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Through a Glass Darkly: reflections on television

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Introduction

Human communication involves the capacity to signal to each other and to endow those signals with meaning. Even the most elementary structure of communication entails a message, a sender and a receiver—although, as we know, not all messages arrive, and others end up in unforeseen and unintended places. Without communication, human society is impossible and it is therefore of central concern to social scientists. Through communication, the possibilities exist for influencing the attitudes and behaviour of others and of being influenced ourselves. The moral concerns to which this may give rise are not always easy to clarify but can scarcely be evacuated from such terms as propaganda, indoctrination, news management, manipulation, ideology, distortion and deception, all of which may be found in the lexicon of communications researchers. If, from time to time, those in positions of power take Machiavelli's advice, then things will not always be what they seem: 'Occasionally words must serve to veil the facts. But this must happen in such a way that no one becomes aware of it; or, if it should be noticed, excuses must be at hand, to be produced immediately.'¹ Hence communication is not simply a matter of passing on 'uncontaminated' nuggets of information but involves values, interests and human purposes. Whatever its forms and means, human communication is irredeemably symbolic in character. This carries with it possibilities for conflict and confusion, as well as co-operation and comprehension, in human societies as the biblical stories of Babel and Pentecost illustrate, albeit in contrasting ways.

What the twentieth century has to contend with are new forms of communication. If the invention of printing made possible new and wider forms of communication, with immense significance for the Reformation and Enlightenment, the development of radio and television, alongside a pre-existing newspaper industry, created a new set of media structures. It is the huge readership of the national press, and the millions of people who every day listen to the radio or watch television, that leads us to speak of the mass media. Indeed industrial societies, with their urbanized character, are often described as mass societies. Yet that can itself be an implicit critique—can mass societies be democratic? By extension, we may wonder whether mass communications promote or hinder democracy. There is, after all, an asymmetry between those who send

messages and those who receive them. Those with control over, or access to, the mass media are very few in relation to those who are on the receiving end. What does this suggest to us about the power of the media?

The commercial context

This paper will focus primarily upon television, but it is worth remembering that the mass media in Britain, with the partial exception of the BBC, are embedded in multi-national conglomerates. The interests of these groups may encompass broadcasting and the press in more than one country, as well as concerns that are not directly linked to the media. For example, Trafalgar House, which is currently seeking to buy Scott Lithgow's shipyard on the Clyde from British Shipbuilders, has financial interests in Cunard (UK) and Cementation (South Africa). It has publishing interests in two national daily and Sunday newspapers, a London evening paper, and some lesser interests in Capital Radio, Radio Clyde and ATV. The ramifications of Rupert Murdoch's News International are enormous, which is why his purchase of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, when he already controls the *Sun* and the *News of the World*, was thought by many to be against the public interest and a suitable case for the Monopolies Commission. This was not done, and in a very short time Murdoch forced the resignation of Harold Evans, the independently-minded editor of *The Times*. There is a trend towards the increasing ownership and control of the mass media, as Jeremy Tunstall has recently observed:

A small number of corporations—many of them subsidiaries of the same holding company or linked by cross-ownership or interlocking directorships—now dominate the British mass media. Thus half the commercial TV programmes that are transmitted, over two-thirds of paperback and record sales, over three-quarters of women's magazine circulation, and over nine-tenths of national daily and Sunday paper circulation, are controlled by the five leading companies in each sector.²

There is no obvious reason to suppose that this trend will be reversed with the development of cable and satellite, at least in the present political climate.

The issue of the commercialization of our communications networks bears further examination. The essence of the matter is that the readership or audience is conceptualized in market terms. That is why the *Financial Times* can survive on a circulation that would bankrupt other national dailies: the advertisers recognize the wealth and power of its primarily business readership. In television, interest in the audience as a market explains the continual preoccupation with the ratings. The direct interest of the advertisers is naturally with

ITV. The much publicized troubles of TV-AM remind us of the dependence on advertising which a TV company has, and how a perceived solution to a problem is inseparable from improving the ratings. Indeed by the time various changes in presentation and organization were made, it was difficult to see a relationship between that and the original basis upon which the IBA awarded the contract to TV-AM.

The BBC also gets embroiled in the battle for the ratings. Despite being founded on the premise of public service, the BBC is heavily influenced by commercial values. It is not obvious, for example, that the BBC would have launched into Breakfast TV if they had not known of the IBA's plans. Once made, the decision has knock-on effects throughout the BBC, since budget and resource allocations are at the expense of possible alternative commitments. In such ordinary ways, policies based upon other values can be undermined or diminished. More generally, programme scheduling reflects the ratings battle. Hence the scramble to get sports contracts (often now involving collaboration with commercial sponsors of the events), the prepackaged Christmas programmes with offerings such as *Gone with the Wind*, *My Fair Lady* and *The Sound of Music* set before us, having been purchased from the United States at great price. Prime time, say 7-10pm, when most people are available to view, is of special interest to advertisers. It is then that we have the situation comedies, quiz, variety and talk shows, soap opera and recycled films. Even Channel 4, which was set up to encourage diversity and cater for minority interests, is under some pressure from commercial interests to replicate the mould it was designed to break. The difficult role of the chief executive of Channel 4 might have been a little easier if the channel had been publicly funded rather than dependent on a position within the structures of the IBA. With a brief to cater for diverse interests in a plural society, Channel 4 needs as much autonomy and freedom from commercial pressures as it can get.

While commercial interests do not wholly determine programme scheduling, and still less content, they do provide a context within which decisions are shaped. Sometimes conflicts occur. A notable American example involved the resignation in 1966 of Fred Friendly, the CBS news anchorman. The company chose to put on a rerun of an *I Love Lucy* comedy, instead of covering, as it could have done, the live Senate Foreign Relations Hearings on the Vietnam War, which would have included the testimony of the eminent and authoritative George Kennan. Friendly's view was that a broadcasting system designed to produce profits to respond to the stock market, which in turn responds to ratings, was governed more by concern for growth and earnings than for news responsibility.³ The difficulties which Friendly encountered had already been articulated by the distinguished American journalist, Ed Murrow:

One of the basic troubles with radio and television news is that both instruments have grown up as an incompatible combination of show business, advertising and news. Each of them is a rather bizarre and demanding profession. And when you get all three under one roof, the dust never settles. The top management of the networks, with a few notable exceptions, has been trained in advertising research, sales or show business. But by the nature of the corporate structure, they also make the final and crucial decisions having to do with news and public affairs. Frequently they have neither the time nor the competence to do this.⁴

What is news?

The commercial dimension of television draws our attention to the treatment of the public as consumer. There are at least two aspects to this. First, the programmes themselves are often 'packages' which have been bought by the TV company from various corporations; this in itself structures access to the media, and the buying-in process permeates the programme scheduling. Secondly, advertising between the programmes reminds us that television is a vehicle for moving goods from the producer to the consumer. Hence the flow is interrupted regularly, such that news of killing in Beirut or famine in Ethiopia is juxtaposed against advertisements for food, clothes, holidays and a range of luxury goods. We treat it as normal. Perhaps we should recover a sense of the strangeness of these practices, which from some perspectives may even appear obscene.

The continual preoccupation over the ratings, explains the thrust of television towards entertainment. The problem is whether the profit motive should have such a dominant place. If we think it should, then we cannot offer a moral critique of output—however violent or trivial we think it to be—if that is where the logic of the market takes us. Once we attempt such a critique, we are implicitly recognizing that the market is not sovereign. The overriding interest in keeping the public entertained, means that non-entertainment categories have to fight for their existence against the stream. Moreover, even non-entertainment features such as news and current affairs can be affected. Hence a discussion programme with two polarized views may be thought of by producers as 'good television', yet this may risk throwing up more heat than light. Again, the news presenter becomes a newsworthy 'personality', and so we are encouraged to follow the personal lives and careers of such as Angela Rippon, Anna Ford and Reginald Bosanquet. And in news bulletins the fictional world of *Coronation Street* or *Dallas* finds a place—tonight millions of people will find out who shot J.R., the news reader tells us—and in this way television feeds parasitically upon its own output. More generally, the need to entertain, even in news, is presumably what leads to the coverage of Elton John's wedding or Prince Andrew's latest girl friend—'she meets the press but doesn't say anything, only hello'.

If the audience is viewed in consumer terms, then it is not so surprising if unscheduled interruptions to production processes and consumption patterns are highlighted. In a study of industrial news coverage, my colleagues and I noted the great emphasis, both in time allocated and number of items, to accounts of strikes.⁵ The reference point is commonly the inconvenienced consumer of goods and services. We noted: 'A strike that grounds aircraft is highly inconvenient to the holiday-makers and businessmen, a railway strike is very troublesome to the commuter, a doctors' work-to-rule or hospital workers' boycotting of private patients is distressing to the consumer of health services, and a strike of dustcart workers is a growing difficulty for the consumer wishing to dispose of his unconsumed leftovers.'⁶ These stories, by their continual presence on the screen, overstate the frequency or extensiveness of strikes or the role they have in accounting for the problems of our economy. Even in the mid-seventies, the portrayal of Britain as especially strike-prone did not stand up to careful investigation.⁷ In *Bad News*, we went on to argue:

Given this emphasis it is difficult to structure news in a way that does not implicitly, at least, blame those groups or individuals who precipitate action that, in one way or another, is defined as 'disruptive'. This structuring often demands a search for the disruptive element, which is exacerbated by the lack of historical perspective—an element of news presentation that often results in a somewhat arbitrary allocation of blame for this disruption.⁸

There are inferential frameworks which can carry moral baggage, offer causal imputations, and permeate the organization of stories.

Considerations of this kind alert us to the issues of selectivity and interpretation in news. News, that is to say, operates from certain perspectives and yet, characteristically, it is done in the name of objectivity and impartiality. News cannot be differentiated from current affairs by saying that one is about 'hard facts' and the other about opinion. From a professional news service we have a right to expect accuracy (allowing for human fallibility)—who wins a football match or a general election is a matter for the record. But news typically involves comment on the significance of events, as indicated, for example, by the authoritative role of the correspondents. So we have explicit or implicit causal statements, attributions of responsibility, informed and sometimes misinformed speculations and working assumptions about individuals or collectivities in the public arena. Between the world in which events take place and the viewer, there are a number of mediations which affect the way the world is presented to us. The emphasis may be upon the actuality or the immediacy of the reality we are viewing, yet there are editorial, journalistic and filmic routines and choices which construct the

message. Events are translated into news stories and a great deal of effort goes into the professional presentation. What looks like the straightforward reproduction of an interview, may actually involve dubbing in the interviewer's nods long after the interviewee has departed. Direct statements that were originally the product of an interview may be shown; edited cuts in a speech may not be indicated. Much of this kind of thing constitutes taken-for-granted routines, but they serve to remind us that things are not always what they seem. More generally, whether the accounts embodied in the stories, and the explanations of the way the world looks, point in one way rather than another, or are restricted in terms of other available interpretations, is a matter for empirical inquiry. Our own analysis suggested that certain explanations did tend to dominate at the expense of others, when matters concerning industrial relations and the nature of the economic crisis were being reported.⁹

One aspect of this structuring of news bulletins is agenda-setting. It refers to the way in which the selection and interpretation of topics is telling the audience what to think about. Given that television news is a major source of information, then this is of considerable importance. If a decision is made, as was the case, to give saturation coverage to the Falklands conflict and whole bulletins are devoted to it, then that tells us something about news values and agenda-setting. Furthermore, if the focus of the coverage is on military rather than diplomatic solutions, as reflected in what is reported, who is interviewed, and the prevailing interpretation of events, and if 'public opinion' is selectively reported, then a shaping of 'what everybody knows' takes place.

News then is a specialized and skilful means of constructing reality. This does not necessarily imply that the audience is passive, but that the material it has to work with is not, and cannot be, neutral. The material, that is to say, has already been encoded. Events can be variously described and contextualized, and thereby carry with them different connotations. But how the audience decodes the messages it receives is another matter, and highly problematic—as it pertains to comprehension, interpretation, attitudes and conduct.

Media power

If we enquire into the power of the media, and television in particular, we can think of it as constrained and constraining. Reference has already been made to commercial constraints. That aspect can be extended to take into account the selling of politicians to the voter/consumer, and of course it is particularly prominent at election time. After the 1983 British general election, this was the subject of a Panorama programme presented by Michael Cockerill, who also wrote an article based on the programme, 'The Selling of the Prime Minister'.¹⁰ Cockerill pointed out that Christopher

Lawson, formerly a successful director of the company that made Mars bars, was appointed the Conservative Party's director of marketing. Lawson recognized that he had much less influence on the product—that is party policies, as against Mars bars—but otherwise, 'I think it's more or less the same. It's communication. It's getting the message across.' Mrs Thatcher also had a media adviser, who over the years has worked on her voice and appearance for television and, as is well known, Saatchi and Saatchi produced the party's election broadcasts. Here the advertising motif is explicit. As Lawson put it: 'I think it is the same as advertising a product. You just say things more and more frequently and people will eventually understand it and keep on saying it to themselves.' In Cockerill's view, Mrs Thatcher's election tour was geared to the media. So it was that we saw photographs and film of the Prime Minister on a tractor, or sorting peanuts on a conveyor belt.

For the defeated parties to complain, might well smack of sour grapes. Perhaps more significantly, other parties may seek to apply the lesson. What this might well lead to is a change in the character of electioneering, with far less opportunity to engage in adversarial politics at the hustings and far more managed gatherings of the faithful, admitted to ticket-only proceedings. We could, in other words, be moving towards the politics of impression management, with the best public relations outfit carrying the day, rather than being able to engage seriously and directly with the issues of substance and policy. Of course, we can also see that there is a working collusion between the media and the politicians. It was noteworthy that the Panorama programme, with its revelations of how the election campaign was 'managed' by the public relations experts, only appeared after the election. However much journalists resented what was happening, they did not let the public in on it. Yet if journalists did change the rules of the game, the character and contextualizing of the election would shift. This may be more easily said than done, particularly bearing in mind the political context within which broadcasting takes place.

The government of the day is indeed a constraint on the power of the media. This is so in a general sense, that media institutions are legally established by Parliament and can in principle be changed; but also in more specific ways, such as the issuing of D-notices which can prevent the publication of matters regarded by the government as matters of state security, or the operation of the lobby system with its system of unattributed ministerial briefings to a limited number of journalists. Given that politicians and journalists depend upon each other, whilst at the same time not always sharing the same perspectives or interests, the relationship between broadcasters and politicians can perhaps best be described as one of antagonistic co-operation. Much can take place at the level of tacit assumptions,

which are only occasionally questioned: for example, on how to treat the issue of Northern Ireland.¹¹ At other times disagreements surface, as in the criticism by the Conservative government of the BBC's coverage of the Falklands conflict. Behind this was the view that the BBC should speak for Britain 'in the national interest', which was in practice interpreted as requiring endorsement of the government's policies. The irony was that, for the most part, support for government policy was built into the coverage and what the criticism actually taught us was something about the limits of dissent.

Finally, I will comment on the idea of television as constraining. The question of what television does to people—its effects on beliefs, attitudes and behaviour—is a source of endless controversy. Imputed effects range from the addiction which turns us into passive spectators of the world as mediated to us through the television screen, to those who respond in an active way to the stimulus of violence. In other words, the effects are anything from mass apathy to collective aggression. In a back-handed way, this does cast doubt on the concept of the mass media as powerful, uniform and direct in their effects on the exposed population, which is sometimes termed 'the magic bullet theory'. Influences are likely to be more indirect and effects more variable.

Conclusion

From a Christian perspective, I want to suggest that it is wise to exercise critical judgement in relation to the mass media—with its production, organization, content and consequences. The responsibilities of educators in this respect seem to me to be very great. If our culture is now permeated by the electronic media, we need to understand and to convey that understanding as to how this consciousness industry is constituted. We may even learn how to use audio-visual material to provide a critique of mass media practices. If we wish to illustrate the trivializing features, the preoccupation with fictionalized violence, or the restricted explanations of the way the world works, we will, by the same token, wish to contrast that with alternative possibilities. The 'principalities and powers' of the mass media may present us with a constraining word, but it is not, or need not be, a determining one. For example, it is certainly worth recalling that, in relation to the peace issue, television, while contributing to the debate, actually tended to follow the social movements for peace rather than to initiate them. This raises the interesting question as to how such movements can be generated, and what their sources are. But it is to a world in need that the Christian gospel is addressed. Poverty, famine, war, the nuclear threat, disease and death are part of reality. The Christian message of love, peace and hope remains as a reconciling word and we must ensure that, throughout the great plurality of messages, the reconciling word is heard and responded

to. We must do our own agenda-setting within and outside the structures of the mass media.

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NOTES

- 1 Cited in Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1947), p.135.
- 2 Jeremy Tunstall, *The Mass Media in Britain* (Constable, London 1983), p.109.
- 3 Fred Friendly, *Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control* (Vintage, USA 1968).
- 4 *ibid.*, p.251.
- 5 Glasgow University Media Group, *Bad News* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1976).
- 6 *ibid.*, p.203.
- 7 See, for example, C.T.B. Smith, *et. al.*, *Strikes in Britain*, Department of Employment Manpower Paper No. 15 (HMSO, London 1978).
- 8 Glasgow University Media Group, *op.cit.*, p.204.
- 9 *ibid.*, and also Glasgow University Media Group, *More Bad News* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1980).
- 10 Michael Cockerill, 'The Selling of the Prime Minister', *The Listener*, 16 June 1983.
- 11 See, for example, Philip Schlesinger, *Putting 'Reality' Together* (Constable, London 1978).