THE NEWS MEDIA AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: 
EXPERIENCE AND THE MEDIA REALITY

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Media coverage of the 1986 Reykjavik Summit is examined. It is argued that media presentation is a crucial determinant of the public perception of international politics.

La couverture médiatique du sommet de Reykjavik en 1986 est examinée. Il y est proposé que la présentation médiatique est hautement déterminante dans la perception du public quant aux politiques internationales.

Apart from the business of our daily lives, none of us can hope to experience the world first-hand. We rely on the news media, among other things, to bring that world to us. How the media go about performing their task is of greatest importance, since their account of the world outside of our daily lives creates the 'media reality' on which we base so much. This is a paper about why we come to depend on the media reality as a cornerstone of our understanding of the world.

Part one deals with the concepts of image and reality and how the two often become blurred. It will be suggested that the seeming remoteness of international affairs makes us even more reliant on the media for the information and images that at one level inform us of events on the world stage, and at a deeper level, become the basis of our belief systems. Part two discusses briefly a proposed model of factors that influence the media reality. Such a model could be based on material from various media scholars who have tried to categorize the types of things that become news, and the way the news media present certain issues and events. The concept of the media reality is examined in light of the media coverage of the meeting between President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev that took place in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October, 1986.

At heart, this paper is about the link between perceptions and structure; we must consider not only the things media reports lead us to believe about our world, but also attempt to look at how those perceptions become the basis of our actions. I conclude that the media reality is a valid concept for looking at the role of the news media in shaping our perceptions of international relations. Sadly, I have been able only to hint at the link between those perceptions and structure. There is much work to be done and this paper is only a start.
It may seem an obvious statement to suggest that what people believe to be real is real in its consequences. The philosopher Plato made the point in his allegory of the prisoners in the cave, a story worth repeating here at length:

Imagine men living in a cave with a long passageway stretching beyond them and the cave's mouth, where it opens wide to the light. Imagine further that since childhood the cave dwellers have had their legs and necks shackled so as to be confined to the same spot. They are further constrained by blinders that prevent them from turning their heads; they can see only directly in front of them. Next, imagine a light from a fire some distance behind them and burning at a higher elevation. Between the prisoners and the fire is a raised path along whose edge there is a low wall like the partition at the front of a puppet stage. The wall conceals the puppeteers while they manipulate their puppets above it.

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- You describe a strange prison and strange prisoners.
- Like ourselves. Tell me, do you not think those men would see only the shadows cast by the fire on the wall of the cave? Would they see anything of themselves or of one another?
- How could they if they couldn't move their heads their whole life long?
- Could they see the objects held above the wall behind them or only the shadows cast in front?
- Only the shadows...
- By every measure, then, reality for the prisoners would be nothing but shadows cast by artifacts.
- It could be nothing else (Sterling and Scott: 1985, pp 209-210).

Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, restricted by the chains of perception and belief, we do not make decisions based on "objective facts of the situation, whatever that may mean," but on our image of the situation. "It is what we think the world is like, not what it is really like that determines our behavior" (Boulding: 1959, p 120). In a prophetic work written in 1922, journalist Walter Lippmann spoke of the "world outside and the pictures in our heads." Our environment, Lippmann wrote, is "altogether too big, too complex and too fleeting for direct acquaintance." (Lippmann: 1922, p 11) To manage, we insert between ourselves and our environment a "pseudo-environment" composed of images and stereotypes of what we believe the world outside to be like. And we often preserve those images in the face of what would seem to be clear evidence to the contrary (Shaheen: 1985, p 171).

C. Wright Mills calls ours a "second-hand world" where to varying degrees, ordinary citizens and powerful decision-makers alike structure their belief systems on the basis of information that comes to them from others.

People are aware of more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect. The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others. Everyone lives in a world of such meanings. No man stands alone directly confronting a world of solid fact. No such world is available (Said: 1981, p 42).
This paper contends that much of that second-hand world, especially the world of foreign affairs and occurrences that take place outside of our cultural and national boundaries, comes to us through the news media. In an odd sort of way, we are something like the prisoners in Plato's cave, relying on shadows and reflections brought to us by the media for our vision of a world we cannot experience directly.

Despite widespread criticism of the news media from all quarters, they are still regarded as "factual, accurate and impartial - three qualities which contribute to the acceptance of their reports as authoritative". In a landmark study of the nature of foreign news coverage, Johan Galtung and Holmboe Ruge called the news media "first-rate competitors for the number one position as international image former" (Galtung and Ruge: 1965, p 13). Most of what we know of international affairs comes to us through the news media; there simply are no practical alternatives. The seeming remoteness of international affairs from our daily lives causes us to be even more reliant on the media for the substance of our mental pictures of the world. As Jack Shaheen suggests in a recent study of Western media coverage of the Arab world, "the greater the distance we are from any group...the greater the reliance upon preconceived images about that group" (Shaheen: 1985, p 161). In forming our images and beliefs about the world of international affairs, a world that is for most, outside of direct experience, our reliance on the media is exacerbated. This is an argument about the role of the media in turning the world outside of direct experience into reality.

Media Influence

The importance of the media as a source of information among political leaders and decision-makers in international politics is contested. Media scholars like Colin Seymour-Ure and journalists such as James Reston of the New York Times, have suggested that media influence is greatly exaggerated (Reston: 1966; Seymour-Ure: 1974). But there is much evidence to the contrary. In his study of Western media coverage of Islam, Edward Said contends that 90 per cent of what Americans came to know about the crisis in Iran following the 1979 revolution, came to them through the news media (Said: 1981, p 75).

Traditional democratic thinking cites the influence of the media on policy makers as indirect, "in the impact of the media upon public opinion, and through it, the effect of that mass opinion on the...decision makers" (Smith:
But others go further than this 'filter up' view of the influence of news media on decision-makers. Some suggest that many of the most elite members of the foreign policy decision-making process get much of their information from the media. In The Press and Foreign Policy, one of the most authoritative works in the field, Bernard Cohen suggests that policy makers get more information from the press than they get from diplomatic sources, and generally get it more quickly (Cohen: 1963, p 40). In his 1986 study, based on interviews with 250 British ministers, diplomats and journalists, Yoel Cohen concluded that members of parliament, interest groups and the wider public are almost entirely dependent on the news media for their information about international developments. One prime minister interviewed by Cohen contended that "Governments don't decide policy based on information from the media. Even if they hear something first in the media they will check with that country's embassy...You have your own superior sources" (Cohen: 1986, p 21). But Cohen goes on to cite studies showing that as much as 75 to 90 per cent of the information gathered by embassies comes from published sources. It is a point made well by W. Phillips Davison when he says:

To an extent not ordinarily realized, the press serves as the eyes and ears of diplomacy. Diplomatic reporting and national intelligence services play a significant supporting role, but most information reaching governments about developments throughout the world comes from the wire services, newspapers, news magazines, radio and television...And it is often maintained that much of the information flowing through official channels is originally culled from the press in any case (Davison: 1974, p 177).

But any study of the role of the media in international affairs must take account of the influence of the media in relation to other social and cognitive processes that help shape our "pseudo-environment". As Martin Barker points out in Radical Philosophy, we must be wary of the assumption that "other things being equal, people's understanding of the world is a construct of the balance of information that flows to them" (Barker: 1987, p 30). This returns us to Lippmann's assertion that a news report is the "joint product of the knower and the known, in which the role of the observer is always selective and usually creative. The facts we see depend on where we are placed, and the habits of our eyes" (Lippmann: 1922, p 54). Joseph Klapper takes the argument further in his description of the "phenomenistic" view that communication is but one influence in a total situation. Klapper suggests that mass communication is more likely to reinforce existing opinions than to change them. Klapper says the media's role as a reinforcer of existing beliefs is mediated by such factors as selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention. He also places emphasis on the role of groups and opinion-leaders in influencing how audiences handle information (Klapper: 1960, pp 50-51). An exhaustive examination of these mediating influences is clearly
beyond the scope of this paper. Certainly their presence cannot be ignored, but at the same time they are not as important as Klapper and Lippmann say. We could perhaps compare mass communications to rainfall, and at the same time, visualize the mediating influences Klapper speaks of as tall trees whose leafy branches shelter much of the ground beneath them. Certainly the trees and their wide branches could be seen as an intermediary influence on the vegetation below, but it would be unfair to suggest that they are more important than the rainfall. The trees which stand between the rainfall and the young saplings below, not unlike our belief systems, will already have been greatly influenced by previous showers. What Klapper and others seem to overlook is the initial influence of the media in shaping the preconceived notions and belief systems that mediate future exposure to the media, and shape the thinking of influential opinion leaders.

But such research still faces another methodological problem: who is the mass audience? Galtung and Ruge state clearly that their study's concern is only with the first half of the news chain, "from world event to news image... in other words: how do events become news" (Galtung and Ruge: 1965, p 64)? But it is worth exploring elements at the other ends of the news chain. How do decisions about what becomes news affect those who rely on the media reality for their vision of the world? Just how much of the process of turning information into beliefs can be attributed to the media is difficult to ascertain. By nature, everyone has their own, distinct version of the media reality. As Lippmann suggested, that reality will be a joint product of knower and known. But we can still look for generalizations about the nature of the media reality without examining specific individuals. It is the work of future studies to examine more closely the effect of media coverage on distinct groups or individuals within society. But as there are as many media realities as there are people exposed to the media, we can look generally at the mass audience and the role of the media in shaping 'our' reality about the world of international affairs.

The Media Reality

The position here is that what the media report about international affairs is a vital factor in the formulation of our beliefs about the world. What the news media bring to us creates what I have called the media reality. We need not tangle with the age-old philosophical debate over whether reality exists as an objective reality, or only in the mind of the individual. Even if there is an objective entity, we must realize that it is impossible for us to comprehend it in its entirety, or for the media to bring it to us.

The media of communication, despite their great diversity, have in common the inability to communicate everything that happens and
to communicate in one undifferentiated mass... The media might be regarded as a giant prism, separating the huge mass of public affairs into discrete and salient items, individual beams so to speak, that illuminate particular areas of public policy (Cohen: 1967, p 195).

Therefore, what the media bring to us becomes our reality, and we treat it as such, even though at best, it represents only a portion of what is taking place in our world. Many have pondered if the tree that falls in the woods makes any noise if no one is there to hear it. We could fire back that if the tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, it does not matter if it made a noise or not. Bernard Cohen expressed this most succinctly in relation to the news media when he said "if we do not see a story in the newspapers (or catch it on radio or television) it effectively has not happened so far as we are concerned (Cohen: 1963, p 13). In a sense then, every media image creates its own reality.

The real danger facing any terrorist group, for example, is that of being ignored by the news media. Terrorists are not trying to convert the masses to their cause, they are just trying to get their attention. It has been noted that "government officials and private citizens have often erroneously commented on increases in terrorism during years that actually witnessed absolute decreases in both the number of incidents and the damage inflicted" (Dowling: 1986, p 18). In this way, small groups often become substantial terrorist movements in the media reality.

News reports often contain the implicit assumption that they are a reflection of reality. In fact, such a presentation was for two decades summed up explicitly in American broadcaster Walter Cronkite's famous sign-off at the end of each newscast. Cronkite's "and that's the way it is," was at one and the same time hopelessly false and yet, paradoxically true. Lippmann told us over 60 years ago that news and truth are not the same thing, and yet for millions of television viewers, what Cronkite summed up with "and that's the way it is" became a reality.

Onto the media agenda come stories that literally take flight, attracting the attention of much of the world and effectively pushing others off the 'radar screens' of reality. "The power to make a reportable event is the power to make experience," Daniel Boorstin says in The Image (Boorstin: 1975, p 10). "Media recognition," Patricia Karl adds, "is an admittance ticket to participation on a global scale" (Karl: 1978, p 282). There are abundant examples of the power of the media and those who use it to create a reality. To ensure that their message would not be cut off, those holding the American hostages at the embassy in Tehran in 1979 installed their own cameras in the embassy compound complete with dish antennas to relay signals via satellite to American
livingrooms. "Part of this production included a show for viewers in which Iranian mobs shouted slogans in English (and in French for one Canadian television crew) and shook fists on cue" (Karl: 1983, p 143). Much of such television coverage was presented in newscasts that ended with Cronkite's legendary "and that's the way it is." And for millions of American television viewers, that's the way it was.

Alongside the power to make a reality is the power to effectively keep something from becoming a part of the media reality by keeping it out of the newspapers and off the television screens. Witness restrictions in South Africa on media access and the consequent disappearance of troubled black townships from the Western news agenda. Until something enters the public domain, it effectively is not a part of the media reality.

As many critics have noted, the power of television, more than the other media, transcends the transmission of information that becomes the basis of images and beliefs. "The highest power of television," wrote Reuven Frank, a producer with NBC, "is not in the transmission of information, but in the transmission of experience...joy, sorrow, shock, fear, these are the stuff of news (Hill: 1981, p 27). It has already been suggested that the special importance of media coverage of foreign affairs is due in part to the fact that few of us actually experience first-hand events played out on the world stage. We rely mainly on the news media to bring those events to us. Gladys and Kurt Lang point to the Iranian hostage crisis as "an occasion in which the televised event, regardless of how authentic or revealing the real thing, became shared experience: The reality that lives on is the reality etched in the memories of the millions who watched rather than the few who were actually there" (Larson: 1986, p 109). In a classic work, Michael Oakeshott stated that there is "No separation possible between reality and experience; reality is experience and nothing but experience. And since experience is a world of ideas, reality is a world of ideas" (Oakeshott: 1933, p 54). More often than not, those ideas come to us through the media rather than from our direct experience of events. And perhaps because of the way we receive those messages, we elevate their reception to the level of direct experience. In so doing, we make them a part of our reality. Could it be that receiving information through the media can substitute for experience? Marshall McLuhan suggested over two decades ago that the media are "extensions of man," part of the sensation of experiencing the world, rather than an intermediary between the world and our senses (McLuhan: 1964).

Perhaps the information the media bring to us can be treated as a form of experience, not so much because of how the media send their messages, but
because of the way in which we receive them. Jay Epstein warned in a study of television news coverage that what appears on television news is very different from a mirror image of reality (Epstein: 1975). I would suggest that the opposite is true, that the mirror image is an ideal comparison. What the news media bring to us is a mirror image of reality, partly because of how that information is delivered, but more importantly, because of the way in which it is received. Remember that, after all, the images we see when looking in a mirror are less than a completely accurate picture of reality. What we see is a reflection, not the real thing; we also see that reality in reverse, and depending on lighting conditions and the type of mirror we are looking at, with many slight distortions that markedly change its perspective. And yet, nothing could seem to be a more accurate reflection of reality than the face we see in the bathroom mirror each morning. We view the media's mirror image of reality in the same way, overlooking its in-built distortions, accepting what we see, hear or read, as an accurate reflection of reality. The point is that beliefs we hold about parts of the world we 'experience' through the media become our reality. This simple, yet sweeping statement makes the information the media bring to us, and those factors that shape that information before it reaches our screens of perception, of vital importance.

Part Two: The Media Reality and Coverage of the Reykjavik Summit

When US President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, met in Reykjavik, Iceland in the fall of 1986, millions watched - or so they believed. In fact only a few dozen top officials from the United States and the Soviet Union had any direct experience with the historic meeting that took place in Hofdi House October 10-12. A few dozen more, mostly reporters, security guards and curious passers-by, actually witnessed some of the events of that memorable weekend with their own eyes. The rest of us were left to make our decisions, about what did or did not happen during those 10 hours of intense negotiations, on the basis of information that came to us in the way that news of major events on the world stage comes to most people—through the news media. The remoteness of arms control and super power summitry from our daily lives made us even more dependent on the media for our version of events in Reykjavik.

And yet, most of us who are interested enough in international relations to take notice of such an event would probably recount with confidence what took place there. Indeed, political and military decision-makers, arms control negotiators and other actors on the international scene probably made important decisions based, at least in part, on what the news media told them about the
event while it was taking place, and in the hectic days that followed. We can fairly speculate, I think, that perceptions among some key decision-makers, based on what they saw in the media's 'uncertain mirror,' entered into decisions that influenced the 'structure' of international affairs. Regardless of what really took place behind closed doors in Reykjavik, the 'reality' of Reykjavik for those of us who were not there is a combination of what we have taken from television reports, newspaper and magazine articles and radio bulletins - cumulatively, the media reality. Why the media chose to cover certain aspects of the Reykjavik meeting and how those elements were presented is very important. News does not just happen. News factors internal to the media system and influences from outside play a crucial role in shaping the reality of an event such as the Reykjavik meeting.

For what the media produce is neither spontaneous nor completely 'free': news does not just happen, pictures and ideas do not merely spring from reality into our eyes and minds, truth is not directly available, we do not have unrestricted variety at our disposal...television, radio and newspapers observe certain rules and conventions to get things across intelligibly, and it is these, often more than the reality being conveyed, that shape the material delivered by the media (Said: 1981, p 44-45).

A model of these forces that constrict the media, if fully developed, would have two parts: influences internal to the media system, or news factors, and forces outside of the news system - external factors. News factors are those influences which determine 'what' becomes news and 'how' that news is reported. By far the best categorization of factors that determine what becomes news was assembled by Galtung and Ruge (Galtung and Ruge: 1965). They refer to such factors as unambiguity, size, involvement of elites, ethnocentrism, negativity and unusualness as some of the factors that will determine what becomes news. Decisions about what makes the news, by excluding some events and including others, obviously have a great impact on what forms the media reality. After these events cross the media threshold, how they are presented takes on increasing importance. The news media's tendency to simplify and make abundant use of metaphors, as well as its effect of imposing structure where none may otherwise have existed, are also of importance here. NBC's Frank said every television news story should have the attributes of drama and fiction - a beginning, middle and end (Hill: 1981, p 27). Political scientist Robert Jackson compares the world's stream of events to an endless motion picture (personal communication, 1986). Media coverage has the effect of freezing that film, pulling out a single frame and by making it the focus of attention, losing track of what the production looks like as a whole. Most important is the theme that runs through most news coverage, an idea that the whole story has been told. Robert Fulford calls this the "grand illusion" that there is nothing that can not be said in a minute and thirty
seconds, or written in a few column inches. Central to this myth, according to Fulford, is the "breathtakingly audacious idea that everything can be understood" (Fulford: 1984, pp 9-10).

Government propaganda, image-making and news management are at the heart of influences on the media reality external to the news system. Terrorist groups too are proficient at making use of news factors to make themselves a part of the media reality.

Simply covering the news means consciously or unconsciously creating a reality by using a common set of news factors to package what is going on in the world. We can take some comfort in the fact that what the media bring us must be, at least in part, a reflection of what is happening in the world around us. But those reflections are no more reality than are the shadows cast on the wall of Plato's cave. What is perhaps most disturbing is the lack of fidelity between the world outside and the pictures that the news media help us to form in our heads.

The Case Study

My case study examined coverage of the Iceland meeting from its announcement on October 1 through to the end of December. Reports from the International Herald Tribune and the Financial Times newspapers were examined in depth. Reports about the summit on London-based Independent Television's News at Ten were also examined. This is not a content analysis. The 130 newspaper articles and 26 television reports gathered were examined in detail, not with an eye to column-width, page placement or the number of seconds devoted to a given television shot, but rather in an attempt to reach conclusions about the general themes and trends in coverage of the summit.

Studies of media coverage often look at some objective record of events in comparison with what becomes news. In a study of one event, emphasis could perhaps be on how the event was portrayed, rather than on why it became news. And yet, the fact that it seems obvious to us that an event such as the Iceland meeting should receive blanket coverage raises an interesting point. The assumption that Reykjavik deserved such attention shows how deeply entrenched are certain rules and conventions about what becomes news. The Western media's tendency to look at many events in terms of the 'East-West' struggle left no doubt whether Reykjavik should be a major news item. There would be no such assumption about a high-level meeting of leaders of the non-aligned movement. Even if lengthy consideration of why Reykjavik got so
much attention seems unnecessary here, our assumption that it deserved such coverage says much about our in-built judgements on what should become news.

More interesting in an examination of the Reykjavik summit are the "how" factors, the implicit rules and conventions of media coverage that shape the media reality of all events, and which were undoubtedly applied to the Reykjavik meeting.

Arms control is not a simple matter. It is probably fair to say that few people, even those who closely follow developments on the international scene, understand fully all of the intricacies of arms control negotiations. It is perhaps for that reason that arms talks are notoriously under-reported and misunderstood. One wonders whether the mass audience is simply uninterested in the details of such negotiations, or if the news media decide the whole affair is too difficult for them to comprehend. In practise, complex events like the Reykjavik summit are grossly simplified in the conviction that this will make them more understandable for the wider audience. References to the summit meeting as "High Noon in Reykjavik," (International Herald Tribune, [IHT] October 11, 1986) or an encounter between summit gladiators reduced a complex series of events to a wild west showdown or fight to the death in a Roman arena. The players in this high-level football match would "move the ball forward" (Financial Times, [FT] October 10, 1986) with one initiative or change the rules of the games to "sudden death" with another (FT October 14, 1986). Is it wrong or inaccurate for the media to present such an event to us as if it were a high-stakes poker game, with Gorbachev raising the ante and changing the rules as he goes along? Right or wrong, this simple and dramatic presentation of the event enters the media reality. This simplification and use of imagery is perhaps a reflection of Edward Said's point that the further away we are from events, both metaphorically and physically, the greater will be the reliance on pre-conceived images.

And yet clearly, Reykjavik was more than a personal confrontation between two actors on the world stage. Portraying the events of the meeting as being similar to a chess match or card game may make them easier for the average viewer, listener or reader to understand, but employing such simplistic metaphors also changes the nature of the event as it becomes our media reality. This metaphorical style of reporting relates closely to the media's tendency to impose a structure or pattern upon events that might otherwise be seen in an entirely different context. Like the frame in Robert Jackson's film analogy, Reykjavik was pulled from the stream of events, frozen there, and presented in such a fashion as to be out of context with other developments in arms control. It was as if there had been no negotiations on nuclear arms in any other forum,
as if the two key players came together for a final showdown, winner take all. Most reports presented the meeting as a direct result of the resolution of the so-called 'Daniloff affair.' Rather than being viewed in the wider context of arms control efforts that had gone on for decades, Reykjavik was presented initially as a spin-off from the successful resolution of the Daniloff incident.

By looking at individual reports we find excellent examples of the media's tendency to impose a structure or pattern on what would otherwise be an ongoing stream of events. Virtually every report on ITN's *News at Ten* followed the standard beginning-middle-and-end format so familiar to television journalism. Reports involving Reagan invariably began with familiar shots of the President's jaunty stride and hearty wave as he made his way either from a helicopter, to a car, up, or down the steps of Hofdi House. Somewhere in the middle would come clips from briefings with presidential spokesman Larry Speakes or from Soviet news conferences. After news began to leak out the middle of the story would revolve around sketchy details of measures being discussed, but would still be sandwiched between familiar shots of a procession of black limousines arriving for, and departing from each session.

On the day when the 'break-up' of the summit became apparent, the first report on *News at Ten* gave lengthy coverage of the news conference by a visibly disappointed George Shultz. But the next item, a packaged story likely prepared hours earlier, returned to the standard formula.

The dramatic style of television is best summed up with a few phrases from a report on *News at Ten* the day following the end of the meetings:

> By dawn today it was all over in Reykjavik, Mikhail Gorbachev waking aboard Nikita Kruschev's old cruise ship the Baltica, only a four hour flight to Moscow ahead. On the quay Soviet officials might have pondered world reaction to the momentous events of the night before, suddenly camera shy during their last hours in the West...

> Then Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev, lead by a bodyguard, arm in arm down the liner's steps. Minutes later, the Soviet leadership pulled out in force, cosseted in limousines, staring straight ahead, a bleak farewell to a frozen land. At the airport, a stoic farewell from Gorbachev to key foreign affairs advisor Giorgi Arbatov, on the right. A wave from Raisa Gorbachev, but even her face betrayed little of the spontaneous charm of earlier days in Iceland. Final words to negotiators, now flying to European capitals to explain the summit's collapse. Mikhail Gorbachev called this Iceland summit, now he was leaving with nothing but news of an American president who said no to all he had to offer...

> And so Iceland's hopes of stamping its name on a famous arms control pact have been dashed. The haunted house where the superpower leaders met and failed to agree stands empty again. Ian Glover-James, *News at Ten*, in Reykjavik, Iceland (News at Ten, October 13, 1986).
There were repeated references in coverage to the public relations war, details of who had upstaged who and how the battle of images was proceeding. If the details of what was going on inside the house would not be released, it seemed as if the less consequential war of images was destined to become the focus of news coverage. This is a reflection of Bernard Cohen's suggestion that if something does not make the news, it effectively has not happened so far as we are concerned.

Especially interesting in the case of Reykjavik is the influence of factors external to the news system, namely, efforts by both superpowers to get their version of the story onto the media agenda. From the beginning both sides made efforts to downplay the meeting, even refusing to refer to it as a summit. Reagan repeatedly told a skeptical press that he was expecting the meeting to be nothing more than an informal session to get ready for a full summit. Gradually the media came around to the President's preferred terminology and references to 'summit' changed subtly to 'pre-summit,' 'mini-summit' or even blandly, 'the upcoming meeting in Reykjavik.' This semantic shift may seem insignificant, but it nonetheless shows the ability of forces outside the news system to change the nature of the media reality, indeed, even before an event has taken place.

The battle to win public opinion reached full steam in the days following the breakdown of the summit as both sides sent forth a flotilla of experts to try to get their side of the story across. In an unprecedented move, White House spokesman Larry Speakes announced on October 14 that all comments by administration officials would be on the record. When asked by reporters if this was not an effort to change perceptions of what had happened at the meeting, Speakes replied that officials were simply trying to state the facts in hopes people would decide for themselves what had happened (Speakes: 1986). In several stages, the propaganda blitz that followed re-defined what had and had not been said at Reykjavik, who had picked up their things first when the final session ended, and what the status of arms control talks were following the summit. In his television address of October 14, Reagan painted the summit in a much brighter light than had Shultz in his gloomy news conference only days before. "With typical audacity President Reagan cast the Reykjavik summit not as a failure but as a success," (FT, October 15, 1986) one report said. Of course the news media and many in the audience were not unaware of the attempted news management that was going on. In fact the propaganda campaigns became the news item themselves in the days after both sides left Iceland. But ironically, even though there was nothing secret about attempts by both sides to change the media reality of Reykjavik, arguably, the tactics worked. Despite explicit statements by Shultz and other officials immediately after the meetings that SDI had been the stumbling block and that the
President was refusing to move any further, as early as October 14 both sides were saying that the meeting had ended with all options open and with everything still on the negotiating table. By October 16 and 17 news reports were saying results of the summit were not so bad as they had once seemed.

It was as if the near agreements Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev had packed into their briefcases so hastily on the Sunday afternoon had never left the negotiating table. In the days and weeks that followed, the complexion of the meeting changed. As Gladys and Kurt Lang suggested, the reality that lives on is the reality etched in the memories of the millions who watched, rather than the few who were actually there (Larson: 1986, p 109). The media reality of what had occurred at Reykjavik took a dramatic shift, despite what had actually taken place behind the doors of Hofdi House. And for those of us dependent on the news media for our version of events, that media reality was all that mattered.

Conclusion

As the example of coverage of the Reykjavik summit has shown, the media reality can be a powerful influence on what we think about the world of international affairs. Regardless of the objective reality of an event (what 'really' happened – something I would argue we can never truly discover), what matters for us is what we believe to have taken place. The media enjoy such influence because we take their reality and accept it as our own. For the most part, we 'experience' the world outside of our daily lives through the media, or take our information second-hand from opinion-leaders who have, in turn, formed their impressions of the world based largely on media reports. As Michael Oakeshott would have suggested, we often make little distinction between experience and reality. Indeed, experience is reality. And based on that logic, there is no reason for us to believe that the news and information we 'experience' through the media is anything but a fair appraisal of what is taking place in our world. But as the study of coverage of the Reykjavik summit attempted to show, the nature of the news system, and the influence upon it from within and without, mean the reality the media bring to us is fluid and ever-changing.

But what is the power of the media and its reality to affect us? In conducting lengthy studies of media influence of voting behaviour, for example, many analysts mistakenly view the media's power simply as one of persuasion. In examining how the media influence our decisions on which 'route' to take, many overlook the media's role in creating the 'map' on which such routes are plotted. The power of the media may be not so much in its editorial persuasion
on a given issue (though even there it is considerable), but rather, in its subtle and cumulative sculpting of the belief systems that are the basis of our decisions.

It is ironic that media coverage, often criticized for being event-oriented, shallow and lacking in analysis of the long-term significance of events, becomes the basis of our opinions about those weighty issues which the media are accused of ignoring. We take short-term, episodic accounts of events and make them a part of the belief system that will shape our judgement on future events. We are more reliant on the media to help us to understand international relations than other aspects of our lives, but "international images have been noted to be gross, poorly organized and ill-articulated in the attitude structure of the individual" (Smith: 1973, p 115). And yet they form the basis of our understanding of the world.

But perhaps the greatest paradox of our so-called 'information age' is that although international communication has increased at all levels, we do not seem much closer together than before. McLuhan spoke of a 'global village' where modern technology would lead to greater understanding and enhanced communication. And yet, because of overconfidence in our own views, and in our ability to keep an open mind, we fail to realize how much we process the information that comes to us, and the extent to which the media reality is already the product of a complex series of screens and filters.

Communications technology continues to improve. Year by year we seem to know more about the world around us, and yet, in our certainty that ours is the correct version of events, we know less than we believe. The first step toward some kind of shared reality is the realization that ours is not the only way of seeing the world, that what we perceive is not reality, but rather, the 'media reality.'

REFERENCES


Mr. Thompson, who is now a staff writer with the Toronto Star, prepared this essay on the basis of work he did for an MA degree in International Relations at Kent University in Great Britain, supported by the Gordon Sinclair Foundation fellowship.