

Media Power: The Double Bind

by Stuart Hall

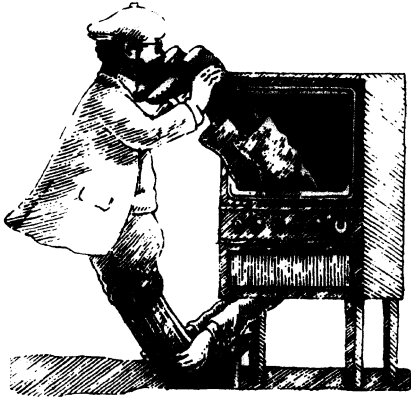
An English scholar's analysis of the broadcaster's relationship to the power structure of society suggests that balance within that structure preserves its definition of the political order.

British broadcasting institutions have a great deal of formal autonomy from the state and government, but their authority to broadcast derives from the state, and, ultimately, it is to the state that they are responsible. What are usually understood as "external influences on broadcasting" are in fact the everyday working context for broadcasting.

The study of such specific "influences" therefore is an inadequate model for examining the mediation between broadcasting and power. It is predicated on a model of broadcasting which takes at face value its formal and editorial autonomy; external influences are seen as encroaching upon this area of freedom.

I do not mean to deny specific instances of pressure, influence, and censorship to which broadcasters have been subject. Nor do I mean to deny the relative autonomy of broadcasting in its day-to-day practice. Nevertheless, the real relationship between broadcasting, power, and ideology is thoroughly mystified by such a model. One difficulty is that we have few ways of understanding how power and influence flow, how relative institutional integration is accomplished, in societies which are of the formal democratic type. Institutions are conceived of as either state-controlled and dominated, in which case they belong within the complex of state power, or as free and autonomous. We cannot, from an "external influences" model, predict or comprehend the specific areas of conjecture and disjuncture which arise between different institutions in civil society. Thus, we would find it impossible to account for the fact that on some specific occasions broadcasters assert their editorial indepen-

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dence against clear political pressure, and at the same time account for the mutual adjustments, the reciprocity of interests and definitions, occurring from day to day between broadcasters and the institutions of power.

The coverage of recent events in Northern Ireland has been subject to massive internal watchfulness and external constraint. Specifically, this has operated with respect to the broadcasters' right to interview repre-

sentative spokesmen of the IRA. Here, clearly, the broadcasters have been subject *both* to "external influence and pressure" *and* to internal institutional self-censorship. But, even had no specific representations on the issue been made to the broadcasters, can one envisage a situation in which, systematically, the broadcasters of their own accord gave precedence in their current affairs coverage to the definition of the Northern Ireland situation proposed by the IRA and its sympathizers? There seems to me only one, distant but just conceivable, contingency in which such a practice could ever become widespread within the broadcast organizations: if opinion were to crystallize so powerfully against government policies that the broadcasters could refer to an external authority alternative to that of the state itself, "public opinion." Otherwise, whether the state intervenes directly to censor broadcasting's coverage of Ulster or not, the prevailing tendency of the organizations has been to orient themselves within the dominant definition of the situation. The broadcasters' decision not to interview IRA spokesmen is the "free" reproduction, within the symbolic content of their programs, of the state's definition of the IRA as an "illegal organization": it is a mirror reflection and amplification of the decision, to which both political parties subscribe, that the IRA do not constitute a legitimate political agency in the Ulster situation.

Simpler, but more misleading, models are frequently advanced by both the political right and the political left. On the right, spokesmen try to account for what they call a "taste for agit-prop" in the media by what they see as the leftist tendencies of the people who are recruited for work in broadcast institutions. Much the same proposition, in reverse, is advanced by those on the left.

Television certainly recruits from an extremely narrow social band, and those who work in television are powerfully socialized into the ethos and morale of the broadcasting institutions. But I do not believe that television's built-in biases can be accounted for in terms of the overt political inclinations—to left or right—of its individual practitioners. What is far more significant is the way quite different kinds and conditions

of individuals are systematically constrained to handle the variety of news and accounts which they process daily within the framework of a limited set of interpretations. Nor do I believe that the broadcasters are systematically censored and pressured from extrinsic sources except in limited and largely exceptional cases. Just as it is impossible to "net" the influence of advertising in the press in terms of the number of times advertisers have explicitly threatened editors with the withdrawal of their custom, so it is impossible to "net" the real structure of interests in television or radio in terms of direct representations by government officials to broadcast institutions. Certainly there are issues and areas where the system of scrutiny is very precise—and it is important to identify where and what these are. But the relative autonomy of the broadcasting institutions is *not* a mere cover: it is, I believe, central to the way power and ideology are mediated in societies like ours.

Broadcasting accommodates itself to the power-ideology nexus by way of a number of crucial intervening concepts. These concepts mediate the relationship of the broadcasters to power. They provide the structure of legitimations which permit the broadcasters to exercise a substantial measure of editorial and day-to-day control without contravening the overall hegemony. At the same time, it is essential to recognize that this orientation of broadcasting within the hegemonic ideology is *not* a perfectly regulated, fully integrated one-dimensional system.

The central concepts which mediate broadcasting's relationship to the power-ideology complex are balance, impartiality, objectivity, professionalism, and consensus.

***Broadcasting institutions are required
to operate a system of balance
between conflicting interests and viewpoints.***

Until recently, producers were expected to provide balance within single programs, and whenever a topic is controversial this groundrule is more strictly applied. Elsewhere, it has come to be more liberally interpreted: balance "over a reasonable period of time." The broadcasters are thus *required to recognize* that conflicts of interest and opinion exist. Indeed, because controversy is topical and makes good, lively broadcasting, controversial programs flood the screen.

Thus broadcasting appears as the very reverse of monolithic or univocal—as precisely open, democratic, and controversial. Yet balance is crucially exercised within an overall framework of assumptions about the distribution of political power: the conflict here is scrupulously regulated. A debate between Labor and Conservative party spokesmen—an area subject to both executive and informal sanctions—is itself *framed* by agreements, set elsewhere but reproduced in the studio, on television's presentational devices and in its very discourse.

Political balance operates essentially between the legitimate mass parties

in the parliamentary system. Balance becomes trickier when groups outside the consensus participate, since the grounds of conflict then become the terrain of political legitimacy itself—an issue on which Labor and Conservative spokesmen stand together, against the others. In this way television does *not* favor one point of view, but it *does* favor—and reproduce—one definition of politics and excludes, represses, or neutralizes other definitions. By operating balance *within a given structure*, television tacitly maintains the prevailing definition of the political order. In one and the same moment, it expresses and contains conflict. It reproduces unwittingly the structure of institutionalized class conflicts on which the system depends. It thereby legitimates the prevailing structure of interests, while scrupulously observing “balance between the parties.” It also, incidentally, offers a favorable image of the system as a system, as open to conflict and to alternative points of view. It is this last twist which keeps the structure flexible and credible.

Impartiality defines the way broadcasters negotiate situations of conflict from within.

Broadcasters are not supposed to express personal opinions on controversial issues: they are committed to a rigorous impartiality between the conflicting parties. In practice, of course, all broadcasters have views. The working compromise is to insist that the broadcaster must be the last person, if at all, to express a view. But as all good producers know, there is more than one way of cutting a program. Producers have become extremely skilled at producing “balanced” studio teams; the infinite calculation of how many Bernadette Devlins make an Ian Paisley is one of those editorial acts which all producers are skilled at intuiting.

Yet the practice of impartiality has several inescapable consequences. It leads broadcasting into the impasse of a false symmetry of issue. All controversial questions *must* have two sides, and the two sides are usually given a rough equality in weight. Responsibility is shared between the parties; each side receives a measure of praise or censure. This symmetry of oppositions is a *formal balance*: it has little or no relevance to the quite unequal relative weights of the case for each side in the real world. If the workman asserts that he is being poisoned by the effluence from a noxious plant, the chairman must be wheeled in to say that all possible precautions are now being taken. This symmetrical alignment of arguments may ensure the broadcaster’s impartiality, but it hardly advances the truth.

Impartiality as a practice gives the broadcaster/presenter a built-in interest in compromise, in conflict resolution. It commits him to the pragmatic view of politics. His only way of intervening actively in a controversy is to act, in the studio, the shadow-role of the compromiser, the middleman. His only legitimate interventions can be to salvage some “lowest common denominator” from the deeply held but opposing positions before him. All conflicts thus become translated into the language of

compromise: all failures to compromise are signs of intransigence, extremism, or failures in communication. The other way of neutralizing conflict is to assert some overriding interest which subordinates the conflicting parties. Thus all broadcasters are safe in asserting that Britain's perilous economic position overrides all industrial conflict, even if the strikers have "a good case."

This stake of the broadcaster in conflict resolution has the function of legitimating those elements in a conflict which are "realistic"—which can be abstracted from a general case and built into a "package." The case which is intrinsically not amenable to this process is "unrealistic" and "unreasonable."

Broadcasting is thus raised above the conflicts which it treats. It seems to stand outside the real play of interests on which it reports and comments. The men and women who produce programs are real social individuals in the midst of the conflicts they report. But this subjective dimension is repressed in the "objectivity" of the program. The programs they produce are outside these conflicts; they reflect on and judge them, but they do not participate in them. This tendency of broadcasting to stand above conflict is especially damaging for the viewer, who is encouraged to identify with the presenter and who thus comes to see himself as a neutral and dispassionate party to a partisan and impassioned struggle: the disinvolved spectator before the spectacle of conflict.

*If the broadcaster is required to be impartial
between witnesses, he is also enjoined to be
objective before "the facts."*

Objectivity, like impartiality, is an operational fiction. All filming and editing is the manipulation of raw data—selectively perceived, interpreted, signified. Television cannot capture the whole of any event; the idea that it offers a pure transcription of a reality, a neutrality of the camera before the facts, is an illusion, a utopia. All filmed accounts of reality are selective. All edited or manipulated symbolic reality is impregnated with values, viewpoints, implicit theorizings, common-sense assumptions. The choice to film *this* aspect of an event rather than *that* is subject to criteria other than those embedded in the material itself: *this* aspect rather than *that* is significant, shows something special, out-of-the-ordinary, unexpected, typical. Each of those notions is operating against a taken-for-granted set of understandings and only has meaning within that context. Each decision to link this piece of film with that, to create a discourse out of the disparate fragments of edited material, makes sense only within a *logic of exposition*. The identification of social actors, their projects in the world, is accomplished against the prevailing schemes of interpretation which we regularly but tacitly employ for the recognition and decoding of social scenes: it partakes of the stock of social knowledge at hand which men employ to make sense of their world and events in it. Such a stock of knowledge is not

a neutral structure; it is shot through with previously sedimented social meanings.

The illusion of "reality" *depends* on such contexts of meaning, such background schemes of recognition and interpretation, for its construction. How "objective" is a clip from a miner's picket line used in a news or current affairs documentary program? The images we see are real enough; no one doubts that the cameraman and reporter were there, saw it happen, are trying to show it "as it is." Yet the brief extract of this denoted foreground event is an enormously compressed item of information, rich in connotations. It only has meaning for us within its multiple contexts: the picket (from the viewpoint of the strikers) as an index of the union's power to hold the line while the strike continues; the picket (from the viewpoint of the Coal Board) as an index of the strength and effectiveness of rank-and-file resistance; the picket (from the viewpoint of the government) as an element which might contribute to the defeat of the government's wages policy; the picket (from the political viewpoint) as an index of escalating class conflict; the picket (from the viewpoint of the police) as a problem in the policing of class conflict; and so on. Whether the item is accompanied by commentary or not, whether it provides the "actuality" basis for a studio discussion or not, its meaning lies in its *indexical* significance within the relevant context of meanings; we *decode* its significance—it cannot literally be "read off" the denoted images themselves—in terms of these contexts of awareness, in terms of the connotative power of the message. The different logics of interpretation within which this objectively presented item makes sense in a public discourse are not neutral networks of meaning, and no broadcast program can offer such an item without situating it within one or another of those logics.

***All professionals generate their own
distinctive ideologies and routines.***

Professionalism in broadcasting seems to serve as a defensive barrier which insulates the broadcaster from the contending forces which play across any program-making in a sensitive area. It is often a species of professional retreatism, a technique of neutralization. By converting issues of substance into a technical idiom, and by making himself responsible primarily for the technical competence with which the program is executed, the producer raises himself above the problematic content of the issues he presents. What concerns him is identifying the elements of "good television": cutting and editing with professional finish; the smooth management of transitions within the studio or between the program elements; "good pictures," full of incident and drama.

The most pervasive of these semitechnical structures is that of *news value* itself. The media journalist, like his counterpart in the press, "knows a good news story when he smells one"; but few can define what criteria are integrated within this notion. News values are, however, a man-made,

value-loaded system of relevancies. Such a system has great practical use, since it enables the editor to get his work done, under the condition of heavily pressured schedules, without reference back to first principles. But the idea that such sedimented social knowledge is neutral—a set of technical protocols only—is an illusion.

*Consensus may be defined as
the "lowest common denominator" in the
values and beliefs which are widely shared
amongst the population of a society.*

Consensus provides the basis of continuity and fundamental agreement in common social life. "The consensus" is the structure of common-sense ideology and beliefs in the public at large. In formal democracies, a great deal of what holds the social order together consists of those tacit, shared agreements about fundamental issues embedded at the level of "common sense ideology," rather than what is formally written down in constitutional protocols and documents.

"The consensus" on any specific issue is, however, extremely fluid and difficult to define. The opinions of very few individuals will coincide exactly with it. Yet, without the notion that *some* shared bargain or compromise has been reached "on fundamentals," it would be difficult either to govern or to broadcast in formal democratic societies.

In modern, complex bureaucratic class societies, consensus plays the role which "public opinion" was cast for in ideal democratic theory. In practice, since the majority of people have little real, day-to-day access to decisions and information, common-sense ideologies are usually a composite reflection of the dominant ideologies, operating at a passive and diffused level in society.

Though "the consensus" is extremely difficult to locate, its existence also underwrites and guarantees the broadcaster in his day-to-day functions. His sense of "the state of play" in public opinion provides a sort of warrant for his performance. It offers a rough-and-ready way of referring to "what people in general are thinking and feeling about an issue." It is my impression that in their everyday professional practice, broadcasters are *more consistently* regulated by their sense of their audience than by any single other source.

But, as we have noted, the consensus is in fact an extremely fluid and ambivalent structure, at best. In practice, the agencies of government and control, while responsible in some formal sense to the people/the electorate/public opinion/the audience, are, for that very reason, driven to treat the area of consensus as an arena in which they *win* consent for or assent to their actions and policies, their definitions and outlooks.

The elites are in a powerful position to win assent: (a) because they play a dominant role in crystallizing issues, (b) because they provide the material and information which support their preferred interpretations,

(c) because they can rely on the disorganized state of public knowledge and feeling to provide, by inertia, a sort of tacit agreement to let the existing state of affairs continue. We are thus in the highly paradoxical situation whereby the elites of power constantly *invoke*, as a legitimation for their actions, a consensus which they themselves have powerfully prestructured. Thus the process of opinion formation and attitude crystallization is, like so many of the other processes we have been discussing, a process "structured in dominance."

We can now understand why broadcasting itself stands in such a pivotal and ambiguous position. For the media and the dominant institutions of communication and consciousness-formation are themselves the primary *source* of attitudes and knowledge within which public opinion crystallizes, and the primary *channels* between the dominant classes and the audience.

At the same time, as the rift in the moral-political consensus in the society widens, the consensus ceases to provide the broadcaster with a built-in ideological compass. The ruling elites thus have a direct interest in monopolizing the channels for consensus-formation for their preferred accounts and interpretations, thereby extending their hegemony: they also have a vested interest in insuring that, when left to their own devices, the media will themselves reproduce, on their behalf, the tentative structure of agreement which favors their hegemony. In such moments, the media themselves become the *site* for the elaboration of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies and the *terrain* of societal and class conflict at the ideological level.

Both of television's functions are locked into this process: those occasions when it elaborates interpretations and accounts of the world on its own behalf, and those many occasions when, via the skewed structures of access, it is obliged to reproduce and validate the status of accredited witnesses, whose views it is obliged to attend and defer to, and whose statements "in other places" (in parliament, in conferences, in boardrooms, in the courts) it is required to transmit. The media cannot long retain their credibility with the public without giving some access to witnesses and accounts which lie outside the consensus. But the moment it does so, it immediately endangers itself with its critics, who attack broadcasting for unwittingly tipping the balance of public feeling against the political order. It opens itself to the strategies of both sides which are struggling to win a hearing for their interpretations in order to redefine the situations in which they are acting in a more favorable way. This is broadcasting's double bind.