Decline of a Paradigm?
Bias and Objectivity in News Media Studies

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—This essay outlines emerging empirical, methodological, and epistemological challenges to several key assumptions associated with conventional research on news bias. These assumptions are: (1) the news can and ought to be objective, balanced and a reflection of social reality; (2) the political attitudes of journalists or editorial decision-makers are a major determinant of news bias; (3) bias in news content can be detected with existing reading methods; (4) the most important form of bias is partisanship. It is concluded that the concepts of structured orientation and ideological effectiveness are more fruitful than that of partisan bias, and that the concepts of bias and objectivity ought themselves to be objects of research rather than evaluative standards.

BIAS, or its commonly accepted opposite, objectivity, are the concepts which most citizens link with the political or ideological role of the news media. The concepts are enshrined in administrative guidelines for broadcasters, and they are sometimes adopted by disgruntled politicians. Spiro Agnew’s 1969 denunciation of the networks’ “nattering nabobs of negativism” is perhaps the best-known attack by an American politician on the news media for alleged ideological bias—in this case, for being too sympathetic to radical protest. Interest groups which monitor the media frequently adopt similar terms of reference. For instance, a study by the International Association of Machinists (1981) concluded that U.S. network news was overwhelmingly pro-corporate rather than prolabor. And of course journalists themselves use the concepts of bias and objectivity to assess their own work. Objectivity has been described as “the emblem” and “keystone” of American

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journalism (Schudson, 1978, p. 9; Doll & Bradley, 1974, p. 256).

Not surprisingly then, academics have also adopted bias and objectivity as organizing concepts in many studies of journalism. Students of news production, from Breed (1955) to Sigelman (1973), often took for granted the distinction between the biased editorial "policy" which may be enforced by newspaper publishers, and the ideal of journalistic objectivity—skeptical though they might have been of its realization in practice. Numerous content analyses have sought to evaluate the objectivity of news coverage of election campaigns, issues, policies, institutions, movements, or politicians. Much of this research was inspired by Agnew's charges of "liberal" bias in network news (Adams, 1978, p. 20).

However, the utility of bias and objectivity as conceptual tools in the analysis of the media's ideological functioning is increasingly being called into question. For instance, Hall, Connell and Curti (1976, p. 91) have argued that bias is a "wholly inadequate conception" which "does not exhaust in any way the relation of TV to the political."

The challenges to the bias/objectivity couplet are broad-ranging, and hinge on questions of evidence, methodology, and epistemology. It is the aim of this article to outline some of the main thrusts of these critiques. The next section proposes some key assumptions of conventional bias research, which are then critically examined. Finally, in light of these critiques, some tentative suggestions are offered for future directions in the analysis of the news media as a political and ideological institution.

**BIAS AND OBJECTIVITY**

What is conventionally understood by the concepts of bias and objectivity in the media? A schematic presentation here cannot do justice to the historically evolving issues and nuances evoked by those terms. (For historical discussions of news objectivity, see Schudson, 1978; and Rosheo, 1975.) Suffice it to note that most definitions in common language regard news bias as the intrusion of subjective "opinion" by the reporter or news organization, into what is purportedly a "factual" account. Thus MacLean (1981, p. 56) suggests that "When a story does not distinguish clearly between its author's interpretations and the facts being reported, it is a biased or slanted report."

It has sometimes been noted that the concept of news bias has two moments which are not entirely consistent. One is a lack of "balance" between competing viewpoints; the other is a tendentious, partisan "distortion" of "reality." The ambiguity is suggested by the Doll and Bradley (1974, p. 256) survey of journalism textbooks for synonyms and antonyms of reportorial bias. On the one hand, the moment of imbalance is suggested by the synonyms "preferential," "one-sided," and "partial," and by the antonyms "equal," "equally-forceful," "neutral," and "fair." On the other hand, the moment of distortion is suggested by the terms "warped," "distorted," "indirect," and "stereotyped," versus "straightforward," "factual," "factually accurate," and "truthful." In journalistic practice, the goals of balance and accuracy (non-distortion) may not always be compatible. To take a simple example, in the 1972 U.S. election campaign, George McGovern made many more public appearances than did the incumbent Richard Nixon. To have "balanced" the television exposure of the two candidates would have "distorted" the strategies and progress of the campaign.
Related to the distortion/imbalance distinction, there is a tension between impartially reporting contradictory truth-claims by high-status sources, on the one hand, and independently determining the validity of such truth-claims, on the other. The media’s uncritical amplification of Senator Joe McCarthy’s unfounded accusations made journalists acutely aware of this tension, and now the concept of objectivity is sometimes taken to include interpretive and analytical reporting (Roshco, 1975, pp. 48–57).

Such ambiguities in journalistic norms are reflected in the differing operational definitions and measures used in bias research. Both the “imbalance” and the “distortion” concepts have been adopted. Leaving aside questions of epistemology, the “distortion” approach is technically feasible if alternative accounts or appropriate benchmarks are available. Possible benchmarks include the full transcripts of a politician’s speech; the perception of participants or interviewed sources in a reported news event (Lang & Lang, 1953; Lawrence & Grey, 1969); and government statistics on crime (Davis, 1952) or workforce distribution and work stoppages (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976). The “distortion” criterion may be considered especially appropriate when there do not exist contending viewpoints of equal legitimacy, thus rendering the criterion of balance inapplicable. Such would be the case, for example, in studies of news about international relations, an area where journalists are not expected to balance their presentation between pro- and anti-American (especially Communist) viewpoints. Only when foreign policy (e.g., the Vietnam war after 1968) generates sufficient division within legitimate political circles must the media take balance into account. More normally, foreign affairs coverage would be consid-

ered biased only if it distorts reality in a politically motivated direction. Thus Chomsky and Herman (1979), whose work can be regarded as a less traditional bias study, argue that U.S. news coverage of Third World repression, and America’s role in such repression, is distorted by the media’s subordination to the interests and outlook of U.S. political and economic elites. Methodologically, they compare, not coverage of two competing parties or viewpoints, but rather mainstream media accounts with alternative evidence (from government documents, international human rights and relief agencies, the foreign press, and—some might say paradoxically—evidence scattered within the American media themselves).

Balance or equality of coverage is the more usual standard adopted in bias studies, no doubt because appropriate benchmarks are not always available, and because it is legally enshrined. The U.S. Communications Act, and the Federal Communications Commission’s fairness doctrine, oblige broadcasters to provide “reasonable opportunity for the discussion of conflicting views on issues of public importance” in news programming, to “permit answers to personal attacks occurring in the course of discussing controversial issues,” and to provide equal time for all political candidates, if any one candidate is given time outside of news programming (Brundage, 1972, pp. 531–532, 537). However, even researchers who agree that bias equals dyadic imbalance differ in their methods. True, many of them measure the air-time or news-space accorded each side, and make judgements of direction (favorable, negative, neutral or mixed) of statements or news items about each party. But beyond such basic procedures, variations exist. For example, McQuail suggests several pos-
sible manifestations of bias: explicit argument and compilation of evidence favoring one view; a tendentious use of facts and comments, without any explicit statement of preference; the use of language which colors an otherwise factual report and conveys an implicit but clear value judgement; and the omission of points favoring one side, in an otherwise straight news report (McQuail, 1977, p. 107).

Hofstetter and Buss (1978, p. 518) reject three potential definitions of bias: outright lying, distortion by emphasizing certain facts but not others, and the aggrandizement of certain values or mores. The authors suggest that while common in popular polemics, these concepts may not be very useful in scientific investigation. Occupational norms and sanctions render deliberate lying and distortion infrequent, while values do not provide objective benchmarks for the identification of bias. Instead, they propose that bias be treated as "selectivity," which "may or may not lead to the unbalanced, inequitable or unfair treatment of individuals or issues." Hofstetter (1976, pp. 33–34) further distinguishes between political bias resulting from the partisan preferences or ideological convictions of news persons, and structural biases which are due to the character of the medium or the imperatives of commercial news programming. Patterns of reporting which are similar within each medium but different between media are held to constitute prima facie evidence of structural bias. Within-medium variation suggests the possibility of political bias. As the authors concede, the researcher using this approach cannot identify which reporter or news organization is presenting biased coverage "without many additional assumptions and evidence" (Hofstetter & Buss, 1978, p. 522). Nor can this approach deal with biases which pervade the entire media.

Some authors have developed more specific catalogues of techniques by which journalistic "opinion" may surreptitiously be merged with "fact" in the presentation of news stories. (See, e.g., Cirino, 1971, pp. 134–179; MacLean, 1981, pp. 30–46; Efron, 1971, pp. 102–121.)

By contrast, Doll and Bradley (1974, pp. 258, 262) abandon the attempt to define bias. Instead, they treat it negatively, as the absence of objectivity, which they operationalize as equal time and positional emphasis to the major candidates and parties, the use of neutral or objective language, the use of evidence to support reported conclusions and to provide a balanced account, and the avoidance of gratuitous statements.

Notwithstanding such variations in conceptualization and methodology, bias studies tend collectively to accept the following assumptions:

1. The media can and ought accurately to reflect the real world, in a fair and balanced way. The concept of bias implies the possibility of a zero-degree unbiased or objective account of events. (Sometimes this assumption is explicitly made, e.g., "The detection of bias is crucial to the maintenance of democratic institutions and the people's right to unbiased [italics added] political information." See Hofstetter and Buss, 1978, p. 528.) The ideal of objectivity suggests that facts can be separated from opinion or value judgments, and that journalists can stand apart from the real-world events whose truth or meaning they transfer to the news audience by means of neutral language and competent reporting techniques. Accord-
ingly, news media would offer a faithful compression of the day’s most newsworthy events—those most relevant and interesting to the audience. Unbiased media would accord quantitatively and qualitatively balanced coverage to the contending, legitimate political perspectives.

2. The most important potential obstacles to the presentation of such a balanced and accurate account of the world are the political prejudices or social attitudes of communicators, who allow their values or selective perceptions to bias their reporting.

3. When such biases appear in news content, they can readily be detected through existing methods of reading or decoding.

4. The most important form of political or ideological bias in the media is witting or unwitting favoritism towards one major candidate, party, political position or interest group over another.

The following sections consider critical challengers to each of these respective assumptions.

**CAN NEWS REFLECT REALITY?**

In the preceding section, I noted a tension between “balance” and “non-distortion” as practical criteria of objectivity. They are also incompatible at an epistemological level. A relativist, Mannheimian epistemology underlies the notion that bias is avoided by balancing between competing, incompatible worldviews, each with its own (limited and partial) validity. By contrast, the goal of avoiding distortion implies a positivistic, nonrelativist affirmation of the ultimate knowability of “the straight facts,” whose visibility is temporarily obscured by the biased journalist.

Beyond their incompatibility, both notions of bias have been subjected to a telling epistemological critique. Skirrow (1979, pp. 28–29) argues that to attack TV news on the grounds of imbalance, is unwittingly to reinforce the very idea on which the news implicitly depends—that a plurality of viewpoints approximates truth. Skirrow argues, for instance, that it is ludicrous to suggest, as did one BBC program, that “there could be a neutral stand on exploitation and racism.” The program in question “balanced” the film *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, depicting some of the poverty and oppression of South African blacks, with a South African government production “which showed black people driving around in cars in the apparently affluent and happy township of Soweto.”

It is not that journalists consciously work from a well-developed, abstract theory of knowledge. Epstein (1974, pp. 44–77) shows that networks’ attempts to balance the news are partly a response to government fairness rules and to the concerns of affiliate stations. Tuchman (1971/72) argues that the journalist’s presentation of conflicting truth-claims is one of several “strategic rituals” of objectivity, by which news workers protect themselves from such occupational hazards as missed deadlines, libel suits, and superiors’ reprimands. Such concerns are eminently practical and political, not philosophical. Nevertheless, although journalists often report conflicting statements from sources without trying to assess their validity, it can be held that there is at least an implicit truth-claim in such a juxtaposition. Sometimes it is explicit. Epstein has described the dominant “‘dialectical’ model for reporting controversial issues”
as follows:

The correspondent, after reporting the news happening, juxtaposes a contrasting viewpoint and concludes his synthesis by suggesting that the truth [*italics added*] lies somewhere in between. (Epstein, 1974, p. 67)

Such an approach can be epistemologically justified only by a position of social agnosticism and relativism, which regards the validity of different ideas as limited by the partial perspective of the group which produces them. The familiar paradox of relativism raises itself: what, then, justifies the truth-claims of news organizations themselves? Moreover, far from being in some absolute sense neutral, news balance generally leads the media to reproduce the definitions of social reality which have achieved dominance in the electoral political arena.

The alternative conception, that journalistic objectivity results in an undistorted view of the facts, is subject to many of the same criticisms that have been directed against positivism in general. This position implies that the journalist and the news media are detached observers, separable from the social reality on which they report; that truth or knowledge depends upon the observer’s/journalist’s neutrality in relation to the object of study; that the news medium, when “properly used,” is neutral and value-free, and thus can guarantee the truthfulness of “the message.” That is, the news can potentially transmit an unbiased, transparent, neutral translation of some external reality. Through the news, objects and events in the real world can be known to us as they “really are” (Skirrow, 1979, pp. 25, 30).

Several arguments have been advanced against this position. First, the news media *unavoidably* structure their representation of social and political events in ways which are not pregiven in the events themselves. Thus, researchers of news production overwhelmingly reject the “mirror” metaphor which is sometimes put forth by media spokespeople. Altheide (1976) argues that due to the organizational features of news work, local TV news inevitably decontextualizes events and recontextualizes them artificially in accordance with “the news perspective.” As internal factors which shape the news, Tuchman (1978) identifies the news gathering net (the location of correspondents, camera crews, etc.), bureaucratic interactions within news organizations, and the rhythms of news work, with their associated “typifications” of newsworthy events and processes. Drawing upon organization theory, Epstein argues that the most critical demands which structure the scope and form of American network news are the budgetary limitations imposed by the assumption that improving the news show will not proportionately increase ratings or advertising revenue; the need to maintain the network’s base audience for the prime-time schedule which follows the supper-hour newscasts; the need of affiliate stations for news of national scope, which results in the “nationalizing” of local happenings; and the federal government’s fairness regulations.

Other critics argue that, quite apart from journalism’s mediation of the social world, *language* itself cannot function so as to transmit directly the supposedly inherent meaning or truth of events. In part, this is because labelling implies evaluation and context. In David Morley’s words, neutral value-free language “in which the pure facts of the world could be recorded without prejudice” is impossible, because “evaluations are already implicit in the concepts, the language in terms of which one observes
and records” (Morley, 1976, pp. 246–247). And as Hall and colleagues note regarding the media’s use of such labels as “mugging”:

They not only place and identify those events; they assign events to a context. Thereafter the use of the label is likely to mobilise this whole referential context, [italics in original] with all its associated meanings and connotations. (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, p. 19)

Hall (1982) also argues that such connotations are not fixed and pregiven, as in a dictionary, but rather are a product of political struggle over signification.

Studies which demonstrate the unavoidable editorial and linguistic mediation of events, nevertheless, leave open the possibility that the media stand separate from the events which they observe and report. This latter assumption is challenged by the argument that the social and political world is not a pregiven, “hard” reality for the media to reflect; it has to be socially constructed. Moreover, far from constituting a detached observer, the media help actively to construct that world.

Altheide and Snow (1979, pp. 10, 12, 15, 146) go so far as to argue that modern American society is dominated by a “media logic,” by which they mean “the process through which media present and transmit information,” a process whose elements include the various media and their formats. In previous centuries, media reflected the form of the dominant institutions. But in the modern era, media themselves “are the dominant force to which other institutions conform,” including “the entire political process” which is now “inextricably tied to the logic of media work and has been transformed by it into an extension of media production.”

One need not accept such sweeping media determinism to acknowledge the interventions of journalism in society and politics. One example is the widespread production of what Boorstin (1980, p. 11) labelled “pseudo-events,” which are preplanned or incited, and which have the primary purpose of being reported or reproduced. News conferences and most political speeches are examples of pseudo-events which are arranged for media propagation, and which would not occur in its absence.

Apart from the deliberate production of pseudo-events, news media may influence the very social or political trends which their reports supposedly reflect. Thus television has been credited with undermining party identification and altering the qualities of successful presidential candidates. A complex example derives from the work of Hall and his colleagues. They have investigated interaction between (a) reports of “mugging” in the British press; (b) increased sensitivity to this apparently new crime by police, judiciary, and public; (c) the upsurge of “mugging” crimes in police crime statistics; and (d) the emergence of a “moral panic” over the issue in British society. Simply to contrast types of crimes reported in the press, with government crime statistics (as did Davis’ 1952 study of crime news in Colorado newspapers), would be to overlook this dialectic. Moreover, it would risk according bureaucratically-generated statistics an epistemological primacy which must be justified rather than assumed.

Molotch and Lester (1974, p. 105) radically problematize the very concept of “event,” and thereby explicitly question the notion on which the concept of “bias” depends: that “the media stand as reporter-reflector-indicators of an objective reality ‘out there,’ consisting of knowably ‘important’ events of the
world.” Rather, what counts as an “event” is socially determined: events are what we are accustomed to pay attention to. An event, in their definition, is an occurrence (any cognized happening) which is used creatively for time-demarcating purposes. Occurrences become events according to their usefulness to an individual (or organization) trying to order experience. Different people or institutions may have different, even conflicting, “event needs,” and hence will attempt to order or define reality in different ways. In such a case, an “issue” has arisen. However, with the exception of accidents or scandals (which are leaked by nonofficial informers), most press stories are “routine events” which are promoted by political and bureaucratic power-holders: the “event needs” of the news promoters (political or bureaucratic sources) and the news assemblers (journalists) are complementary. Similarly, Fishman (1980, chaps. 2, 3) argues that “bureaucratic phase structures,” by which institutions transform complex happenings into procedurally defined “cases,” provide the criteria of relevance and the mechanisms of time-demarcation which define “events” for the media. As an example, the journalist covers “crime” as a set of discrete bureaucratically-organized cases, each beginning with the arrest (or the reported perpetration of a crime) and ending with the sentencing. Conversely, the institutional organization of event detection results in the creation of “non-events” which cannot be seen under the institutional scheme of interpretation, but can be seen under a different one. Thus, the media help actively to constitute reality, even if it is only by amplifying and conferring legitimacy upon the structuring of social processes achieved by political/bureaucratic institutions. Therefore, one cannot make a radical distinction between the world of social processes and events, and the news media which are supposed to reflect them. As Hall has put it, reality cannot be viewed as simply a given set of facts, but rather as:

the result of a particular way of constructing reality. The media defined, not merely reproduced, “reality.” Definitions of reality were sustained and produced through all those linguistic practices (in the broad sense) by means of which selective definitions of “the real” were represented. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of making things mean. (Hall, 1982, p. 64)

So language (and the media) must be regarded as a structuring agent, rather than a neutral transmission belt which can refer directly to a world of non-discursive objects. As Hall (1982, pp. 70–71) notes, two rather different epistemological positions can be derived from this argument:

A Kantian or neo-Kantian position would say that, therefore, nothing exists except that which exists in and for language or discourse. Another reading is that, although the world does exist outside language, we can only make sense of it through its appropriation in discourse.

The first (Kantian) position represents the more radical rejection of the notion that media bias distorts an external reality. Thus Fiske and Hartley (1978, p. 161) argue that:

Reality is never experienced by social man in the raw. Whether the reality in question is the brute force of nature, or men’s relations with other men, it is always experienced through the mediating structures of language. And this mediation is not a distortion or even a reflection of the real, it is rather the active social process through which the real is made.
For Bennett (1982, p. 295), Hall’s position that the media help to define social reality is not radical enough, since it “keeps alive the concept of media as mirror at the same time as it contests it.” He wants to eliminate fundamentally the distinction between the realm of social reality, and the realm of representations, a point which applies not only to the media but also to language. Signification is “a process which actively constructs cognitive worlds rather than simply passively reflecting a pre-existing reality.”

Bennett (pp. 307–308) further claims that it is impossible directly to counterpose “the truth” against “allegedly distorting systems of signification.” No such system can permit the real to speak through it without modification. Instead, analysis should shift from “the investigation of the relationship between sign and ‘reality’ to that of the relationship between signs, the play of signification upon signification within a structured field of ideological relationships.”

Such a position will be more familiar to many social scientists in the form of Althusser and Balibar’s (1965/1970) concept of “theoretical problematic,” and Kuhn’s analysis of the role of “paradigms” in the development of science. Kuhn argues that science has never proceeded by a direct comparison of statements with empirical fact; rather, scientific work during periods of “normal science” proceeds within a dominant paradigm—an ensemble which includes symbolic generalizations, “metaphysical” aspects such as the belief in broad models, scientific values, and “exemplars” (i.e., concrete problem-solutions that students learn as part of their socialization into a scientific discipline). For Kuhn (1970, p. 77), the falsification of theories by direct comparison with nature is merely a “methodological stereotype.” While Kuhn hedges on the question, he can be taken as saying that theories are incommensurable, and determine their own criteria of validity.

Similarly, Althusser has been interpreted as arguing that the adequacy of a problematic is indicated by its internal coherence, its systematicity. Thus, in Sumner’s (1979, p. 181) view, science for Althusser is “that field of significance which most systematically connects itself, or . . . that body of concepts which explains itself the best.” This kind of position raises the specter of idealism and theoreticism, and is vulnerable to the criticism that:

Systematicity provides no guarantees . . . that the theory is an accurate and explanatory “cognitive appropriation of the real.” Scientific theory may be systematic; however, its condition of existence is not systematicity but rather that it explains the nature, mediation and movement of practical appearances and thus acts as the theoretical expression of concrete social relations.

In my view, the first (Kantian) position to which Hall alluded above, tends towards a linguistic determinism which overestimates the self-determination of signification, and overprivileges the semiotic at the expense of other aspects of social practice. It does not seem necessary to accept this position in order to reject the claim that media reports must either passively reflect or actively distort reality. There may indeed be no world of self-evident pristine “hard facts,” standing outside of socially-constructed meaning and language, for journalistic (or scientific) discourse to operate upon. And it must be granted that if journalism actively participates in the struggle over the signification of events, then we cannot simply accuse the news of “distorting” their “real” meaning. Nevertheless, as Sumner maintains, there are “concrete social relations.” And for some
purposes, journalism can be assessed on the basis of its adequacy as a “theoretical expression of concrete social relations.”

DO POLITICAL ATTITUDES DETERMINE NEWS BIAS?

The second assumption of the bias model to be discussed here is that political partisanship on the part of owners, advertisers or editorial decision-makers is the major impediment to objective reporting. Because bias is often conceptualized as “a manifestation of conscious purpose or the unwitting consequence of ideological position or party attachment” (Hofstetter, 1976, p. 15), the concept of bias is often associated with left-wing or right-wing conspiracy theories of the media. Kristol (1975) and Efron (1979) offer an influential rightist version of such a critique. They argue that the media, particularly the television networks, are part of a “new class” of bureaucrats and intellectuals who have a vested interest in expanding the regulatory activity of the state, at the expense of private business. This “new class” uses the media to propagate its anticapitalist and antitechnological worldview. A contrary radical view sees the American media generally reinforcing “establishment” viewpoints, due to the power of big business media owners and advertisers (Cirino, 1971). The solution typically suggested by such critics is to diversify politically the personnel and perspectives available within the media (Efron, 1971, pp. 209–218).

What Adams (1978, p. 18) calls the “political-attitudinal theory” implies an instrumentalist view of news production, which sees news workers as authors of their own practice. Many journalists who doubt the attainability of objectivity nevertheless conceive of the obstacles to it as individuals’ subjectivism rather than organizational or structural factors. (See, e.g., Green, 1969, p. 229; and Griffith, 1974, p. 49.) The theory makes several assumptions:

1. News persons as individuals have stable, long-term, coherent political values. In some versions of this theory, journalists’ collective values are seen to differ substantially from the general population.

2. Journalists retain personal control over the news product.

3. Journalists are willing to inject their preferences into news content (Epstein, 1974, p. 45).

The evidence to support these assumptions is mixed at best. Regarding the first one, Lichter and Rothman (1981) interviewed 240 journalists at leading U.S. newspapers, newsmagazines and television networks. The authors found that journalists were substantially liberal in their views on social issues and foreign policy, were more favorable towards “post-bourgeois” than “acquisitive” social values by comparison with business executives, and were far more likely than was the general public to have voted for Democratic presidential candidates. On the other hand, Epstein (pp. 206–229) found that while the network correspondents he interviewed expressed superficially liberal opinions on some issues, they did not evince a systematic or consistent ideological commitment. Neither did network producers and news editors.

Evidence that news coverage itself is “slanted” by partisanship is even weaker. Experimental evidence suggests that journalism students’ own attitudes towards a source have little impact on their news writing; indeed, in some situations, students overcompensated for their personal views (Kerrick, Anderson &
Swales, 1964; Drew, 1975). Epstein (pp. 206–229) concluded that both network controls and the journalist’s own sense of objectivity effectively inhibit editorializing in television news reporting. Content data seem to confirm this. For instance, Hofstetter (1976) and Robinson (1983) found no substantial partisan bias in network coverage of the 1972 and 1980 presidential campaigns. Robinson (1978, p. 200), arguing for renewed attention to the political model, nevertheless conceded that “most of the empirical research conducted by political scientists finds little or no evidence for a political interpretation of television news content.”

With its history of partisanship and its lack of subjection to fairness regulations, the printed press might be expected to exhibit greater political bias in reporting. David Paletz and colleagues (cited in Robinson, 1978, p. 202) found that the liberal New York Times gave “unusually positive news coverage” to the newly formed “public interest” group Common Cause. Stempel (1969, p. 705) found that when prestige newspapers editorially endorsed a candidate during the presidential campaigns of the 1960s, he tended to be accorded more news space than his opponents. However, the partisan traditions of press reporting have withered under broadcasting’s impact on audience expectations of the news, increasingly anonymous corporate ownership, the extensive reliance on news agency reports, and the economic need to reach as broad a market as possible. Even during the 1960s, Stempel found that equal news space for the two major parties was the norm. Eavarts and Stempel (1974) reported no substantial correlation in six leading U.S. newspapers, between editorial endorsements and the direction of statements about the Democrats and Republicans in 1972 campaign coverage. As Black (1982, p. 214) has noted:

Non-partisan news columns make far fewer customers unhappy than do partisan accounts. The surviving “press barons” whose chief object is to run personal propaganda outlets are engaged in an expensive, risky vanity. They are the aberrations, not the norm.

The major exception to the finding of nonpartisanship in broadcasting is Efron’s (1971) study of network coverage of the 1968 campaign. She found an apparent bias for Democratic candidate Humphrey, against Republican Nixon and independent rightwinger Wallace. However, Efron’s methods and data have been strongly criticized, and a partial replication failed to produce similar results (Epstein, 1974, pp. 234–236; Doll & Bradley, 1974, p. 255; Stevenson, Eisinger, Feinberg & Kotok, 1973). Even if her highly dubious evidence is accepted, it can be interpreted quite differently. Thus Weaver (1972) argues that it was Efron’s mistake to ignore the progress of the campaign itself, interacting with the requirements of television journalism for newsworthy themes. The dominant themes of campaign coverage were Humphrey as an underdog picking up momentum, Nixon as the front-runner clinging to his lead through carefully staged events and statements, and Wallace as the sower of division and violence wherever he went. Clearly, as Efron perceived, these themes had political connotations in favor of Humphrey. But their use could be attributed to television journalism’s need to structure stories, to search for spectacular events, and to hold audience attention, rather than to the supposedly liberal values of newsmen.

Epstein (1974) argues similarly against the conservative critique which
views U.S. network news as politically oriented towards the liberal-left, a bias which is attributed to "a small clique of newsmen in New York and Washington who share the same perspective on politics, report preponderantly the same kinds of challenges to established authority, and then shape the news to fit their own political commitments" (p. 269). While news does originate disproportionately in a few cities, this is for budgetary and logistical rather than political reasons. And because much of the political protest of the 1960s was concentrated in Washington, New York and Chicago, the networks disproportionately reported such protests, which moreover, satisfied the audience-appeal requirement of "conflict between easily recognizable groups." Finally, the networks' need to "nationalize" the news accounted for the broadcasters' apparent overestimation of the significance of local disputes (pp. 270–271).

On the basis of available evidence, such "organizational" explanations of the news are a decided advance over the political/attitudinal theory. However, the organizational approach does not sufficiently inquire into the external determinants or context of news production, and particularly ignores the links between social/political stratification and the news. Nor does the articulation between news values or newsworthly themes, and the broader ideological contours of society receive much attention. In a sense, the chain of inquiry stops too soon. Once Epstein, for example, can relate a characteristic of TV news content to an attribute of network organization, he is satisfied. Neither the political/attitudinal, nor the organizational approaches, exhaust the analysis of the news media's ideological determinants and role.

**CAN WE READ BIAS IN THE NEWS?**

Some confusion has arisen because bias and objectivity have been held variously to characterize the journalists' personal attitudes, the methods which he or she employs, or the stories which he or she produces. Bias researchers have sometimes undertaken studies at the "input" level, that of media production. Thus there have been gatekeeping studies of how journalists select and reject material—an approach which is called into question by the problematic nature of "events" from which journalists allegedly "select." There have also been more fully-rounded participant observation studies in newsrooms, as well as surveys or interviews with journalists. But participant observation is time-consuming and the newsroom is not always accessible to the meddling academic. And while surveys may reveal the personal political views of journalists, they cannot prove that those values are reflected in media output, since journalists operating within a set of institutional procedures and norms may consciously seek to exclude their personal values from their reporting. As Robinson (1983, p. 56) puts it, "Bias that counts must be in the copy, not just in the minds of those who write it." And as Adams (1978, p. 35) notes in his bibliographic essay: "Content research is at the center of television news research. It is the dependent variable for production research. It is the independent variable for effects research."

Consequently, most bias research has focused on news content, rather than its conditions of production. For such work to be viable, a third assumption must be made: that bias in content can be operationally defined, and appropriate em-
pirical measures adopted to assess its presence. As will be argued in this section, this assumption is problematic, particularly if our concern is with ideology in a sense broader than partisanship.

Until recently, the unchallenged method for such work has been content analysis, usually quantitative. It is a technique which begins with the delineation of categories of manifest or apparent content which are considered to be appropriate to the research hypothesis. The frequency, or presence/absence, of each category is tabulated for each unit of analysis. In a news content study, typical categories might be particular words, themes or actors which are assumed both to describe the message, and to enable inferences about the determinants of the message—particularly the intentions or biases of the communicators. The unit of analysis is often the sentence or the discrete news item or article.

Content analysis is associated with the problematic of bias for at least three reasons. First, bias is often conceived in quantifiable terms: the amount of column space or air-time accorded each of the contending parties, the proportions of "favorable" and "unfavorable" statements made about a particular candidate, and so forth. With its predilection for quantification, content analysis appears as an especially appropriate method; indeed, Sumner (1979, p. 66) calls the quantification of categories the key operation of content analysis.

Second, there seems to be in much of the research a residual behaviorist assumption that repetition of units of content is associated with audience impact. Hence, the tabulation of frequencies is assumed to be a useful indicator of the message that the audience is receiving.

Third, Sumner (p. 99) argues that despite its occasional claims to be a neutral technique of description, the real objects of content analysis are the intended message and motives of the communicator. He notes that historically, content analysis flourished during World War II and the McCarthyist period, when it was used to analyze enemy propaganda—both to predict the enemy's moves, and to "prove" his biases and intent to deceive the target audience.

Its proponents claim for content analysis the characteristics of objectivity (achieved by following explicit coding rules which enable two or more researchers to obtain the same results from the same material); systematicity (realized by using consistent criteria for selecting a sample of content); and generality (theoretical relevance to other attributes of content, or to the characteristics of the sender or recipient of the analyzed message). Holsti contends that since these are conditions of all scientific inquiry, content analysis can be viewed as "the application of the principles of scientific research to the analysis of communication content" (Holsti, 1968, p. 598).

However, the growing interest in ideology and the consequent devaluation of bias have been associated with the emergence of new methods for reading ideology in media texts, notably those inspired by semiotics or structural analysis. Its proponents challenge the scientific claims of content analysis, arguing that it is thoroughly inadequate to study the ways in which ideology structures media messages. This is partly because content analysis can deal only with manifest content, with denotive signifiers, as its practitioners admit:

The requirement of objectivity stipulates that only those symbols and combinations of
symbols actually appearing in the message be recorded. In other words, the coding process cannot be one of “reading between the lines.” In this sense, content analysis is limited to manifest attributes of text. (Holsti, 1968, p. 600)

In the terms of structural linguistics, content analysis records the “parole,” the individual speech act, rather than the “langue,” the underlying code or set of conventions which constitutes the principle of intelligibility of the individual’s speech. In the semiotician’s view, content analysis fails to penetrate beyond outward expressions to their invisible inner structure. Against the restriction of content analysis to denotative signifiers, semiotics insists on the importance of the sign in its full complexity, and on the internal structuring of a text or message (Woollacott, 1982, pp. 94–95). The structural analyst seeks to identify consistent relationships between signs. Ultimately, the object of analysis is the cultural “codes” (analogous to languages) which establish the possible combinations of elements which generate meaning within a particular text or corpus of texts. As de Camargo (1972, p. 126) explains:

The code is the system of communication conventions which constitute the rules responsible for organising different meanings. . . . The use of a code permits the selection and combination of the signs which constitute the message.

The code or latent structure which produces the units of significance and is immanent in them, is held to be equivalent to ideology (Sumner, 1979, p. 115; Larrain, 1979, p. 133).

To its advocates, then, the concern with the text as a structured whole, rather than with “the content of fragmented components of it,” is the chief advantage of structural over content analysis (de Camargo, 1972, p. 123), and one which mitigates the need for quantification. Whereas content analysis assumes “repetition—the pile-up of material under one of the categories—to be the most useful indicator of significance” (Hall, 1975, p. 15), the semiotic approach contends that:

there is no reason to assume that the item which recurs most frequently is the most important or the most significant, for a text is, clearly, a structured whole, and the place occupied by the different elements is more important than the number of times they recur. (Burgelin, 1972, p. 319)

The first criticism of content analysis, then, is that it merely counts repeated denotative signifiers, rather than searching for the underlying code which places the signifiers. The confinement to denotation is also flawed in another respect. The content analysis must assume that denotation is unproblematical and universal, that signifiers mean the same thing to everybody. For content analysis to make sense, it must assume (by Berelson’s own admission) “a common universe of discourse” (cited in Sumner, 1979, p. 66). As Hall (1982, pp. 61, 67) puts it, content analysis assumes a referential notion of language, in which (through consensual conventions) words can be related directly to their real-world referents. If the media message can be “assumed as a sort of empty linguistic construct,” then it can be held “to mirror the intentions of its producers in a relatively simple way.”

To illustrate this point, Sumner (p. 66) gives the example that “to prove that a politician has an ideology, content analysis might count the number of times he used the words freedom and order in his election speeches.” This procedure only makes sense on the assumption that the word “freedom,” for instance, has the same meaning regardless of the discur-
sive context in which it appears. It is assumed that what distinguishes one ideological position from another is the frequency with which this (shared, commonly understood, denotative) signifier is used within the ideological discourse. But if the term “freedom” has different meanings in different contexts, if indeed the discourse is what lends meaning to the term, then the counting of its comparative frequency makes no sense. As Cicourel (cited in Sumner, pp. 69–70) argues, frequency counts assume an equivalence of meaning each time a particular element appears, regardless of its context. Content analysis requires a theory of signification, in order to generate appropriate equivalence classes. A semiotician would add that even if such equivalence classes could be theoretically grounded, the repetition of categories is not the best indicator of the structure of the message.

The content analyst’s assumption of a shared universe of discourse is thus rendered highly problematic by the existence of “class struggle in language,” which involves in part the struggle to attach politically loaded connotations to key signifiers. The word “freedom,” for instance, has a different flavor when coming from Ronald Reagan’s mouth than it does when used by the Sandinistas.

The project of deciphering the message from the analysis of texts alone, is further problematized by the potential disjuncture between the encoding and decoding of media messages. Crudely put, the message intended may not be the message received. David Morley’s (1980) work on the audience for the British current affairs program Nationwide revealed the effectivity of class- and subculture-based decoding frameworks. Unless these are taken into account, how can we talk about the media message?

In light of such considerations, Sumner argues that content analysis has no theory of significance to establish that the elements or units which it tabulates are indicative of ideology at work. Without such a theory, it is pointless to total the frequency of units. Perhaps not all content analyses are equally vulnerable to this criticism, however. Sumner concedes that the work of Halloran and colleagues, on press coverage of a mass antiwar demonstration, has partly overcome this shortcoming, since their work was grounded in a “theory of the professional ideologies of news reporting which structures their content analysis of the significance of the news reports” (p. 73). Berelson (cited in Holsti, 1968, p. 605), the dean of content analysis, recognized that the technique “stands or falls by its categories,” and that these must be reflective of the researcher’s hypotheses. It will be clear from the preceding discussion, however, that the utility of counting these categories is in question. So too is the adequacy of the theorizing which purports to connect categories of content, with the conditions of the message’s production or reception. Such theorizing is particularly vulnerable to psychologism and individualism, in which communication is viewed as:

a process whereby one human being emits a message which is received and comprehended in its intended meaning by another human being. Communication is thus seen purely as an interpersonal, interactional process where meaning is transmitted, negotiated or modified: meanings are held to be created and affirmed by reciprocal, conscious, interpretive subjects. . . . [Accordingly] the question of ideology production is reduced to the question of conscious/unconscious bias by prejudiced, “communicating subjects” and, therefore, to the identification of frequent themes which reflect that bias. (Sumner, 1979, p. 71)
Content analysis' psychology, and its assumption of a shared universe of discourse, are linked. The bias of the communicator is assumed to be detectable in the manipulative use of this shared set of meanings—especially in the repetition of signifiers (themes, evaluative words) which reinforce his or her intentions.

Such a psychologistic approach is clearly inadequate to analyzing the appearance of ideologies, if ideology is conceived as the outcome (as well as a determinant) of structured social practices, one which "speaks through" particular texts. By contrast with such psychologism, structuralists seek to undermine the humanistic concept of "the author," positing the autonomy and coherence of the system of relationships which produce the meaning of the text. Consequently, one needs a technique of "immanent analysis," in which "one observes a given system from the inside" (Barthes, 1965/1967, p. 96). From the semiotic perspective, content analysis violates the principle of immanence by too readily (and linearly) inferring from the manifest content of the message, the psychological motives or sociological status of the sender, or its behavioral impact upon the receiver.

It is far from clear that semiotics has itself fully overcome the limitations of content analysis and developed a rigorous method for reading ideology. Some of the most telling anti-structuralist criticisms can be briefly identified. (See, e.g., Sumner, 1979, chap. 4; Belkaoui, 1979; Clarke, 1980; Woollacott, 1982, p. 94.)

First, semiotics tends towards idealism. It overestimates the autonomy of the text and the self-sufficiency of textual analysis. Also, it tends to deny the materiality and effectivity of the concrete, reducing it to mere elements of the underlying structure.

Second, it is ahistorical. It cannot account for the emergence and transformation of systems, which leaves an opening for metaphysical notions of absolute Logos or Telos, such as Levi-Strauss' universal unconscious thought processes. Moreover, because its own method (in principle) allows only the "discovery" of logical relations within the discourse, structuralists have to import sociological and historical assumptions in order to make statements about ideology. Any statement about the social significance of internal structural relations depends upon implicit knowledge about social and historical forces, knowledge which is not produced through "immanent analysis."

Third, structuralism tends towards functionalism. It has no concept of internal contradictions in a system, nor of the system being structured in dominance.

Fourth, semiotics does not offer a coherent method. Its approach has been described as impressionistic, subjective, inferential, arbitrary, unreplicable, unverifiable, and heavily dependent upon the ingenuity of the individual analyst. Many critics wonder if the relations which structural analysis purports to discover within myth, for example, are not in actuality the projections of the analyst.

It may well be that the semiotic approach itself is not adequate and that we still need to develop methods which can take into account that the presence of ideology in a discourse does not consist of immanent properties of the texts, but of a system of relationships between the text and its production, circulation and consumption" (Larrain, 1979, p. 140). Without grounding in an adequate social theory of an ideology's historical specificity and forms of appearance, and without justification for assuming that audience members do elect certain readings of news texts, the significance which
researchers purport to discover in news content may have been produced by their own methods and assumptions (Sumner, 1979, p. 118; Anderson & Sharrock, 1979).

FROM BIAS TO IDEOLOGY

A fourth assumption of the bias paradigm is the definition of bias as favoritism towards one major party, candidate or interest group over another. Many studies have asked whether the media are fair in covering competition between Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, supporters and opponents of Administration policy. (See, e.g., Doll & Bradley, 1974; Efron, 1971; Hofstetter, 1976; Lowry, 1971; Meadow, 1973; Pride & Richards, 1974; Pride & Wamsley, 1972; Robinson, 1983; Russo, 1971/72; Stevenson et al., 1973.)

Should we conclude from the apparently general absence of partisan bias, that the news media are ideologically inert? No. Such an electorally oriented notion of bias and fairness is a very limited one. For example, research based on it takes for granted a State-supervised structure of legitimated access to the realm of public political debate. Thus in the FCC’s words, fairness rules are not intended “to make time available to Communists or to the Communist viewpoints” (cited in Epstein, 1974, p. 64). It may well be, as Robinson (1978, pp. 202, 206) suggests, that previous bias studies have focused too narrowly on election campaigns, precisely where broadcasters have learned to tread carefully; political bias may be more evident in coverage of interest groups. A few studies suggest this may be the case; Efron (1979) found bias against nuclear power, while the International Association of Machinists (1981) found a preponderance of corpo-
rate over labor viewpoints. But even Robinson’s proposal runs the risk of confinement within an implicitly pluralist view of society, a view which makes it possible to ignore both the class structure of power within which such electoral and interest competition occurs, and the relationship between ideology and that structure of power.

While the question of media balance continues to inspire research and debate, critical media scholars are increasingly drawing on the broader conception(s) of ideology. As discussed below, the view that news operates as ideology, fundamentally broadens and even contradicts the view that news messages are biased in accordance with the motivations of communicators. Indeed, Hall (1982) has argued that the very emergence of a new “critical paradigm” in media studies hinged on the rediscovery of ideology. The space left vacant by the absent concept of ideology was partly (mis)filled by the notion of “propaganda,” conceived as messages intended to deceive and/or persuade. (Some implications of this were discussed in the preceding section on the methodology of analyzing bias.)

The political polarization and radicalization of the 1960s helped to rekindle interest in ideology by problematizing the assumption of consensus which had dominated orthodox American social science. In the work of Talcott Parsons, for example, society was assumed spontaneously to cohere around a central value system. How wide and deep was this consensus, how it was maintained in a class-stratified society, and in whose interests it operated, were questions rarely raised. But cracks began to appear in the monolith. In the sociological study of deviance, for example, the “power to define the rules of the game,” and hence the power to define deviance, came to be recognized as a problem, ultimately lead-
In whose interests are the rules defined? Similarly, in political science, “power” was being reconceptualized, from something observable in the making of decisions, to the ability to keep potentially threatening issues out of the political arena (“nondecisions”), to the capacity to influence the very wants and perceived self-interests of those who are relatively powerless (Hall, 1982, pp. 60–65). Such developments inexorably led to theorizing about ideology, and its role in the mass media as an institution which could purvey ideas, influence wants, and help to define social reality. Seen in this light, the long-acknowledged “reinforcement” effect of the mass media could be reinterpreted as part of a legitimizing or hegemonic process.

Considerable ink (and blood) has been spilled over the issue of what constitutes ideology, and how one identifies it. Even within the Marxist tradition, which above all others introduced the concept into modern social thought, “ideology” has been variously defined. In the remainder of this section, only a few of the more pertinent conceptions can be outlined, and some of their possible applications in media studies considered, in order to show how they transcend or subsume the concept of “bias.”

Although useful work has been done on the specific occupational ideology of journalists, the following three conceptions concern ideology as a “global” societal phenomenon:

1. A system of ideas, values and propositions which is characteristic of a particular social class, and/or which expresses the political and economic interests of that class. Insofar as these ideas are conceived to be “distortions” of real social relations, or alternatively, as contradictory to “real” class interests, the term “false consciousness” can be applied to them.

2. The necessary, everyday appearances of capitalism. For example, it appears that wages are the full price of labor, and that the sale and purchase of commodities is an equal exchange between individuals. Insofar as these appearances correspond to a practical reality of capitalist relations of production, they cannot simply be dismissed as “false consciousness.” Nevertheless, by “naturalizing” capitalist social relations, ideology serves, as Hall (1977, pp. 322–325, 337–338) puts it, to “mark, conceal or repress” the “antagonistic foundations of the system”—namely, “class domination, the class-exploitative nature of the system, the source of this fundamental expropriation in the sphere of production, the determinacy in this mode of production of the economic . . . .”

3. The creation or interpellation of human subjects, the provision of subjective identities, of the type necessary to capitalist production relations (Althusser, 1969/1971, pp. 127–186).

The above conceptions share an insistence that ideology is rooted in social conditions of existence, primarily class relations. However, the second and third conceptions move away from a concept of a superstructure hanging over an economic base, towards a view of ideology as a constitutive element in the relations of production, and in their reproduction.

**Ideology as Framing**

Research based on the first conception (ideology as “pictures of the world” serving class or state power) is the least removed from traditional bias inquiries. The manifestations of ideology are perceived in terms not entirely unfamiliar to bias researchers. Thus Chomsky and
Herman (1979, pp. 3–79) see the evidence of the free press' subordination to American imperialism in the following: the omission of embarrassing topics; selective emphases of fact; the generally uncritical treatment and high degree of access accorded to pro-American sources of information; the lack of context given to alleged Communist excesses; the favorable depiction of American actions and client states; the loaded use of labels such as "terrorism" and "police action"; and even outright lies. These types of evidence (though not the theory!) can be found in some of the more conventional bias studies.

Nevertheless, the search for class-biased "pictures of the world" in media content, is a broader and more advanced enterprise than the search for favoritism towards one party, candidate, or group. Thus in its analysis of British television coverage of industrial relations, the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, p. 267) asserts that:

Our analysis goes beyond saying merely that the television news "favour" certain individuals and institutions by giving them more time and status. Such criticisms are crude. The nature of our analysis is deeper than this: in the end it relates to the picture of society in general and industrial society in particular, that television news constructs. This at its most damaging includes ... the laying of blame for society's industrial and economic problems at the door of the workforce.

A similar conception underlies the notion of news "frames" or "frameworks." Gitlin (1980, p. 7) defines media frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual." Thus David Morley (1976, p. 246) who studied British media coverage of industrial conflict, argues that more important than journalistic balance is "the basic conceptual and ideological framework through which events are presented and as a result of which they come to be given one dominant/primary meaning rather than another." Morley documents coverage of the 1973 gas strike, in which:

programmes were often balanced in the sense that they had a gas board spokesman claiming that the strike, through lowering gas pressures, was causing danger to the public, and a union representative claiming that safety precautions were being observed and that therefore the public were not endangered. But analysis must also deal with the problems of how and why the strike comes to be presented primarily in these terms—in this case in terms of the possible dangers it might cause to the public. (Morley, 1976, p. 246)

To take an American example: television coverage of the conflict in El Salvador might have featured Reagan administration spokespersons claiming that the rebels were receiving substantial Soviet or Cuban aid. These spokespersons might have been counterbalanced by other politicians questioning the veracity of the administration's claims. But the analyst must also question why the conflict is signified as a potential extension of Communist influence (and perhaps also, why U.S. "national security" is so defined that this represents a potential "threat"). Many other perspectives are possible—for example, that the Salvadoran people are so oppressed by the U.S.-backed regime that they are entitled to receive whatever aid they can, from any quarter. If the conflict were instead framed as one between rich and poor, such aid might be at best a secondary issue.

Such framing is not necessarily a conscious process on the part of journalists;
it may well be the result of the unconscious absorption of assumptions about the social world in which the news must be embedded in order to be intelligible to its intended audience. Thus the Glasgow University Media Group (1980, p. 402) argues that the news, and the dominant social ideologies, are integrally related. The latter are “the connecting link between the so-called ‘facts’ of the news and the background assumptions which enable us, the audience, to understand those ‘facts’.” Similarly, Hall (1982, p. 72) argues that particular accounts may be ideological, “not because of the manifest bias or distortions of their surface contents, but because they were generated out of, or were transformations based on, a limited ideological matrix”—a set of rules and concepts for making sense of the world which is systematically limited by its social and historical context. This set or matrix constitutes a “deep structure” which is activated by journalists quite apart from their conscious awareness, let alone their intentions deliberately to deceive or manipulate.

It may well be that the very forms by which television news conveys its impartiality and neutrality serve to disguise (or render invisible) such underlying ideological assumptions. Thus, the appearance of “balance” between competing politicians, the presentation of “both sides of the story,” may serve to deflect the viewer’s attention from the question of why the issue is being cast in these terms, or why it is an “issue” at all, and why these individuals (usually officials of bureaucratic institutions, or high-level elected politicians) are accorded the right to define the issue. Therefore, it may be counterproductive to insist merely that journalists adhere to the forms of impartiality, since this may simply help to make the news even more effective in disguising its underlying ideological framework.

Ideology as Naturalization

The argument can be taken a step further: not only do the rules of impartiality disguise the ideological messages in TV news; they are an essential part of television’s ideological functioning. This can be seen if we move to the second conception of ideology offered above, the “naturalization” of social relations. In this case, the relations of political power exercised through the parliamentary State. Hall, Connell, and Curti (1976) focus on the relationship between broadcasting and the State as it is manifested in the format of British current affairs television programming. They argue, essentially, that broadcasting supports the political system as a whole, but this support does not take the form of violating the norms of balance and impartiality so as to give an advantage to one electoral party over another. Rather, the ideological function is twofold. In its treatment of “current affairs,” TV largely accepts and reinforces the definitions of issues which have prevailed in the political domain. The leading spokespersons of the established parties are accorded privileged access to the media, where they have the opportunity to amplify those definitions. This process makes viewpoints which lie outside the consensus (as articulated by the established parties) seem irrational or illegitimate—if those viewpoints receive any attention at all. The media both establish a “Parliamentary and Electoral framework of relevance” in their handling of political issues (at the expense of alternative issue agendas and political prescriptions), and legitimize Parliamentary government itself. The work of current affairs television is critical “in raising the
Parliamentary form of the State to the universal level—in generalising it for the whole social formation, signifying it as natural, as taken-for-granted, beyond the power of history and time to modify or dismantle” (Hall et al., 1976, p. 91).

But this ideological work by television is accomplished through the rules of impartiality and balance, and not by the occasional lapse or departure from them—“bias” in the conventional sense. Rather,

the “skewing” of the access system towards the authoritative spokesmen of Parliamentary and Party politics is no well-kept secret. It is, in the minds of the broadcasters, precisely what a balanced coverage of politics is about. . . . In this sense, the media, in Current Affair television, do not represent in a biased way (ideologically) the structure of political power and its dominant mode of operation: the media accurately reflect and represent the prevailing structure and a mode of power. It is in politics and the State, not in the media, that power is skewed. (Hall et al., 1976, p. 92)

Bennett (1982, p. 306) describes the media’s ideological function in this respect as “a ‘double-dupe’ system, an ideological form which effects a contraction of the sphere of public debate whilst simultaneously engendering the illusion that that sphere is entirely free and open.”

There are several links missing from the above argument. First, the “skewing of access” in favor of spokespersons for the dominant parties is of little interest unless one accepts the premise that the capitalist State (and its structuring of political representation and debate) is not truly democratic or popular. Second, the argument largely evacuates the exercise of class power from the media to the State. Thus it cannot account for situations (e.g., Chile under Allende) where a bourgeois press agitates against a leftist government. Third, the authors do not discuss the specific mechanisms by which the routine editorial criteria of objectivity are enforced, and hence a structured orientation towards the State and the dominant parties maintained. Moreover, the question must be raised: What factors (apart from State power) ensure that those routine criteria retain their effectiveness and their credibility amongst broadcasters and their audiences?

Notwithstanding such caveats, the argument summarized above usefully points to the ideological role of broadcasters’ “impartiality.” In his analysis of TV coverage of the “Social Contract” (the British Labour government’s policy of “voluntary” wage restraint during the 1970s), Ian Connell (1980a, p. 140) applies and extends the argument. A precondition of television’s effectiveness in establishing the dominant political perspectives as “common sense,” “moderate public opinion” or “the consensus,” is the separation and fragmentation of TV coverage from the actual events covered. In other words, part of television’s ideological work consists precisely in presenting itself as nonideological, and in aligning itself with a similarly, apparently nonideological class-transcendent public and national interest. It is as if television states that “we” (the nation, the public, consumers, TV journalists) are nonideological; “we” represent good, sound common sense. The problem is with “them” out there (that irresponsible group of workers on strike, that particularly unfair or inefficient employer) who are ideologically motivated, or who have allowed their narrow interests to override the public welfare. It is not that television achieves its ideological effect by monolithically favoring, for example, management over union viewpoints.

The ideological separation which tele-
vision makes between its own accounts of events, and those events themselves, is paralleled by the way TV news seeks to position or situate the viewing audience: viewers are addressed as passive onlookers for whom the media personnel speak, by contrast with (and separated from) the protagonists who make speeches or initiate news events. This ideological operation, this positioning, is effective for two reasons. First, it is subtly embedded in the codes of visual presentation on TV news. For example, with rare exceptions, only journalists are accorded the privilege of addressing the camera directly; interviewees and speech-makers are filmed at an angle. Second, television's separation reproduces an already established political ideology—the notion that the "nation as a whole" can be divided into those who are "done by" (consumers, commuters, taxpayers, the public, the silent majority, and so forth) and those who "do" (politicians, the unions, militants, etc.). The verbal depiction of actors on TV news further divides this latter group into a hierarchy of activists, differentiated according to legitimacy and/or representativeness. Gibson (1980, pp. 100-101) makes a similar point: television divides interviewees into discursive "adults" who are permitted to present their case at length, and those who are reduced to the status of sloganizing "children."

As part of the same process of making knowledge possible, discourse serves to position human beings, subjects, in certain ways. The discourse of television news (or discourses, for as Barthes (1964/1967) suggests, television may be a complex system combining aural, visual and other levels) is targeted towards particular subject position(s). The viewer is invited, as it were, to accept a certain position in order to read or decode the message. As Coward and Ellis (1977, p. 50) argue with regard to the novel, "The whole process is directed towards the place of a reader; in order that it should be intelligible, the reader has to adopt a certain position with regard to the text."

Now, TV news is preeminently a realist discourse. Realist narrative is the dominant way of using language in bourgeois society. It is a mode in which language is treated as though it stands in for, is identical with, the real world. The business of realist writing is, according to its philosophy, to be the equivalent of a reality, to imitate it... (Coward & Ellis. 1977. p. 47)

Realism thus seeks to establish an identity (or at least an equivalence) between signifiers (loosely speaking, words or other symbols), signifieds (concepts), and their extralinguistic "real world" referents. But such an identity is an illusion, if only because even within a single language, a signifier does not univocally point towards a single signified which in turn clearly delineates a single referent. As Hartley (1982, p. 22) puts it, "signs do not have a fixed internal 'meaning,' but only meaning-potentials, which are actualized in use." Moreover, different languages may generate different sets of signifieds, which "slice up" reality in different ways. The best-known example is the multiple concepts

**Ideology as Interpellation**

The role of TV's apparent impartiality and neutrality is even more central in some theories of television which draw upon the third conception of ideology mentioned above—its interpellation of subjects. For illustration, I shall focus here on analyses of realism and its relationship to the positioning of the television audience.
which the Inuit have in place of our speech community’s single concept of snow. Concepts, or signifieds, are a product of language, not “natural, given entities corresponding to distinct parts of the world out there” (Hartley, p. 16).

Yet realism functions to conceal the productivity of language. Like the capitalist market, realism stresses the product and represses its production. It matters not that “realism is produced by a certain use of language, by a complex production; all that matters is the illusion, the story, the content” (Coward & Ellis, 1977, pp. 46–47). Realist narrative does not appear to be the voice of an author; rather, “its source appears to be a true reality which speaks” (p. 49).

In an article in Screen, Colin MacCabe (cited in Woollacott, 1982, p. 106) identified the “classic realist text” as one in which there is a “hierarchy among the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth.” Within the realist novel, one discourse, the narrator’s, is presented as the voice of truth; other discourses (e.g., particular characters) are subordinated to it, marginalized, rendered as partial perspectives. In MacCabe’s view, the essential features of the “classic realist text” included:

firstly, its inability to deal with the real as contradictory and secondly its positioning of the subject in a relationship of “dominant specularity.” The dominant discourse in a classic realist text effects a closure of the subordinated discourses and the reader is placed in a position “from which everything becomes obvious.” This is achieved through the effacement of the text’s signifying practice, through the concealment of its construction. (Woollacott, 1982, p. 106)

So too with TV news. The newscaster’s or reporter’s voice is that of truth. Only he or she is accorded the privilege of introducing or concluding news items, of direct address to camera, of sustained voice-over narrative. All nonjournalistic interviewees and actors occupy lower rungs on the ladder of access.

As suggested by survey data consistently showing television to be the public’s most trusted news medium, TV news is a particularly potent form of realism, because it can combine its narrative with a visual level of discourse. The verbal narrative seeks constantly to effect “closures” of meaning, to tie up the loose ends of interpretation, to present a picture of our society as one with institutionalized forms of conflict but without fundamental contradictions. The visual discourse seeks to convey a sense of immediacy, a sense that “you-are-there” watching the narrated events unfold before your very eyes. The film stands as the guarantor of the narrative’s validity. Consequently, the evidence of editorial mediation must be rendered as unobtrusive as possible in TV news presentation. A widely used text on the production of TV news, for example, warns apprentice journalists to avoid editorial techniques in which “the viewer becomes aware of the editing process,” which “distracts his attention from the content” (Green, 1969, p. 131)—as if the codes of editorial construction were not also part of the “content.” Walter Cronkite’s famous sign-off phrase, “And that’s the way it is,” exemplifies TV news’ claim to reproduce the real.

While there has been some debate over whether realism in general is necessarily bourgeois (Woollacott, 1982, p. 107), TV realism can be seen as supportive of capitalist social relations in several general ways. In part, it helps to disguise the ideological framing of events. Moreover, the (illusory) reflection of the real world in TV’s verbal and visual sign-systems may be a precondition for TV’s ability to
naturalize dominant social relations. But beyond that, TV realism is important for the ways it seeks to position or situate members of the audience. We have seen that according to Connell, the listener/viewer is situated as a passive observer, a mere consumer of the news, a member of the public who is "done to" by active and manipulative politicians, union leaders, militants, etc. The "consumer angle" of news reporting is evident, for example, in the overwhelming focus of strike coverage on the disruptive impact on services; at the thematic level in TV news, our concerns as workers (rather than consumers) are rarely addressed. Realism aids this positioning of the viewer as passive consumer, by denying his or her productivity even at the level of producing meaning. Such a positioning can be seen as complementary to advertising, in the mass marketing of commodities. From an analysis of the expository form of \textit{CBS Evening News}, Bill Nichols (1981, p. 175) argues that "the structure of the program works to quiet, not arouse, the emotions, to win assent for the proposition that what happens 'out there' need not perturb." A comparison of the commercials with the news portion of the CBS newscast suggests that:

If we were asked to look but remain passive before [during the news items], here [during the advertisement] we are asked to look and become active. We're asked to do something, to change, indeed to improve something. But what we're asked to improve is not the world but our own private situations or selves. And this improvement does not demand spiritual striving or political struggle, it simply requires the purchase of commodities.

A displacement of values occurs. The news which refers to what should be our real conditions of existence becomes something almost imaginary, something highly mediated and punctuated by closure. The commercial message, which is indeed an imaginary message, becomes posited as the real, as an integral part of our lives, the part we can control and change. (Maaret Koskinen, quoted in Nichols, 1981, pp. 175–176)

If the commercials evoke dissatisfaction in order to incite us to individualized consumption, with the news events, "That's the way it is." In canalizing our attention away from the possibilities of political action, and towards privatized consumption, news and the commercials are complementary opposites: they both position viewers as depoliticized consumers.

Skirrow (1979, p. 35) takes the analysis of positioning in a somewhat different but complementary direction. She argues that by claiming and seeming to present facts impartially for the viewer to judge, TV news gives the viewer "a sense of being above and outside the actions displayed, and of having a god-like relation to them." Such a position is compatible with capitalism's need for subjects who feel themselves to be autonomous, free, self-determining, and who hence will voluntarily submit themselves to relations of exploitation, which appear as relations of exchange between equal and free individuals.

Analyses of this type must presently be considered tentative, speculative and exploratory. But they clearly do suggest the possibility that TV news' forms of impartiality and objectivity constitute an essential part of television's ideological work, rather than the primary criteria against which we should identify "biased" journalism.

**FINAL REFLECTIONS**

So long as the State enforces existing definitions of balance and fairness in broadcasting, so long as objectivity remains part of journalists' occupational
self-definition, and so long as media organizations themselves find it in their own political and economic interests to pursue "due impartiality" (to the point of conducting their own in-house content analyses to monitor news balance) (Low- er, 1970), bias research will continue to be conducted. Yet its theoretical underpinnings seem to be trembling. No longer can we simply assume the possibility of unbiased communication, of objective and detached reporting on an allegedly external social and political world. No longer can objectivity be taken as the opposite of ideology in the media, if indeed the forms and rhetoric of objectivity help to reproduce dominant political frameworks, or position the media audience as passive observers and consumers. No longer can we rely on inadequate and speculative methods for reading ideology "in" news content.

Must we then reinvent the wheel in order to analyze the news media as a political and ideological institution? Ought we to discard the very concepts of bias and objectivity? To accept these concepts unreflectingly as the criteria for evaluating news coverage, would be in effect to patrol the media on behalf of the State and the dominant political parties. Surely this is not a satisfying role for critical students of mass communications!

On the other hand, bias and objectivity are so embedded in popular and political debate that to ignore them would court isolation. Nor are these concepts entirely without normative and empirical merit. We would presumably prefer orthodox objectivity to the deliberate propagandizing of nineteenth-century journalism. And where the partisan prejudices or self-interests of news producers do influence content, we would want to know about it. Most important, the concept of bias, however inadequately, does raise for popular debate the question of journalism's ideological effectivity within a class-stratified society.

Rather than dismiss the concept out of hand, I propose that research could fruitfully proceed in two directions. First, make bias and objectivity, as rhetorical devices and practical norms, themselves the object of investigation, rather than the standards by which we evaluate other objects (e.g., news content). The following lines of inquiry seem promising:

1. As Bruck (1981, p. 17) proposes, we could "investigate the politics of the bias rhetoric, look at who raises the bias issue, when and why, and check the discourses and interests carrying it"—and, one might add, the impact on news production. There have been some interesting starts. Gitlin (1980, pp. 269–282) discusses the role of intervention by media executives and politicians under conditions of political crisis, when the normal routines of journalism provide an opening for opposition to the hegemonic ideology. Dreier (1982) undertakes a similar study of the "ideological mobilization among business leaders" to limit perceived antibusiness bias in the US media during the 1970s.

2. In order to demystify and denaturalize it, we could follow Schudson's (1978) lead, and analyze the historical, philosophical and political/economic roots of journalistic objectivity. We could also examine the practical and social consequences of objectivity. What do journalists mean by objectivity? How do they implement it in practice? Is it a norm sufficiently strong to override pressure from media owners and executives who want to set "policy"? Does increasing recruitment from schools of journalism encourage the entrenchment of
objectivity as a pan-occupational norm? Tuchman's (1971/72) discussion of "strategic rituals" attempts with some success to specify what objectivity means in journalistic practice. But as Bruck notes (p. 18), her adherence to ethnomethodology renders her indifferent to the question of the broader social significance of her findings. In particular, what are the consequences of objectivity for journalism's structuring and dissemination of information, issues and images?

The second broad direction for media research involves displacing the concept of "bias" with that of "structured orientation." By abandoning the notion of unbiased communication, we can avoid being sidetracked by the search for standards of balance and nondistortion. Instead, we would analyze the various types of systematic orientations and relationships which unavoidably structure news accounts. These factors may indeed include partisan favoritism or political prejudices. But they also include criteria of newsworthiness, the technological characteristics of each news medium, the logistics of news production, budgetary constraints, legal inhibitions, the availability of information from sources, the need to tell stories intelligibly and entertainingly to an intended audience, the need to package news in a way which is compatible with the commercial imperative of selling audiences to advertisers, and the forms of appearance of social and political events. All these factors and others shape the media's functioning as an ideological institution.

I have suggested that at least three conceptions of ideology may be fruitful in media studies: the "frames" or set of social assumptions promoted in the news; the "naturalization" of social relations; and the interpellation of the audience. The strategy I am proposing would relate the various structured orientations or imperatives of news production to their consequences for one or more levels of ideology.

To be sure, there are problems with some of the existing research on media and ideology. First, insofar as researchers turn their findings on news frames into an accusation of departure from objectivity, they have failed sufficiently to transcend the bias paradigm. They ignore the limited, electorally-defined nature of the media's own claims to impartiality. Since journalists never claimed to be neutral between police and criminals, elected governments and militant unions, or parliamentary parties and radical protesters, why go to considerable length to demonstrate this type of "bias"? The Glasgow University Media Group (1980), for example, accumulated massive evidence to show that British television journalism adopted and amplified the contentious wage-push theory of inflation, which underpinned the Labour government's policy of wage restraint. From this, the authors argued that far from being objective and impartial, the news reproduced the social assumptions of the powerful. Connell (1980b) criticizes this inference, countering that it is precisely through the broadcasters' adherence to due impartiality (which takes into account the "weight" of opinion) that the wage-push theory dominated coverage.

A second problem with some "ideological bias" research is its failure to substantiate its claim that media representations distort social reality. Sometimes the media analyst simply counterposes news coverage of a social phenomenon such as deviance, with his or her own favorite sociological theory, which may not enjoy universal acceptance even within the dis-
discipline (Anderson & Sharrock, 1979, pp. 371–372). In comparing the news with other records or explanations, media students ought more carefully to recall the socially constructed nature of all ways of making sense of a situation, before judging the news to “distort.”

A related temptation is to criticize the news as if it were inadequate sociology, or mere propaganda. A precondition of this type of critique is to ignore the specificity of news as, for example, a form of narrative oriented to providing “acquaintance-with” daily events rather than “knowledge-about” social processes.

Finally, theorists of ideological bias frequently fail to specify the mechanisms which link media frames with their social conditions of production. The analyst may simply posit “structural correspondences between features of the social setting and features of media output” (Anderson & Sharrock, 1979, p. 373). This syndrome may include a tendency too readily to assign responsibility for propagating a particular news frame to “the dominant class,” which is assumed to control the means of cultural production. Such class reductionism surely provides explanations no more adequate than the political/attitudinal model to which it is similar. The strategy of linking structured orientations with ideological consequences is intended to avoid such reductionism.

Clearly the move from “bias” to “ideology” in media studies is no guarantee against naivety or triviality. Yet it seems essential if we are to grasp adequately the political roles of journalism.

To the extent that ideological orientations can be inferred from the study of news content alone, we clearly must move beyond the dyadic methodology of bias research, which compares the amount of news space or the evaluative direction of statements about “each side.” Various aspects of observable content have ideological relevance, including the types of topics which are selected or excluded; the kinds of people or institutions accorded varying degrees of access; the vocabulary in use (e.g., the labelling of social phenomena); the explanatory and evaluative themes employed, and the links between them; and nonverbal stylistic elements.

However, neither this type of diversified content analysis, nor the structuralist search for underlying codes, really mend the Achilles’ heel of existing reading methods. That is, their speculative nature, their lack of integration with a theory specifying the forms of appearance that a particular ideological formation will assume in media texts. Sumner (1979, pp. 238–245) has proposed an “historical materialist” method for reading ideology in the news (or other cultural forms). In his method, one must analyze not only media texts, but also the inner logic of the ideology and its linkages with social relations, its historical conditions and forms of appearance, and the internal determinants and social context of the news media. This is clearly an enormous task. Yet it is arguable that by comparison with exclusively content-based research, case studies of news frames (or “preferred readings”) interacting with their social context have already contributed more to our understanding of the media as an ideological force. Previously mentioned in this essay are studies of audience decoding of a current affairs program, the interaction between mass media and the New Left of the 1960s, and the emergence of a “moral panic” over “mugging” in Britain (Morley, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Hall et al. 1978).

Finally, the challenge to the bias paradigm has implications for radical media
politics. Connell (1980b) argues that the conventional notions of objectivity and balance cannot be the basis for the demands which the left makes on the mainstream media. (Nor, by extension, can they underpin “alternative media” practice.) Needed, he says, are entirely new editorial criteria. Questions must be raised. Is this possible without being seen to produce mere “propaganda?” How important are audience expectations of objectivity as a constraint on potential alternative media practice? What would be the political consequences if mainstream journalists themselves came to regard objectivity as ideological or illusory? Is it not sometimes politically useful to mobilize on the basis of demands for “balance” and “objectivity,” just as the liberal rhetoric of human rights or equal opportunity may sometimes be turned in radical directions? Such questions can only be addressed through collective debate and practice.

NOTE

This paper, focusing as it does on the substantive grounds on which the “bias” paradigm is being challenged, cannot deal at length with the social, political and intellectual factors and movements which underlie such challenges. Briefly, we may say that such forces include the anti-individualist, anti-psychologistic, and anti-behavioralist epistemological assault mounted by French structuralism, and imported into English-language media studies via British Marxism and feminism. Structuralism is briefly discussed in this article, as is the revival of theorizing about ideology, yet another such intellectual force.

REFERENCES


