CREATING REALITY: HOW TELEVISION NEWS DISTORTS EVENTS

BY DAVID ALTHEIDE

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Beverley Hills, 1976, p. 221.

A Review by
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Creating Reality is one of a group of recent books motivated by the perception that the increasing power of television news in defining the reality for the American public is a crucial social issue. The well-documented dependency of the public on TV news for information about events in the world, and the credibility with which the audience regard this coverage, have drawn a number of authors' attention to that group of people who act in their various journalistic capacities as the information gatekeepers of the nation and to the process of news production.

The approach adopted in this book very much belongs to that tradition of media research which has developed through the 70's concerned with the 'institutional process' -- the structure and dynamics of programme production and selection -- in opposition to the more classical studies of media 'effects on audiences'. Of these studies, Altheide deserves considerable attention. Basing his research on several years of participant observation with TV news stations, Altheide comes to the serious conclusion that a considerable bias in the news exists, and documents his case with many examples. He uses these examples to develop the thesis that it is through an understanding of the news process that we can most clearly witness the nature of this bias.

Twisted way of telling it "straight"

The central concept of the book is the notion of 'news perspective'. News perspective, Altheide claims, is the result of the various practical and organizational demands at work in the production of news which typically result in a "convoluted way of simplifying events". The manifestations of this convolution are symptomatic of the bias in news which occurs as facts and/or events are transformed into 'news stories'. The underlying logic of production is imposed upon events as they are taken out of the real world in which they occur, in order to be subsequently re-contextualized in the news story. Thus, Altheide is concerned not only with which stories are selected for coverage, but even more so with 'how' these stories are presented in the news.

News Perspective

Of the various factors that give shape to news perspective, Altheide emphasizes
four in particular:

1. The relationship between audience demand and the changes in the presentation and style of the news: Here, he specifically emphasizes the importance of the 'interpretations' of what the audience prefers, made by the media executives and journalistic staff; for the governing assumptions of media personnel are, in his view, not always accurate.

2. The nature of and problems with the technology in news gathering and presentation: Operating the equipment efficiently within the temporal constraints and difficult situations of news production are limits on the programmes presentation.

3. Scheduling: One of the most immediate constraints on production which sets the temporal framework in which decision-making takes place, and events get selected.

4. Organizational: The pragmatics of operating within a complex organizational setting, in which skills, personalities, attitudes and levels of professionalism which vary across the members of the news team, frustrate the production process.

Taken together, he argues, "these organizational and practical factors in news-work promote a way of looking at events", which are implicitly internalized by all members of the news team, and are taken for granted by newsmen. This 'way of looking' at events generates expectations about what the important kinds of events are (news values, news instincts), and how stories should be presented (news slant, angle) which underly the approach taken by the newsmen to the event. Systematized by the shared experience of news-work, these expectations confine the newscast to a number of 'angles' and limit the degree to which the facts are allowed to speak for themselves.

Public is impaled on a sharp angle

Altheide recognizes that rather than emerging from the material itself, the adoption of a slant on a news story arises out of the need to make the news interesting and relevant to the public, and out of the exigencies of a hurried and limited capacity of the newsmen to actually research and record the story for the newscast. He uses a considerable variety of examples and circumstances to illustrate his point and takes pains to show the various ways a slant will evolve out of the pragmatics of covering an event. Moreover, he identifies several ways in which the journalistic practices predispose the reporter to a particular range of angles on the story. This is the most unique feature of this analysis.

The slant, or angle, as it develops for any given story, provides a kind of selective filter through which the event is viewed by the reporter. It may, because of the mutual interdependency of news organizations (networks, papers, radio), become the framework for other media coverage as well. Once generated, it shapes both the questions asked in the interviews, and the filming of the action visuals;
ultimately the way the story is finally edited supports the interpretation of the event by the newsmen, leaving the rest on the cutting room floor. In this way, facts are incorporated into stories rather than stories being based on facts. Yet the news angle remains hidden behind the guise of objectivity and facticity of the newscasts conveyed by seeing the event for oneself or hearing about it first hand in interviews.

An example of news angle that he develops to illustrate his point, is the coverage of Sen. Eagleton's candidacy for U.S. vice-president in 1972. Eagleton's candidacy was subverted by three weeks of news stories which focused solely on the issue of his past psychiatric history, and the issue of whether such a mental experience limited his ability to perform in public office. Other aspects of Eagleton's qualifications were overlooked to the exclusion of this issue.

Another important element in the discussion of news perspective is the nature of feedback about programming from the audience and its relationship to programme decision-making. Altheide argues that the use of audience reaction itself is part of the distorting process in news production because it biases the producer-directors and production personnel's impression of what the public wants, giving a popular framework to news perspective. He criticizes this framework however because it is based on overly general interpretations of what such data mean. In particular he argues that most production personnel depend excessively on the ratings, whereas he finds good reason to believe that they are inaccurate and say very little about specific aspects of programming or styles adopted for specific stories. He also points out that calls to the station may be based on an atypical sample of viewers' reactions, and are carelessly used by media personnel to reinforce personal interpretations of problems of production. Furthermore, he argues that executives and production staff alike are more sensitive to the criticisms of their peers than of the audience.

The best illustration of the force of Altheide's argument is his interpretation of the Watergate affair. He explains the enormous consequences that were engendered by this story as arising from the angle that was developed for it which led to the further unfolding of its ramifications and its impact on the audience. The angle that was adopted focussed on the theme of corruption in high political places, which, with compelling force, underwrote most of the news exposure of the Watergate story. He feels that other slants, that might have been adopted for the story would not have been of sufficient momentum to sustain journalistic and audience interest which led to the depth of investigation.

And so, this book raises a number of difficult and crucial issues for the understanding of the role of news broadcasting in modern society; for news is a model case for the discussion of the role of media in information dissemination. Ultimately, the question which he poses is the relationship between media broadcasting and the mechanisms of power within modern democracy because it is only in terms of 'bias' is of any impact. Altheide believes that the media have accumulated a level of influence through their control of the flow of information, such that they vie with the more traditional political channels in the process of pluralistic power bargaining, creating agendas not only in terms of priorities, but also hidden agendas based on interpretation.
He raises this question in opposition to either the liberal or the conspiracy-collusion models of information in politics. These positions view the media respectively as being either 'apolitical' or as 'pawns' of larger political interests. He refutes both these cases by illustrating cases where there is a direct conflict between media executives and politicians; and other cases where media power proves greater than all political interests in controlling the presentation of political imagery and dialogue. He argues that the media must be viewed as agencies with semi-autonomous influence over politics. This is the basic reason that he feels the study of news production is essential, for he feels that the public must become more aware of the news as a political process; yet the media have only the most primitive capacity to examine themselves critically.

Some might wish to argue that Altheide's examination of the American media is inappropriate to the Canadian context. After all, we Canadians have never had a Watergate or Eagleton affair, and our media system mixes commercial with public networks. These, in fact, are two serious limitations on Altheide's work because he does not locate the development of the journalistic traditions as cultural or historical processes, nor does he explore the importance of the broader institutional arrangements on the news process. Yet, many of the points he makes are directly applicable because the process of news production in most broadcast agencies remains the same. It is easy to see, based on constant haggling at the CRTC, and on the recent controversies caused by a dispute over the cover of Macleans, and the reassignment of Peter Kent of the CBC National, that the very issues Altheide raises are important to the Canadian media; it may even be that in Canada these are more important simply because the Canadian traditions have not been as concerned with the political aspects of media, as have the Americans. The basic thrust of Altheide's book was to promote greater public awareness of the news process and its distortion of events -- of media news literacy -- as a means of enhancing the institutions of democracy. It is a shame therefore that news analysis remains the concern of the media analyst and cognescent, and has made little dent in the public realm.

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The thrust for Freedom of Information legislation continues. At the federal level, we have had two reports, and a promise for legislation in the next session. At the provincial level, Nova Scotia has an act, Ontario has a commission, and British Columbia has a position paper. At the municipal level, Winnipeg has taken some steps, and Ottawa is studying the situation.

ACCESS moves into its third year, organized better than ever to promote strong freedom of information legislation. We lobby, hold public forums, and general meetings, make submissions, collect and share information, and we lobby. Last year, ACCESS did not solicit funds, but this year we need your support: people, supplies, money.