NEWS, PUBLIC RELATIONS AND POWER

edited by SIMON COTTLE

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AND POWER

The *Media in Focus* series provides students and lecturers with an authoritative, that is, balanced and informed account of the media communication field and its many sub-fields of contemporary research. The editor of each volume, an expert in the media sub-field in focus, contributes an introductory 'mapping essay' charting the perspectives, debates and findings of major studies before introducing the reader to a carefully commissioned and structured range of chapters authored by international researchers. In this way, readers gain a relatively compact and structured overview of the media sub-field in question as well as exposure to a judicious range of writings selected to illuminate theoretical and methodological frameworks, key research findings, and defining debates. The *Media in Focus* series, then, is informed by strong pedagogical and scholarly emphases throughout and provides media communication lecturers and students with an accessible and authoritative resource for teaching and learning.

Simon Cottle, Series Editor

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PART I
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

News, Public Relations and Power: Mapping the Field

Simon Cottle

We are living in increasingly 'promotional times'. Today states, corporate organisations as well as diverse pressure groups and new social movements all seek to put their message across via the media in pursuit of disparate organisational interests, collective aims and public legitimacy. The study of media sources and public relations, therefore, takes us to the heart of key concerns and debates about the media's relation to wider structures and systems of power. It invites us to reconsider the relative power of the media in relation to other organised interests, as well as the nature of the mechanisms that link them and through which they interact. Small wonder, perhaps, that the study of media sources and public relations is fast becoming a key area for empirical research and theorisation within the broader field of media communications study.

The field of journalism, by definition, occupies a pivotal site in the communication of conflicts and in relation to the surrounding voices that vie and contend for media influence, representation and participation. Who secures media access, and why and how, inevitably raises fundamental questions about the nature of media participation, processes and forms of mediated citizenship, issues of media performance and the play of power enacted between the news media and their sources. Public relations (PR) also occupies a central position in today's wider promotional culture. Defined here as 'the deliberate management of public image and information in pursuit of organisational interests', the practice and institutions of public relations have grown across the twentieth century into a major industry. Indeed, in recent years this growth has assumed exponential proportions. The rise of the public relations industry, and its associated army of public relations consultants and so-called 'spin doctors' employed by governments and corporations, pressure groups and celebrities, mirrors the rise of an increasingly media aware, and 'mediatised' society – a society where both commercial interests and cultural identities seemingly compete for media space and strategically mobilise forms of communicative power.

News, Public Relations and Power aims to introduce some of the most important theoretical ideas and empirical findings delivered by researchers working in this field and so help us to better understand the complex relations of power enacted

between media sources and journalism. The chapters that follow are written by leading international researchers in the field, and their contributions address diverse source fields and media public relations strategies, as well as the characteristic forms and opportunities that attend news access and participation. Specific areas covered include:

- the recent rapid growth of public relations and its impact on news production;

- state information management strategies in times of internal political dissent;

- political parties and mediated 'spin' conducted at national and local levels;

- the historically changing nature of journalist and source strategies in times of war and international crises;

- comparative analysis of non-governmental organisations – quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (quangos), trades unions, voluntary groups and charities – and their efforts to secure media access;

- the communication strategies of environmental pressure groups and ecological and cyber-activists;

- tabloid television and forms of cultural representation; and

- the 'deliberative' architecture of television's news and current affairs programmes and how this variously enables and disables the public engagement of contending views and voices.

In these ways this book examines media source involvement and public relations strategies across different fields of organisational activity, in relation to different collective interests, and across time. It thereby provides a comparative base from which to appraise competing theoretical and explanatory frameworks and different levels of analytical approach. The collection throws its net much wider (and critically deeper) than narrowly conceived ideas of public relations as the technical organisational accomplishment of 'effective' communications, and encompasses a wider range of theoretical approaches to the study of sources than is usually the case. This is designed to encourage a more conceptually nuanced and theoretically sophisticated appreciation of the multidimensional nature, dynamics and complexities of media–source interactions and forms of public relations. Together, then, the nine chapters that comprise this book serve to provide the reader with an entrée into the latest thinking and research findings concerning this historically changing, organisationally complex, and often politically contingent field.

This first chapter now sets the scene for the chapters that follow by mapping the broad contours of theoretical approach, empirical study and defining debates that have informed the study of media sources and mediatised public relations.[1] On this basis we can better understand the continuing relevance of past media communication research and appreciate the productive departures of more recent researchers in this key area of communication enquiry.

Media Communications: Research Traditions

Questions of media source involvement raise fundamental concerns about who is delegated to speak or pronounce on social affairs and wider conflicts, of how exactly this communicative entitlement is conducted, and by whom it has been authorised. Profound questions of 'representation', 'social and cultural power' and 'citizenship' are all thereby raised. Putting the matter succinctly, whose voices and viewpoints structure and inform news discourse goes to the heart of democratic views of, and radical concerns about, the news media. Traditionally, liberal democratic theory contains an implicit concern with questions of news representation and access. Here the liberty of the press (and wider news media) must be protected so that dissenting views can be aired, opinion formation facilitated and 'representative' democratic process sustained (Mill, J. 1997; Mill, J.S. 1997). Variants of critical theory, for their part, have generally been more explicit and observe how the news media in fact routinely access and privilege elite 'definitions of reality'. These, it is said, serve ruling hegemonic interests, legitimise social inequality and/or thwart moves to participatory democracy (e.g. Golding and Murdock 1979; Gitlin 1980; Hall 1982; Herman and Chomsky 1988).

Both liberal and critical theorists, in their different ways, point to the fundamental, pivotal even, concerns of media source involvement and media representation. Whose voices predominate, whose vie and contend, and whose are marginalised or rendered silent on the news stage are questions of shared interest. How social groups and interests are defined and symbolically visualised is also part and parcel of media source access. Whether social groups are representationally legitimated or symbolically positioned as 'Other', labelled deviant or literally rendered speechless can, of course, have far-reaching consequences as shown, for example, in studies of media representation of youth subcultures (Cohen 1972), ethnic minorities (Van Dijk 1991), political dissidents and 'terrorists' (Gerbner 1992) or the victims of 'risk society' (Cottle 2000a).

Much depends, therefore, on how we conceptualise and theorise the relationship between the news media, their sources and wider society, and how we understand the mechanisms and meanings that surround and inform processes and patterns of news representation and entry. Liberal democratic theory and variants of critical theory have traditionally staked out, in broad terms, an area of common concern and debate – the role of media in giving voice to surrounding political interests (or elite views) and the articulation (or ideological manufacture) of public opinion. These views have also informed more recent debates centred on the media approached as 'public sphere' (Habermas 1989) – a space constituted by the media, available to all, and in which public debate and reason prevail for the benefit of public opinion and political will formation (Elliott 1986; Garnham 1986; Curran 1991; Frazer 1992; Hallin 1994; Dahlgren 1995; Murdock 1999; Husband 2000). Here theorists debate as fiercely as ever the operations of power – economic, political, social, cultural – and how these variously condition and shape, or erode, the contribution of today's media to forms of 'citizenship', 'rational' opinion formation and 'consensus', while

nonetheless acknowledging the less than ideologically closed and less than individually open nature of public communications. This turn to a more historically nuanced, empirically differentiated and politically contested view of 'the media' as a site of struggle, in which contingencies as well as determinisms are thought to inform the operations of material and discursive power and representational outcomes, provides a foundation for much current work in the media communications field, including the study of media–sources interactions. Developments in both society and social theory have added new levels of inflection as well as urgency to this concern with media approached as 'public sphere'.

New(s) Times: Contested Fields

Contemporary social theorists maintain that we live in globalising, post-traditional and uncertain times. Each of these characteristic features of late-modern societies point to the increased centrality of the media in expressing the profusion of competing interests and associated discourses that now clamour for public representation. Processes of globalisation assisted by new forms of communication technology and delivery have accelerated the collapse of space and time, stretched and intensified social relations conducted at a distance (Giddens 1994), and given rise to a global 'network society' (Castells 1996). Globalisation has also prompted increased flows of finance, peoples and cultures around the globe (Lash and Urry 1994) and contributed to the undermining of nation states and their ability to control and manage economic and political processes – both within and without territorial borders (Held et al. 1999). In such ways, the contemporary world generates new economic and political conflicts, exacerbates problems of state legitimation, and has prompted the rise of the 'public relations state' (Deacon and Golding 1994).

   Globalisation also consolidates modernising impulses, including the disen-chantment of the world where faith and tradition become subject to Max Weber's 'iron-cage' of instrumental reason. Pronounced individualism, con-sumerism and technical rationality undermine traditions and belief systems once taken for granted. In 'post-traditional times', however, traditions do not neces-sarily disappear but, paradoxically, can assume a more assertive and combative stance in response to modernising/ globalising forces. The point is that they are now expected to defend themselves in reasoned and self-reflective terms and cannot assume unquestioning adherence on the basis of tradition alone (Giddens 1994). Traditional solidarities of class and political allegiance rooted in the social relations of mass production have also been weakened in respect of new flexible arrangements of social production and cultural patterns of consumption; this has given rise to new forms of identity politics, new social movements and other extra-parliamentary 'subpolitics'. Together these constitute an expanded field of 'the political' within civil society (Hall and Jacques 1989; Mouffe 1996; Beck 1997; Castells 1997). Such social transformations have also produced a cacophony of discourses as different state, corporate and group interests and cultural identities

compete, contend and promote a diversity of values and aims via communicative action in the media 'public sphere' (Habermas 1996).

This profusion of contending discourses is also encouraged by today's increased 'social reflexivity' which questions knowledge claims and expertise, including the 'certainties' of science and the technocratic administration of 'risks' – those potentially catastrophic 'manufactured uncertainties' of late modernity now circumnavigating the globe and possibly affecting generations yet unborn (Beck 1992; Beck et al. 1994). Anthony Giddens maintains that such powerful forces of social change have given rise to feelings of 'ontological insecurity' (Giddens 1990), fuelling the rise of environmental consciousness and grassroots protests conducted at local and global levels – protests that are invariably played out in the mass media spotlight. All this contributes to the growth of 'subpolitics' – a politics from below – questioning 'normative' goals of economic growth and state-sanctioned environmental exploitation. Powerful states as well as individuals inhabit uncertain times of course, as the events of September 11, 2001 bear witness (Zelizer and Allan 2002). This has prompted renewed efforts at an international 'suprapolitics' – a politics from above – and this too is no less dependent upon the legitimating arenas of the mass media and its public relations capabilities.

The foregoing points to some of the profound processes of social transformation that today are thought to underlie the profusion of discourses that clamour for media access and public representation. The mass media constitute a prime arena in which the contending interests, values and viewpoints that comprise this 'radical pluralism' seek to engage in communicative action in pursuit of public recognition, legitimacy and strategic aims – whether by strategies of 'disclosure' or 'enclosure' (Ericson et al. 1989). But how have theorists researched, theorised and explained the involvement of media sources in processes of news representation? What are the principal complexities involved and what are the key questions that we need to pursue today?

The following maps in more theoretically proximate terms the different paradigms and range of approaches that have helped to define the current field and stake out its fundamental concerns with media–source interaction and participation. The first, broadly sociological, paradigm is generally concerned with how sources strategically pursue their organisational interests via media access and aim to secure 'definitional advantage'. The second, broadly culturalist, paradigm pursues the representational nature of media portrayal and access and examines questions of 'symbolic power'. And the third, emergent 'communicative', paradigm develops on and departs from the previous two by focusing more explicitly on how forms of 'communicative power' are performed and enacted in the media with a heightened awareness of the contingencies involved – whether in relation to the potentially transformative aspects of 'ritual processes', or the less than certain outcomes associated with live mediated encounters and 'risks' of public performances. While there is certainly overlap between these three paradigmatic orientations, each nonetheless pursues different questions and emphasises different aspects of news media–source interaction. Importantly, each also serves to illuminate different dimensions of power informing media–source relations, whether strategic, symbolic or communicative. These paradigms will be

reviewed in turn, but first it is useful to revisit briefly the tradition of symbolic interactionism. This earlier sociological approach has proved to be seminal, bequeathing influential ideas to later sociological studies of sources strategies, culturalist approaches to the study of the symbolic nature of media representations, as well as studies of communicative action and the dynamic nature of mediatised encounters.

Seminal Beginnings: Symbolic Interactionism

The sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969, 1971) sought to explore how labels, symbols and meanings inform human interactions and understanding. Influential studies of how 'outsiders' were labelled as deviant (Becker 1963), how 'others' were stigmatised (Goffman 1963), and how 'moral entrepreneurs', 'control agents' and 'folk devils' featured within moral panics (Cohen 1972) have informed countless studies of media representation to this day. In extreme cases of deviant labelling, social groups have become dehumanised, demonised and their aims depoliticised and delegitimated (Cohen and Young 1981). This early sociological approach with its concern with processes of labelling and symbolisation influenced the early development of cultural studies (Hall 1974), but it also prompted a more strategic view of social power. Howard Becker's (1967) notion of a 'hierarchy of credibility' helps us to map the evident patterns of elite access within the news media (and documented across countless empirical studies) and he explains this with reference to the social structure and cultural mores of the wider society.

> In any system of ranked groups, participants take it as given that members of the highest group have the right to define the way things really are. And since . . . matters of rank and status are contained in the mores, this belief has a moral quality. . . . Thus, credibility and the right to be heard are differently distributed through the ranks of the system. *(Becker 1967: 241)*

Becker's formulation, though suggestive, nonetheless remained theoretically underdeveloped. It offers a far too static and ahistorical view of 'social hierarchy' and cultural 'mores' and thus begs questions concerning the role of the media in mediating change, conflicts and contending interests. However, when aligned to Herbert Blumer's views on processes of 'collective definition' and the so-called 'career' of 'social problems', a more processual and strategic view on news access is opened up (Blumer 1971: 301). As 'social problems' proceed through Blumer's discerned stages of 'emergence', 'legitimation', 'mobilisation', 'formation' and 'transformation', so the strategic activities of key players become crucial, as do the news media – one of the 'key arenas of public discussion' (Blumer 1971: 303). In a statement remarkably redolent of more recent theoretical positions on news source interventions (see below), Blumer usefully draws attention to the dynamics and political contingencies involved in mobilising social problems.

> How the problem comes to be defined, how it is bent in response to awakened sentiment,
> how it is depicted to protect vested interests, and how it reflects the play of strategic
> position and power – all are appropriate questions that suggest the importance of the
> process of mobilization for action. *(Blumer 1971: 304)*

Symbolic interactionism, then, with its seminal ideas of 'labelling', 'hierarchy of credibility', the 'play of strategic position and power' and 'the mobilization of action' contributes valuable analytical tools for the interrogation of media sources strategies, the symbolic nature of media representations, as well as the investigation of interactional forms of communicative action. Nonetheless, for the reasons mentioned, these remain theoretically underdeveloped in respect of the exact mechanism(s) linking the strategic promotion of particular 'social problems' with the news media.

Moral panic theory, as elaborated by Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), promised to bridge this gap. Moral panic theory explores how public anxieties are generated by the media through processes of media amplification involving sensationalising, exaggerating, distorting and symbolising 'problematic' events and social actors which, in turn, leads to processes of societal reaction (typically a tough law-and-order crackdown) and the resurrection of a 'societal control' culture. Cohen's theory of moral panics thus served as a bridge between symbolic interactionist ideas of labelling and neo-Marxist ideas of ideological legitimation. But again we can note how the exact mechanisms linking the news media to a discerned wider 'societal control culture' remained empirically under-explored, as did the possible motivations informing the so-called 'control agents' and 'moral entrepreneurs' manning, courtesy of the news media, the moral barricades. Moreover, in today's promotional times, we can no longer assume that dominant social interests have it all their own way; yesteryear's 'folk devils' have increasingly learnt to 'fight back' on today's media stage (McRobbie 1994).

Media Sources and Strategic Power

Sociological studies of media sources and news–source interactions encompass a range of influential theoretical approaches: neo-Marxism, the sociology of news production and the sociology of source fields. Each contributes important insights and conceptualisation for improved understanding of the strategic nature of media source power and source interventions into the world of news discourse.

Neo-Marxism and Legitimation

The early works of the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) (1976, 1980) and Stuart Hall and his colleagues (1975a, 1978) are in many respects similar. Each builds upon the ideas of symbolic interactionism, each is informed by

neo-Marxist views of society structured in dominance, and each seeks to move beyond interactionist ideas of 'labelling' to those of ideological 'legitimation'. Importantly, each also identifies the role of a dominant 'world-view' or 'dominant culture' and structured hierarchical access as the key mechanisms accounting for the privileging of dominant ideas by the news media. Thus, according to the GUMG,

> television news is a cultural artefact; it is a sequence of socially manufactured messages, which carry many of the culturally dominant assumptions of our society. From the accents of the newscasters to the vocabulary of camera angles; from who gets on and what questions get asked, via selection of stories to presentation of bulletins, the news is a highly mediated product. *(GUMG 1976: 1)*

These 'culturally dominant assumptions' are said to inform journalist's views and, in turn, to inform the systematic and preferential patterns of news access: 'Access is structured and hierarchical to the extent that powerful groups and individuals have privileged and routine entry into the news itself and to the manner and means of its production' (GUMG 1980: 114). A slightly less static account of the news media and their sources is provided by Stuart Hall, who maintained: 'broadcasters and their institutions mediate – hold the pass, command the communicative channels – between the elites of power (social, economic, political, cultural) and the mass audience' (Hall 1975a: 124). Hall and his colleagues also provide a twin-pronged approach to news access and the reproduction of the voices of the powerful.

> These two aspects of news production – the practical pressures of constantly working against the clock and the professional demands of impartiality and objectivity – combine to produce a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions. *(Hall et al. 1978: 58)*

In these ways, Hall et al. maintain that the news media reproduce the voices of the powerful who become the 'primary definers' of events. Though subject to some limited opportunities for challenge in the news media, the 'primary definers', via routine access and news legitimation, command the discursive field and set the terms of debate there. The voices of the powerful are translated into the 'public idioms' of different newspapers, which thereby serve to invest them with 'popular force and resonance' (Hall et al. 1978: 61). For both the GUMG and Hall, questions of news 'mediation' ultimately boil down to the reproduction of the 'culturally dominant assumptions of society' (GUMG 1976: 1) and how different news outlets become 'inflected with dominant and consensual connotations' (Hall et al. 1978: 62). In both cases, ideas of news mediation are effectively reduced to a view of ideological translation and transmission that leaves little room for consideration of the characteristic forms, differentiated appeals and discursive possibilities inhering within different journalist genres and in relation to differently organised source fields. We need to know more about the interactions within and between news sources and news producers before we can

simply position the news producers as 'unwittingly, unconsciously' serving 'as a support for the reproduction of a dominant ideological discursive field' (Hall 1982: 88) – a point that has also been recognised by more recent work by members of the GUMG (Eldridge 1993; Miller et al. 1998a).

Perhaps too, ideas of 'dominant culture', like those of its correlate 'dominant ideology', were always too generalising, too nebulous to substitute for an analysis of the complex of forces at play (Abercrombie et al. 1980). But the most serious limitation of these studies is that neither examines the complexities and interactions informing the professional and organisational worlds of news production and news sources. This is so notwithstanding the GUMG's partial (but aborted) production study, self-described as a 'reconnaissance into alien territory' (GUMG 1976: 58) and Hall's theoretical acknowledgement of the role of bureaucratic routines and the professional ideology of objectivity in accessing primary definers (Hall et al. 1978: 53–77). For a more grounded appreciation of the role of 'strategic position and play of power' in respect of these, we have to look elsewhere.

Sociology of News Production: Behind the Scenes

Studies in the sociology of news production, many based on considerable time in the field and drawing upon different news outlets, have revealed something of the normally concealed internal workings of the 'black box' of news production and the routine professional practices and organisational and cultural norms informing its operation (Epstein 1973; Altheide 1976; Tuchman 1978; Schlesinger 1978; Golding and Elliott 1979; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980; Ericson et al. 1987; Cottle 1993a). Their findings help to throw light on source–news interactions.

According to Gaye Tuchman's observations, for example, news is a bureaucratic accomplishment organisationally geared up to 'routinizing the unexpected' and 'taming the news environment' (Tuchman 1973, 1978). Here processes of news manufacture must ensure that sufficient amounts of news, comprising a certain mix of news subjects, are produced and packaged on time and to a predetermined and professionally understood organisational form (Rock 1981). This bureaucratic goal necessitates a newsroom division of labour, organisation of journalists into 'news beats' and the setting up of news bureaux (Rock 1981; Tuchman 1973; Fishman 1980), as well as the development of a 'vocabulary of precedents' that helps journalists to 'recognise', 'produce', 'source' and 'justify' their news stories (Ericson et al. 1987: 348).

It is these practical responses to news work, it is said, that lead to the systematic accessing of powerful, resource-rich institutions and their definitions of events – and to the marginalisation of resource-poor social groups and interests (Goldenberg 1975; Gitlin 1980). Society's major institutions – government, the courts, and police and so on – are thereby positioned to pronounce on social affairs and command both the physical resources and the authoritativeness to define and pontificate on newsworthy events. They also have the organisational capacity to manage professionally the flow of news material or even produce their own 'pseudo-events' (Boorstein 1964; Sigal 1973), encouraging favourable