United States who were accused of being involved in a sex scandal (*Channel Four News*, 23/4/93).

iii) International Violence

BBC1's *Nine O'clock News* tends to cover the greatest number of foreign countries and will even set the agenda for such coverage. For example on 3 May 1994, the Rwanda team was despatched again and the *Nine O'clock News* was congratulated for leading bravely with Rwanda on a day when all the other news programmes had different lead stories. When questioned why Rwanda had been off the news agenda for several weeks, in spite of the growing evidence of genocide, a journalist replied,

'To be honest I'm not that sure why Rwanda has gone off the agenda probably because it is not Europe, or a former colony' (BBC1 Editor, TV News Programmes, 3/5/94).

BBC1's *Nine O'clock News*, BBC2's *Newsnight* and *Channel Four News* all attempt to offer diversity of coverage of countries. However, it would appear, particularly from the evidence gained in my content analysis, that the primary news values stories need to get onto the agenda are cultural proximity in that the country is either a former colony or a bureau is situated there. If not, then the only criterion for countries which do not fall into either category is mass destruction, genocide, famine or war.

Although the week I analysed in April 1993 was particularly skewed towards international violence, it was noticeable that all three countries where the violence was occurring, Bosnia, South Africa and the United States, were already allowed access to the news agenda for reasons other than the violent content of the news. In effect such stories are very newsworthy because they come from countries which are all culturally significant to the British audience.

Therefore, for a country such as Rwanda or Ethiopia to get onto British news there must be a significant amount of violence or death occurring.

McLurg's Law certainly does apply. However, once all the news media arrive in a country such as Rwanda, competition for the best coverage becomes a priority. At a BBC meeting on 6 May 1994, several editors commented on their envy of the piece James Mates had done for ITN on Rwanda, it had the birth of a baby in it which everyone thought was marvellous - a real personal touch to the crisis.

In contrast *Channel Four News* sought to look at a different aspect of the Rwandan crisis. At the morning meeting on 27 June 1994, the Editor of Channel Four Programmes argued that he did not want to do a piece on Rwanda which was just a 'lots of dead Tutsis angle', but to consider whether Rwanda was still a viable country. He wanted to examine whether it would ever be stable again especially as all the educated people have been murdered or displaced and to question who would run the country in the future.

f) Summary

The structure and origins of a news organisation and the remits of the different news programmes exert a good deal of influence on the types of news stories which are broadcast by the different news programmes, and also shape what is deemed by them to be both newsworthy and in the public interest. As Chapters 4 and 7 have illustrated, different television news programmes undoubtedly have a particular affinity for certain types of stories and a distinctive way of telling those stories. Evidence has shown that stories which are deemed very newsworthy will be covered by all the news programmes, but it is when the news programmes have to select middle-ranking stories then the differences in their priorities are apparent.



However, as I have also shown in this chapter, a diverse range of views and approaches exist in different news organisations and for different programmes towards what is ostensibly the same story category. In the case study in Chapter 8, this diversity of coverage is analysed. First by considering what constitutes a newsworthy story for all the different television news programmes. Secondly, by examining closely how the different news programmes covered the “same” story. Thirdly, by analysing what aspects of the story different news programmes and different news organisation deemed to be the most newsworthy and which particular dimensions of the event were seen to be best at serving their definition of the public interest.

As Chapter 7 has shown, there are qualitative and quantitative differences between the news output of ITN’s Channel 3; *GMTV News* and *Calendar News* compared with the news output of *Channel Four News* at 7pm and BBC news programmes. The former are much more inclined to stress or search for the “interesting” aspects of an event or an “interesting” event *per se*, whereas the latter are much more likely to concentrate on matters of “importance”. Such organisational visions about what constitutes the public interest and therefore what informs newsworthiness are translated into the news product and affect the information quality of the news itself.

BBC news output shows a much more diverse range of “important” news stories than ITN (which shows more human interest and consumer type stories). BBC news programmes generally concentrate on the more serious or worthy aspects of a day’s events. However, there is a drift away from the BBC’s original founding remit via commercialization and there is greater inclusion of human interest type stories in the news content and a tendency to concentrate on entertainment and stylistic devices in the news format.

Given that the majority of the public perceive television to be their primary source of information about the world (Gunter et al, 1993) there is some question about what information can be usefully transmitted and retained by an audience from a fifteen or thirty minute news programme, particularly if it is dominated by human interest or politicians arguing (Fallows, 1996). As I argued in Chapter 1, the nature of television journalism is multiply constrained and really should only be perceived as a restricted source of selected information. This does not free television news journalists from their socially responsible role as important and valuable providers of some types of information about the world. Journalists have an important position in relation to their membership of institutions which embody citizenship. What is clearly disturbing for the relationship between the television news medium and democracy is the trend towards further restriction of the informational capacity of television news through increasing commercialization of the broadcasting institutions in Britain in the 1990s.

## **CHAPTER 8: BIG NEWS AND MEDIA EVENTS: A CASE STUDY OF BRITISH WEEKDAY TELEVISION NEWS.**

The Television News Coverage of the End of the Siege in Waco, Texas, 19th April to 23rd April 1993 inclusive and John Smith's Funeral in May 1994

### a) Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is two fold. First, to perform an analysis of the similarities and differences between different British television news programmes in their coverage of a major event, such as the ending of the Waco siege in Texas. This part of the study seeks to illustrate how different television news programmes deal with what is ostensibly the same event. In my ideal-type model of the television news genre (see Figure 1, Introduction), I show how the whole field of news relevance comprises a variety influences from other genres such as entertainment, education and information and so on. Although "news" exists in the centre of this model as a discrete phenomenon, any news programme may also (and in the 1990s will also) contain elements or influences from one or more of the other genres. Where news overlaps with different genres, news sub-genres are formed. Such influences from other genres therefore act upon and shape the final news product each different television news programme can be constituted from a variety of different news sub-genres. As previously outlined (see Introduction, pages 20-21) the degree of potential diversity which can be exhibited by the different news programmes is wide-ranging.

Following on from the main concerns of the previous chapters I illustrate clearly how in certain circumstances television news coverage shares the similar practice of omitting vital pieces of information or simplifying complex situations reducing the likelihood of any useful level of

information being transferred to the viewer. I also show how coverage of an international big news events or media events follows a particular line where the content of the report is constrained by bodies outside the media organisations. Finally I consider how different television news programmes can pursue different angles of what is ostensibly the same event. Some of these angles help to improve background and contextual knowledge aiding a more discerning understanding of news events whereas other news angles simply rely on human interest interpretations of events providing a low dissemination of knowledge where the journalistic role of interpreter is seriously compromised and under-utilised. In those cases where the programme epistemology has determined that a purely human interest angle is pursued or where journalists have not gone on to interpret or question the USA's "government-line" the notion of serving the public interest or empowering citizens to be competent communicators in the public sphere has been severely compromised.

The second purpose of this chapter is to analyse the concept of the big-news event in some detail to illustrate how certain events fall into a category of coverage that is qualitatively different from most ordinary, easily forgettable newsworthy events. This distinction highlights the differences between three categories of story covered by the television news.

First, media events such as John Smith's funeral in May 1994 or the coverage of the VE Day celebrations in May 1995 are so big and so important that they have a "beyond news" character. Secondly, a really big news event such as John Smith's death, the plane crash on Lockerbie, or the British reporting of the ending and aftermath of the Waco siege in Texas will be covered by all the television news programmes in some

form, although style and content will differ between different news programmes. Thirdly, middle-range news stories that proliferate television news coverage on a day to day basis, such as the release of a Government White Paper, the death of an elderly actor or a routine court case will be covered by some news programmes and not others. Using the ending of the Waco siege in Texas as an example, I examine the criteria of the big international news event. I will show how a media event in one country (the Waco tragedy in Texas) can simply become a big news story for another. This will illustrate how British journalists unquestioningly adopted and accepted the criteria that marked the activities at Waco as a media event for the American media. This indicates some important characteristics of both the media event and the big news story. The criteria identified by Dayan and Katz (1994) can be used to identify the former (1). However, Dayan and Katz's analysis is weakened by the fact that they do not consider the crucial differences between international media events and national media events. In their analysis, one collapses into the other and they both are subsequently analysed as "media events". As I show later in this paper, it is not sufficient to simply assume that global and national media events have the same significance. Whilst I find Dayan and Katz's media event analysis useful, therefore, I go on to critically assess the differences in media events, arguing that it is not sufficient to talk about the Olympic Games and national funerals in the same breath.

This chapter also illustrates the importance of a dual methodological approach to the study of newsworthiness. By performing both a content analysis of the events in Waco and observing the newsroom processing of a media event (the funeral of John Smith) as well as observing the day to day coverage of routine news stories, it has been possible to gain a greater understanding of the key characteristics of the media event, the big news

story and the middle-ranking news story. Furthermore, because an in-depth analysis of newsworthiness has been extended to a variety of different television news programmes, it has been possible to gain a greater understanding about the ability of different news programmes to mould the concept of “news” to suit a particular remit, thereby showing how television news is becoming increasingly fragmented and adaptive to a changing news environment in the 1990s. In acknowledgement of the diversity of television news coverage and influences imposed upon it from the other genres from the “not news” environment (see Introduction, Figure 1) it is therefore useful in this chapter to examine the concept of the media event genre which may be defined as,

'..a new narrative genre that employs the unique potential of the electronic media to command attention universally and simultaneously in order to tell a primordial story about current affairs. These are events that hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience. We call them collectively "media events"' (Dayan and Katz. 1994).

or as

'Meta-event...news stories that concern those public actions of government agencies, the authority and the purpose of which are beyond the research of investigative journalism....characterised by the underlying absence of fit between what is reported and what is happening...!' (Jones and Baker, 1994).

The events at Waco in Texas occurred during the week selected for my doctoral content analysis and as such I was able to collect and analyse all the broadcasts made by the different news programmes during a full week. This was then supplemented by my observation period in television newsroom the following year, whereby I was able to ask specific questions regarding the Waco coverage but also to observe how a media event (John Smith's funeral) and everyday news stories were

selected and processed. From observation and content analysis the following rationale for the study of the characteristics of the big news story, as a strong indicator of television newsworthiness, was formulated.

i) Big news events are covered by all the television news programmes for some days and therefore provide a good opportunity to assess the *similarities* in coverage of the story by different news programmes (in terms of format, content and duration). The analysis of the coverage of the events at Waco, allowed for an investigation of the presence of a consistent “media world view” when reporting major events. In particular, this analysis and assessment of the similarities in the content and production of the news stories relating to the ending of the Waco siege illustrated some of the common values, assumptions, myths and definitions of newsworthiness shared by the different television news programmes (2).

ii) Big news events are covered by all the television news programmes for some days and provide the opportunity to assess the *differences* in coverage of the story by different news programmes (in terms of format, content and duration). In the case of coverage of the events at Waco, this allowed for the examination of how different aspects of the events were stressed, and why. Also examination of whether different definitions of newsworthiness were in operation once the initial story-line had been covered illustrated differences in the conception and portrayal of the newsworthy by different television news programmes. This illustrated how such programmes can be flexible and adaptive to fulfil a particular remit, and showed how television news can be exemplified in its own particularity by different television news programmes.

iii) Some big events exhibit characteristics particular to a media event identified by Dayan and Katz (1994). In such cases the media merely act as a witness, simply recording such events as the Royal Wedding, the Olympic games, VE Day celebrations, the Silver Jubilee, the Moon Landings, or John Smith's funeral. These events are always planned by external organisers with television in mind. Such collaboration between the organisers of an event and the media was formalised in the case of John Smith's funeral, for example, when event organisers circulated the arrangements to all television staff several days before the event took place. The BBC news planners therefore had marked the funeral arrangements in their Prospects on the day of his death, the details of which were confirmed and streamlined during the next eight days. The rules regarding media coverage and proper respect to the mourners were accepted and adhered to and those external to the media were able to control the tone and structure of the reporting of the funeral.

Of particular interest to this study is the status of the events in Waco, Texas in April 1993 as they exhibited certain characteristics specific to a media event. For example, it is alleged that the presence of the television cameras at the scene of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, was because ATF secretary, Sharon Wheeler summoned them over the telephone on 27 February 1993. She asked various news media if they would be interested in reporting a weapons raid against a local "cult" The ATF later denied this by claiming that Ms Wheeler had simply said something big was about to happen (Lewis, J.R. (Ed.), 1994). The exact words she used are immaterial because once the media were present and positioned accordingly the official agencies could control the information flow to them in the same way it is controlled when organising and staging major media events.



'.....the most disturbing aspect of the Waco stand-off....the bungled attack by federal agents that started the siege at the end of February was filmed, live, on television. How did this happen? The media were alerted that something "big" was going to occur somewhere in Texas. It did not take a reporter to figure out where. As part of the increasingly ghoulish compact between television and the police, the agents wanted their raid to be filmed and it was' (*The Independent*, 21/4/93).

A characteristic of media events is that they are pre-planned and announced or advertised in advance (Dayan and Katz, 1994). Furthermore they are often not interrupted by criticism of the organisers, but only by analysis and explanation of the events unfolding in front of them. In the case of John Smith's funeral this involved identification of mourners and explanation of the procedures being undertaken. Media coverage of the ending of the Waco siege, as I will show below, *initially* followed the line defined by the authorities and their activities were exempted from any constructive analysis of events, therefore following a pattern of coverage characteristic of the media event.

Media events are usually broadcast live, so that the audience can participate or become involved in the events unfolding on the screen. In the case of John Smith's funeral, viewers were able to express sorrow and sadness and to come together as a nation in mourning. In the case of the Waco raid and subsequent fire, viewers could share the horror and drama of the events that were unfolding before their eyes. We, as viewers, were even expected to observe a British victim's relative watching the events live, in goulish voyeurism.

It is easier to recognise John Smith's funeral as a media event because it clearly exhibited criteria identified by Dayan and Katz. First of all, the

funeral was shown as a rite of passage of a good, potentially great, man. Such an important event, invited audiences to stop what they were doing and watch. The ceremony was shown by the main channels reinforcing its significance to the nation. The journalists presiding over the funeral suspended their normally cynical or critical stance to treat the event with respect and reverence.

Closer analysis of the events in Waco show that there too were elements of ceremony imposed by the authorities. The viewers were enthralled by the spectacle supplied by the authorities and the reporting in the first instance made the implicit and even explicit assumption that David Koresh and his followers were mad or evil and somehow deserving of their fate. The polarisation of the conquest into good versus evil by the authorities and the media, allowed the story to be uncritically, and reverentially told. This fulfilled a further criterion of Dayan and Katz, that in general, public approval is required for an event to succeed, official events cannot be imposed on the unwilling or unbelieving. As I discuss below, the demonising of David Koresh and his followers by the media and the authorities as well as the deliberate use of the label "cult" to describe the group served to,

'..otherise Koresh and his flock so that we will not feel any dignity in their dying, nor experience their deaths as fully human' (Palmer, 1994:103).

Both the ATF and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), were initially allowed to retain their credibility because their actions were interpreted as legitimate. Such credibility is surprising when we consider the many violations made by the ATF and the FBI. Such violations include use of unnecessary force, the use of CS gas to attack American citizens in the compound, even though the substance has been banned

from use in combat abroad, and the use of military weapons and techniques against civilians. In the early post-mortem of events that occurred, the FBI and the ATF were at worst accused of bungling the raids, but generally exonerated from too much blame given that the “cultists” were seen to be inviting attack.

Both John Smith's funeral and the fire at Waco commanded audience attention and both served as an opportunity for the technological expertise of the broadcasters to be exercised. A proliferation of live links and conversations between studio presenters and reporters on the scene were characteristic of the reporting of both events.

iv) Big events share the common characteristic of dominating television news coverage as the lead story for at least one full day, and often remain firmly part of the television news agenda as a point of speculation and interest to journalists for several days. In the case of Waco, some superficial speculation was centred on the mystery surrounding the start or cause of the fire which engulfed the Branch Davidian's compound at Mount Carmel. In the case of John Smith's death and funeral arrangements, the journalists immediately involved themselves in “solving” the mystery of who would be the future Leader of the Labour Party. Both events contained elements that pushed them into the realms of the “super-newsworthy” or the media event/meta event category outlined above.

This opportunity to analyse the discrete coverage of the big event in some detail facilitates the examination of some of the fundamental aspects of television newsworthiness and notions of public interest journalism, such as the main criteria and rationale of news coverage and the key characteristics of television news values. It also provides a chance to

reflect upon the differences between an event that falls into the category of media event, the really big news event and the middle-range news stories that proliferate in everyday news coverage.

v) Of great importance to this analysis is the fact that one story is a domestic story (it occurred to a British person in Britain) and the other is a quasi-domestic story (it occurred to British and foreign persons in another country). The news coverage of the latter, was often devoted to the plight of the British families in Britain who had lost loved-ones in the fire at Waco. I argue that in the particular example of the events at Waco the “investigative” focus of the television news media was primarily domestic. As a result of this particular focus on the domestic British angle of the Waco tragedy, there was a general acceptance by the British television news media of the original media line taken in the United States, even though for the Americans the events at Waco had completely different cultural implications and meanings. Clearly, although the American media were initially invited, used and misinformed by the authorities to serve a particular purpose and to report a certain version of events, a good deal of post-mortem investigative journalism is now being undertaken in the United States (3). In essence the initial presence of a virtually uncritical media at the events constructed by the ATF and the FBI bears a great deal of similarity to the presence of the British media as a witness at John Smith's funeral. As Dayan and Katz point out,

'Typically, these events are *organised outside the media*, and the media.....only provide a channel for their transmission' (Dayan and Katz, 1994:5).

However, as any reading of British newspapers and study of British television coverage will show, the British reporting of the events at Waco in 1993 took, and *stayed with*, the official line promoted by the FBI agents and the Government. Furthermore, British journalists have not

mirrored the American media interest in the political fall-out and post-mortem deliberations and it was not until July 1995 that some of the British quality press and BBC2's *Newsnight* reported the start of the Congressional hearings in the United States (*Newsnight*, 18/7/95). In this respect the coverage of the events at Waco differs from the coverage of the death of John Smith. In the case of the latter, the media stayed with a variety of angles, investigation and speculation from the time that John Smith died until his funeral several days later. During this period both the press and the broadcast media continually questioned Labour Party politicians in the hope that they would learn something about John Smith's future successor. Also a great deal of information and background was broadcast regarding John Smith's life and his achievements. Therefore when the media were required to merely act as a witness to his funeral and uncritically report the media event, it was within the context of a good deal of information and background which had already been provided. In contrast, when reporting the events at Waco the British media accepted the constraints imposed upon them by the character of the staged American media event but did not then go on later to provide context and background or to investigate and analyse the events to supplement the paucity of information provided by the authorities.

In the case of the British reporting of the Waco tragedy, the boundaries between media event and big news story are blurred simply because the British media accepted the arrangements, rules and definitions supplied by the American authorities of the events in Waco and as such reported an American media event as a big news story. Unfortunately, and as I go on to show, such acceptance of external power to define events often resulted in the British media merely paraphrasing the American authorities. Furthermore concentration on the domestic angle of the story,

acceptance of the ATF/FBI line, and the inability to stay with the story once it moved away from the dramatic to the investigative has ensured that the British audience is left with the perceptions that were originally promulgated by the authorities and the anti-“cult” experts in March and April 1993 and illustrates a disturbing lack of news information quality in British television news reporting of an international (media) event. In contrast the American audience has subsequently been given the opportunity to be much better informed about the actions of the authorities than they were in April 1993, as there has been continual coverage in the American media of the fall-out and doubts about the FBI's activity (CD Newsbank, Inc. July 1994-May 1995). This has also been reflected on the Internet where some sections have been devoted to journalistic analysis of Waco (The Internet, Journalism). This clearly shows how an international story receives a different kind of coverage from a domestic story.

In contrast, to the coverage of the events in Waco the certainty of the cause of John Smith's death and the surety of the election of a future leader, all sustained a feeling of national sorrow, but promised a comfortable resolution to the current crisis. The “mystery” of who would be leader, was sure to be resolved, but sparked off speculation and debate in the media. Conversely, the events at Waco were shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. At variance with this was the reporting of those events which were replete with expert affirmations and confirmations supplied by anti-“cultists”, journalistic value judgements regarding the status of “cults” and David Koresh's sanity, and the most likely cause of the fire (mass suicide). British reporting also ignored academic or scholarly input and neglected to place the reporting of the story into any kind of religious or theological frame. Furthermore, the British television news media also

neglected to subsequently correct such affirmations when further evidence was available several months later.

It is due to this lack of follow-up and clarification by the British media, that it is now necessary to give a brief descriptive overview of the events that occurred in Waco, Texas on and up to 23 April 1993 in order to context and utilise the analysis that follows. I do not, however, for the reasons just outlined, feel it is necessary to provide the same information or contextual detail regarding the funeral of John Smith.

b) Background and Description of the Events Occurring in Waco from 19th-23rd April 1993 Inclusive.

My description of the events leading up to and during the ending of the siege in Waco, Texas can only be a brief over-view supplied in the main by press articles, a film, conversations with journalists who were somehow involved in the coverage of the story (from the newsroom) and papers, books and articles written by other researchers and critics in Britain and the United States. Not being an eye witness to an event obviously means that one has to rely on a series of other sources. Therefore my interpretation of the events has been made on the basis of a detailed content analysis of the news which was broadcast, which cannot possibly assess what was not covered and why. My later experience of newsroom observation and interviews with journalists, has provided me with a greater understanding of the formal and informal processes and influences coming to bear on the coverage of any potential news story.

The picture the audience obtained of David Koresh, born Vernon Howell, was of a high school “dropout” (*Independent*, 20/4/93); a 'lonely, poor, illegitimate and unexceptional child' (*The Times*, 20/4/93), and a devoted

Seventh Day Adventist who memorised long extracts of the New Testament by heart. He was rejected by the Seventh Adventist Church for being too extreme, and in 1984 set up his own group called the Branch Davidians. He, and close co-preachers conducted missions in Britain and the States to recruit Davidian members. Many of his British converts were West Indians from Manchester and Nottingham.

'Historically, Seventh-Day Adventism, with its exuberant expression of Christian faith in life after death, found eager converts among the oppressed black people of the Caribbean and the southern states of the US.....They were also less likely than most people to dismiss him as a fantasist because their faith is founded on the certainty that Christ's second coming is imminent' (*The Independent*, 20/4/93).

Eventually Koresh and his Branch Davidian followers moved to a compound, comprising several wooden buildings, at Mount Carmel, Waco in Texas. The new religious movement and its activities did not get any coverage by the British media until 28 February 1993, when the ATF made an attempt to storm the building. Four United States agents were killed and fifteen wounded, six Davidian members died and the so-called Waco Siege began. The rationale for the attack by the ATF, appear to be two-fold. First that there were allegations of child abuse by David Koresh, by an ex-member of the Branch Davidians who left the compound. Secondly, Koresh and several of his followers were known to be buying a large quantity of firearms. Since the raid by the ATF several critics and academics have questioned the need or the rationale for the ATF to use such force to serve a warrant, indeed it is still not clear why the ATF, who as yet has presented no concrete evidence that the Branch Davidians were guilty of anything, attacked the compound at Mount Carmel on 28 February 1993.



The ATF has a very dubious record and has been known to use unnecessary force, to injure suspects and to frame minorities by selling them legal fire-arms in an illegal manner and then arresting them once they had made the purchase (Lewis, (Ed.), 1994). One theory is that the ATF raid, which was televised live throughout the United States, was bungled (Ibid. 1994). A second is that the overriding motivation was the desire to attract favourable publicity, particularly as the ATF is known in the United States as the least well-trained and least professional of all the federal agencies, and was very nearly abolished by President Reagan who saw the ATF as a “rogue agency” (Ibid. 1994).

The first televised coverage of the ATF attacking the compound at Mount Carmel was shown on British television on 1 March 1993, by several mainstream news programmes. Waco was now “on” the news agenda. CNN and other United States networks had had their reporters in position the day before.

Fifty-one days after the raid by the ATF, on 19 April 1993, the FBI, which had been staking-out the compound since March 1993, began bombarding the Mount Carmel compound with “non-pyrogenic” “non-toxic” tear-gas, allegedly in an attempt to flush the children out of the compound and end the siege. Tanks began punching holes in the walls of the compound and gas canisters were pushed inside the building. However, a fire or fires were started inside the compound and within two or three minutes it had become an inferno. Television cameras were well placed to capture the events on film. Even the press made pejorative remarks about the presence of the film crews, implying that a still photograph is less voyeuristic than rolling film.

‘What seemed to be the mass death by fire of more than eighty people was captured by the rolling TV cameras’  
(*The Guardian*, 20/4/93).

'And there on Monday, was the inferno of the compound, live again on the networks' (*Independent*, 21/4/93).

The fire(s) at the compound started at about 6.27pm GMT on 19 April 1993, following about six hour's bombardment by the FBI tanks. At the end of the BBC's *One O'clock News*, the presenter added that there were "developments" at Waco but did not elaborate what those might be. The end of BBC1's *Six O'clock News* caught the fire starting, but it was *Channel Four News* at 7pm that was the first to cover the story in any length, accompanied by film of the burning compound. All the other news programmes followed with the story later that evening and continued to cover it in some detail for the next two days, (see Table 8.1 overleaf) for a breakdown of the news coverage over the week 19 April to 23 April 1993).

**TABLE 8.1: WACO: A CASE STUDY**

Table to show the coverage of the end and aftermath of the Waco Siege by fourteen different television news programmes from 19th April to 23 April 1993 inclusive

**MONDAY 19TH APRIL 1993 - DAY ONE**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) Devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage
MONDAY 19TH APRIL				
BBC1	BREAKFAST NEWS	---	---	---
ITV3	GMTV	---	---	---
C4	BIG BREAKFAST	---	---	---
ITV3	ITN 5.40PM NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1*	ONE O'CLOCK NEWS	18	Int. Violence	0.11
BBC1	CHILD. NEWSROUND	---	---	---
ITV3#	ITN 5.40PM NEWS	111	Int Violence	0.62
ITV3	CALENDAR NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1^ **	SIX O'CLOCK NEWS	342	Int. Violence	1.89
BBC1>	LOOK NORTH	25	Int. Violence	0.13
C4***	C4 7PM NEWS	520	Int. Violence	2.88

**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**MONDAY 19TH APRIL 1993 - DAY ONE CONTINUED**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) Devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage ,
BBC1	NINE O'CLOCK NEWS	439	Int. Violence	2.42
ITV3	ITN NEWS AT TEN	588	Int. Violence	3.26
		131	Human Int.Ser.	0.72
BBC2	NEWSNIGHT	267	Int. Violence	1.47
		619	Human Int.Ser.	3.42
	<b>% Waco coverage over the week studied</b>			<b>16.92</b>

**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**TUESDAY 20TH APRIL - DAY TWO**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage
BBC1	BREAKFAST NEWS	1666	Int. Violence	9.19
		40	World Politics	0.22
		356	Human Int.Ser.	1.96
ITV3	GMTV	137	Int. Violence	0.76
		658	World Politics	3.36
		941	Human Int.Ser.	5.19
C4	BIG BREAKFAST	64	Int. Violence	0.35
		39	Human Int.Ser.	0.22
ITV3	ITN 12.30PM NEWS	247	Int. Violence	1.36
		186	World Politics	1.03
		570	Human Int.Ser.	3.15
BBC1	ONE O'CLOCK NEWS	298	Int. Violence	1.64
		171	World Politics	0.94
		170	Human Int.Ser.	0.94
BBC1	CHILD. NEWSROUND	129	Int. Violence	0.71
		69	Human Int.Ser.	0.38

**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**TUESDAY 20 APRIL 1993 - DAY TWO CONTINUED**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage
ITV3	ITN 5.40PM NEWS	155	World Politics	0.86
		115	Human Int.Ser.	0.63
BBC1	SIX O'CLOCK NEWS	186	Int. Violence	1.03
		308	World Politics	1.70
		180	Human Int.Ser	0.99
BBC1<	LOOK NORTH	44	Human Int.Ser.	0.24
C4	C4 7PM NEWS	999	World Politics	5.52
BBC1	NINE O'CLOCK NEWS	154	Int. Violence	0.85
		239	World Politics	1.32
		213	Human Int.Ser.	1.13
ITV3	ITN NEWS AT TEN	129	Int. Violence	0.71
		229	World Politics	1.26
		165	Human Int.Ser.	0.91
BBC2	NEWSNIGHT	229	World Politics	1.26
	<b>% Waco coverage over the week studied</b>			<b>50.08</b>

**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**WEDNESDAY 21 APRIL 1993 - DAY THREE**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) Devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage ,
BBC1	BREAKFAST NEWS	705	Int. Violence	3.90
ITV3	GMTV	901	World Politics	4.97
		424	Human Int.Ser.	2.34
C4	BIG BREAKFAST	9	Internat Hum.Int.	0.05
		41	Internat. Violence	0.23
		14	World Politics	0.08
		9	Human Int.Ser.	0.05
ITV3	ITN 12.30PM NEWS	125	Int. Violence	0.69
		114	Human Int.Ser.	0.63
BBC1	ONE O'CLOCK NEWS	133	Int. Violence	0.73
BBC1	CHILD NEWSROUND	---	---	---
ITV3	ITN 5.40PM NEWS	106	Int. Violence	0.59
ITV3	CALENDAR NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1	SIX O'CLOCK NEWS	138	Int. Violence	0.76
BBC1	LOOK NORTH	---	---	---

**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**WEDNESDAY 21 APRIL 1993 - DAY THREE CONTINUED**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) Devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage
C4	C4 7PM NEWS	113	Int. Violence	0.63
BBC1	NINE O'CLOCK NEWS	133	Int. Violence	0.73
ITV3	ITN NEWS AT TEN	221	Int. Violence	1.22
BBC2	NEWSNIGHT	15	Int. Violence	0.08
	<b>% Waco coverage over the week studied</b>			<b>17.68</b>



**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**THURSDAY 22ND APRIL 1993 - DAY FOUR**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) Devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage
BBC1	BREAKFAST NEWS	412	Human Int.Ser	2.28
ITV3	GMTV	1080	Human Int.Ser.	5.96
C4	BIG BREAKFAST	46	Int. Violence	0.25
		9	World Politics	0.05
ITV3	ITN 12.30PM NEWS	123	Human Int.Ser	0.68
BBC1	ONE O'CLOCK NEWS	92	Human Int.Ser.	0.51
BBC1	CHILD. NEWSROUND	---	---	---
ITV3	ITN 5.40PM NEWS	113	Int. Violence	0.62
ITV3	CALENDAR NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1	SIX O'CLOCK NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1	LOOK NORTH	---	---	---
C4	C4 7PM NEWS	15	Int. Violence	0.08
BBC1	NINE O'CLOCK NEWS	21	Int. Violence	0.12

**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**THURSDAY 22ND APRIL 1993 - DAY FOUR CONTINUED**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) Devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage
ITV3	ITN NEWS AT TEN	150	Int. Violence	0.83
BBC2	NEWSNIGHT	---	---	---
	<b>% Waco coverage over the week studied</b>			<b>11.38</b>

**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**FRIDAY 23RD APRIL 1993 - DAY FIVE**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) Devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage
BBC1	BREAKFAST NEWS	---	---	---
ITV3	GMTV	446	Int. Violence	2.47
		195	Human Int.Ser.	1.08
C4	BIG BREAKFAST	34	Int. Violence	0.19
		20	Politics- Gen	0.11
ITV3	ITN 12.30PM NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1	ONE O'CLOCK NEWS	17	Int. Violence	0.09
BBC1	CHILD. NEWSROUND	---	---	---
ITV3	ITN 5.40PM NEWS	---	---	---
ITV3	CALENDAR NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1	SIX O'CLOCK NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1	LOOK NORTH	---	---	---
C4	C4 7PM NEWS	---	---	---
BBC1	NINE O'CLOCK NEWS	---	---	---

**TABLE 8.1 CONTINUED**  
**FRIDAY 23RD APRIL 1993 - DAY FIVE CONTINUED**

Channel	Programme	Length (in Secs) Devoted to Content Category	Content Category	Percentage of Total Waco Coverage ,
ITV3	ITN NEWS AT TEN	---	---	---
BBC2	NEWSNIGHT	---	---	---
	<b>% Waco coverage over the week studied</b>			<b>3.94</b>
	<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>18120</b>		<b>100.00</b>

\*The first mention of the events in Waco, at the end of the news programme. Simply reported as 'there are "developments" in Waco'.

#The compound was reported as being stormed by FBI tanks.

^The compound was reported as being tear-gassed by FBI tanks.

\*\*At the end of BBC1 *Six O'clock News* at 6.27pm - there was a live two-way with the presenter and the BBC correspondent at the scene. The first piece of film was shown live, of the fire starting.

\*\*\*The first full report of the events leading to the fire at the Waco compound accompanied by film of the fire starting, taking hold and engulfing the compound. It was *Channel Four News*' lead story.

>Summary of the main story of the day (reported by BBC London) by BBC1's *Look North*.

< A story about a Lincolnshire man who died at Waco, told as a local news story.

It is still not clear whether the Davidians were victims of manslaughter as a result of errors and miscalculations made by the FBI, whether they committed a mass act of suicide, or whether they were in fact murdered by the authorities in an attempt to cover up the collusion, malpractice and lies which had occurred up to that point. In support of the latter scenario, several critics have expressed disbelief at the FBI's tactic of punching large holes in a building on a windy day, claiming that these were ridiculous conditions in which to gas people, but ideal for burning down a building (Bradford, 1994) (4).

c) Programme Similarities: The "Media" Line.

In this section I will show how the different television news programmes examined showed many similarities in the way that they covered and broadcast the events in Waco. As I go on to argue, this tendency of the British media illustrates their willingness in this instance to follow the authorities' interpretation of the events in the United States and shows their acceptance of common-sense assumptions and explanations regarding the status of David Koresh and his followers, and shows a lack of intention or ability to interpret the information blizzard.

All the journalists I questioned agreed that the Waco story was newsworthy, because 'it had Brits in it', 'good visuals', 'good human interest', and 'a lot of dead', indeed if one looks at the story in terms of news values the notion of the newsworthy value of the event is confirmed. As Tunstall (1971) indicated, the possession of film increases the prominence given to a story, indeed the visual imperatives of television are so strong that the need for film or at least still pictures dominates. In the case of the ending of the Waco siege, the cameras were able to capture the disaster unfolding live. The events also occurred at a time when they could be accommodated by the news day. *Channel Four*

*News* in particular was well placed to be the first to “tell the story” (see “periodicity” Galtung and Ruge (1965) and “recency” Bell (1991). Furthermore, the story was predictable (see “predictability” Ibid. (1965)), in the sense that the news media were on hand to film it. As the logistics of the filming operation had already been taken care of, and live-links to correspondents and reporters could be established without difficulty, the news organisations used this facility to emphasise the “nowness” of the event. The events at Waco were undoubtedly negative, and as negative news is generally a single event or a disaster, it is easier to record (Ibid. 1991). Also see the news value “negativity” (Ibid. 1965).

Furthermore news items of an extremely complex, ambiguous or abstract nature can not easily fit the format of television news. As I discuss below, the Waco story was in fact simplified by adopting three basic story-lines. Postman also argues that the more dramatic the news is, the more likely it is to pass through Galtung and Ruge's “threshold” (Postman, 1987). The Waco story contained enough drama to ensure that it displaced another dramatic story, Chris Hani's funeral and violence in South Africa. The Waco story contained elements of a “docu-drama”, with the polarisation of the actors into the “authorities” and the “cultists”, or good versus evil (Jones and Baker, 1994).

Finally, the story contained an element of cultural proximity (see “proximity” Galtung and Ruge (1965)), because British people were members of the Branch Davidians. As such all the television news media were able to bring in a human interest angle relating to the deaths of British victims and the effects on their families. As I go on to show, this was perceived by all the television news media as a very important dimension of newsworthiness in this instance.

Below, I offer further explanations regarding the newsworthiness of the events in Waco.

The Waco Tragedy - An insouciant Tale, No Need to Analyse

As I have argued above, when reporting of the Waco disaster, the British media simply acted as witnesses to an American media event. The cultural differences between the United States and Britain meant that the journalists at the BBC did not need to agonise over frightening the British public by reporting that a man, who thought he was Jesus Christ, and his followers had died in Texas. Unlike British crime stories, the Waco siege was so far removed from everyday life in Britain that it seemed to be almost fictional. Also there was no problem with the story because the political fallout, if any, would occur in the United States and not in Britain, so it was also possible to superficially speculate whether the attack had been bungled by the FBI. Analysis of the coverage of the story also shows that there was relatively little shock or distress exhibited by the correspondents on the scene, even though they were witnessing the death of eighty-seven people. In a sense then, it appears that this “disaster” was not perceived as unexpected or as horrific, as say, the fire at Bradford football club, but was just one possible outcome of a long and boring siege. The people inside the building were classed as extremist “cult” members or even criminals and there was a strong sense immediately that the media was fixing the blame for the events on those inside the compound.

The early adoption of the word “cult” to describe the Davidians allowed both the media and the authorities to pursue the rather simplistic but attractive explanation of Koresh as a power-mad dictator who was brainwashing his followers. According to some scholars the term “cult” is virtually meaningless. It has become a label that is simply applied to

religious groups that are regarded as too marginal, radical or dangerous. Indeed it is worth noting that as soon as a “cult” gains credibility by numbers, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists, the label tends to drop away. As the term “cult” is so clearly pejorative it follows that any group so labelled will be assumed to exhibit the worst excesses imaginable of any marginal organisation, such as brainwashing, child abuse, polygamy, violence and so on. By supplying a label for a group, and not an explanation, the organisation and its followers can be successfully ostracised by the media and the authorities (Barkin, 1994). As Dayan and Katz (1994) show any kind of media event celebrates what are generally establishment initiatives which are therefore unquestionably hegemonic. The media event staged by the FBI on 19 April 1993 was no exception, and the frame of interpretation and conditions for reporting were well established and continually passed on to the media by the authorities.

The type of “experts” chosen by the media and the authorities to advise and provide information had an important impact on the content and tone of the media reports and upon the attitude and actions of the FBI/ATF. Many “experts” were actually part of the anti-“cult” movement that has built up in the United States comprising a mixture of deprogrammers, ex-“cult” members and disillusioned relatives of “cult” members. The deprogrammers “kidnap” members of new religious movements and attempt to force them to renounce their affiliation. The type of advice and analysis provided by such experts was often supplemented by medical experts who tended describe Koresh as exhibiting psychotic tendencies. In the United States the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) has consolidated a powerful access network to the media ensuring that it has become institutionalised and credible as a source of authoritative information. As Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) show in the area of



crime reporting it is vital in the battle for access to the media to make a large commitment and investment in the interest of media relations. It is apparent that CAN has far more credibility and access than the non-official "cult" members or supporters of the new religious movements. As such media reporting of "cults" tends only to focus on them when they are newsworthy. It follows therefore that the media are only attracted to reporting "cult" stories about scandals, atrocities, failures, negative or sensational behaviour or any other outrageous or dramatic aspects of such movements. Therefore journalists, unlike academic scholars do not routinely analyse such organisations to learn more about them.

At no stage were biblical or theological scholars quoted in the mainstream media even though they would have been able to offer a much more intelligent explanation or interpretation of Koresh's beliefs. Indeed it was not acknowledged by the media that Koresh had taken his name from a messiah, King Cyrus from Isaiah 45. The Greek translation of this Hebrew word is Christos, from which the name Christ is derived, this ancient king, Cyrus was called Christ. The media endlessly reported that Koresh believed he was Jesus Christ, when in fact he believed he was one of the many messiahs who have consistently appeared throughout the Bible with specific tasks to follow (Tabor, 1994). Koresh believed his task was to solve the mystery of the Seven Seals and was writing the first of the Seven Seals at the time of his death (see Tabor and Gallagher (1995) for a copy and analysis of the text written by David Koresh printed directly from a computer disk which was saved by a survivor of the fire, Ruth Riddle). The FBI, however, held press briefings at which they consistently belittled Koresh, claiming that he was a high school dropout who was not capable of writing a book.

By following the simple story line that Koresh and his followers were extremist religious nuts it was easy to imply that they were to blame for the events that claimed their lives (indeed it was automatically assumed by all the broadcast media that the fire in the compound was a mass suicide plan). Although the deaths of the children were mentioned several times, the implication was that the mothers were to blame for not letting their children escape when the FBI had invited them to do so. This was further exacerbated with the universal reporting of Clinton's statement, in which he officially and publicly put his stamp of approval on using military weapons and tactics against United States civilians in the case of religious differences, denying that the tactics were too strong or inappropriate.

'I was surprised at calls for the resignation of the Attorney-General because some religious fanatics murdered themselves' (President Clinton quoted on all television news programmes, 20/4/93).

As Koresh was reported as being an extremist, the violence he had shown whilst defending the compound from the ATF, and his alleged violence against the children was reported in the context of extremism. As Schlesinger notes,

"'Extremist' violence, therefore, becomes the object of moral repugnance, whereas the legitimate violence of the security forces is handled within a framework which emphasizes its regrettable necessity' (Schlesinger, 1991:205).

In his analysis of the media politics of siege management in Britain, Schlesinger (1991) expresses concern that the violent solution to the end of the Iranian Embassy siege was glorified and treated in patriotic terms. In contrast, the Waco siege was not a question of national security, but was a domestic problem which was similarly dealt with by using extreme

violence. Only the press analysed the siege in terms of the American problem of firearms.

'It is not violence that is as American as apple pie, but guns. And in the great funeral pyre at Waco on Monday the world saw again the gruesome American marriage of guns and zealotry and the implacable response of the state militant...a state which also defines itself in terms of fire power (*The Guardian*, 21/4/93).

All the broadcast media ignored the opportunity for an analysis of the problem of the use of weapons in the United States and they also entirely ignored the issue of religion only casting events in terms of violence, political fallout or human interest. Indeed the content of the television news output for the entire week analysed did not contain any reference to religion (see Table 8.1 and Tables 8.2 to 8.4 overleaf).

**TABLE 8.2 - WACO: A CASE STUDY**

Table to show the different emphasis on content during the coverage of the end and aftermath of the Waco siege by the four terrestrial television news channels from 19th-23rd April 1993 inclusive.

<b>Television Channel</b>	<b>Content Categories Covered</b>	<b>Number of Stories Broadcast</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Waco Coverage</b>
<b>BBC1</b>	Human Int-Serious	13	26.0
	World Politics	5	10.0
	International Violence	32	64.0
<b>BBC2</b>	Human Int-Serious	1	20.0
	World Politics	1	20.0
	International Violence	3	60.0
<b>ITV</b>	Human Int-Serious	35	50.0
	World Politics	14	20.0
	International Violence	21	30.0
<b>Channel Four</b>	Human Int-Serious	4	15.4
	World Politics	4	15.4
	International Violence	15	57.7
	Political-General	2	7.7
	International Human Interest-Serious	1	3.8

**TABLE 8.3: WACO: A CASE STUDY**

Table to show the percentage distribution of coverage of the end and aftermath of the Waco Siege from 19th April to 23rd April 1993 inclusive by content category for each television news programme.

News Programme	Content Categories Covered	% Distribution of Waco coverage by each news programme	Distribution of total Waco Coverage as a % of Total Coverage by all news progs.
BBC1's Breakfast News	Int. Violence	74.58	13.09
	World Politics	1.26	0.22
	Human Interest-Ser.	24.16	4.24
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
ITV3's GMTV News	Int. Violence	12.19	3.23
	World Politics	32.60	8.60
	Human Interest-Ser.	55.21	14.57
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
C4's Big Breakfast	Int. Violence	64.91	1.02
	World Politics	8.07	0.13
	Human Interest-Ser.	16.84	0.27
	Politics-General	7.02	0.11
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	3.16	0.05
ITN's News at 12.30pm	Int. Violence	27.25	2.05
	World Politics	13.63	1.03
	Human Interest-Ser.	59.12	4.46
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----

**TABLE 8.3 CONTINUED**

News Programme	Content Categories Covered	% Distribution of coverage over progs.	% Distribution over total Waco Coverage
BBC1's One O'clock News	Int. Violence	51.84	2.57
	World Politics	19.02	0.94
	Human Interest-Ser.	29.14	1.45
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
BBC1's Childrens' Newsround	Int. Violence	65.15	0.71
	World Politics	----	----
	Human Interest-Ser.	34.85	0.38
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
ITN's 5.40pm News	Int. Violence	80.83	2.69
	World Politics	----	----
	Human Interest-Ser.	19.17	0.63
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
ITV3's Calendar News	Int. Violence	----	----
	World Politics	----	----
	Human Interest-Ser.	----	----
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----

**TABLE 8.3 CONTINUED**

News Programme	Content Categories Covered	% Distribution of coverage over progs.	% Distribution over total Waco Coverage
BBC1's Six O'clock News	Int. Violence	57.71	3.68
	World Politics	26.69	1.70
	Human Interest-Ser.	15.60	0.99
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
BBC's Look North	Int. Violence	36.23	0.13
	World Politics	----	----
	Human Interest-Ser.	63.77	0.24
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
C4's 7pm News	Int. Violence	39.34	0.35
	World Politics	60.66	5.52
	Human Interest-Ser.	----	----
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
BBC1's Nine O'clock News	Int. Violence	62.30	4.12
	World Politics	19.93	1.32
	Human Interest-Ser.	17.77	1.13
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
ITN's News at Ten	Int. Violence	67.45	6.02
	World Politics	14.20	1.26
	Human Interest-Ser.	18.35	1.63
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----

**TABLE 8.3 CONTINUED**

News Programme	Content Categories Covered	% Distribution of coverage over progs.	% Distribution over total Waco Coverage
BBC2's Newsnight	Int. Violence	24.95	1.55
	World Politics	20.27	1.26
	Human Interest-Ser.	54.78	3.42
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----



**TABLE 8.4: WACO: A CASE STUDY**

Table to show the differences in length of coverage of the end and aftermath of the Waco Siege from 19th April to 23rd April 1993 inclusive by content category for each television news programme.

News Programme	Content Categories Covered	Distribution of Waco coverage by each news programme (In Secs)	Distribution of total Waco Coverage as a % of Total Coverage by all news progs.
BBC1's Breakfast News	Int. Violence	2371	13.09
	World Politics	40	0.22
	Human Interest-Ser.	768	4.24
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>3179</b>	
ITV3's GMTV News	Int. Violence	583	3.23
	World Politics	1559	8.60
	Human Interest-Ser.	2640	14.57
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>4782</b>	
C4's Big Breakfast	Int. Violence	185	1.02
	World Politics	23	0.13
	Human Interest-Ser.	48	0.27
	Politics-General	20	0.11
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	9	0.05
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>285</b>	

**TABLE 8.4 CONTINUED**

News Programme	Content Categories Covered	Distribution of coverage over programme (In Secs)	% Distribution over total Waco Coverage
ITN's News at 12.30pm	Int. Violence	372	2.05
	World Politics	186	1.03
	Human Interest-Ser.	807	4.46
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>1365</b>	
BBC1's One O'clock News	Int. Violence	466	2.57
	World Politics	171	0.94
	Human Interest-Ser.	262	1.45
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>899</b>	
BBC1's Children's Newsround	Int. Violence	129	0.71
	World Politics	----	----
	Human Interest-Ser.	69	0.38
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>198</b>	

**TABLE 8.4 CONTINUED**

News Programme	Content Categories Covered	Distribution of coverage over programme (In Secs)	% Distribution over total Waco Coverage
ITN's 5.40pm News	Int. Violence	485	2.69
	World Politics	----	----
	Human Interest-Ser.	115	0.63
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>600</b>	
ITV3's Calendar News	Int. Violence	----	----
	World Politics	----	----
	Human Interest-Ser.	----	----
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
BBC1's Six O'clock News	Int. Violence	666	3.68
	World Politics	308	1.70
	Human Interest-Ser.	180	0.99
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>1154</b>	
BBC's Look North	Int. Violence	25	0.13
	World Politics	----	----
	Human Interest-Ser.	44	0.24
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>69</b>	

TABLE 8.4 CONTINUED

News Programme	Content Categories Covered	Distribution of coverage over programme (In Secs)	% Distribution over total Waco Coverage
C4's 7pm News	Int. Violence	648	0.35
	World Politics	999	5.52
	Human Interest-Ser.	----	----
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>1647</b>	
BBC1's Nine O'clock News	Int. Violence	747	4.12
	World Politics	239	1.32
	Human Interest-Ser.	213	1.13
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>1199</b>	
ITN's News at Ten	Int. Violence	1088	6.02
	World Politics	229	1.26
	Human Interest-Ser.	296	1.63
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>1613</b>	
BBC2's Newsnight	Int. Violence	282	1.55
	World Politics	229	1.26
	Human Interest-Ser.	619	3.42
	Politics-General	----	----
	Int. Human Int-Ser.	----	----
	<b>TOTAL (In Secs)</b>	<b>1130</b>	

Events and issues relating to the events at Waco might be defined as being centred on the freedom to worship, human rights abuse and abuse of military power but were reported in terms of legitimate (if bungled) authority, madness and restoration of order. Furthermore David Koresh and his followers were reported as extremists who use violence, against themselves (in the form of an assumed mass suicide, although there was no proof of this at the time) and against others, and therefore were met with “legitimate” violence. The majority of reports about the ending of the siege fell into my content category “international violence” (see Chapter 3, Appendix 1 TV News Code Book).

The media (on the basis of what they were told by the authorities) promoted the myth of Koresh as an evil villain. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1991) examined how this image can then be elevated by popular television and the press to play on the fear of the public whilst at the same time stressing to them that the evil villain will be dealt with by the legitimating forces in society. In the case of the ending of the Waco siege however, the image of Koresh as a villain was unquestioningly accepted by the media, but to some extent the legitimating forces themselves quickly came under superficial scrutiny for their part in the events. In Britain, the story was quickly unfolding into three basic dimensions. David Koresh was a mad “cult” leader who was mainly responsible for deaths of eighty-five people, British families were suffering due to the strange and unfathomable behaviour of their loved ones who had been brainwashed, and that the American legitimate forces were not as competent as the British ones.

British television news reports used symbolic images of David Koresh and his “cult” as well as the ironic use of “religious” or pejorative language, to establish that Koresh was mad.

'Good afternoon, they called it Ranch Apocalypse, it ended in apocalypse' (Presenter, BBC1's *One O'clock News*, 20.4.93).

'...the man who said he was the son of God led his followers to an end that more closely resembled Hell' (Correspondent, ITN's *5.40pm News*, 20/4/93).

'The human sacrifice father of Waco victim demands enquiry' (Presenter, BBC's *Look North*, 20/4/93).

'Janet Reno said today that she had taken a lot of advice from doctors and psychiatrists and from hostage experts and they thought the state of mind was such that there would not be a mass suicide. In fact Koresh himself had said he would not tell his followers to commit suicide. But obviously he's said things in the past and didn't follow them through this was obviously something like that as well' (*GMTV News*, live two-way between the presenter and a correspondent in Waco, 20/4/93).

'David Koresh, the cult's fanatical leader, triggered the mass suicide plan, which until then the authorities thought was a bluff' (Correspondent, BBC's *Look North*, 20/4/93).

The news for children was even less restrained in its explanation of Koresh's state of mind. This analysis of Koresh made it easier for children to dismiss him as a lunatic or crank and to accept the common story-line on 20 April 1993, that David Koresh had triggered a mass suicide.

'The FBI says followers of religious nut David Koresh torched the compound near Waco.....' (Channel Four's *Big Breakfast News*, 20/4/93).

'More than eighty of religious nut David Koresh's disciples are dead after the apocalyptic end of the Waco siege' (Ibid. 20/4/93).

'David Koresh believed he was Jesus Christ, the group he led, the Branch Davidian's would do anything he said and were prepared to die for him' (Presenter, BBC1's *Children's Newsround*, 20/4/93).

This was supplemented by the use of medical experts to assert David Koresh's state of mind or sanity and to go some way towards justifying the events in Waco.

Presenter: '...but isn't fifty-one days of negotiation, fifty-one days of trying to bring the siege to an end, fifty-one days of broken promises by Koresh, wasn't that long enough?'

Spokesperson: 'Well Koresh was mad and the negotiations don't appear to have taken into account the fact that he was mad' (British Consultant Psychiatrist speaking on BBC1's *One O'clock News*, 20/4/93).

The expertise of the British armed forces compared with the American authorities did not go unnoticed.

'...I certainly think the British approach to hostage situations has always been to go in very, very fast. Not to park a tank outside a building and start pumping in tear gas, look at a long term solution' ("Cult" expert; *GMTV News*, 20/4/93).

The concentration on the mass suicide and extremism angle and the neglect of any kind of religious explanation or analysis of the problems of guns in the States in part came from a precedent already set by the news media for the reporting of "cult" activities. As one journalist said,

'The first thing you do is look for something else that has happened like it' (Correspondent, BBC1's *Nine O'clock News*, 3/5/94).

In this case the press and the broadcast media immediately drew parallels with the “Jonestown Massacre”. In 1978 the Reverend Jim Jones had set up the Jones People's Temple in the Jonestown commune in the jungles of Guyana. Upon his instruction more than nine hundred people committed suicide by drinking poison, those who did not were shot. As soon as the fire began at the Waco compound, FBI agents were reported as making the assumption that,

'...oh my God they're killing themselves'. Film of Bob Ricks, FBI speaking (ITN's *12.30pm News*, 20/4/93).

'In the fifteen years since another American cult leader, the Reverend Jim Jones led nine hundred followers into mass suicide in the jungles of Guyana, the cult phenomena with its obsession with the destruction of the world has been studied endlessly, whatever they may have learned did not help the FBI to get into the mind of David Koresh' (BBC1's *One O'clock News*, 20/4/93).

The FBI's speculation further fuelled the media's conjecture and assumptions about how the fire started. It also continued to confirm the news angle the press and broadcast media were also taking, based on the Jonestown Massacre in 1978. For example, an interview with Graham Baldwin a “cult” expert.

Presenter: '....from what you know was this the way it was going to always end?'

Spokesperson: 'I thought it was, I mean if you look at the Jonestown situation'.

Presenter: 'Now this is Jim Jones isn't it, 1978, similar situation'.

Spokesperson: 'Nine hundred and thirteen people took their own lives, particularly as soon as the tanks went in. I mean this is the problem, the paranoia which must have been building up in there that the enemy was going to come' (*GMTV News*, 20/4/93).



David Koresh was consistently presented as a clone of Jim Jones by the American authorities and all the news media. David Koresh, the man, or future prophet still remain an unknown quantity (Palmer, 1994).

To summarise, the Waco events were newsworthy for a variety of reasons. Of great importance was the fact that the media were already at the site, and that the logistics of coverage of the FBI's attack on the compound had already been taken care of, and planned for. Furthermore, the technology was in place in the form of fly-away satellite dishes ensuring that the film of the fire was live and lively and would "entertain" the audience. The story did not take much telling as the Jonestown suicides had already set a convenient precedent to follow and required little analysis, by either the British broadcast media or the audience. Neither did it challenge any preconceived common sense assumptions. The events in Waco had all the ingredients of a good soap opera or television drama, and had, significantly for a newsworthy foreign story, the all-important British angle. Undoubtedly, a lack of cameras at the site or the lack of British "cult" members would have reduced the newsworthiness of this story. It also follows that if the initial events, the attack by the ATF, or the fire, had not been covered, then the subsequent day long examination of the potential political fall-out or the chase for victims' families would not have occurred either. In this way, the media can actively create a variety of newsworthy stories for one event. As I have shown in the above example of the ending of the Waco siege, all the British television news media in this instance followed very similar frames of reference and used very similar language in the pursuit of their different story angles.

The telling of the Waco tragedy also illustrates some of the worst faults of the broadcast media, such as the lack of analysis and investigation and the establishment of such a simplistic set of assumptions. The willingness to accept the “analytic” line of the authorities, can in large part be explained by the fact that the British media were reporting an American media event and as such had to follow the rules laid down by the authorities organising and staging that event. Indeed, if the event had occurred in this country the broadcast media would have had to address far more issues and the story would not have been dropped so quickly. As such the charges of collusion, corruption and cover-up would have been explored more carefully and thoroughly. In a sense then, this story was only a major news story for Britain because of two main factors, the presence of the cameras at Waco and the presence also of British victims and survivors and was not a media event for this country.

This section has analysed the similarities of coverage of the Waco siege exhibited by different television news programmes illustrating how certain circumstances can encourage some of the worst excesses of the “me too” tendency (Bell, 1991) of the television news media.

#### d) Programme Differences: The Bid for Diversity

My aim now is to show how different television news programmes exhibit differences when covering what is ostensibly the same event. Again using the ending of the Waco siege as an example I will show how different television news programmes have adopted influences from different genres from the “not news” environment and how news programmes are increasingly becoming constituted from a variety of different news sub-genres. The influence from this variety of constituent parts comprising news programmes affect both the initial selection of

news stories and the final news product. (see Figure 1, Introduction and pages 20-21).

Table 8.2 illustrates how the four different television news channels chose to emphasise different aspects of the events at Waco. BBC1 in total told fifty “stories” about Waco, many of which are accounted for by the rolling news on BBC *Breakfast News*. However, it is possible to ascertain that the majority of those stories fell into the category “international violence”. Similarly BBC2 and Channel Four coverage tended to concentrate most on that category, whereas ITV concentrated more on the human interest aspect of the events. Obviously these figures only partially indicate the priorities of the news channels because they do not give any indication of the length of time devoted to each of these content categories. I will now go on to analyse the findings of the content analysis in order to determine how coverage of the Waco siege by different television news programmes was prioritised in terms of the time allocated to the story, and how the coverage addressed different types of content category.

Newsworthiness: Commitment to the event measured in amount of time devoted to coverage by each television news programme.

Table 8.5 (overleaf) breaks down the television news coverage of Waco to show the total length of time devoted to coverage of the events at Waco by each of the television news programmes. This is shown as a percentage of total broadcasting time for all the news programmes for the week 19 April to 23 April 1993. It also shows the percentage of time devoted to Waco by each news programme as a percentage of each individual programme's overall news coverage for the week 19 to 23 April 1993 inclusive. Clearly *GMTV News* provided the most coverage of events in Waco, with over a quarter of the overall coverage for the week analysed. Furthermore 30% of *GMTV News*' total output for the week

analysed was devoted to the Waco story. Other news programmes which prioritised Waco were ITN's *News at Ten*, which devoted 23.37% of its week's coverage to the events, followed by ITN's *12.30pm News*, The mainstream BBC programmes, the *One, Six and Nine O'clock News* devoted between 14.55% and 11.55%, ITN's *5.40pm News* showed a similar level of interest with 13.85%, with Channel Four's *Big Breakfast News* showing similar commitment, and BBC's *Children's' Newsround* 9.07%. In contrast, BBC's *Breakfast News* and BBC2's *Newsnight* appeared to consider the events slightly less newsworthy by only devoting 8.55% and 7.48% respectively of their programmes to Waco.

**TABLE 8.5: WACO: A CASE STUDY**

Table to show the differences in coverage of the end and aftermath of the Waco Siege: A comparison of the overall percentage of coverage by all the news programmes, and as a proportion of each individual news programme from 19th April to 23rd April 1993.

News Programme	Percentage of the Overall Coverage of the Events in Waco	Coverage of Waco as a Percentage of the General Weekly News Coverage by each Programme
GMTV	26.40	30.71
BBC1's Breakfast News	17.55	7.48
Channel Four News	9.11	12.93
ITN's News at Ten	8.91	23.37
ITN's 12.30pm News	7.54	16.84
BBC's Nine O'clock News	6.57	14.54
BBC's Six O'clock News	6.37	14.21
BBC2's Newsnight	6.23	8.55
BBC's One O'clock News	4.96	11.55
ITN's 5.40pm News	3.32	13.85
C4's Big Breakfast News	1.58	11.79
BBC1's Newsround	1.09	9.07
BBC1's Look North	0.37	1.00
YTV's Calendar News	----	----

*Look North News* and *Calendar News*, found little regional interest in the events in Waco, although *Look North News* briefly covered a story about a Lincolnshire man who died in the fire, *Calendar News* ignored the story.

*GMTV News'* commitment to the story needs further analysis, especially as it also devoted the greatest amount of time to Waco, with 4782 seconds (approximately 80 minutes) over the week (see Table 8.4 earlier). Unlike the other television news programmes, *GMTV News* concentrated far more upon the human interest elements of Waco, and immediately made contact with one of the survivor's families in Manchester, the Lovelock family. On day two, Tuesday 20 April, *GMTV News* cameras filmed the Lovelock family receiving (or perhaps pretending to receive) news that Derek Lovelock was one of the two British survivors. Thereafter two of his sisters were monopolised by *GMTV News*. They came into the studio for interviews with the two presenters; they watched whilst the presenters spoke live to the *GMTV News* correspondent at the scene; and then on Wednesday 21 April *GMTV News* flew the two sisters out to Waco to meet up with their brother. On Thursday, 22 April *GMTV News* interviewed the two sisters after they had met their brother, devoting far more time to the story than the other news programmes and on Friday 23 April, when other news programmes were dropping or had dropped the story, *GMTV News* was still talking to the Lovelock sisters and reporting on the Waco developments (see Table 8.1 earlier). *GMTV News* and the main GMTV programme were therefore creating their own agenda. Long after the story had ceased to be viewed as newsworthy by the other news programmes, *GMTV News* and the GMTV programme were pursuing the human interest aspect of the story.

The concentration on this type of news event by *GMTV News* is very indicative in relation to the news priorities of the different news programmes. The Waco story, as I have already outlined above, was a rather simplistic tale, easily gathered and which concentrated on some of the worst examples of common sense interpretation of foreign news events which occurred in the week analysed. Also the over-concentration on the human tragedy aspect of this drama, and the voyeuristic attachment to the Lovelock family, was more akin to a woman's magazine than to a television news programme. In a sense *GMTV News* and the main GMTV programme were doing what they do best, and that is to entertain a mostly female audience early in the morning, without challenging any existing prejudices, and therefore portrayed human drama as entertainment (Postman, 1989).

ITN's *News at Ten* also concentrated relatively heavily on the events in Waco, far more so than ITN's *12.30pm News* and ITN's *5.40pm News*. However, as I showed in Chapter 6, *News at Ten* deliberately attempts to provide a different programme structure from those shown earlier in the day. Concentration on the Waco story may have just been part of its remit to be different, and cannot be dismissed simply as an attachment to the more voyeuristic or simplistic qualities of the news story. Indeed, as I will show below, different news programmes concentrated on different aspects of the news events and as such, the events at Waco adopted particular dimensions which fit the particular requirements of the news programmes. This demonstrated the influences of the particular news sub-genres on the different news programmes.

Newsworthiness - Assessment of the different commitment to content categories by the different television news programmes.

Tables 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4 (earlier) show how the coverage of the ending and aftermath of the Waco siege was divided in terms of content category and it is to this set of important distinctions that I now turn. BBC1's *Breakfast News* clearly considered the "international violence" aspect of the events in Waco to be the most important, devoting an enormous 74.58% of its coverage to it (see Table 8.5 earlier), concentrating in large part upon the fire itself, the numbers of dead and injured and the sifting through the ruins for bodies. The only reference to the political aspect of this disaster was in a brief forty second piece on whether or not Janet Reno, the Attorney-General should resign. The rest of the coverage was devoted to the human interest angle of the problem of "cults". BBC1's *Breakfast News* also managed to conduct a live interview with Tony Kakouri, a former Branch Davidian member who had spent six weeks in the compound at Waco. As is typical of a de-programmed ex-"cult" member, the interviewee concentrated on the intimidation caused by David Koresh, and did not attempt to analyse the concept of "cults" in any further depth, other than to illustrate their problematic and intimidatory nature.

Presenter: 'So the brain washing was largely intimidation?'

Spokesperson: 'Intimidation, fear, a lot of people were scared to even ask questions they were so frightened and I believe that if there was a mass suicide then a lot of people would have been intimidated by the hierarchy that he had around' (BBC1's *Breakfast News*, 20/4/94).

*GMTV News*, as already outlined devoted 55.21% of its total coverage to the human interest angle of the story (see Table 8.3), by "buying in" one survivor's family and following them all week, letting the audience share



in the emotion of a family that has just learned that their loved one has survived.

'I just want to throw my arms around him and give him a big hug, that's all. I don't know what I will really say to him, you know, I'll just be glad, so glad to see him' (Lorraine Lovelock on *GMTV News*, 20/4/93 when asked how she felt about the survival of her brother).

Surprisingly perhaps *GMTV News* devoted more coverage to the possible political implications of the FBI's actions than the BBC, with hardly any coverage of the fire itself. This concentration on the "political" in large part was the result of "exclusive" information gained by *GMTV News* that David Koresh had been beating the babies. This information, which *GMTV News* claimed was exclusive was circulated first by the ATF and secondly used by the FBI as justification for their tactics. Janet Reno, the Attorney-General also alluded to child abuse being a reason for her support of the raids. However, none of the vague accusations of child abuse were ever proven to be true in spite of a prolonged period of observation by the local authorities and the ATF and FBI had had to drop their indictments. *GMTV News'* claim to an exclusive was simply the reporting of hearsay which had been in circulation for several months and which was subsequently dismissed.

Channel Four's *Big Breakfast News* did not appear to consider the events in Waco to be particularly newsworthy, devoting only 1.58% (see Table 8.5 earlier) of its coverage to the story (only about five minutes in total over the week studied). However, the tone of the coverage was extremely simplistic and often took headlines from the tabloid newspapers as a "still" to accompany the news story. Therefore, at the side of the presenter would appear large bold, coloured words, such as, "RANCH APOCALYPSE", "BLAZING INFERNO" or "HELLFIRE". These were

accompanied by very short news stories that provided little information but gave a very definite interpretation of the events, even getting the name of the relative Samuel Henry wrong.

'Waco, nine survivors including two Brits. FBI said follows of religious nut David Koresh torched the compound'.

'Samuel Jones (sic) whose wife and children were killed watches blaze on TV in Britain and condemns the FBI'.

'Waco - only nine survivors, two are British. FBI said cult members set fire to the compound' (Channel Four's *Big Breakfast News*, 20/4/93).

ITN's *12.30pm News* concentrated most heavily on the human interest aspect of the events, interviewing the British families of the victims and survivors. The programme also further pursued the line of Koresh as an extremist by locating a spokesperson who had met him five years earlier.

'He talked so much about Armageddon, the Apocalypse, fire, judgement, those sort of things, persecution. He would be persecuted as Jesus was persecuted. I don't think we can be too surprised at the outcome' (Dr Derek Beardsell, Principal of Newbold College speaking on ITN's *12.30pm News*, 20/4/93).

On 20th April 1993, ITN devoted its Talking Point session to the problem of "cults" in order to analyse

'the question behind it all, how do people like David Koresh manage to put people under their spell' (Presenter, ITN *12.30pm News*, 20/4/93).

The various experts were a man from the Cult Information Centre, and a psychiatrist who helps to deprogramme people who manage to get away from "cults". As illustrated earlier, it followed that the tone of such a

conversation would be simply that “cults” are problematic and that people need to be cautioned against joining them and counselled once they managed to escape. When the psychiatrist expert was asked how she thought the FBI should have handled the siege she condemned both the FBI and David Koresh in her reply.

'I think they should have started off by consulting some of the numerous experts that there are in America in the field .....they would have told them that if you are dealing with a paranoid schizophrenic who is threatening to blow the place up you don't increase the amount of aggression you show against him' (ITN's *12.30pm News*, 20/4/93).

Thus the common themes identified earlier in this chapter of Koresh as a madman and the FBI as incompetent are continued.

BBC1's *One O'clock News* concentrated on the violence angle of the events, it picked up some of the earlier coverage by BBC1's *Breakfast News*, and added in new pieces on the plight of the victims' families in Britain. This usually took the form of a second package, which, on 20 April 1993, took a brief look at several British families. The first, Vincent Norbrega, had rescued his daughter Natalie from the compound days before but his estranged wife had died in the flames. The man and his daughter posed for the cameras outside his home, close-ups of the daughter's face revealed her showing very little emotion, probably still in shock. The next scene showed a woman sitting looking at photographs of her brother, Renos Avram, who had survived the fire, followed by a father sitting at a table looking at paper clippings about Waco and David Koresh. His son did not survive. This dismal scene was further compounded by a clip of the interview with the “cult” escapee filmed on *Breakfast News* earlier in the day followed by film of Alan Beale, MP

calling for “cults” to be controlled. This piece was very short and was not balanced by any information about the safety of “cults”.

'There are some cults which cannot be allowed to operate because clearly they are a danger to the people who are involved, clearly the methods which they use within them are so dangerous that they shouldn't be allowed to operate' (BBC1's *One O'clock News*, 20/4/93).

The events in Waco were also simply reported by the BBC as being the result of extremist action by “cult” members and although several spokespersons were allowed to speak on the news programmes they were all negative about the dangers of “cult” activities.

BBC1's *Children's Newsround* only covered the events in Waco for one day, 20 April 1993. It showed the fire, explained Koresh's belief that he was Jesus Christ and concentrated on relating the events leading up to the fire, beginning with the battering of the compound by FBI tanks. The rationale given for the FBI's overt use of violence was one that would appeal to the younger viewers.

'The decision to end the siege yesterday was taken when it was thought that conditions inside the ranch were getting worse. American agents had cut off water and electricity supplies and it was feared that innocent children there were suffering' (BBC1's *Children's Newsround*, 20/4/93)

*Children's Newsround* personnel always try to find a children's angle to a story and this was stressed when telling the Waco story. However, by the next day the story ceased to be deemed to be newsworthy to children and the story was dropped, whilst all the other news programmes continued to report the political fallout and the search for bodies.

ITN's *5.40pm News* concentrated on the international violence aspects of the events and to a lesser extent on the human interest aspects. Concentrating initially on the fire in the same way as the other television programmes, ITN, like the BBC quickly branched off to provide a second package which considered the British families' plight. Some of the same families were filmed, Vincent Norbrega and his daughter Natalie, had obviously done a photocall and the film was the same as the one used by the BBC. However, ITN differed from the BBC in that it concentrated much more carefully on the reaction of Samuel Henry actually watching the fire happening on television. The feeling of voyeurism and sharing a family's plight was as strong as for *GMTV News'* method of reporting. At one point Samuel Henry was moaning with his head in his hands and then waved his arms around in a very distressed state. This compared rather unfavourably with BBC's carefully stage managed, but anodyne shots of families flicking through newspapers or photographs.

The dramatic nature of the ITN news package, ended with a shot of a Manchester street and the sound of a newspaper seller shouting 'Slaughter of Manchester's Waco Innocents - read all about it'. The reporter ends with words full of pathos and drama,

'Tonight the numb horror of the Waco inferno is still fresh, the scale of the slaughter, still sinking in' (ITN's *5.40pm News*, 20/4/93).

In contrast to BBC1's *One O'clock News*, and ITN's *5.40pm News* BBC1's *Six O'clock News* also began to concentrate more on the political implications for the Clinton administration than on the human interest angle, this was continued further by the *Nine O'clock News*, although the latter used far longer shots of the burning building than the *Six O'clock News* and therefore increased its commitment to the international violence perspective of the events.

*Channel Four News*, unlike any of the other news programmes, devoted more time to the political implications of the events at Waco and took by far the most analytic line of all the news programmes by considering the possibility of corruption in the Justice Department. This line, in relation to Waco, has since been consistently pursued by the American news media, but with the exception of one small attempt, the British television news media completely ignored this important issue.

'The political firestorm, for that is what it is now, about what went wrong on the ground in Waco reflects, however, a much wider debate that has been underway here in Washington for some time now. What is to be done about the Justice Department and the FBI? These two great arms of State, the very pillars of law and order in modern America, but both of them in recent years seriously tainted by corruption, mismanagement and the pervading sense that justice often comes secondary to the politics of the Administration of the day' (Presenter, *Channel Four News*, 20/4/93).

ITN's *News at Ten*, as already described devoted more time to the coverage of the story than most other news programmes (see Table 8.5 earlier). However, in large part this was due to its desire to cover the news of the day in more depth or to include stories which had not already been in the news. Much of the film used by *News at Ten* was of the fire, of the tanks bombarding the building and of investigators sifting through the ruins. The concentration on the violent aspect of the events was usually compounded by a live two-way each night set up between the reporter in Waco and the studio. *News at Ten* was well placed to take advantage of the time difference between Britain and the United States, and, unlike some of the earlier programmes was able to report progress and activity live on the programme. Much of this focused on the events and subsequent investigative work at the compound with a stress on the

violent nature of events that had taken place. Furthermore, on 21 April 1993, *News at Ten* showed the bodies being brought out of the compound (vague film of some activity in the background), reporting that the FBI was making allegations regarding bullet wounds in some of the bodies. By the time the breakfast programmes were reporting this the next day, the story was less fresh and therefore less time was devoted to its coverage, giving them a lower count for violent coverage. *News at Ten* appeared to have concentrated on “international violence” far more than the other programmes, but was simply the best placed temporally to capitalise on the daily activities at the compound during the investigation period, when live ammunition continued to explode and the emphasis was still on violence and destruction.

BBC2's *Newsnight*, in complete contrast to the other news programmes chose, on 20 April 1993 not to lead with Waco, but led with Bosnia, followed by a story about the British economy and a story about religion, the defection of Anglicans to the Catholic church. The latter's concentration on religion in Britain, without any mention of the peculiar nature of the events emanating from religious influence in the United States seemed curious for a programme that often takes unusual angles. Of all the news programmes I would have expected *Newsnight* to analyse media coverage of the Waco siege and to consider the fact that David Koresh was simply assumed to be mad, or that the religion aspect of the events was not tackled by any of the other news programmes. In the same way that the “Killer Bug” frenzy by the media, and the tabloid newspapers' attack on Jamie Bulger's killers were analysed, the Waco siege could have been considered from a variety of different angles. In the event *Newsnight* told the story in a short newsbelt, using all the sources already shown during the day by the other mainstream news stories, and as such missed an opportunity to analyse it. However on 18

July 1995, *Newsnight* did present an eight minute piece which gave a brief history and analysis and background to the events in Waco and outlined the areas of controversy which have emerged regarding the FBI's activity. The "peg" for such a piece was supplied by the Congressional hearings due to start on 19 July 1995. However, whilst it was refreshing to see a contextualised and historical resume of events occurring in the news, *Newsnight* once again was only reporting the "facts" as they were being defined in the United States.

After ITN's *5.40pm News* on 21 April 1993, Waco was never again the lead story (with the exception of *GMTV News* which was promoting its own agenda) for any of the different television news programmes during the week analysed. Therefore the event and aftermath dominated the news agenda for forty-eight hours.

On Thursday 22 April, 1993, events at Waco were still covered by some of the news programmes, but it was at this point in particular in the coverage of the events, that the real divergences began. For example *GMTV News* still ran it as their lead story, but ITN's *5.40pm News* did not cover the story at all. Such differences and the reasons for them will be analysed in more detail later in this chapter.

By Friday 23 April 1993, the Waco story was virtually off the news agenda. As Table 8.1 (earlier) shows, the last piece, which was a short seventeen seconds up-date was run by BBC1's *One O'clock News*.

As Table 8.1 (earlier) also shows, over 50% of the coverage of the story occurred on day two, 20 April 1993; over 16% on day one, 19 April, 1993; approximately 17% on day three, 21 April 1993; 11% on day four, 22 April 1993 and tailed off to 3% on day five, 23 April 1993. Therefore,



the life cycle of this quasi-domestic, big news story, which contained several angles and dimensions was still actually quite short.

As one journalist told me,

'If David Koresh had popped up again, now that would have been a story' (Correspondent, ITN 13/6/94).

However, given that he did not reappear, that the mystery was not solved, that the blame was not directly apportioned, and that the inquests were not held until January 1995, and that the Congressional hearings were not held until July 1995, the story had to be dropped, because it was no longer newsworthy (for a medium that relies on the here and now, the immediate and the visual). Although, the events at Waco did receive an extraordinary amount of media coverage when compared with mainstream news stories, the story in Britain was not treated as a media event, but as a very newsworthy story, which could be dropped as soon as something more interesting came along, which, in this case was a new set of atrocities in Bosnia.

One journalist, when asked why an event like the Waco tragedy might not be followed up during the aftermath said,

'I have some sympathy with that argument that if you are into a story you ought to keep tracking it, but on the other hand the choice is that you drop something else ... and to be honest it wasn't a front page story any longer' (Editor for the Day, BBC1's *Nine O'clock News*, 3/5/94).

e) Conclusion: Analysis of the Media Event and the Big News Story: The Waco tragedy and John Smith's funeral.

John Smith's funeral clearly fitted into Dayan and Katz's (1994) media event genre as a "Coronation" type occasion. The funeral occurred after almost ten days of speculation and attention by the media, and called a temporary halt to such activity. On the day of the funeral, the media attended the ceremony and acted as a bearer of ritual and symbol, assuming a reverential uncritical role. The notion of "funeral" itself holds a symbolic position in our society and the audience was invited to join in, to share the national grief and to pledge allegiance to the central power-holders. The funeral was also a time for reflection and remembrance and John Smith briefly became a mythic hero, who might have led the country to greatness. The stress was upon the waste of talent, the sadness of loss, but also upon continuity and the future. The television media captured all the symbolism of the great occasion and the news programmes merely continued such a reflection in their own broadcast programmes. The funeral of John Smith therefore in a sense was beyond ordinary newsworthiness. The television news programmes had no choice but to follow the expectations of the authorities and the audience by showing them a summary of the events of the day. There was therefore no sense of optionality about the coverage of the funeral and the primary role and duty of the television news media was to fulfil their public duty and serve the public interest by following the custom and tradition expected of them.

The siege at Waco became very newsworthy because it also was a staged media event, designed by the American authorities to promote a message about the legitimate use of violence against extremist religious organisations. These new religious frontier men and women could not be tolerated in a country that is explicitly conservative about religious

movements. As the United States is a country that is explicit about its belief in the use of violence as a solution to some types of problems, domestic and national, the invitation to the American media to witness the latest “solution” staged by the ATF was not likely to be ignored.

As I outline below, the reasons that the events at Waco became newsworthy for the British television news programmes are multifarious and are different from the public interest and national interest reasons a media event such as John Smith's funeral is broadcast. Indeed, acquisition by the British media of film of the ATF activities in on 28 February 1993 ensured that film of the storming of the Davidian compound and library film of David Koresh speaking already existed at both ITN and BBC News and Current Affairs. Furthermore, CNN and the American networks were continually tracking developments at the compound. Close to the date of the storming of the compound by the FBI, more crews gathered and ITN, BBC News and Current Affairs and *Sky News* sent reporters and crews to the scene.

When the FBI began attacking the compound with tanks it was all captured on film, as was the start of the fire and the subsequent inferno. The possession of film is a key criterion of newsworthiness in the broadcast media and increases the prominence given to a news story (Tunstall, 1971). It is this pre-planned aspect of the tragedy that ensured that the ATF and FBI activities were portrayed by a compliant media, in the same way as any other “pseudo-event” (Boorstin, 1960), and ensured that the events were predictable (see “predictability” Galtung and Ruge (1965)). Furthermore the storming of the compound by the FBI occurred during a media day ensuring that the events could be accommodated by the news day (see “periodicity” Ibid. (1965) and “recency” Bell (1991)). As I have shown, the events in Waco were told as a quasi-domestic story,

focusing on the British relatives awaiting news of their loved ones (see “proximity” Ibid. (1965)). The polarisation of the drama into the authorities versus the “cultists” became a tale of good versus evil ensuring that in general public approval could be gained, as official events cannot be imposed on the unwilling or unbelieving (Dayan and Katz, 1994). The sensational and dramatic news from Waco was of an extremely negative nature involving many deaths and this negativity increased its newsworthiness (see “negativity” Galtung and Ruge (1965)). The television media were able to pursue simplistic lines of explanation, following a precedent that had already been set when reporting the Jonestown suicides, ensuring that the story was not excluded due to undue complexity, or that it would take too much telling. Finally, the dramatic nature of the fire at the compound made it more likely that the story would pass through Galtung and Ruge's (1965) “threshold” category.

It is clear, therefore, that the staged media event at Waco became a big news story for the British broadcast and press media. It illustrated how a given news story with its newsworthy ingredients so clearly spelt out, will encourage the broadcast journalists to follow the regular media line and that the “me too” tendency of television journalism (Bell, 1991) was a factor in the coverage of the events at Waco. It would have been most interesting to have been able to perform a parallel analysis of a similar incident in Britain. Such media coverage of any large-scale hostage or “cult” situation would then have been directly comparable with media coverage of the Waco siege and would, I believe, have clearly highlighted the tendency for the broadcast media to pursue simple lines of enquiry when dealing with an international story and media event. I would have expected there to be more diversity and follow-up in the coverage of a domestic story of this nature.

In spite of the similarities of coverage of the events at Waco identified above it is notable that some basic differences in concentration on newsworthy aspects can also be discerned which illustrate the fragmentation of television news into a variety of programmes each constituted from different news sub-genres. Indeed, the coverage of the death of Stephen Milligan MP outlined in Chapter 7, highlighted the basic differences in the interpretation of taste and decency by ITN and the BBC where the commitment to avoid the “tasteless” was apparent in the long newsroom debate held at the BBC about the language to use when describing the circumstances of his death. It was notable too during the coverage of aftermath of the Waco siege that BBC news programmes, unlike GMTV and ITN avoided the strong human interest coverage of the events and certainly did not allow the audience to join in the voyeuristic entertainment of British families receiving both good and bad news.

*Channel Four News* was the only programme that attempted any deeper analysis of the situation in Waco, beyond the basic lines identified in this chapter ( see Introduction pages 20-21 for an analysis of the different newsroom approaches to news coverage). Its analysis of corruption at the Justice Department, and the longer time devoted to each story resulted in a more detailed consideration of the situation. *Channel Four News* was the only news programme that did not continually use the film of the fire to illustrate the story angle. Instead it compared other siege situations, the Iranian Embassy siege, which it implied the British got right by going in fast and giving no warning with the 1986 Philadelphia siege which the American authorities got wrong by dropping a stun bomb on a house causing a major fire. This rather smug analysis of British competence was followed by an interview with an FBI official who was with the Counter-Terrorism Section of the FBI from 1976 to 1988. In a sense

therefore *Channel Four News* continued the media line identified earlier, that of FBI incompetence, but unlike the other television news programmes did not simply report the opinion of the victim's families or David Koresh's lawyer on this, but attempted to find new spokespersons and to find a new angle, namely corruption in the Justice Department. This divergence from the regular media angle is more obvious when one looks at the BBC1's *Nine O'clock News* which followed two hours later. This programme, led with Waco, but in spite of the BBC's rhetoric of a commitment to analysis, the events were reported in a very similar way to the other news programmes. Although the news report on Waco was presented in three separate sections by three different reporters, there was no attempt made to analyse the situation or to deviate from the lines already established by the mainstream news programmes. The *Nine O'clock News* reported Clinton taking full responsibility for the events, but blamed David Koresh for the deaths, and concentrated on the investigation of the ruins and the plight of the British families.

On closer analysis it appears that the events in Waco only became newsworthy due to two significant factors. First that the British correspondents and their crews were already at the scene to film the events leading up to the fire and the fire itself live. Secondly, because there was a British angle as several of the "cult" members were British as were two of the nine survivors. All the media seemed to pursue similar angles when telling the story, and were all guilty of little analysis or consideration of any of the wider implications of the events in Waco. None of the news programmes for example analysed the events from a religious angle, nor considered the implications of the siege for gun control in the United States. David Koresh was unequivocally accepted as a mad man and the nature and role of all "cults" were portrayed as

unsatisfactory and dangerous, with the anti-“cultist” spokespersons acquiring direct and unchallenged access to the media.

This chapter has shown how a media event in one country is reported in another and as such tells us a great deal about the nature of the media event and the characteristics of the big news story. It is apparent that some media events are global in nature and their content or subject matter can unite most of the world. Events such as the Olympic Games or the 1981 British Royal Wedding reached audiences in hundreds of countries. Sometimes countries may be united by a type of universal morality, which is often replete with common sense assumptions. Such assumptions have the power to unite countries to fight issues such as famine (as in the case of the Live Aid efforts in 1985), or perhaps mass genocide in Rwanda. Some media events, however, may only unite a nation, such as the funeral of a senior politician, or major court case and have little or no interest to other nation states. In the case of John Smith’s funeral we saw how there was no sense of optionality about the coverage of the funeral and the primary role and duty of the television news media was to fulfil their public duty and serve the public interest. They duly did this by following the custom and tradition expected of such an event. In contrast, the funeral of John Smith was merely a news story in other countries. Conversely, some media events may have an impact upon other countries, primarily because individuals from that country are involved or affected. For example, the ending of the Waco siege in Texas resulted in several British victims and survivors. In the case of this American media event, the British media only became so involved due to the British victims’ angle.

It is therefore the case that media events do have transferable properties that can be globally relevant. However, in the main, the transferability of

such events from nation to nation is determined by parochial factors such as the impact of the media event upon “us”, the nation, or the direct involvement of any of “our” nationals. This is a fine distinction which Dayan and Katz (1994) fail to make. Sometimes such transferability might be due to comments made by one of “our” important politicians. This parish pump dimension of the media coverage of international media events also relates to the coverage of big and middle-ranking international news stories by the national news media.

The study of a media event and a big news story clearly demonstrates their different characteristics, the lack of optionality in the former and possibility of some flexibility and choice in the reporting of the latter. However, the possibility of flexibility and choice in the latter only appears to apply to the coverage of big *national* news stories. In the case of big *international* stories, whether they originate from a media event or are unexpected big events, there is an obvious tendency for the British television news media to search for a British angle. The style and content adopted by the British television news programmes covering the events in Waco was obviously at the expense of searching for a more truthful line in reporting and analysing the activities of the authorities. Much of the British television news coverage of events in Bosnia, for example, has revolved around following the UN forces and their activities, whereupon British input and opinion has been stressed and the French input, for example, has generally been ignored. Similarly, coverage of the Gulf War was very different in the United States from the coverage in Britain, where in both cases the nations did not tend to mention the input or contribution of the other in fighting the war.

As I have also shown, the examination of the coverage of media events and big news stories also serves to indicate the optionality, or forgettable



nature of many of the mainstream middle-ranking news stories. Of note is the ability of the increasing proliferation of different television news programmes to adopt a particular and specific news agenda that best serves their own requirements and needs. It is of course this particular capability of television news to be flexible and to adapt and diversify which is of concern in the current period of change in the character and nature of television news. This change began in the 1980s and will continue well into the next millennium. As the case study of the Waco tragedy has shown, there is already a firmly established tendency for certain news programmes to adopt a trivial, sensational and human interest approach to international media events when translating them into a big national news story. Indeed during the Waco siege, its ending and aftermath, most people learned about David Koresh and the Branch Davidians from second-hand sources, namely the media. The television news media in Britain took on a remarkable uniformity in depicting the group as a strange and dangerous "cult" and played a vital role in the dissemination of the dominant characterization of "cult" leader David Koresh and the Branch Davidians as "cultists" (Tabor and Gallagher, 1995). The television news journalist neglected to fulfil his/her important role as rigorous and critical interpreter of information in this particular instance and simply accepted the standard line provided by the anti-"cultists" and authorities in the United States.

If modification and diversification of television news programmes results in further deterioration of quality of the reporting of international news, then this will have serious implications for the informational quality of television news in general and international television news in particular. Clearly the unquestioning adoption of the authorities' line of explanation of events in Waco nourished prejudice and xenophobia. It is vital therefore that the television news media adopt a more critical and

discerning approach, with less reliance upon authorities such as the ATF, the FBI or the UN, when covering some of the big and middle-ranking international news stories. Whilst the basic but important principle of pursuing an interpretative approach to journalism can be abandoned in the name of public interest for the coverage of large state occasions such as state funerals and some other media events it must still be at the heart of the type of public interest journalism which is needed to nourish the public sphere and protect democratic process and citizenship rights (the majority of television news stories). Without the basic tool of information the citizen is unable to act competently in the public sphere, is unable to be discerning about institutions of authority and cannot contribute to or argue against the political processes which affect his or her everyday life.

## CONCLUSION

### DEFINITIONS OF NEWSWORTHINESS IN THE MID-1990S

I) On the basis of the various studies carried out in the work programme for this thesis - theoretical study of television news, a content analysis and newsroom observation study - I conclude that newsworthiness is constructed by the journalist's zone and mode of operation which is defined by the dynamic relationship between political, historical, and economic macro influences and organisational, cultural and professional normative assumptions and practices of the particular television newsroom. The journalist's zone of operation therefore, is a framework within which, through which, and by which the journalist participates in the understanding and interpretation of an event (as a journalist and not just as a neutral individual). This participation occurs through the adoption of a particular mode of understanding and by way of a certain historical consciousness, which in this case is "journalistic". Such an historical consciousness is both grounded and perpetuated in the sharing by all journalists of a set of extant formulas, practices and normative assumptions as well as a journalistic mythology which are passed down to new generations of journalists.

This study showed that the agreement of usage was adapted to the designated style of each organisation and each news programme and was only one way of doing the job (style was not universal). Indeed it was the fragmentation and diversification of the news genre itself which allowed different television news programmes to be constituted from a variety of different news sub-genres resulting in differences in news content, format and newsroom-epistemologies. This resulted in very different television news programmes and therefore it followed, differing definitions by

journalists in different television newsrooms and news organisations of what was in the public interest and therefore what was newsworthy

I have reached these conclusions by addressing several key themes and issues throughout this thesis in the following way:

i) A guiding principle of this thesis has been that television news is an important institution of the public sphere and is one which has a vital role to play in the enhancement of the citizen's ability to act competently in the public domain. Therefore television news has a vital role to play in a democracy in relation to its position as an institution which embodies citizenship. The significance of television news has long been recognised by successive governments and its role as a business affected with public interest has been grounded in a commitment to careful regulation of the television medium. A positive version of the notion of public interest is one which aims to capture the essence of what is in the public good or what constitutes good public service. Such aims can be and are reflected to a significant extent in the notion of newsworthiness demonstrated in the programme output of those television organisations which are still adhering to a particular ideal of public service broadcasting. BBC News and Current Affairs in particular shows a strong commitment to a type of television news production and selection that contains stories which it deems to be "important" and "worthy". Similarly ITN's *Channel Four News* attempts to set a news agenda which covers those important events which are neglected by other news services and aims to both cover and analyse events and issues.

Problematically public interest can have elastic and ambiguous meanings and can be stretched by television news programme makers to include varying degrees of entertainment devices and human interest journalism. Although the BBC has introduced a variety of entertaining format changes

(such as a relatively new studio set, an increasing use of graphics and other devices to help tell and “sell” the story) the content of BBC news, in the main, avoids an excessive coverage of human interest or people-centred stories. In contrast, ITN’s Channel 3 news programmes, *GMTV News*, Channel Four’s *Big Breakfast News* and Yorkshire Tyne-Tees Television’s *Calendar News* programmes all show a strong commitment to both the use of entertaining format devices and a high percentage of human interest coverage. A key concern of this thesis is that such news coverage does not contain useful or relevant information which can enable or empower citizens to critically assess or analyse the institutions and events which affect their lives. Such a lack of useful information in news output is increasingly becoming the norm for *all news programmes* as the current trend is a movement towards the maintenance of audiences through interesting and entertaining news stories. Thus we are witnessing the use of entertainment devices to maintain audience interest which often result in a reduction in complex content and context in favour of the human interest story and short sound bite (Gitlin, 1991).

ii) A second guiding principle of this thesis has been that television news has reached a critical junction in Britain in the 1990s. The nature of its predicament is strongly related to developments occurring in technology, transnational influences and changes occurring in the politico-economic arena (the new commercialization of television news). The 1980s and 1990s have seen an unprecedented growth in the power and diversity of media technology. The growth of satellite, cable, optic fibre technology, computerised newsrooms, the Internet and the capacity for technologies to merge, has led in principle to a much greater access to information and a massive growth in outlets requiring information. However, in practice greater access to information does not necessarily correlate with a more knowledgeable and informed public and may even have the negative effect of obscuring information by exceeding the interpretative capacity of

the subject (Baudrillard, 1993 in Stevenson, 1994). Although the explosion of cable and satellite channels, in theory opens up access of the broadcast medium to the public it is still unclear whether such access will be an empowering exercise whereby the public will be encouraged to articulate, argue and discuss its views in a public forum or whether the viewing of television news will become an even more isolating, confusing and uninformative activity.

Technological convergence and development will not manifest itself immediately, but will result in anomalies and problems that will have to be addressed by educators of journalists and television organisations for years to come. Such problems will revolve around the maintenance of an increasingly fragmented audience, the difficulties of sustaining a place in the schedules for mainstream prime-time news programmes and a reassessment of the role of journalists as helpful interpreters or mere conduits of a blizzard of information. In the case of the latter, journalists and their organisations clearly have an important choice to make. The role of the journalist as a helpful interpreter of the mountains of information which are now available is a vital role in enabling citizens to attempt to understand some of the complex events and issues occurring in the world. In an era where we are all increasingly becoming specialists with narrow but detailed knowledge of particular areas of life it becomes even more crucial for the journalist to have an “overview” of international, national and local events in order to be able to interpret and pass on relevant and useful information to those people who depend on it. The temptation however, appears to be for some journalists and news programmes to over-simplify the complex in the belief that anything too demanding or involved would lose audience interest. Such an assumption is dangerous for the depth and breadth of public knowledge and for democracy itself.

In the United States, for example, those television news shows which have exhibited this tendency and moved down market are said to offer “News McNuggets”. Events are chopped up, artificially flavoured and served in bite-sized pieces (Hoggart, 1995). Once television news programmes begin to offer news in easily digestible and undemanding form then they must start to prioritise the human interest dimensions of every event. Indeed, it was far easier for British journalists to cover the events in Waco by showing a burning building, crying relatives and a pontificating President than it was to explain the complicated, “behind-the-scenes” constructions and negotiations. Furthermore, media researchers, Gaber and Barnett (1994), have shown that in order to boost ratings ITN News is becoming increasingly “tabloid” (their word) emphasising crime and human-interest stories and carrying fewer political and foreign stories than the BBC, although this is denied by ITN management.

Transnational influences are having increasing influences upon Western democracies and there is widespread agreement amongst academics and scholars that a process which has been termed “globalisation” is occurring (Waters, 1995). Some analysts and commentators are concerned about such developments as they fear that power and influence is shifting away from elected national governments towards unelected supranational bodies (Keane, 1992; Marr, 1995). Related to this, is an increasing difficulty in identifying key centres of power within nation states. This may present problems for those journalists trying to act in the public interest as thorough and analytic interpreters.

Historically in Britain information about the nation (national television news) has been emphasised over and above the importance of local communication (regional news) and overseas news (international news). A disturbing trend is the rationalisation which is occurring by both BBC

news and ITN in relation to their international news coverage (ITN's international bureaux have been closed and at the BBC the World Service has been redesigned), and their regional coverage (this is being compromised by the ITV system's recent spate of take-overs and mergers which are changing the commitment to regional coverage and by the BBC closing down local radio outlets and producing fewer programmes in the regions, see Chapter 1). This activity is particularly contradictory when we consider the increasingly important role international news must have in relation to the process of globalisation. Due to the process of globalisation the nation seems to be less self-sufficient and is more dependent in international terms (Leca, 1992). It becomes more difficult for the state to convincingly explain its political, economic and social position unless it can use the international context as its referent. In the contemporary period, this reduced commitment by both the BBC and ITV system represents a very unreflective approach to the selection and production of television news.

Politico-economic changes and the new commercialization of television news are centred upon the belief that competitive market forces will be driven by consumer demand, ensuring that consumers will get what they want (Gunter, 1993). Baudrillard argues that in practice commodification can result in the individual believing he or she is the sovereign consumer, masking the effect of hegemony (Stevenson, 1994). Such concentration on the "possessive" individual, and individual consumer choice as the key right of public life has infiltrated and influenced contemporary governmental and popular conceptions of citizenship and public interest. Although free-market philosophy was a minor theme of British television broadcasting since the creation of the ITV system in the 1950s the balance of state policy was, until the 1980s and 1990s, weighted against it through regulation and support for the BBC. Currently the balance is now weighted in favour of the application of a free-market philosophy to the



whole broadcasting industry. This change has initiated broad debate about the role of public service broadcasting in Britain and has highlighted concerns about the relationship of television news to the public sphere and democracy and the interpretation of the notion of public interest.

A crisis in television news will probably be precipitated by further deregulation of television and relaxation of ownership rules. Great concern is expressed by many about Rupert Murdoch's ability to escape national media legislation as well as the implications of cross-media ownership upon the regional ITV system in Britain. Murdoch's potential to establish priorities and set successful precedents in all areas of broadcasting may formulate future standards and audience expectations. Murdoch's expediency in taking the BBC World Service off his northern satellite beam in order to get Star accepted in China is one such precedent. An alarming consequence of such activity might be that a "no news" approach to programming becomes a real possibility in a strongly commercial television environment.

iii) A third guiding principle of this thesis has been that it is only possible to analyse the concept of newsworthiness in relation to the proliferation of different television news programmes which are developing. I outlined and illustrated my generic model of the ideal type television news genre in the Introduction and Figure 1, and show in Chapters 6 and 7 and in the case study in Chapter 8, how influences from the different genres from the "not news" environment can, and do, act upon and affect the content, production and possibly audience reception of television news. In an era of global and converging technology the distinction and borderline between news and entertainment, news and education, news and fiction is constantly shifting and adapting (Garber, Matlock and Walkowitz (Eds.), 1993). It has been useful to assess whether the increasing divergence and

diversity in television news is a positive development or whether the fragmentation of television news into a proliferation of television news programmes constituted from different news sub-genres is resulting in a two-tier news service. This thesis has shown that there are clear differences in the types of television news being selected and produced in Britain in the mid-1990s. There are also divergences in the notion of what constitutes newsworthiness and what is in the public interest in different television news organisations and newsrooms. Such diversity is currently covering quite a broad spectrum with “important” news being prioritised by some of the BBC news programmes and *Channel Four News* and “interesting” news being prioritised by *Calendar News*, ITN’s *5.40pm News*, *GMTV News* and Channel Four’s *Big Breakfast*. Other news programmes currently lie in between the two extremes and provide news programmes which attempt to reconcile “interest” with “importance” (see Introduction, pages 20-21 for an analysis of the diversity of television news programmes). Currently, such a diverse range of television news programmes, each exhibiting a particular rationale, newsroom epistemology, interpretation of public interest and differing approaches to notion of newsworthiness, is reassuring. The danger will be if those programmes which set the “top line” in terms of news informational quality begin to slip away from their high principles (this study has identified signs that this may be happening in response to technological developments, in spite of the importance of transnational influences and as a reaction to the new commercialization of television news). The loss of a “top line” in high informational quality news programming may result in a gradual shift down-market for all television news programmes.

iv) A fourth guiding principle of this thesis has been the necessity and importance of analysing both the content and the production processes of television news. This approach has been adopted in order to ensure that

an understanding of newsworthiness is not constrained by the use of only one methodological tool or concentration on only one dimension of a complex concept. As such my analysis of television newsworthiness has included both a detailed content analysis and newsroom observation of a variety of different news programmes. It has been possible therefore to consider the diversity of journalistic outcomes and journalistic rationales and actions within the current changing television news environment.

II) In Part I of this thesis I examined the changing structural and cultural relationships of British television news during the 1980s and 1990s and the key themes, issues and research paradigms which have been used in the study of the broadcast media in general and television newsworthiness in particular. This analysis of television news has been situated in the broad socio-political context of modern society centring on the role of television news as an important institution of the public sphere and the evolution of the public interest idea which underpins both the BBC and ITV systems. This notion of public interest is embedded both in legislation and in the national broadcasting regulatory framework and is particularly relevant to the role of terrestrial news in a democracy. Television news values are strongly related to this regulatory framework which requires that journalists work to a criteria of objectivity and impartiality, advocated on the grounds of public interest. The notion of objectivity itself underpins the concept of television newsworthiness.

The fragmentation of the television news genre has resulted in the development of a variety of television news programmes constituted from different news sub-genre whereby different concepts of newsworthiness are evident in different television newsrooms. This clearly illustrates that different notions of public interest journalism operate in different television newsrooms.

In Chapter 1 I show how three key vectors of change have strongly affected the broadcasting environment in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, these are politico-economic (and the new commercialization of television news), technological and transnational. Such developments have had important implications for the public sphere, definitions of public interest and the relationship of television news to democracy.

Chapter 2 analyses the existing research relating to the study of the media in general and television news in particular which is relevant to this thesis. The theoretical elements which underpin the analytic and methodological approaches in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 were developed through consideration of these studies. The weakness of such approaches have been discussed in relation to their analysis of television newsworthiness, and I have argued that none of the approaches will stand alone as explanations of television newsworthiness. Existing studies of British television news are becoming dated by the massive changes and developments occurring in television broadcasting. These changes pose vital questions to practitioners and researchers, but are currently not being examined in any depth. Current research is also neglecting to consider the dynamic nature of television news newsworthiness and the transformations that are taking place. As I have shown, it is now necessary to recognize and consider such diversity and change as a means of analysing television newsworthiness.

At the end of Part I, I outlined the main aim of my research and indicated that I hoped to perform a critical assessment of television newsworthiness. It was also necessary to identify and avoid the pitfalls of the political economists by including dimensions of organisational influences, thereby not isolating my study from any kind of organisational context. It was also necessary to avoid falling into the trap of some ethnomethodologists who isolate themselves from any understanding of an organisational

context or external environment. It is for these reasons in particular I go on to closely examine the organisational aspects of television newsworthiness, and consider the differences and similarities between television news programmes and their operational definitions of television newsworthiness. It is here that I also consider the wider social, political and historical context in which the television newsrooms operate indicating that in large part legislation and regulation, the historical legacy of the news organisations themselves, technological change, transnational changes, and a more competitive environment are changing the dynamics of television news production, structure and content construction.

This analysis of television newsworthiness has therefore aimed to complement the theoretical approaches of the political economists and the sub-cultural analysts. However, I also believe that the dynamic changes occurring within the television news environment should be analysed in order to update the more established theoretical approaches of sociological media researchers. Further and deeper consideration could also be made of the impact of increasing competition and audience fragmentation upon the production and reception of media messages. This study of the differences between British terrestrial television news programmes highlights the need for a reconsideration of the traditional unitary approaches to television news analysis in particular and to the study of images and messages in the television media in general.

In Part II of the thesis I used a dual methodological approach to the study of both the content and the production processes used by journalists. The findings from each methodology are used together to critically assess and analyse the nature of television newsworthiness in a multi-programme news environment in Chapters 6 and 7. In the case study in Chapter 8, this methodological approach is particularly useful for the critical analysis

of the ending of the Waco siege and the coverage of John Smith's funeral by the British television journalists.

In Part III of the thesis I examined the similarities and differences of the different television newsroom cultures and processes, concluding that journalists share certain extant formulas, practices and normative assumptions in which the concept of newsworthiness is grounded. In Chapter 6, I showed how certain practices and values are the basis of all journalistic practice and common to all newsrooms. Such practices are exemplified by: a common training; the adherence to, and acceptance of, editorial policy and the assumption of editorial autonomy; the acquisition of objectivity as a professional norm and value; the constraints of broadcasting law; the maintenance of a critical distance from a mythical audience; the acceptance and use of the wire services and other technological devices; the adoption of a shared set of logistical constraints; the construction of the newsworthy around a diary and planning and the development of journalistic lore and myths through formal and informal journalistic language and humour. Such journalistic practices and values enable journalists to reconcile the contradictory impulses which constitute news in a way which ensures a high level of journalistic consensus regarding news values. There have been many assertions about the level of consensus which exists amongst journalists about what is newsworthy (Gold and Simmons, 1965; Clyde and Buckalew, 1969; Buckalew, 1969; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Whittaker, 1981). These shared similarities and experiences common to all television newsrooms form a framework and context within which, and through which, a journalist can understand and interpret events.

In Chapter 7, I illustrated how different television programmes and different television news organisations create their own newsroom

epistemologies (their own way of “knowing” what is the public interest and what therefore constitutes newsworthiness). The concept of newsworthiness is also determined by particular considerations, such as how a particular news organisation reported a story in the past, as well as considerations regarding the wealth of the news organisation, or the relationship with a particular government or owner. I showed how different organisations, cultures and histories can result in different considerations and treatment of whatever is deemed to be newsworthy. For example, the BBC has a stronger commitment to informing and educating its audience than ITN. As I have argued throughout this thesis, it is the commitment to informing the audience which underpins the notion of public interest serving the public good. In order for television news to retain its position as an important institution of the public sphere, this commitment and rationale must remain intact and undamaged by the impact of technological change, globalisation and the new commercialization of television news.

In Chapter 8, I analysed the similarities and differences between different British television news programmes, identified in Chapters 6 and 7, in relation to their coverage of two major events, the ending of the siege in Waco and John Smith's funeral. The historical development of a firmly entrenched journalistic consensus about what is newsworthy can lead to an uncritical acceptance of a given or apparent explanation of an event or issue. This can be shown to be particularly evident in the reporting of foreign news stories. The case study of the coverage of the events in Waco in particular illustrates some of the worst dimensions of uncritical television journalism, namely the tendency to accept and report a particular set of explanations regarding an event. Such newsworthy situations are recognised by journalists, not simply on the basis of a set of news factors, associated with an event, such as those identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965); Tunstall (1971); Bell (1991), or by particular

criteria used by the editors as identified by Epstein (1973) (1), but by political considerations. Such political considerations might include the problems the story might cause for a particular television, news organisation. Journalists often search for an historical precedent to follow when reporting a story, such as the dubious connection made with the Jonestown suicide in the case of the fire at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas in April 1993.

I have also shown how the history, culture and economic well-being of the broadcasting organisation itself can inform choices the journalists make. As my observation of ITN's *News at Ten* clearly shows, increasing competition for viewers can enhance consideration of whether a particular news story will cause the audience to turn the television off and possibly change the methods used to tell that story and determine its place in the running order. As I have further shown, such considerations can be particular to different television news organisations and different television news programmes. As the case study in Chapter 8 clearly shows, there are discernible differences in the television news format and content of different news programmes. It follows therefore that each television news programme has a set of determining factors which construct the newsworthy and different epistemologies and rationales for telling the newsworthy story. The fragmentation of television news has been illustrated by showing how different television news programmes can adopt influences from the different genres from the "not news" environment by the formation of news sub-genres which are news relevant and which act upon and shape the final news product.

Such influences can result in an overtly human interest angle being adopted when telling a news story. In the case of the reporting of the Waco siege, for example, *GMTV News* concentrated on, and privatised access to the Lovelock family, whose relative had survived the fire. In



contrast, *Channel Four News*, more than any other news programme, attempted briefly to analyse the events from an American political perspective, influenced more by the news and current and affairs and education genre, than by the entertainment genre (see Introduction, pages 18-19 for an overview of the different programmes and their production of different sub-genres). However, the events in Waco occurred in a foreign country and the British television news media showed a strong tendency to find a British angle, but were inclined to be far less critical or discerning about the nature of the events they were reporting than if those events had occurred in Britain. This is not surprising when we consider that the reporting of foreign television news began via reports on the state of the markets in the British colonies where the interest in the news was purely in relation to its impact on Britain and the British markets.

It is however, the analysis of the reporting of the routine, ordinary everyday domestic news stories which illustrates most clearly the differences between the different television news programmes. On many occasions BBC News and Current Affairs will prioritise different stories from ITN *Channel Four News* and ITN Channel 3 News.

III) It is only possible to answer the question of what constitutes television newsworthiness in Britain up to a point. One problematic of my analysis is that it is confined to the present and cannot at this stage consider changes to the construction of newsworthiness over time. Future research work could therefore consider the currently unprovable assumptions that there is an increasing reliance on the “wire” services and that continued technological developments will further compromise the quality of journalistic output and the notion of what is newsworthy. Over time one could assess whether Galtung and Ruge's (1965) “unpredictability” factor is being increasingly compromised due to more and more planning, and whether there will be an increase in Boorstin's

(1964) “pseudo-events”, or whether content will be subverted to the format requirements of an increasingly visually exciting media.

To some extent this study can only speculate about the changing role of BBC news. Its undoubted shift away from the purely Birtian format of the late 1980s towards a slightly more populist approach may be the first stage of a gradual decline in news standards or it may be a pragmatic adjustment to be more accountable to the audience's requirements. According to John Birt, creator of “Year Zero” at the BBC, the BBC is itself guilty of some of the worst excess of tabloid journalism. He has criticised political reporting in particular for moving away from a concentration on reflection and analysis towards enhancement of disputation and conflict. Ironically, it may be Birt's own policies which have pushed the BBC political reporting towards such excesses. Huge expenditure on resourcing 4 Millbank has resulted in the situation where political correspondents are expected to produce something everyday to justify such investment. As Roger Bolton (1995), argues this might account for the overkill on British political stories and their endless recycling. Such concentration of resources in the rarefied atmosphere of the capital's political headquarters often produces news which is artificial and concerned with the minutiae. In the United States there is already a strong tendency to politicise news stories in terms of their political conflict potential (Fallows, 1996). If high investment in political journalism results in inconsequential reporting then it would surely be better, and would more clearly reflect the values of public service broadcasting, if resources were redeployed to the neglected regions or neglected areas of the news agenda, such as coverage of the plight of the homeless or disenfranchised.

To uphold BBC news reporting as the only possible style of quality television news therefore is a superficial argument. As my content

analysis shows, the BBC does cover a wider variety of international stories than ITN and has invested more in its political reporting. Although ITN's *Channel Four News* is commercial news it also provides choice, analysis and diversity. However, a main theme of this thesis has been that the diversification of the television news is challenging long established notions of quality in programming and also notions of public interest. Some television news programmes defy traditional quality assessments forcing consideration of whether entertainment-type news programmes serve the public interest as well as the more serious news programmes (Mulgan, 1990). As the audience continues to fragment according to consumption interests and capacities, television news will be increasingly targetted at different groups according to market strategies.

The pressures which have affected broadcasting institutions in the 1980s and 1990s have had profound implications for the whole rationale and ethos of public service broadcasting in Britain, as both the BBC and ITV systems begin to drift away from their original founding remit. The diversification of broadcast products in the name of consumer choice complements and coincides with the emergence of demassified, consumerist and Post-Fordist society in the late 1980s and 1990s (Hall and Jacques, 1990)

I have argued in this thesis that the belief in the possible reformation of a public sphere in which citizens can actively engage in public debate and argument is Utopian when related to terrestrial television news in a British public service broadcasting system or to commercial news generally, due in large part to the constraints of the medium itself. However, this does not mean that the news organisations and journalists working within them do not have a socially responsible role to provide information which is useful, enlightening and informative.

The BBC therefore has a responsibility for the future of broadcast journalism. If the BBC ceases to invest strongly in its news product due to its need to reconcile the pressures of commercialism with public service broadcasting, then it may change the standards of all British television news. In this case the concept of the newsworthy and the public interest at the BBC would undoubtedly begin to change. BBC news would begin to stress the human interest aspects of news stories, to tell stories from a people perspective, reduce investment in overseas and political stories and begin to marginalise those stories which are too complicated, worthy or demanding. However, as Simon Hoggart notes, the rot may already be setting in,

'Even *Newsnight* precedes its interviews with a pert, wrapped-up-with-string-and-a-ribbon style package'  
(Hoggart, 1995:20).

That there is a defensiveness exhibited by all television news personnel at both ITN and at the BBC when they are accused of adopting "tabloid-style" measures is reassuring, showing the strong attachment broadcast journalists still have towards producing news which is more up-market and useful than that produced by the so-called "gutter press". However, as digital terrestrial and satellite news channels begin to draw viewers away from the established terrestrial television news programmes, then it is possible that a Murdoch-style news format, based upon entertaining and interesting the audience, will gain a competitive edge in the ratings' battle. ITN may, at the mercy of its contractors, follow the same route, indeed it has already shown itself to be quite capable of adapting and changing to meet any contractor's requirements. It is therefore more likely in a market-oriented environment that the more popularist forms will become the mainstream news programmes. John Kean's prophecy may then come to pass and citizens, instead of seeking to actively engage in politics and contribute in the public sphere,

'...will amuse themselves to death, spending their spare time "grazing" the new abundance of pre-censored, commercialized radio, television, newspapers and magazines. Perhaps they will be persuaded to privatize themselves, to regard politics as a nuisance, to transform themselves silently and unprotestingly from citizens to mobile and private consumers' (Keane, 1991:192-193).

To avoid such apathy television news should take an active part in enabling the public to participate and judge the events and issues which affect it. Television journalistic practice charges journalists with the role of working with public concern by analysing and interpreting the data which exists "out there" on behalf of the public. Institutions such as academia in general and journalism are an important part of the public sphere and have a role to play in interpreting and presenting information to the public. A critical difference, however, is the time-scale to which such agencies work. Journalism has to work to a short time-scale and therefore is restricted in the depth of analysis, in the rigour of research methodology as well as by the format constraints of the programme structure. As such, the very nature of television journalism is multiply constrained and should only be perceived as a restricted source of selective information.

IV) Journalism in the 1990s however, does have a very useful role to play in society as an important and valuable provider of an overview of information about the world. This is particularly significant in an era of information-overload and specialisation. What is disturbing for the relationship between the television news medium and democracy is the trend towards further restriction of the informational capacity of television news through increased commercialization of broadcasting institutions and a tendency for some journalism organisations to look inwards towards

the nation and to simplify, trivialise and sensationalise events in order to maintain audience interest.

Television news has a number of useful roles it could play in the empowerment of citizens in a liberal democracy. The excavation and analysis of the unaccountable areas of public life would enable citizens to understand and perhaps even control events which affect them. By exposing injustice and corruption television news does enable the public to make a judgement about the validity and authority of political institutions but, as Fallows (1996) points out, there is a danger that a public which is continuously exposed to information about politicians who are shown to be scheming endlessly will cease to take an interest in the political news coverage or even in the political process itself. A balance obviously has to be struck between the presentation of important issues to the public and the temptation to politicize them.

Television news is intimately bound up with citizenship rights and as such its journalists have a social responsibility to attempt to engage and empower its viewers. One particularly important role is the representation of the various minority publics which are emerging due to fragmentation and diversification of British society. To some extent the diversification of the television news genre reflects the fragmentary nature of the audience, but it is questionable if the broadcasters themselves are adequately and accurately representing the diverse range of views which currently exist in British society. Fortunately television news does sometimes exhibit some of these properties, and exposes scandals in public life and brings our attention to atrocities and injustice. For instance in recent years it has addressed such issues as the unaccountability of quangos, the greed of the chairmen of the public utilities and human rights abuses in China. At the moment, what is conceived of as newsworthy by the terrestrial television channels in

Britain often has much merit, bringing to our attention genocide in Rwanda and famine in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, however, any further move towards the trivial or the sensational by any of the mainstream television news programmes in response to commercial pressures may, at worse set in motion an adjustment of *all* television news values over time, which may result in an eventual marginalisation of quality news programming. This is a real possibility and is justifiably a subject of public and political concern and action.

Given that television news as a useful information source is already a restricted and constrained outlet, some of the trends resulting in a diminishment of information quality identified in this thesis are very disturbing and raise very serious concerns about the value and role of British terrestrial television news in a democratic state in the 1990s.

## NOTES

### NOTES: CHAPTER 2

#### Footnote 1

##### The Effects of the News - News Audience Research.

As television news only provides for one-way communication, research concern has long been directed at the possible effect this might have on the audience. Concern about media effect can be traced to back to the pessimistic mass society thesis of the Frankfurt School, although there has also been a long standing conservative preoccupation with media effects. The nature of the analytic approach adopted by the Frankfurt School can be easily understood in the light of their experiences of the breakdown of modern Germany into Fascism which left people atomised and exposed to external influences and propaganda. Their pessimistic theory of the Hypodermic Model of media effects, assumed that the effects of the media on our lives were very simple and direct. Therefore it was assumed that the mere portrayal of criminality by the media was enough to stimulate a rise in criminal behaviour among a vulnerable audience. Indeed such assumptions are sometimes seized upon by politicians. For example when two year old Jamie Bulger, was killed by two other children in 1993, the incident was further exacerbated when a judge, and then the Prime Minister, John Major, made a causal link between the child's death and the video *Childs Play Three*. A debate followed about the effects of violent videos on children. Similarly Oliver Stone's film *Natural Born Killers* has recently been cited by a teenager as providing him with the inspiration he needed to murder his step-mother and half sister. Such claims can appear to provide strong evidence that the media do have strongly negative effects on some people and they are often perceived as being dangerous enough to cause the legislators and policy makers to consider banning such material, even though no causal link has ever been proven to exist between a violent video and subsequent violent action.

In the 1980s audience research was "rediscovered", by those media scholars who followed a critical studies, or cultural studies, or semiological line of study. Critics of these approaches such as Professor Barrie Gunter argue that these schools of thought have rarely attempted to thoroughly and empirically investigate the audience. They tend instead to make assumptions about the audience on behalf of the audience (personal communication, March 1995), and also tend to make assumptions about the production context on the basis of the audience's reading of a particular "text" or programme. Audiences came under close scrutiny by both the media industry and by researchers Lorimer (1994) and Morley (1989). The former were obviously interested in audiences from a commercial perspective, and concentrated on ways of improving audience



commitment. Most recent audience reception studies have focused on soap operas and news/documentary programmes (Morley, 1980). These publications represent the discovery of empirical audience research methods by cultural studies scholars (B. Gunter, personal communication, March 1995). Most contemporary academic audience research usually contains a critique of the earlier pessimistic versions of audience interpretation in the context of a re-emergence of the "Uses and Gratifications" approach, whereby audiences are seen as comprising active, thinking human beings able to interpret and use media messages (Morley, 1992). As early as 1955 American social psychologists, Katz and Lazarsfeld began arguing that the Hypodermic Model was flawed and started to examine how people actually used the media for themselves (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Klapper regarded the media as having socialising properties which reinforce attitudes, values and beliefs learned from other sources, underlining a move away from the Hypodermic Model (Klapper, 1960 cited in Gunter, 1987). Although there are now several distinct versions of the later reception studies, all of them start from a view of human beings trying to shape their lives according to their own individual needs.

However, most audience reception studies have to perform a balancing act between avoiding treating the audience as a passive cultural dope and discounting all notions of ideology and hegemony (Dahlgren, 1992). Indeed, studies of the ethnography of television viewing have shown that an individual may watch a particular programme or use the broadcast medium for a particular reason - it might make him feel more secure, it may be routine, it may be for companionship, often in the case of women it may be a guilty pleasure (Ang, 1985), it may be part of a political power struggle in the living-room, (Morley 1986), or as in the case of the Sri Lankan fishermen, it may be that to own a television set is simply a status symbol and the fact that there is no electricity available is unimportant. The Uses and Gratifications approach has been criticised for being an essentially psychologistic problematic. The research relies on the analysis of mental states and needs and processes of the individual, which are abstracted from the social situation of the individual (Morley, 1992).

Furthermore, the assumption is sometimes made that the audience are able to "read" texts because they are open to interpretation, (ie are polysemic and have multiple meanings), (Fiske, 1987). This does not allow for the idea that hidden or dominant ideological, messages are passed to the recipient, even though, for example, it is possible that television can cause us to spend too much (Cashmore, 1994). The notion of an active audience, getting whatever meaning it wants from a message however, has been stretched too far by some researchers working from a cultural perspective.

When considering the abilities of the audience to interpret media messages the notion of intertextuality is important in that both the style and content of authors are found in their texts (in the same way a news programme contains the style and content of the authors). Indeed the audience's knowledge of a preceding text (or in this case television news programme) is related very strongly to its understanding and familiarity with previous texts. This is particularly relevant to the understanding by the audience of different television programmes and the television news genre itself. Television news, for example, has a very different format and style from a situation comedy, or a film, and the audience is easily able to recognise the differences. Television news uses a set of format devices to signal to the audience that what follows is important and authoritative and is to be taken seriously. The introductory music, for example, is booming and resonates with importance and pomposity. The use of Big Ben in the opening sequences of *News at Ten* grounds the programme in the authority of the nation state and parliament. All the news programmes have their own devices to signal to the audience that it is time to use their taken-for-granted knowledge and understanding to decode the signals being given out from that particular programme (Lorimer, 1994). Indeed Ang (1985) drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's notion that popular pleasures are related to the possibility of identification, argues that popular pleasure is foremost a pleasure of recognition. Although Ang is referring to a popular soap opera, I believe that the concept can be extended to factual programmes such as television news. Indeed, as I illustrate clearly in the generic model of the television news genre, (see Figure 1, Introduction), there is no strict dichotomy between entertainment programmes and information programmes as both ingredients can be included in one programme. The diversity of news formats and introductory sequences certainly seeks to keep the viewer amused, loyal and primed to understand and accept the fast-moving, ever-changing stream of news content.

A well documented example of a failure on the part of the audience to correctly understand the media message was when Orson Welles' radio play of War of the Worlds was broadcast in such a way that it convinced about one million people (who tuned in late), that the Martians had really landed. This well documented example of the extreme effects of the media has often been used as an illustration of the potential power and danger of the broadcast media (Glover, 1990; Eldridge, 1993).

Audience research has also been performed by psychologists. Barrie Gunter's evidence of how violence is perceived and interpreted by TV audiences has shown that not only are our perceptions of violence on TV highly sensitive to its many different facets, such as character, motive, plot and setting, but more importantly, our reactions vary according to our

social attitudes and personal circumstances (Gunter, 1987). In short, television messages do not mean the same to everyone.

Research into the audience initially concentrated on the theory that the effects of the mass media were direct and simple. The Hypodermic Model, originally concerned with the impact of the cinema, assumed that media effects could somehow be injected directly into the veins of the audience causing an immediate effect. As outlined earlier, the pessimism of the theory had its roots in the experiences of the Frankfurt School theorists. Although this theory has many weaknesses it has been influential because, as outlined earlier, it can be called upon to “explain” problems in society, from the corruption of the young by pervasive media to the breakdown of social cohesion. Film theory still has its roots in the Hypodermic theory of effects and tends to isolate the meeting of the reader and the text from all social and historical structures and from other texts which also affect the subject (Morley, 1992).

The American empirical school of communications research in the 1940/1950s concentrated by contrast on quantitative, empirical audience research. Both the Frankfurt and the American empirical schools concentrated on dimensions of power: the former from a pessimistic perspective and the latter from a more optimistic perspective. The studies emanating from these schools either concentrated on the analysis of the content of the messages and moved on to study their effects on audiences (behaviourist perspective) or audience-based studies which focused on the social characteristics, environment and needs which the audiences derived from, or brought to the media message (structural-functional orientation).

The concentration in the 1960s on the general functions of the media for society was also concerned with the subjective motives and interpretations of individual users. Individual users were no longer conceived as atomised individuals, subject to a crude injection of media information, but as social beings who built up relationships in groups and were influenced by group leaders. (See the Two-Step Flow Model - Katz and Lazarsfeld, (1955)). Later writers tended to ignore Katz and Lazarsfeld's concentration on the use opinion leaders make of the media and instead simply concentrated on the uses the audience make of the media (Glover, 1990). This strand of research re-emerged in the “Uses and Gratifications” approach.

Currently there are different kinds of audience research being undertaken. The first is information gathered from large-scale communication institutions. This emerges in the form of statistics, but is limited in what it tells us about the audience. Other audience research outlined below tends to contain influences of the Frankfurt school and the Uses and Gratifications approach as outlined above and is an extension of literary criticism.

In his study of *Nationwide*, Morley assumes that watching television is an active process of “decoding” or “interpretation” and not passive “reception” or “consumption” (Morley, 1980, 1992). He does this by applying Hall's encoding/decoding essay to the study of *Nationwide* (Hall, 1980). Hall argues that there are differences in the way that media texts are encoded and decoded. When a text is encoded it encodes cultural forms via a specific historical mix of professional norms, institutional relations and technical equipment. However, when an audience decodes the text it is dependent upon social structural relations, political and cultural dispositions and access to the relevant technology. The audience has various reading strategies, first, a “preferred reading” (the audience simply absorbs the intended meaning in the text); second, a “negotiated reading” (the audience is able to resist or recognise the intended meaning in the text) and third, an “oppositional reading” (the audience is able to reject the intended meaning in the text). Morley argues that through different decoding strategies the preferred meaning of the text can be resisted by the culturally coded reading strategies of the audience. Therefore *Nationwide* does not have a direct “effect” on the audience, but must be interpreted. Morley's *Nationwide* study attempt to connect the theoretical questions about the maintenance of hegemony via a structured polysemy, (a text which is not totally ideologically closed), with the empirical question of how a particular programme acts to “prefer” one set of meanings or definitions of events, and has several weaknesses. He only applies his study to factual programmes and concentrates almost exclusively on class as an explanatory factor for preferred readings made by the audience whilst ignoring other important factors such as race and gender.

John Fiske, on the other hand, simply detaches the text or the cultural commodity from the encoding process and dispenses with the notion of the “preferred” reading (Fiske, 1987). Once the audience member engages with the text he or she can use it entirely for their own needs and can therefore use it as a form of resistance towards the existing power-bloc. From this perspective, the more information that is produced by the power bloc, the less able it is to govern the interpretation of it. Fiske's interpretation of the increasing quantity and diversity of television news in the 1990s would therefore be optimistic in terms of the audience's ability to resist ideological messages which would increase in direct relation to the amount of information produced.

An important contemporary contribution to the cultural study of television audience has been made by David Morley, who, by building upon Stuart Hall's famous “encoding and decoding” essay, has analysed the interpretative capacity and viewing contexts of television audiences. The viewing context of the audience is seen by Morley as being strongly related to the operation of gendered power within domestic settings

(Morley, 1980; 1992), which has been confirmed by other studies (Silverstone, 1993). John Fiske's writing on television audiences is interesting and has value in that it is an attempt to place an emphasis on the ability of the weak in society to evade, via negotiated or oppositional readings of texts, the messages of the power-bloc (Fiske, 1991). However, it also has weaknesses as his work tends to ignore the institutions which structure and produce the media product. He does not attempt to analyse the possibility of ideological forces working on the audience because he always assumes that the audience resists the dominant messages, and he tends to assume that his own decoding of the textual messages is actually the same as the audience.

#### Footnote 2

The impact of Galtung and Ruge's work was enormous. So much so that it came to be seen as pivotal either in developing work along the same sort of lines or for generating debate that sought to establish a different mode of news selection analysis. Much of the research which was complementary to and followed Galtung and Ruge was in the form of case studies that often only dealt with certain aspects of theory of news factors, most frequently the Complementarity Hypothesis. These studies utilised content analysis and tended to support Galtung and Ruge's theory, (Smith, 1971; Sande, 1971, Hicks and Gordon, 1974, Peterson, 1981).

There also emerged, what can be called an American Perspective, which also supported the existence and importance of news factors. This approach identified slightly different news factors or news elements (Buckalew, 1969; Clyde and Buckalew 1969) analysed and tested five elements of news, normality, significance, proximity, timeliness and visual. Badii and Ward (1980) identified and examined, conflict, oddity/normalcy, impact/no impact, known principles/unknown principals, immediate reward/delayed reward. These studies concentrate on news factors as the cause of selection, where news is published because of its particular qualities and because of a journalistic consensus as to the particular significance of those qualities.

#### Footnote 3

Sande (1971) identified problems with the empirical testing of Galtung and Ruge's news factors and their five hypotheses. In particular he found the selection hypothesis impossible to test accurately. Such testing would require data about all the events occurring in the world which did not subsequently become news. Despite his misgivings, Sande, however, tried to assess how six of Galtung and Ruge's news factors operated in the news chain. He looked at how elite nations F9, elite people, F10, personification, F11, negativity, F12, continuity F7 and composition F8 had an effect on news presentation. He found that all the news factors except composition have a certain effect on news presentation. Two of the factors were shown to be particularly powerful, negativity and

continuity. He also tested the complementarity hypothesis, that is, when an event is low on one factor it will have to be high on some other factor to be selected as a news story. He found that this hypothesis was not true for all possible pairs of factors, for example it did not work for continuity and negativity (i.e. if negativity was low it did not mean that continuity was necessarily high). Any pair of the news factors, elite nations, elite people and negativity confirm Galtung and Ruge's complementarity hypothesis (i.e. the less elite a nation or person, the more negative the news will be about them).

Hicks and Gordon (1974) further examined Galtung and Ruge's work by studying foreign news content in Israeli and US newspapers on twelve consecutive non-working days finding that there was no apparent relationship between physical distance and international news flow, the relationship was more likely to be one of cultural similarity confirming Galtung and Ruge's factors, F4, F4.1, F4.2 (meaningfulness, cultural proximity and relevance). All the papers reported more elite-oriented news than news about common people, confirming Galtung and Ruge's reference to elite people factor F10. It was not always found to be true that an event should be negative to be newsworthy, refuting Galtung and Ruge's negativity factor, F12. (However, this could be because the data were collected on rest days when the news may have had a more positive content).

Smith (1979) used data already collected in 1962 from the New York Times to test propositions developed by Galtung and Ruge. Smith found circumstantial evidence supporting the frequency factor F1, but admitted that '...I had no direct means of testing this proposition' (Ibid, 1979:27). He also confirmed the threshold factor, F2, the unambiguity factor F3, the consonance factor, F5 and the unexpectedness factor, F6. However, as already indicated in the study by Hicks and Gordon (1974) above, the negativity factor was again rejected. Smith reasoned that this might be because the New York Times is cosmopolitan enough to transcend the bounds of its own culture. What is of greater interest, however, is that it may indicate that the negativity factor is not as significant in distant news events as it is in domestic events, although evidence from this study relating the three international events examined in the content analysis were primarily negative in nature. Also my own observation at the BBC indicated that the type of news stories routinely taken via Eurovision by other countries were again primarily negative or violent in nature (see also Chapter 6).

Peterson (1979) examined the role of seven of Galtung and Ruge's news factors, elite nations, F9, meaningfulness, F4, negativity, F12, unambiguity, F3, frequency, F1, elite people, F10 and threshold F2. Peterson examined the role of these news factors in Galtung and Ruge's complementarity and additivity hypotheses which have been tested by

Galtung and Ruge themselves, and by Sande (1971) with positive results. Peterson's study confirmed the complementarity hypothesis finding that higher negativity in a story can compensate for lower national rank of a nation, and for lower meaningfulness. It also confirmed that the more elite a person is, the less necessary it is for him or her to come from an elite nation to be reported in the news, and the more meaningful a story, the less important it is that it comes from an elite nation. Peterson's work also supported the additivity hypothesis, showing a larger proportion of events with higher additivity scores get published (the more news factors a story contains the more likely it will become news). Peterson (1981) argued that the social construction of news can be explained to a great extent by news factors.

### **NOTES: CHAPTER 3**

#### **Footnote 1**

A problem which can result from any content analysis is that of human error. The television violence study which I am currently undertaking illustrates many of the difficulties inherent in trying to get a group of people to see something in the same way. In spite of carefully constructed definitions of violence, a rigorous training and a detailed, systematic coding schedule, coders still interpret some violent situations differently. My content analysis for this thesis was initially coded by me alone, therefore errors or inconsistencies in interpretation or understanding are consistent. When I asked another person to watch and code a news programme for me in order to check my own consistency, I found that there was only a very small discrepancy, and as such consider this content analysis to be as rigorous and systematic as it possibly can be. The only subjective decisions are those not measured by time, namely choice of content category, however on the basis of my checking mechanism, (ten percent of this study was double-coded) I am happy that my content analysis is as accurate as any such empirical study can be.

#### **Footnote 2**

The content analysis for my thesis is the third such analysis I have undertaken. The first was an analysis of the geographical distribution of television news in April 1991 for Yorkshire Television, the second, is an on-going two year study of television violence on four terrestrial channels and four satellite channels, for four weeks, covering twenty-four hours a day. The latter operation uses twenty-six coders and is a very large content-based study. None of these studies have yet been published (Gunter, B. and Harrison, J.L., Violence on Television in Britain, forthcoming).

#### **Footnote 3**

In order to formulate my own research plan for my newsroom observation study, I considered a variety of other similar studies which have been

performed in Britain and the United States, asking of each, what were their aims and goals, did their aims coincide with mine, how was their study performed and for how long, did the researcher encounter any problems and if so how were they solved, did the researchers have any insights which might help my work, what did they find out and how were their findings interpreted and presented.

The studies I consulted were as follows:

British studies: The study of producers' attitudes towards the television coverage of an election campaign (Blumler, 1969). Studies of the BBC (Burns, 1969, 1972, 1977). The study of the production of a seven programme documentary series made in 1967 for ATV (Elliott, 1972). Observation in regional BBC and ITV companies and the BBC Current Affairs Department to examine what factors determine or influence what will and will not be made available as programme material (Tracey, 1977). The study of news in the regions (Hetherington, 1989). A study of how a "film" comes to be made at BBC's Horizon (Silverstone, 1985). The study of the BBC (Schlesinger, 1987). A study of the way Central Television represents the problems of urban distress (Cottle, 1993).

American studies: The observation of evening news at ABC, CBS and NBC (Warner, 1971). A study of CBS/ABC and NBC (Epstein, 1973). A study of CBS, NBC, Newsweek and Time (Gans, 1980). A study which examines the corporate domination of Mexican television news (Molina, 1987).

Analogous studies: The investigation of social welfare activities and a good indication about field-research methods (Johnson, 1975). A study of schools which concludes that teachers are subject to various pressures and constraints and have developed ways of "coping" via a series of survival strategies. (An analogy I draw to this is of the young trainee journalists who are experiencing and learning in the television newsroom. They undergo a period common to all journalists of simply surviving the day to day demands of journalism until they are able to move away from this to a more holistic contribution to the daily activities of the newsroom. See Chapter 6) (Woods, 1986). Qualitative research methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A study of how psychiatrists use hospitals (Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, Ehrlich and Sabshin, 1981).



## NOTES: CHAPTER 5

### Footnote 1

#### FORMAT AND STRUCTURE OF NEWS AT TEN

The structure of *News at Ten* varied from other mainstream television news programmes shown on ITV's Channel 3 and on the BBC. *News at Ten's* structure changed little from day to day keeping the same or very similar format as follows:-

#### Bongs

Item 1

Item 2

Item 3

Item 4

Item 5

#### Pre Commercial Break Teaser ("PRECOMS")

#### COMMERCIAL BREAK

Item 6

Item 7

#### Newswrap

#### Special Report

#### Sport

#### Headlines

#### And Finally

#### End Titles

## NOTES: CHAPTER 6

### Footnote 1

#### Existing Statutory Arrangements and Agreements Established by Precedent Directly Relating to Broadcasting Companies

- 1) The Minister of State responsible for broadcasting controls the number of services and the manner in which they are provided by granting or refusing a licence.
- 2) The Minister of State's powers make him or her the final judge on questions about coverage of broadcasting services
- 3) The Wireless Telegraphy Act 1949 empowers the Minister of State to prescribe the level of broadcasting receiving licence for the BBC.
- 4) The Independent Broadcasting Authority Act empowers the Minister of State to increase or reduce the rate of additional payments of the 'levy' paid by the ITV companies
- 5) The Independent Broadcasting Authority Act 1973 empowers the Minister of State to change the advertising requirements and methods, to ban adverts.
- 6) The Minister can call on the BBC and ITV companies to make cuts in their capital investment programmes.
- 7) The BBC's Licence and Agreement and the IBA Act 1973 empower the Minister to restrict broadcasting hours. For example in 1973-74 broadcasting was closed down by 10.30pm to save fuel.
- 8) Any Minister of Crown may require the Broadcasting Authorities to broadcast announcements in connection with his functions. (Clause 13(5) of the BBC's Licence and Agreement and Section 22(1) of the IBA Act 1973).
- 9) Power of patronage enables the Prime Minister to appoint the Chairman of the BBC and the Minister of State appoints the key figures in broadcasting such as the Chairman of ITC and members of the ITC.
- 10) The Minister of State may, under Clause 13(4) of the BBC's Licence and Agreement and Section 22(3) of the IBA Act 1973, veto, by a notice in writing, the broadcast of matter he or she deems not to be in the national interest.
- 11) The D-Notice System, set up in 1912 amid concern over the "catch all" nature of the Official Secrets Act 1911. It is a system of self-censorship, a committee consisting of the permanent secretaries of the Ministry of Defence, Home Office, Foreign Office and eleven representatives of the media. The D Notice System is a voluntary advisory service and has no legal status. Its decisions or advice can be overruled. In 1987, the BBC programme, *My Country Right or Wrong* had been scrutinized by the Committee and was deemed fit for broadcast, however, this decision was overruled by the Thatcher Government and the D-Notice System almost collapsed.
- 12) Statutory powers of the Minister of State over the BBC and ITC are manifest in a number of positive duties. Those of the ITC are laid out in the Broadcasting Act of 1990 and those of the BBC laid out in its Royal

Charter and the BBC's Licence and Agreement (and Appendices), broadly they are to broadcast government announcements and to maintain political impartiality.

#### Footnote 2

#### General Laws which directly affect the working journalist, producer and editor

- 1) Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1976, restricts the media from identifying the complainant in rape cases. This has been extended by the 1992 Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, to cover the victims of virtually all sexual assaults.
- 2) Criminal Justice Act 1925, Section 41, prohibits the taking of a photograph or making a portrait or sketch of a court scene with a view to publication. The Criminal Justice Act 1991 rules that Parliament can now impose a statutory ban on the reporting of the result of a court hearing. This reduction in journalistic freedom was particularly pertinent during the reporting of the Guinness trial when journalists were allowed to report the commencement of the hearing, but due to the passing of the Act, not allowed to report its conclusion.
- 3) Judicial Proceeding (Regulation of Reports) Act 1925, restricts the reporting of details regarding divorce cases or indecent material, surgical or physical details of a court case.
- 4) Children and Young Persons Act 1933 Section 49 and 1969, states that it may be an offence to publish the names or addresses of persons aged seventeen or under who are involved in court proceedings or to publish information calculated to reveal their identity if the court so directs. The anonymity provision of the 1989 Children and Young Persons Act has been significantly widened to protect children from reports by the media.
- 5) Wireless and Telegraphy Act 1949 prohibits the use of police radio messages as a source of information.
- 6) Theft Act, 1968, Section 23 prohibits the journalist from stealing information.
- 7) Appellate Proceedings Act 1968, restricts the reporting of appeals from domestic cases.
- 8) Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, Section 8, restricts reporting of past offences to allow offenders with minor offences privacy from media intrusion.
- 9) Magistrate Courts Act 1980, replaces part of the 1967 Criminal Justice Act, adding ten extra restrictions to the reporting of Magistrate Court cases.
- 10) Contempt of Court Act 1981. This was used by the Thatcher and Major Conservative Governments to enforce journalists to conform to governmental wishes via the use of injunctions. These are known as prior restraints, where an injunction can be served to prevent a story from being published. In 1991, to the disappointment of many journalists, the European Court ruled that the Thatcher Government had been entitled to serve the injunctions against the Observer and the Guardian to prevent

them from publishing material from the Spycatcher novel in 1986. Any refusal to comply with an injunction or prior restraint results in a contempt of court. This, like the Official Secrets Act 1989, can be used as a 'catch all' device to curb journalistic activity and disobedience.

11) Public Order Act 1986, gives guidelines for the reporting of race which cannot be threatening, abusive or insulting.

12) Official Secrets Act 1989, amendment of the 1911 Official Secrets Act, Section 2. This act reduces the amount of information a journalist is allowed to report regarding government activities.

13) Defamation Act 1952, enables the individual to protect his or her reputation and to preserve the right of free speech. However, these two purposes conflict and the law attempts to preserve a proper balance between them, and the Tabloid press in particular has been accused of invading people's privacy in the search of a good story. Although this invasion of privacy is not the same of defamation it can still cause great offence to the individual who is the victim of it. Defamation can roughly be defined as the publication of matter which is likely to affect a person adversely in the estimation of reasonable people. A defamatory statement is libel if it is in permanent form, and slander if it exists in words or gestures. However, under the Defamation Act 1952, broadcasting is regarded as publication in permanent form.

14) Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. Prior to this Act a speaker (provided he or she was not speaking from a script) owned no copyright of his or her words, they were owned by the news organisation. The 1988 Act gives the speaker a copyright as soon as the words are written down by a journalist. The Act was later amended, Section 58 was added which stated that journalists did not infringe this Act provided he or she obtains permission to print or to broadcast from the person who uttered the words.

15) Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1978, identifies those organisations which are deemed to be of a terrorist nature. The Home Secretary issued directions in December 1990 under Section 29(3) of the Broadcasting Act 1981 and Section 10 of the Broadcasting Act 1990, requiring all television companies, and Satellite companies to refrain from broadcasting words spoken by representatives of those organisations identified in the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1978. This ridiculous ruling was repealed in 1994.

16) Representation of the People Act 1983 relates to the coverage of general elections, local elections, European elections and By-elections. Section 36 of the Broadcasting Act 1990 requires the ITC to formulate rules for Party Political Broadcasts on Channels 3, 4 and 5.

### Footnote 3

See Chapter 2 of Inglis (1990) for a discussion of the impact of technology.

#### Footnote 4

Briefly, his concerns were as follows. On 30 June 1990, a story had been reported overnight by the foreign wires (Reuters and Associated Press) of an attempted coup against president Kaunda's government in Zambia. The capital Lusaka, was not within easy reach of an ITN foreign bureau, the nearest foreign correspondent was located in Johannesburg. It was decided by the editors that it was not worthwhile sending him for three main reasons, i) the story would have "been over" by the time he got there, ii) there was no any intention of developing or analysing the events beyond the coup itself and iii) it was a Sunday when any major expenditure on news coverage is discouraged. Therefore the cheaper option was taken. A British freelance journalist working in Lusaka was asked to deliver a voice report via the telephone which would be recorded at ITN, accompanied by the relevant pictures which would be acquired by satellite link. The relevant pictures would then be edited to this. (Usually this procedure is the other way round, words are written according to the pictures available). However, the satellite link broke down and there were just a few seconds of film available. In order to get round this, the freelance was given instructions about what he was to say and the length of time he had got to make each point in direct relation to the pictures available at ITN. Furthermore the country was only releasing official information at the time, stating, wrongly that the coup was the work of one confused individual. ITN refused, on the grounds of cost to set up a live-link to a Kaunda "expert" who could have given the alternative view. As such the journalists had to compromise on the accuracy and informative nature of the story due in large part to technological breakdown and cost constraints.

#### Footnote 5

A contradictory phenomenon is exhibited by the programme editors. When the newscast begins, they are absorbed by the content and newsworthiness of the story, as the day progresses they become more involved with the subversion of that content to the format of the programme. Two or three hours before the transmission an editor is still talking to correspondents about the dimensions of the story, the spin-offs or links, however, the closer it gets to transmission time, the more obsessive an editor becomes about the programme format. The hybrid nature of a news editor's job also reflects the changing criteria of newsworthiness which occur during the newscast. For example, the closer it gets to transmission time, the story needs more ingredients, or the kind of news factors identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965); Tunstall (1971) and Bell (1991). Editors will routinely turn-down stories offered to them by the copy taster or Newsgathering/Intake close to transmission, simply because there would not be time to cover them properly, so stories which would have been included in the news programme had they happened two hours earlier are routinely ignored. For example, as already noted, at the BBC on 26 April 1994, at 1.15pm, actually during

transmission of the *One O'clock News*, a story came on the wires about a plane crash in Japan, there was no information about deaths or casualties and so the editor for the day decided not to include it in the bulletin as "there might not be many dead".

#### Footnote 6

1. Many of the international news reports relied substantially on material from Eurovision.

June 16 1994. the Prospects read: US outlining sanction plan at the United Nations. CNN fed package to ITN 0.05 BST, WTN material from South. James Mates, Diplomatic Correspondent - IN HOUSE. i.e. the correspondent will cut and prepare the film in London.

June 20 1994. *News at Ten* Prospects: Rwanda, selling pix from WTN; Mostar, UN administrators move in pix from WTN.

June 21 1994, *News at Ten*, Trevor McDonald ends the programme with '..and finally, they are chanting that name again in Buenos Aires tonight. Diego Maradona. Argentina's controversial captain scored a spectacular goal in their first world cup match tonight, eclipsing the hat-trick of his team-mate Gabriel Batistuta. Vernon Mann at ITN reports'. The report which follows was edited and prepared in the ITN studio using film from WTN.

2. 6th May 1994, BBC1 The Queen and John Major travel through the Channel Tunnel and the Queen opens the Waterloo International passenger terminal. This was a particularly well planned day as the BBC and other media organisations had been notified well in advanced. The arrangements for the day were planned with the precision of a military operation as follows

#### Chunnel/Waterloo

The Queen opens the Waterloo International passenger terminal as the first part of today's inauguration of the Channel Tunnel, 0930. She then boards a Eurostar train to travel via the Tunnel to Calais, dep 0953, arr 1140. No live two-ways possible after 0745 for security reasons.

Christopher Wain (TV) + Links for BN.

Jackie Hardgrave (Radio) + Radio Car for 5 Live Breakfast/Today.

Producer: Anthony Massey.

#### Chunnel/Calais

The Queen and President Mitterand arrive at Calais simultaneously for the inauguration of the French Eurotunnel terminal. 1140 - 1255 BST and then 1345 - 1400. (Lunch is private). Speeches (all in French); Flypast.

Mike Smartt/Christopher Wain (TV) + SNV + BBC TV OB (Outside Broadcast) (ceremony live on BBC1).

Stephen Jessell/Jackie Hardgrave (Radio) + Radio OB.

Bi-media Producer: Anthony Massey.

### Chunnel/Folkestone

The Queen and President Mitterrand travel from Calais to Folkestone in one of her Rolls Royces in a Eurotunnel shuttle wagon. On arrival at 1430 BST they inaugurate the British Eurotunnel terminal. Speeches, Flypast. Depart 1540, she for London, he by air from Lydd to Paris.

Mike Smartt/Christopher Wain (TV) via BBC TV OB (ceremony live on BBC1).

Jackie Hardgrave (Radio) and Radio OB.

Bimedia Producer: Anthony Massey.

### Chunnel/Rally

HRH Prince Michael of Kent leads more than a hundred British and French vehicles from London to Paris through the Channel Tunnel. They leave Hyde Park today at 1000 and will travel through the tunnel tomorrow at 0930.

Contact: Mark Perry.

### Footnote 7

#### Quotes given by journalists to denote newsworthiness

1) 'It's a quiet news day'. The story has only got onto the running order because not much else is happening.

2) 'It interests or involves a lot of people'. E.g. the Rail Strike. Or 'the audience can identify with the event because it shows the problems of day to day living' (programme editor, ITN's *5.40pm News*, 15/6/94). For example a story about a policeman hitting a fifteen year old boy who was misbehaving was suspended, but received a good deal of public support. This story was covered extensively by the tabloid newspapers. 'It make's people say "oh really"' (Ibid 16/6/94), or 'It's got the "Hey Maud" factor', (editor-for-the-day, BBC1's *Six O'clock News*, 12/5/94). 'It's got some nice human stuff in it' (correspondent, BBC's *Look North News*, 29/7/94).

3) 'It's worthy'. It is a story which ought to be done because it is important, but it is often very boring (producer, BBC1's *One O'clock News*, 27/4/94).

4) 'It's compulsory'. For example during the European election period, all the news genre had to adhere to the Representation of the People Act, which meant that parties such as the Green Party had to have some coverage.

5) 'It is something different', or 'it's new', 'it moves the story on'. For example a new development such as the mass exodus of refugees in Rwanda moved the story on from coverage of bloodshed and massacre providing new pictures and a new story line.

6) 'We've got great pictures'. The visual imperative of the television medium is confirmed (see Tunstall (1971)).

7) 'It's the sheer scale of the thing'. An explanation of why the killings in Rwanda were being covered (see Galtung and Ruge (1965)), their news factor, "superlativeness", refers to the scale of an event, i.e. the bigger an event, the more likely it will be covered.

8) 'It's on the front page of the papers'. All programme editors and news personnel check the papers everyday. However, for the programme editor of ITN's *5.40pm News*, the fact that a foreign story had made it to the front page of the newspapers encouraged him to also cover the story.

9) It fulfils a particular programme need. For example, there is often a search for the perfect "and finally..." story or a 'good story after the break', or 'we need a better second story' or 'we need something different' (programme editor, ITN's *News at Ten*, 20/6/94).

10) 'It's a first'. 'It's got Brits in it'. 'Everyone else is there'. 'It balances the programme'. 'It's a death plus' (i.e. it is more than just an 'ordinary' death) (programme editor, ITN's *5.40pm News*, 14/6/94).

11) 'We can get a good spokesperson on this'. 'We can do a lot of elements for this story' (programme editor, BBC1's *Nine O'clock News*, 18/5/94).

Quotes given by journalists to explain why an event will not be covered.  
(lack of newsworthiness)

1) 'We've already done that'.

2) 'It's not our kind of story'.

3) 'It's too expensive'.

4) "It's too late, my programme is full'.

5) 'It's too tacky, too down-market'. 'It's dodgy'. Problems with the legality of the story. Lawyers may stop pieces being broadcast or an internal review by senior editorial staff may decide a news item could cause problems.

6) 'It's boring'.

7) 'It's yesterday's news'.

8) 'We've not got any pics'.

9) 'It doesn't happen in our time'.

10) 'It doesn't move the story on'.

11) 'We've not got cameras there'.

12) 'Not enough dead'.

13) 'Too samey'.



14) 'It can wait' (This story could be told any time, and does not have a particular "peg" at the moment).

15) 'Everyone's packages have come in over long so something will have to go'. This occurs when correspondents disobey the programme editor and squeeze a few extra seconds by making their package longer than the allocated time. If several correspondents do this on the same day it can result in a piece being dropped.

16) 'It would take too much telling'. It is too complicated for the medium and for the time allocated to it. *Look North News* correspondents found that the complexities of the Supergun issue were become too much for them and were glad to hand the story over to the national news centre in London (presenter, BBC's *Look North News*, 27/7/94).

#### Footnote 8

Personal telephone communication with Emeritus Professor Blumler in April 1994, prior to my newsroom visit to the BBC.

### NOTES: CHAPTER 7

#### Footnote 1

Birt and Jay identified two models of news. First, the newsroom model, where the dramatic or unusual (and personalities) are given prominence over other values in the news. They argued that these values are not problematic when they are applied to simple stories of human interest, but are inadequate or even dangerous when they are applied to social, political, economic and international forces. Birt and Jay identified a tendency for journalists to report complex issues as separate stories or discrete facts, so that budget stories lead on the price of beer rather than to a commitment to full employment. This, they argued was due to the uninformed and untrained journalist being unable to explain issues if they are trained to simply report straight every crime story they come across. Their second model, the movie model, also draws attention and effort away from analysis of issues. The tendency is for such programmes to work to film requirements and to see a story as an excuse to make a film rather than film as an aid to explanation (*The Times*, 28/2/75 and 30/9/75).

Birt and Jay's prescription for the malaise in British television journalism was to unify the news and current affairs department in order to emphasise the issue rather than the event. This would appear in a daily flag-ship programme, broadcast from 10pm to 11pm everyday, where only five or six stories would be placed in the fullest context possible. 'As the premier programme of the News and Current Affairs Department it would have first call on the Department's pooled journalistic resources' (*The Times*, 1/10/75). The staff would be organised into two parallel echelons under a head of department. The first group would consist of programme editors and producers exercising the editor's delegated

responsibility, and the second would consist of journalists organised into subject teams (specialist units), each headed by a different editor, such as a foreign affairs editor, industrial editor and so on. This, they argued correctly would be much easier at the BBC than at ITV as the BBC's News and Current Affairs Departments were both already under the same management, whereas the ITV federal system enables individual companies to pursue their own programme philosophies.

#### Footnote 2

Professor Barrie Gunter, formerly Head of ITC Research says 'it is not true to say that the ITC has a lighter touch than the IBA. The touch can still be heavy, its just that it is implemented differently' (personal communication, 25/3/95).

#### Footnote 3

Table 4.3 (Chapter 4) shows the diverse range of headlines broadcast by the different television news programmes from 19th-23rd April 1993 inclusive. Below are listed further examples of diversity and difference, taken from the week analysed by my content analysis and the weeks spent in the television newsroom. Obviously space does not permit me to give every example, and these are by no means the only examples from those weeks. However, they are intended to be used as an illustration of the type of diversity one can find on "an average news day", and to show that diversity exists even on a news day when the first two stories are so newsworthy that they are covered by all the news programmes.

#### Monday 19 April 1993

Although there were two stories which dominated the day for all the newsrooms, Chris Hani's funeral in South Africa (which had been planned well enough in advance to ensure that it got a good deal of media coverage), and the evacuation of Srebrenica by the United Nations troops the rest of the news stories covered that day were of a wide range. For example ITN's *12.30pm News* also covered third, the forthcoming Newbury By-election, fourth, a police investigation of a hit and run accident, and fifth the introduction of identity cards in Ireland. BBC1's *One O'clock News*, covered the identity card story third in their running order, followed fourth by a piece on the Euro Tunnel and fifth, the forthcoming Italian referendum. BBC1's *Children's Newsround*, led with the opening of a Cancer Helpline for teenage victims, second the evacuation of Srebrenica, two sports stories and a fifth with a story about a baby Ostrich with a broken leg!

#### Thursday 22 April 1993

BBC1's *Breakfast News* led the story about Bosnian Serbs claiming that the Muslims in Srebrenica had only surrendered a fraction of their arms and were therefore contravening the cease-fire agreement. The second story concentrated on an attempt by Labour to force a referendum on the

Maastricht Bill which was defeated, third, unemployment figures due out later in the day were expected to show a rise in unemployment (actually there was a fall, so the speculation was incorrect). In contrast *GMTV News* lead with a story a Waco survivor meeting up with his two sisters in the United States, followed by a speculation that Dennis Thatcher has cancer, and third a story about Bill Wyman remarrying. *Big Breakfast News* lead with a story about British soldiers discovering atrocities in a Bosnian village, followed by the British Rail and RMT rail union talks, placing the aftermath of the Waco siege third in the running order.

#### Tuesday 3 May 1994

BBC1's *One O'clock News* led with a story about Michael Portillo's comments about a single European currency, followed by an interview with Kenneth Clarke, the programme also covered the following countries South Africa (elections), Rwanda, Russia and Bangladesh, dropped a story about Frederick West (the mass killer) and a story about an injured jockey, and a brief story about Ronnie Knight returning from Spain to face a prison sentence was run tenth in running order. In contrast ITN's *12.30pm News* on the same day lead with the story about Ronnie Knight, followed by coverage of South Africa (elections), the changes in the housing market and ended with an animal story.

ITN's *5.40pm News* on the same day again led with the Ronnie Knight story and used a 'Sun' interview, followed by John Major at Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs are only included by the *5.40pm News* if 'there is a good "punch-up" in the House', (programme editor, ITN's *5.40pm News*, 15/6/94), the third story was a shooting in Manchester. In contrast BBC1's *Six O'clock News* led with Rwanda, followed by politics, Portillo's comments on a single European currency, followed by an education story, then Clinton and Haiti, followed by a good news story about jobs being created in Northern Ireland, the story about Ronnie Knight was moved up to sixth place in the running order.

#### Wednesday 4 May 1994

Both ITN's *12.30pm News* and BBC1's *One O'clock News* led on a big story, the signing of the Peace Accord by the Israeli Prime Minister and the leader of the PLO. However, ITN's *5.40pm News* led with a different story, Prince Charles announced that smacking can be good for children whereas BBC1's *Six O'clock News* continued to lead with the signing of the Peace Accord.

#### Thursday 5 May 1994

ITN's *12.30pm News* led with a story about a house fire secondly with the discovery of another body murdered by the now infamous Frederick West and thirdly with the caning of American Michael Fay in Singapore and fourth with Rwanda. In contrast BBC1's *One O'clock News* led with

Rwanda, followed by South Africa, third with a piece on the forthcoming local elections and fourth with the Frederick West story.

#### Wednesday 25 May 1994

ITN's *12.30pm News* and the *5.40pm News* led with a story about the "killer bug", the flesh eating, necrotising fasciitis, accompanied by some horrific film of a man with an enormous piece of flesh missing from the side of his torso, BBC1's *One O'clock News* and *Six O'Clock News* ran this story third and omitted the very gruesome film. By the evening, however, the *Nine O'clock News* ran a story on the so-called killer bug as the lead. This was in direct reaction to the media hysteria which had been building up all day. The *Nine O'clock News* took a much more analytical line, first reporting the story straight, without the gruesome film followed by a second package based upon analysis of the media hysteria. The main theme of this was that foreign newspapers were reporting on the media hysteria occurring in Britain, arguing that just as many people die of the "bug" in Belgium but it was not a news story there! The questioning of the journalists on the *Nine O'clock News* of their fellow journalists' news values was echoed by a package done by *Newsnight* the next evening. This rather lofty approach taken by the journalists from the latter two programmes was a common feature of the two newsrooms, where down-market or mainstream journalism was disparaged.

#### Footnote 4

For example, a correspondent cannot approach an MP if he or she is talking to someone else, they have to hover around them, make eye contact, nodding to them, and are unable to run after them if they miss them. Obviously experienced correspondents who are known and trusted by the politicians tend to be much more successful in the Lobby. One correspondent likened the practice to soliciting! Everything that is said in the Lobby by politicians is "off the record" and so if a correspondent betrays this trust, he or she is immediately barred from the Lobby. Generally the journalists and the politicians do not mix socially, and the cafes and restaurants are segregated. The criticism that Lobby correspondents receive no more information than government wishes to know seems to be most apt.

#### Footnote 5

In May/June 1992, I conducted a study of the press coverage of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I found that the coverage by all the main British national broadsheet newspapers was reported in a manner which subverted environmental issues to ones of political, economic and human interest. There was very little analysis of the significance of the Earth Summit,<sup>3</sup> but instead a great deal of concentration on the tension between the political leaders in attendance. Ecological disasters were sometimes focussed on as examples of what could go wrong with the environment, but were always extreme and difficult to relate to, as they

were not applicable to the world views of the average British newspaper reader (see Harrison (1992)).

## **NOTES: CHAPTER 8**

### **Footnote 1**

Dayan and Katz (1994), provide a list of criteria which separate media events from news events:-

- 1) Media events attract the largest audiences in the world.
- 2) Media events allow the realisation of the full potential of electronic media technology.
- 3) Media events may create their own constituencies, uniting nations or groups of people.
- 4) Media events have the power to declare a holiday, to interrupt routine in order allow participation in the civil religion, ceremony or ritual. Generally media events provide the opportunity for festive viewing. Viewers often dress up rather than down and watch in groups rather than alone.
- 5) Media events cause reality to be uprooted. Sometimes the location of the event is actually inaccessible to the millions watching it on television, but it is made to feel "real" and accessible.
- 6) Media events give an insight into the aesthetics of television production. Audiences have particular expectations regarding the coverage of a media event.
- 7) Media events need public approval to succeed. In a democracy official events cannot be imposed on the unwilling or unbelieving.
- 8) Media events have particular functions in society. They may commemorate events, restore order and well-being after a national trauma, or transform and solve problems.
- 9) Media events usually monopolise all television channels which switch away from their regularly scheduled programming.
- 10) A media event is broadcast "live", as it is happening.
- 11) The organisers are typically public bodies with whom the media co-operate. The media therefore acts as a witness to the event. The journalists who preside over them suspend their normally critical stance and treat the subject with respect or reverence. As such they rarely interrupt the spectacle, only intervening with analysis and explanation but rarely or never with criticism.
- 12) Media events are preplanned and announced in advance. There is usually an active period of looking forward to the event by the media and the nation.
- 13) Media events celebrate, what are on the whole, Establishment initiatives and are therefore hegemonic. Such events integrate societies, renewing loyalty to the legitimate authorities.
- 14) Media events are pronounced "historic" occasions.

Footnote 2

THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE WACO NEWS STORY

- 1) Description of the events and establishment of facts and figures. The number of dead, the number of British, the number of children, the number of survivors etc.
- 2) First stage media speculation about the cause of the fire. A precedent is found - the Jonestown Massacre in 1978. A media line is established regarding "cult" activities.
- 3) Demonising the violent extremist. Within the context of what was known about "cult" leaders, the television news programmes then substantiated this with a series of interviews with ex-"cult" members, with relatives who were negative about Koresh, with a variety of "cult" experts and with members of the FBI.
- 4) Perusal of the human interest angle, via interviews with relatives. *GMTV News* in particular monopolised a family and followed them to the United States.
- 5) Exploration of controversy regarding who was to blame. Within this context David Koresh was not exonerated in any way, but the FBI were also accused of being incompetent. Much of the coverage implied that the British would have handled it better.
- 6) The potential political fallout, brief speculation as to whether anyone would resign, most television news programmes dropped the speculation about blame once President Clinton announced he took full responsibility and thereby indicated clearly that he approved of using military weaponry and tactics against US civilians. Only *Channel Four News* examined the possibility of corruption in the Justice Department.

However, as Tables 4.15 to 4.29 in Chapter 4, and Tables 8.1 to 8.5 in Chapter 8 show, there were differences in emphasis on what constituted newsworthiness by different television news programmes. *GMTV News* for example considered the human interest dimension to be the most newsworthy, and BBC1's *Breakfast News* considered the international violence aspects the most newsworthy and *Channel Four News* considered the political aspect of events to be the most newsworthy. This general trend identified in the content analysis of all television news programmes was supported by the type of news coverage different news programmes used for the ending and aftermath of the Waco siege.

All the news programmes ignored the religious perspective of the story. None explained in any detail what the Seventh Day Adventists or the

Branch Davidians believed, other than in the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. None of the television news programmes consulted a biblical or theological scholar and therefore none of them established that Koresh believed he was a messiah, or a christ and not Jesus Christ. None reported that he believe that his mission was to decode the Seven Seals. There was no indication that the majority of his recruits were of Caribbean origin and why their impoverished position in British society encouraged them to believe more strongly in a better life in the next world. Furthermore none of the news programmes considered the implications for gun control in the United States.

#### Footnote 3

In contrast to the British media's acceptance and reporting of events at Waco, debate is currently underway in the United States about the quality of information the media were given by the authorities. At a meeting in Oklahoma on 27 May 1995, David Hall, General Manager of Oklahoma City TV (KPOC-TV) reported that 'at the beginning of the Waco incident, KPOC was given a set of facts from the BATF and the Justice Department, facts which they initially acted upon as if true'. His current News Director, Kristina King, acting as reporter at the scene, later called David Hall claiming that everything the Government had indicated was a lie. As a result KPOC has financed a fourteen month investigative effort into uncovering the events at Waco, hiring academic experts. In August 1994, a report entitled *Overview and General Information of Criminal Negligence by Agents of Federal Government* was prepared and sent to Congress" (The Internet, *Journalism-Critical*, 1 June 1995).

#### Footnote 4

See also the essay by Palmer (1994) for an analysis of the three versions of reality and explanation of the events of Waco. She refers to these as "The Manslaughter Version", "The Murder Version" and "The Suicide Version". She puts forward an argument which diminishes the possibility of a mass suicide and critically questions the role and ambition of the federal agencies.

### NOTES: CONCLUSION

#### Footnote 1

Epstein (1973) identified various criteria used by news editors in selecting television news stories. Such as, personality considerations, predictability, film value, geographic balance, time considerations, preferences for good correspondents, or technological implications.

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