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REVIEWS

Representing Order: Crime, Law and Justice in the News Media

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These two books are part of a three-volume series devoted to the results of a major study on news of deviance, law, and control. Their focus is on various media organizations in Toronto, and notably these organizations' interactions with their news sources, and the impact upon news formats of the audiences and markets which the organizations serve. The books follow an earlier text by the same authors, *Visualizing Deviance* (1987), which was devoted primarily to ethnographic research on "making news" of social deviance at the Toronto *Globe and Mail* and CBLT television station.

In *Visualizing Deviance*, the authors noted the tendency for journalists to look to established organizations for their predictable supply of news. This analysis is extended in *Negotiating Control* (hereafter *NC*) which focuses primarily upon the way in which various source bureaucracies organize to communicate through the Toronto-based media. Using ethnographic techniques, the researchers frequented journalists' beat newsrooms at the provincial Law Courts, the offices of the Metro Police, and the provincial Legislature. Here they gathered data on the daily routines of negotiation and struggle between sources and reporters in the process of news gathering and dissemination (hence, incidentally, the book's title). This data was then extended by a wide-ranging series of interviews with source spokespersons from the criminal justice sphere, all levels of government, and the private sector. Finally, as part of an exploration of sources' remedies for biased or unbalanced reporting, the process of selecting readers' letters for publication at "a major newspaper" was examined in some depth. (The identity of the newspaper is not given, but clues abound.)

With so much data, and 400 pages of text, the scholarly quality of *NC* is dependent upon a number of criteria: notably, an overarching thematic and conceptual framework which draws the material together; the originality of the contents and of the insights offered; and not least, readability. On all these criteria, I would count the book to be a substantial success. It is well written, and refreshingly free of jargon. Conceptually, the news media are perceived as agencies which scan organizational activities in their endless search for signs of deviance. In turn, source organizations work to protect themselves from journalists' intrusions, whilst concomitantly trying to gain favourable publicity. To this end, they often maintain their own public relations departments. Sometimes

through the means of such departments, they will allow journalists into their "front regions" where public business is transacted, but will use various techniques to keep them from the "back regions" where knowledge of decisions is restricted to those persons who are officially authorized to be there. This model of regions and closures, derived by the authors from the work of Goffman and Giddens, is put to good use in demonstrating how, in varying degrees and ways, source bureaucracies endeavour to control journalists' access to information.

Bureaucracies may endeavour to control, but one of the original features of this book is that it makes very plain that the media are not simply the mouthpieces of their sources as has often been claimed. On the contrary, the media are powerful and frequently have the upper-hand in defining the news. True, journalists need to be on fair terms with source personnel in order to gain information, but those who become co-opted (as are some who work the police beat) are likely to be unpopular with more independently minded colleagues.

In addition to the above perspective, *NC*'s other main claim to originality rests in its focus on Canadian news sources (although the study of "letters to the editor" is almost unique in social science research on news). However, its merits having been cited, what of the book's limitations? They are similar to those of *Visualizing Deviance*—very bulky in size, research restricted to the Toronto media, and insufficient attention given to the wider social, economic, and ideological ramifications of the research. For example, a study which demonstrates that "the space available for participation in the public sphere has been bought out by the public-relations machines of the corporate and governmental conglomerates" (p. 279); and again that letters to the editor tend to be chosen in order to bolster "the newspaper's image and public acceptance" (p. 375), cries out for substantial commentary upon the ideological role of the media in western societies.

And so on to *Representing Order* (hereafter *RO*) which actually claims, in an initial summary statement, to challenge the dominant ideology thesis. This is because the book focuses mainly upon different media, their markets and variations in reporting of news on crime, law, and justice. The media distinctions are between a "quality" newspaper, television, and radio outlet in Toronto compared with their "popular" counterparts (six news outlets in total). The authors, to quote the summary, find "that the news media provide a somewhat open terrain for struggles for justice, even though particular issues and institutional sources predominate. The documented variation by medium and market shows pluralism in meanings and values."

A brief overview of *RO* reveals that it is a highly complex work. The book opens with the statement that "the news institution focuses upon what is out of place: the deviant, equivocal and unpredictable" and works to provide a set of classifications which "establish the normal, reduce equivocality and increase predictability—that is, to represent order" (p. 4). Once this point is established, the authors turn to their main theme of examining pluralism and variation fostered by the different media. This theme commences with a general discussion of media and markets, followed by a chapter devoted to examining the application of qualitative and quantitative techniques in news content analysis. The former technique is then

applied in longitudinal analyses of two news items as covered by the six news outlets: a murder story (the death of a young woman) and a law-reform story (an amendment to the Employment Standards Act). Much of the remainder of the book consists mainly of quantitative cross-sectional analyses of differences among the six outlets in news formats, sources, and topics of 1485 "bad news" items (i.e., those dealing with crime, deviance, law, and justice) sampled over 33 days in June and July 1983. Bad news was found to constitute between 45% and 72% of the total output of the outlets during the sample period.

RO offers a host of evidence which shows that newspapers, television, and radio have distinctive medium characteristics that fundamentally influence the formats, sources, knowledge and topics of their communication" (p. 345). Similarly, quality media and popular media aim at different markets, though on many news dimensions the "quality-popular" distinction is much less evident in television news, with its mass populist appeal, than in radio news and especially in newspapers. This is, however, but one set of findings gleaned from amidst the multitude of correlations and permutations which the authors create by linking news data to such variables as media forms, outlets, the quality-popular distinction, and so on. Regrettably, the quantitative cross-sectional analysis, which goes on for 189 pages, buries many other significant findings and occasional keen insights in a seemingly endless flow of data analysis and description. Some careful editing here would have helped, although the concluding chapter does try valiantly to pull the main research findings together.

The need for better editing is just one element which makes *RO* a less satisfactory book than the earlier volumes. Stylistically, and with the notable exception of the insightful longitudinal analyses, the writing style is much more dense, complex, and occasionally quite difficult to follow. In the early chapters, the language of structuralism is often used without clarification, and unfamiliar words ("polysemous" is my favourite) dot the textual landscape. More serious, however, the "challenge to the dominant ideology thesis" promised in the introductory summary is left largely implicit, so that one searches in vain for a substantial discussion of this issue. As in *NC*, therefore, the wider ideological ramifications of Ericson, et al.'s research are explored insufficiently.

Finally, although the book concludes with the observation that "news programs...can be used in myriad ways to visualize deviance, negotiate control, and represent order," this reference to the titles of all three of the authors' books does not make *RO* the "final volume" in a trilogy. In other words, it does not perform the synoptic function of providing a general overview of their work and an assessment of its significance for future research in the sociology of communications and/or deviance. Such a synopsis would be very valuable, partly because of the lacunae noted at the end of the last paragraph; and partly also because, despite *RO*'s academic warts, the three books provide the most significant series of empirical studies of media yet produced in English Canada.