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MORE BAD NEWS

Glasgow University Media Group

RKP £17.50

Television news reporting must by now be one of the most intensively scrutinised, criticised and analysed of all social practices.

Yet, despite the volume of the critical attention it has received, there has been comparatively little 'really useful' knowledge produced. The recent publication of *More Bad News*, the second volume of work from the Glasgow University Media Group, unfortunately does little to change this state of affairs.

The basic task which the Group have set themselves in both volumes is to demonstrate convincingly, and once-and-for-all, that both BBC and ITN news reporting constantly fails to meet the criteria of impartiality and balance. This is not at all an unfamiliar charge. It has been made by critics of various political orientations. But, what distinguishes *More Bad News* from this other body of work is its contention that the failure to meet the basic editorial criteria is routine,

and not, as others would have it, merely an occasional lapse.

According to the Group their case is proved because, in the reporting of early stages of the Social Contract 'viewers were given a misleading portrayal of industrial disputes in the UK when measured against the independent reality of events'. The portrayal was 'misleading' they suggest because 'the news was organised and produced substantially around the views of the dominant political group in our society'. This was no accident, no mistake, but rather the typical way in which news reporting is produced and organised. The major conclusion arrived at is that 'the bland assertion of objectivity and impartiality as a regular professional achievement is little more than the unsupported claim to a unique

understanding of events. This serves only to obfuscate what is in fact the reproduction of the dominant assumptions about our society - the assumptions of the powerful about what is important, necessary and possible within it.'

The evidence offered by the study of the reporting of the early stages of the Social Contract in Part I of the present volume is carefully assembled. But, it in no way substantiates the claim that the reporting was not balanced and impartial. What it does demonstrate is that a certain, and contentious, economic thesis about inflation was taken over by television news reports and there represented as the 'basis of reality' upon which serious discussion of strategies could be mounted.

The reproduction of this thesis is demonstrated in various ways. For instance, at no time during the various phases of the Social Contract was the basic premise, namely that inflation was 'wages-led', systematically questioned. On this point, the case study in *More Bad News* does provide some useful material to suggest that it could have been given the existence of other diagnoses of, and prescriptions for 'Britain's economic ills'. Some of the most useful work demonstrates just how this course of action was not adopted and how, instead, the 'wages-led' thesis was installed in news-stories as an orchestrating principle. If we pass from the moment studied in *More Bad News*, the early months of 1975, we can see that progressively the premise was represented as a 'fact-of-life'. By 1977, so complete was this process that the various challenges to the Social Contract then being mounted by some trade unions were spoken of in news-stories as a fundamental threat to the economy and to the political stability of Britain. This interpretation was not at all peculiar to news. For instance the BBC news bulletins of July 6, 1977 all included interviews with Jack Jones, 'architect of the Social Contract' who authenticated and confirmed the view that 'the political stability could be threatened'.

This last feature of the news-stories, the employment of 'accredited witnesses' drawn from the ranks of the labour movement to authenticate and give authority to the reproduction of the economic thesis in question, is only fleetingly referred to in *More Bad News*. Why is this the case? It has to do with the erroneous assumption that the thesis 'belonged to' only 'the dominant political group'. It is an assumption which reveals a severely limited and limiting concept of political and ideological dominance. The basic economic ideology spoken of in *More Bad News* was not dominant simply because it was advanced by the politically powerful. It

was dominant, or more precisely hegemonic, because it framed the economic issues for 'subaltern' and subordinate groups also. It is an ideology which was already deeply ingrained in common sense forms of understanding economic affairs well before the ruling political-economic bloc exploited it in its attempts to win voluntary assent to the strategy of the Social Contract.

Another flaw in the case presented by *More Bad News* is that it was only concerned to demonstrate that the basic premise was reproduced in news-stories. Now, while the premise was not questioned in any fundamental way, it was nevertheless questioned. Much of this questioning focused on the 'voluntary' character of the strategy pursued by the Labour government. Labour Ministers and their supporters (especially, at



critical moments in the attempts to win the assent of workers, prominent trade union leaders and members of the TUC's Economic Committee) were questioned as to the effectivity of the strategy; would the various limits set by the Government not be broken; and, in the event of breaks, would the Government be willing to activate the 'statutory measures' it had declared in the autumn of 1976 to be holding in reserve. It is true that many of these inquisitive exchanges took place in Current Affairs programmes, and not infrequently led to quite heated arguments. But, they were not entirely absent from the news in the early months of 1975 and yet very little is said about them in the case study presented in *More Bad News*. Why not?

The reasons are to be located in the basic

thesis of the book. This thesis grants no autonomy whatsoever to television news reporting, and thus the impression created is that television news is merely engaged in reproducing and amplifying those strategies which emerged as dominant in the primary domains of political-economic struggle. This is based on the assumption that 'due impartiality' was absent.

This was not at all the case. According to the Annan Committee report on the future of broadcasting (HMSO, Cmnd. 6753, 1977) 'due impartiality', which is all that has ever been constitutionally required of television journalism, means in practice that broadcasters 'take account, not just of the whole range of views on an issue, but also of the weight of opinion which holds these views'. To put the point another way, television journalists are required to reproduce, as accurately as possible, the way in which 'public opinion' has already been formed up in and through the primary political and economic struggles. Contrary to the suggestions in *More Bad News*, television news reporting did *not* define the agenda, did *not* establish the structure of the debate between the various political and economic forces. Rather it accurately reproduced that structure, and it did so not in spite of, or through any lapse of the basic editorial imperatives. No, it was accomplished precisely in and through their practical implementation.

The central mechanism of this practical implementation is 'balance'. *More Bad News* makes much play of the fact that during the first four months of 1975 there were 17 occasions when someone appeared on news to argue against the government policy and there were 287 occasions when someone argued for it. By argue against, they mean from a position based on one of the alternative and subordinate diagnoses. On the question of 'balance', the Annan Committee's comments are again pertinent. 'Due impartiality', it is said, 'should not be synonymous with a mathematical balance, nor should it be confused with neutrality or interpreted as indifference. The broadcasters are operating within a system of parliamentary democracy and must share its assumptions. They should not be expected to give equal weight or show an impartiality which cannot be due to those who seek to destroy it by violent, unparliamentary or illegal means'. Sharing the assumptions of parliamentary democracy. This was precisely evidenced in the balance struck between the views of the economy in the period studied by the authors of *More Bad News*. Television news reporting did not reproduce any abstract, mathematical balance — that is

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most certainly true. But it did, accurately, reproduce a real political and ideological balance of forces.

As suggested above, *More Bad News* concentrates almost exclusively on the reproductive processes of news reporting. These are certainly fundamental processes, but by no means the only ones involved in the practice of journalistic story-telling. These other, representational processes are equally important because they are the processes by which news is made to appear as if a 'neutral' instance, as if it were a mere 'window on the world'. In and through these formal processes the news account is made to seem apart from, above and beyond, the various struggles 'reported on'. These formal processes simultaneously prefigure an 'audience' which, like the accounts themselves, is fragmented from the struggles which are the content of the reports. The prefigured audience is constantly addressed as witness to, but not participant in, the struggle and argument over issues. It is made to seem witness and recipient of the conse-

quences of these struggles going on 'out there'. Just how these important effects can and are accomplished could have been, *should* have been, the object of attention of Parts II and III of *More Bad News* where the Group's analysis of the verbal and visual operations of news reporting were analysed. Unfortunately they were not. The main concern of Part III seems to be to demonstrate that the editing of news film is 'badly' done and does not conform to what the Group understands as the normative rules of cinematic film editing. What they fail to see is that the 'roughness' of much of the 'actuality film' in news reporting is absolutely crucial to its construction as a 'neutral' and 'transparent' instance. Sadly the Group were more concerned to deny this 'neutrality' than to demonstrate how this massively important ideological effect is routinely sustained.

In conclusion, then, the assertion of 'objectivity' and 'impartiality' is neither 'bland', nor does it 'obfuscate what is in fact the reproduction of the dominant assumptions about our society'. Rather, it is the/orm

in which that reproduction proceeds in television news reporting. The major problems with *More Bad News* and its predecessor, *Bad News* stem from their refusal to take on the task of producing an understanding of the precise form of reproducing. And this has important strategic consequences. To argue as the Group does that we do not have news reporting which is routinely impartial and objective, leads them to suppose that we can have. Their efforts to transform broadcasting, from the evidence of what is said in the book, would seem to take this direction. While some reforms are proposed, particularly with respect to 'balance', their efforts, if successful, would not lead to a fundamentally different practice of news reporting. In essential respects news reporting would be as it is at the present moment. What we require is not the denial of the practical implementation of these-basic editorial imperatives at the present time, but rather the formation and implementation of quite different editorial criteria.

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