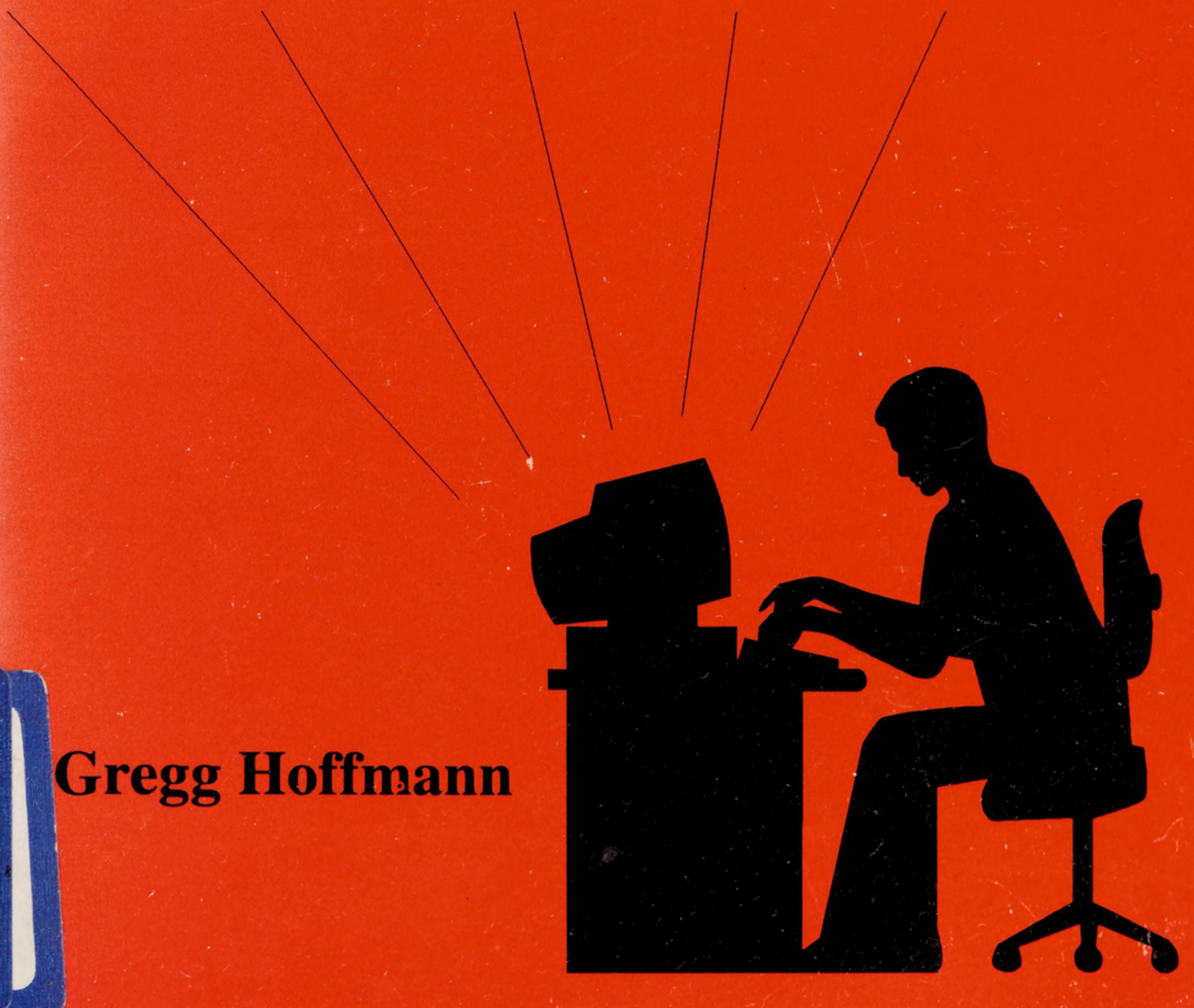
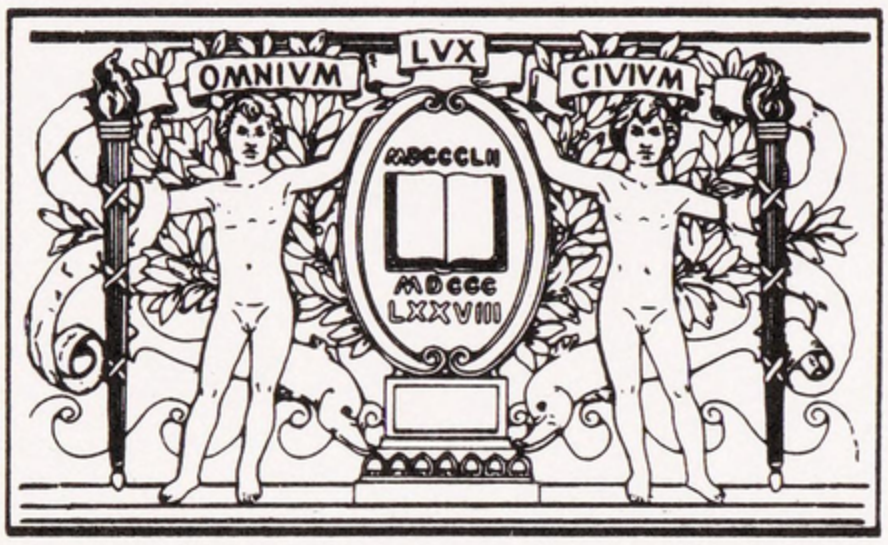
A Book About News Media Literacy

# Media Maps & Myths



Gregg Hoffmann

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# Media Maps & Myths

By Gregg Hoffmann

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# Dedicated to:

**Pauline, my wife; Robert and the late Jeanine Hoffmann, my parents; the late William Branen, my first publisher; Prof. Emeritus Kenneth Johnson, who introduced me to General Semantics; and Alfred Korzybski, the genius who invented General Semantics.**

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# Foreword

What happens when a conscientious veteran newspaperman questions many of the assumptions of his profession and looks across disciplinary lines for more effective ways to do his job? In this book, Gregg Hoffmann raises many of the questions that trouble him and suggests answers that he has found useful.

As a graduate student (with many years of newspaper experience) he brought a special vitality to my class in general semantics. The principles we talked about excited him because he saw applications to the field he loved.

Now, in addition to his role as a news professional, he teaches mass communication courses at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, including one in general semantics. He has written this book for journalism students, journalism professionals and members of the public who want to be more critical news consumers.

General semantics, like the theory or relativity, focuses attention on the observer, the human factor so often lost in preoccupation with "facts" and "objectivity."

Alfred Korzybski, the founder of the field of general semantics, did not attempt to give answers to the questions that plague us. He provided an open-ended, meta-linguistic system for finding answers, for taking into account the nature of language and the critical role of the human nervous system. He emphasized that our experience, our knowledge, begins with our senses abstracting some elements (but never all) from the processes going on around us. We then use language (or other symbol systems) to make "maps" of those "territories." As we become more conscious of this process of abstracting, we become more aware that "realities" we have taken for granted were to a significant degree our own creations.

Too often we accept certain premises, certain assumptions as "given" and work within that system. General semantics provides us tools for going beyond the limits imposed by those

assumptions and for examining assumptions built into the very language we use. Some of these tools call attention to either-or and "allness" statements, to inferences treated as facts, to overgeneralizations, to statements unrestricted in time, to over-simple statements of causality, etc. These and other tools described in this book help us create more accurate maps.

As individuals and societies, we depend for our very survival on ethical map-makers, who produce accurate maps, maps with high prediction value, maps that enable us to make intelligent decisions.

Gregg Hoffmann saw that journalists, as some of society's major map-makers, need special knowledge of the map-making process -- knowledge not generally taught in J-schools or newsrooms -- and constant reminders of the ethical implications of accurate mapping.

News consumers, too, are part of his target audience. To understand the map of the world presented by the media, they need to know how the media operate, how maps come filtered through a chain of human nervous systems and complex media systems.

Gregg Hoffmann is eminently qualified for the imposing task he has undertaken.

*Kenneth G. Johnson*,
**Emeritus Professor**
**of Mass Communication,**
**University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee**

# Preface

My reasons for writing this book, and other introductory remarks, are part of the first chapter. In this brief preface, I hope to address a few of what I project could be readers' reactions.

First, to the general semanticists who read the book, I have adapted the work of Alfred Korzybski, S.I. Hayakawa, Kenneth Johnson and others to create a model for news media analysis. I have combined some of the ideas and principles of GS with cultural studies models and others. So, this is very much Gregg Hoffmann's map of general semantics. I am fully aware of that, and hope you will be too.

To my journalist colleagues, who might think I have been a traitor to the trade, think about those nights spent discussing how we could do our jobs better. Think of your own frustrations. Most of you who I respect know we could do it better. This book is meant as one suggestion of how that could be accomplished.

To those pros who think theory is best kept in the ivory towers, let me state a premise: **there is no action without theory**. The two cannot be separated. Without a philosophy, mindset or paradigm, a belief in how things should be done, we can't do anything.

A major premise of this book is that the key to better journalism is to better understand how human beings evaluate, understand and communicate information. No matter how we change our product cosmetically, or what technology we use to convey the information, the context of that information is still what counts the most.

We have an obligation to bring the most accurate, fair, relevant information we can to our audience. I believe that starts with the journalist better understanding how he understands and communicates. It includes the journalist becoming aware of how he maps the territory, and trying to create the best map possible.

To you journalism students, you are preparing to face a changing field. You will have to learn how it is done today, but also have the critical thinking and creative skills to adapt to change, and perhaps even effect change yourself.

You must: **learn the rules in order to earn the right to break the rules.** While this book is quite critical at times of how journalism is done today, its author also believes you must learn your craft well. But, also realize it could be done better.

Finally, to you general members of the public, I hope this entire book can help you better understand how media produce their messages, and perhaps help you understand how they could be produced better. The final chapter includes specific guidelines and suggestions on how you can become more critical consumers of media messages.

You will face more choices of information sources in the future. New technologies will bring you more varied information than ever before. Without some critical thinking skills, and improved media literacy, you could easily become overwhelmed.

Much of what we think we know about the world comes from media messages. If those messages are flawed, our perceptions and actions in the world also are likely to be flawed. Journalism is a human endeavor; therefore inevitably will be flawed. Thus, you as a consumer must learn to **read between the lines** in an intelligent way.

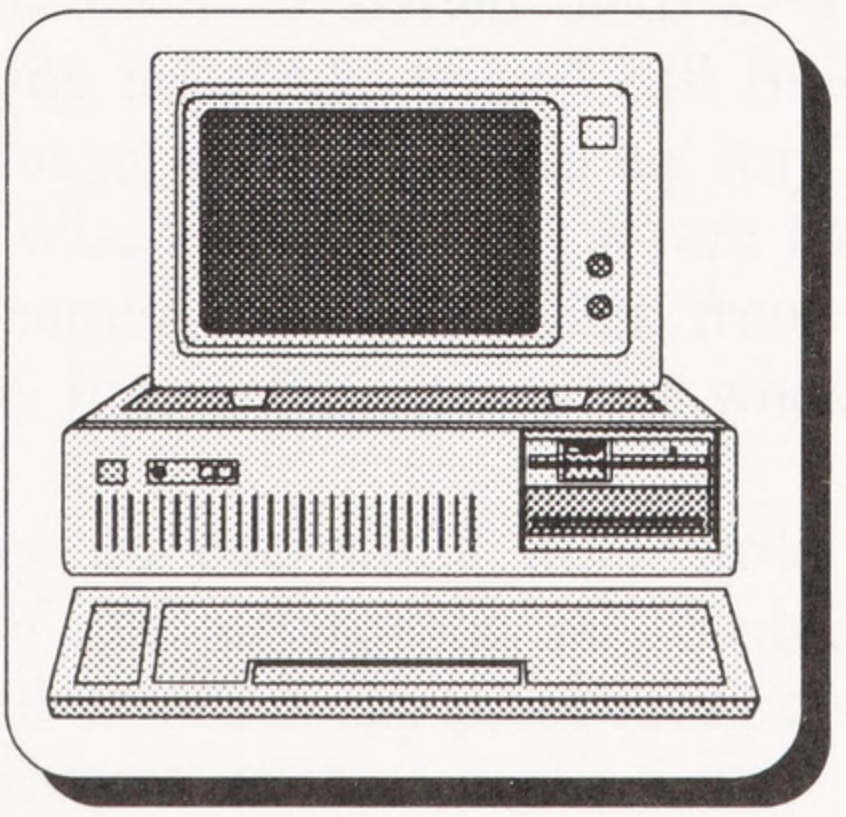
This author acknowledges that this book also is flawed. It too is a product of human endeavor. It is a product of my perceptions, background, biases, etc. The reader will note these, especially in the chapters on covering diversity, covering politics and the media during times of conflict.

This book is my map. I believe it offers some worthy contributions to the media literacy movement, but it is not the final word. As acknowledgement of this, note how each chapter ends.

*Gregg Hoffmann*

## Chapter 1

# The Changing Journalism: Change for the Better?



**No matter what the vehicle of communication, or how we package information, news will not be important to people unless it touches their lives, and is based on the truth, or at least as close to the truth as man can attain.**

**The content of the news is still the most important element, yet it often gets lost in the mechanics and technology of transmitting the information.**

*gregg hoffmann*

# Chapter 1

## The Changing Journalism: Change for the Better?

I remember well when I first decided to become a newspaper man. I was 9 years old. I would spend a great deal of time with my grandfather, Richard Casper, who had been an artist for several Chicago newspapers during the 1930s and 40s. He would tell stories about the business during those times, an era when Chicago was a hotbed for newspapers. Those stories were packed with romance, bravado and hilarity. I remember the look in my grandfather's eyes as he would tell those stories. It was a look that said, "God, I loved those days." It also was a look that convinced me -- at that tender age -- I had found my life's work.

As I look back now, more than 30 years later -- with more than 20 of those years spent in journalism -- I realize many of my grandfather's stories were probably exaggerated, and enhanced. I find myself making some of my own stories about the early days in newspapers..."better." Call it poetic license. When you have to stick to the facts for your professional writing, you're entitled to take some liberties when telling tales over a beer.

I also remember well the first newspaper office I ever worked in. It was the Burlington Standard Press, a weekly paper in Burlington, Wisconsin. I started there as a 15-year-old kid, after school, working for a man named Bill Branen. Bill was an Irishman from Chicago, who had found his way to Burlington via the University of Wisconsin. He was a rare blend of toughness and kindness. I learned more journalism from Bill Branen than anybody else in my life. I felt a great loss when he died of brain cancer in 1988.

Bill had me do everything from write sports stories to "stuff" sections of the newspaper on Wednesday nights. I remember the smell of ink in the press room downstairs, and the clacking of typewriters in the newsroom. I remember the satisfaction of having written a story during the day and seeing it

in print, with my byline, as I stuffed the newspaper at night. If you could see my eyes now, they would have the look that says, "God, I loved those days."

As I write this, I have been in journalism for 23 years. I have been a general assignment reporter, a political correspondent, sportswriter, cop shop reporter, editor, author, freelance writer, a full time journalism lecturer. I have worked for newspapers as small as the Standard Press, about a 14,000 circulation weekly, to USA Today, the Gannett national daily that claims to be the largest circulation paper in the country.

I have loved my work. I could never have seen myself doing anything else for a living. But, I also have major concerns, not only about newspapers, but about how the entire news industry -- print and electronic -- has gone about its business in the last decade or so. I have concerns about the general lack of knowledge demonstrated by large segments of our society, and wonder how that can be during a time when more information is available than ever before.

Some of my specific concerns are:

** The growing trend to mix entertainment with information, with little distinction made between them.

** The general lack of depth and detail to many news stories.

** The tendency to make visuals the most important element of stories, even if they add little to the knowledge or understanding of the news consumer.

** The growth of "bottom line journalism" and the seeming lack of regard by news industry managers for the link between quality news reporting and profit.

** The lack of "guts" in investigative reporting. Tied in with this concern is the over-reliance on people in power as sources.

** The lack of broad knowledge among many of my journalism students and many of the people in the industry. Many journalists are technicians, or glorified stenographers, rather than true reporters, who are knowledgeable about the world and issues.

** The general lack of reverence for seeking the "truth", or "truths." Tied in with this concern is a lack of understanding on how to even pursue the truth.

** The inability to recognize the gap between what "happens" and what actually gets reported in so many news stories.

I have more concerns and fears, for the news industry and our society in general. They will be expressed later in this book. As these concerns grew over the last few years, I contemplated what I could do, what small contribution I could make to a business I love. I watched many serious journalists become cynics, or leave the field entirely. In recent years, there has been an exodus of journalists by the age of 45. I watched other journalists become robots, going through the motions of their work with little or no passion. I listened to others who had become chronic complainers. What could I do?

Equally alarming is the trend in mass communication programs around the country for fewer and fewer students to go into journalism. Public relations majors outnumber journalism majors two or three to one in most programs. We need good PR people in society, but we also need quality reporters who will be trained in independently pursuing truth regardless of what a client might want.

During the same period of growing concern, I became exposed to the ideas of general semantics and critical thinking. As I studied those areas, I saw numerous links between the ideas of people like Alfred Korzybski, S.I. Hayakawa, Wendell Johnson, Neil Postman and news work. They talked about the map and territory. The territory was an event, or occurrence in the world. They said we can never really reproduce or clone that event in our communication process. We can only map it, and our maps inevitably will contain inaccuracies or inadequacies. The entire second chapter of this book is devoted to summarizing the ideas of general semantics and critical thinking. Suffice it to say here that I believe applications of some of these ideas to the news industry could help us become more accurate mapmakers, better serve our

readers and listeners and, in the process, probably also make us more profitable.

News will be brought to the consumer in different ways in the future. Some may receive it via FAX; others may get it over the phone. Graphics and visual reporting will become more important.

However, no matter what the vehicle of communication, or how we package the information, news will not be important to people unless it touches their lives, and is based on the truth, or at least as close to the truth as man can attain. The content of the news is still the most important element, yet it often gets lost in the mechanics and technology of transmitting the information.

I do not profess to have all the answers, but I do think I have suggestions and ideas that are worth putting forth. I hope those who teach prospective journalists, and those who are currently in the field, will approach these suggestions and ideas with an open mind.

We have come through a period of media-bashing. Much of it has been politically-motivated, especially that coming from the far right or left. Much of the criticism has been from outsiders, people who don't really understand the challenges and problems of reporting news.

However, a substantial portion of the criticism has been deserved. The thinking of too many media leaders has not adapted quickly enough to a rapidly-changing society. They have resisted change, and when they have changed they have made primarily cosmetic changes. We have not created newspapers, or newscasts that are relevant or important for a public that needs interpretation and perspective of the complex issues of the late 20th Century and previews of what to expect in the 21st Century.

In general semantics terms, the news media have suffered "paradigm paralysis." We have gotten so caught up in our own definitions of news, and our own ideas of how news should be presented, that we have not asked the very people we serve what they NEED from us. I emphasize NEED because it differs from

what they LIKE. People LIKE to eat cake and ice cream, but they know they also NEED meat and vegetables to remain healthy.

When we have asked questions of our audience, we've often restricted them to closed-ended, marketing-type questions. We have asked what they would like to see more of in the newspaper or in newscasts. But, we have restricted them to choosing from what already appears. That's like a waiter telling a patron you can have anything on the menu and then opening a menu that has a very limited selection. Instead, we should ask people what do you need from us to make intelligent decisions in your lives for the remainder of this century and into the next?

Much of what I will deal with in subsequent chapters is aimed at newspapers, or what newspapers will likely become in the next century. I am operating on the premise that entertainment programming will always remain the priority in the electronic media. But, I will not ignore electronic media news.

I see my audience as having three segments: a) journalism students, b) journalism professionals who are open to change and c) members of the public who want to become more critical news consumers. The book is part textbook and part media criticism. When I have been critical, I have tried to come up with suggestions and alternatives -- not just take cheap shots.

The book is organized in the following manner. Chapter 2 will put forth digested principles and ideas of general semantics and critical thinking, as well as give the reader some background in those areas.

Chapter 3 deals with applications of those ideas to news judgment. Before a reporter ever hits the streets for an interview, somebody has to decide what gets covered. News judgment is subjective, but also can become too universal or staid in the industry. How do we decide what is news? Do we need to revise our standards?

Chapter 4 deals with applications of general semantics and critical thinking ideas to reporting methodology. This chapter primarily is aimed at reporting students and working journalists.

Chapters 5 to 7 deal with three specific challenges in journalism: a) covering an increasingly diverse society without stereotyping, b) covering politics and analyzing political rhetoric and c) covering times of conflict. These are three areas in which the media need to drastically improve, in my opinion. They also are three areas to which general semantics ideas seem to have very appropriate applications.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, is aimed more at the news consumer than at prospective or working journalists. It hopefully offers guidelines on how the receivers of media messages can better understand what they are receiving. The chapter also gives ideas on how news consumers can become more critical evaluators of information. If anybody wants to approach understanding of today's and tomorrow's world, they had better understand media. So much of what we think we know about the world actually is what the media have presented to us.

As I said earlier in this chapter, I do not profess to have all the answers. This book is simply an attempt by one veteran journalist to contribute something to a field he deeply loves. I want to see newspapers, and the news industry in general, remain vital. I want to see the American public become better informed. Perhaps it is pretentious, but I think some of the ideas in this book can help.

*etc.*

## Chapter 2

# What IS General Semantics, and How Does It Apply?

*M does not = T*

*M is not all of T*

**It (general semantics) does not only deal with word meanings. It explores the link between our use of symbols, including language, and our perception and behavior. It also explores our silent reactions to events and things "out there", as well as our verbal reactions. The term often given to this relationship between our internal thinking and reactions and events "out there" is abstracting.**

*gregg hoffmann*

## Chapter 2

# What IS General Semantics, and How Does It Apply?

A strength and weakness of general semantics is the fact it is almost impossible to define it in a short, concise definition. I have always considered that a strength in that it indicates there is true substance to the ideas. However, it also can be a weakness when trying to convey those ideas in a world of slogans, 30-second commercials and sound bites.

In this chapter, I will not try to give a complete lesson in general semantics. There are books, entire courses and seminars that still cannot adequately do that. What I will try to do is briefly present an operational definition of general semantics, give a little background on the development of the ideas and put forth some of the basic principles, especially those that have applications to news.

The terms general semantics and semantics often are used interchangeably. The dictionary definition of semantics is "the study of word meanings and their changes in time." General semantics "goes beyond" that somewhat narrow definition. It does not only deal with word meanings. It explores the link between our use of symbols, including language, and our perception and behavior. It also explores our silent reactions to events and things "out there", as well as our verbal reactions. The term often given to this relationship between our internal thinking and reactions and events "out there" is abstracting.

Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950) is considered the founder of general semantics. A Polish nobleman who spent the last half of his life in the United States, Korzybski was interested in mathematics, engineering, natural and social sciences and a variety of other disciplines. He became quite concerned that while human beings made technological and scientific advances they seemed to have difficulties making similar progress in their evaluating process and communications. He started working on a

comprehensive system of evaluation that was interdisciplinary in nature.

Korzybski explained his theories in two books -***Manhood of Humanity*** (1921) and ***Science and Sanity*** (1933). In the first book, he explained his idea of "time binding." He classified plants as chemical binders in that they linked to the world in stationary form through chemical reactions. Animals also were space binders since they could move around. Humans also could be time binders, however. Humans could bind one age to another through the use of symbols, primarily language. We were capable of recording knowledge, documenting our achievements and mistakes, and learning from both. Unfortunately, humans do not do a very good job of time binding, in Korzybski's opinion. They often pass on false knowledge and myths. Thus, our language could be both a blessing and a curse.

After contemplating this dilemma, Korzybski became convinced that methods of modern science could help humans become better time binders. He went to work on ***Science and Sanity*** and his system of general semantics. The word general was used to indicate that Korzybski's theories were not limited to language. To quote author Robert Potter, "Words are related to thought. Thought is related to behavior, and behavior is related to everything in the world around us. Korzybski wanted to stress the fact that his was a general system, a system that incorporated everything."

Korzybski named his book ***Science and Sanity*** because he believed those two terms symbolized the best and worst in human communications. The unsane (Korzybski's own term) become trapped by their own assumptions, perceptions and fears of the world. Those who use a "scientific" approach to exploring the world and language use tend to create accurate portrayals of "reality." They, therefore, live "sane" lives, in Korzybski's opinion.

A key to Korzybski's ideas is his map and territory analogy. He stressed that we actually live in "two worlds" -an internal, or what he terms intensional world, of ideas, feelings, etc., and a

world outside our skins, what we often refer to as "reality." Korzybski believed that we too often mistake what goes on inside us as the reality out there. In his terms, we allow our maps to become the territory.

Actually, our maps can never match the territory, because our symbols are never the territory itself. The word "computer", for example, is not the machine I am using to write this book. It is only the word, or map, I use for the machine. Korzybski called this principle "non-identification." The Map is not the Territory. Our maps inevitably leave out some things from the territory. We cannot take in everything that happens in a day. We cannot explain everything we experience. We do not know everything about every subject. Our nervous system simply does not react quickly enough to absorb all the stimuli around us. Korzybski called this principle "non-allness." The Map will never be all of the Territory.

Korzybski also noted that we can talk about what we just talked about. We can re-evaluate and revise our ideas and feelings. He called this the principle of "self-reflexiveness." We can make maps of our maps of our maps.....

These three seemingly simple principles are the foundation of what I consider a rather profound system. Korzybski and others have used the system in the fields of psychology, economics, linguistics, education, communications and others. I believe some of the ideas have great applications to news work, and analyzing news messages. In subsequent chapters, I will deal with specific ideas from the system and apply them to areas of news analysis. But, first there is more to say about other general semanticists and principles.

There have been several so-called "populizers" of general semantics. These primarily are people who have taken Korzybski's ideas and applied them to specific disciplines or fields. Undoubtedly, the best known was S.I. Hayakawa. A flamboyant Congressman and college president, Hayakawa was also respected as a linguist and semanticist. His book, ***Language In Action,*** is perhaps the widest read book dealing with general semantics.

Hayakawa's writing style was much easier to read than Korzybski's rather pedantic, academic style. Therefore, many more members of the general public learned about general semantics through his work.

Another man who spread Korzybski's ideas was Wendell Johnson, an expert in speech disorders. His book, ***People in Quandaries***, does a wonderful job of showing applications of general semantics to the communication process. He also used the ideas of general semantics to "cure" his own stuttering problem and counsel others with the same disorder.

Irving Lee, a communications professor at Northwestern University, used general semantics ideas to look at verbal communications and rhetoric. Elwood Murray became a well-known teacher of the discipline at the University of Denver. Stuart Chase wrote extensively about applications of general semantics to understanding language.

Today, Neil Postman of New York University, Rachel Lauer of Pace University, Kenneth Johnson, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, comedian Steve Allen and others are still writing about ideas related to general semantics.

Two groups, the Institute of General Semantics in New Jersey and the International Society of General Semantics in California, publish magazines, books and put on seminars and conferences all over the world. A bibliography for those interested in more specific writings about the area is included at the end of this book.

Perhaps more importantly for the purpose of this book is to deal with other ideas and principles of general semantics and how I see them applying to news work and news analysis. I will keep my writings on these ideas relatively brief in this chapter because, once again, they will be dealt with in more depth later.

**Map & Territory**

This principle has close ties to what we produce in a news story and the actual event or issue we report on. We cannot possibly reproduce the territory. The individual reporter's physical

and mental makeup limit what he or she can take in. His or her background also plays a big part in what form the story takes. There are conventions of the news business that shape how news gets reported, and what is deemed to be news in the first place. There are business demands of the industry that play big roles in determining what becomes news. Therefore, what the news industry produces is a map -- that inevitably will not match or tell all about the territory.

**Extensional Devices**

Korzybski talked about intensional and extensional orientation. An individual with an intensional orientation might concentrate on his own thoughts, feelings, internal "maps." All of us are intensional at times. We all need to do some soul-searching and be introspective. Yet, Korzybski believed a strong intensional orientation also could discourage exploration of the territory. One could become trapped by his or her own assumptions and inferences without adequately exploring the territory first. Korzybski offered a number of devices or guidelines to help people become more aware of their language use and to avoid the tendency to become too intensionally wrapped up in that language and personal perspectives.

One important device is **indexing**, a method using mathematic symbols to designate that no two things are ever identical. Person 1 does not equal Person 2. Issue 1 is not Issue 2. Yet, we tend to group people in our language use. All Blacks behave this way, or all Caucasians think this way. Indexing is intended as a device to help us avoid such traps.

**Dating** is a form of indexing over time. It is intended to remind us that the world is in process. Yet, we tend to apply a static language to it, as if we can freeze things in time. Again, mathematical symbols are used. E.G.: Gregg 1967 is not Gregg 1992 or Russia 1930 is not Russia 1993.

The use of the word **et cetera**, usually abbreviated to etc., can serve as a reminder that we cannot say everything about anything. There is always something we do not know, or missed

about a subject. Therefore, we would be better to talk in terms of probabilities than certainties. We would be better to talk about how things "seem to me" than how "they are."

There are many other extensional devices offered by Korzybski and other general semanticists. Many have appropriate applications to journalism and reporting methods and news judgment. We will deal with them in upcoming chapters.

**Multi-level abstracting**

Korzybski's main model was called the structural differential. **(See addendum at end of book)** In the model, he traced human evaluation and communication through several levels. For example, we first react to an event in the world in sensory terms. Our eyes record light. Our ears pick up sound waves. We then process that stimuli neurally. We start to assign meaning and labels to the event. To this point, much of our reaction might be on a silent level. We then enter linguistic abstracting. This can range from a so-called lower order -- such as describing the event -- to higher order levels -- where theories and doctrines can be devised. Also at higher levels, our assumptions, sometimes based on myths or misinformation, can get in the way of effective communication.

Korzybski believed effective evaluation and communication are best attained when we move between lower and higher order abstracting. We explore a territory, collect information, etc., and then form opinions, draw inferences and come up with theories. We then might test those theories by checking them with the event again. Korzybski warned against the dangers inherent in "dead-level" abstracting. If you cling dogmatically to one level of abstracting, you might ignore changes that go in the territory. This idea has excellent applications to journalism.

**Facts, Inferences Relationship**

Somebody once called a fact "a rapidly aging event." This humorous reference, was pointing out that we often forget that a

fact is information with a relatively high degree of probability in a certain point in time. If those times change, the facts might change. A fact today is not necessarily a fact tomorrow. A fact also might not be the truth. The dictionary defines a fact as something known with certainty, something that has been objectively verified or something that has been asserted as certain.

The last part of that definition might be as close to the truth as possible, in most general semanticists' thinking. How can we be certain of anything when we cannot possibly know everything about anything? At best, we can speak of something with a high degree of probability, and try to verify the information through testing. Then, we can only make an assertion. The goal in general semanticists' thinking is to reach as high a degree of probability, and predictability as possible, within a certain point of time, within a certain scope of knowledge. However, general semanticists will usually leave open this possibility that a fact can change.

We infer from what we believe are facts. An inference is a conclusion, based on evidence and a premise. If our evidence has a high degree of probability, our inference is likely to also have that probability. However, what if our premise is off-base? Or, what if our assumptions and preconceived notions biased the information on which we are basing our inferences?

Newsmen talk all the time about reporting "just the facts." We also strive for "objectivity." But, what we actually report most often are other people's inferences. Too often, we cannot verify those inferences as factual. We will deal more with fact-inference relationships in another chapter.

**Scientific Method**

Korzybski believed that the scientific method, and scientific use of language, allowed us to attain as high a degree of probability as possible. Therefore, by using such methods, we could match our maps most closely with the territory, and be rooted in an extensional or "realistic" foundation.

The scientific method starts with observation and data collecting. We then describe our observations and information.

The next stage includes drawing inferences and coming up with hypotheses or projections. We test those hypotheses through experimentation and additional study. Then, we make the necessary revisions in our conclusions and inferences. A key to this process, as seen by general semanticists, is that it is on-going. It is not sufficient to go through the process only once. Circumstances of the subject under study might change as we do our exploration. New knowledge might be discovered that might necessitate revisions.

Journalists follow scientific method to a degree in their pursuit of information and facts for stories. However, their methodology often is superficial, or done in haste. They often don't have time or space for follow-up and revision. This also will be dealt with more in subsequent chapters.

**Language Analysis**

Korzybski and other general semanticists have spent a great deal of time analyzing the structure and use of our language. One of Korzybski's major conclusions was that most Indo-European languages are two-valued and Aristotelian in orientation. By Aristotelian, he meant our language, which is reflective of how we structure or make sense of the world, is based to a large degree on Aristotelian logic. He stressed that he was not denigrating the work of Aristotle, but more pointing out the distortions in his work and the need to "update" some of the ideas based on Aristotelian logic. For example, Korzybski said we often fall into either-or arguments. Something either is this or that. There are no possibilities of a third option, or fourth, fifth, etc. He also pointed out how our language portrayed things as having qualities and characteristics that are objectively separate from us humans. He felt this approach did not take in the idea that we assign those qualities and characteristics to things "out there."

Korzybski wrote, "In living life, many issues are not so sharp; therefore, a system which posits the general sharpness of `either-or' and so objectifies `kind' (properties, qualities, etc.) is

too distorted and unduly limited. It must be revised and made more flexible in terms of degree."

Korzybski believed that an inflexible, either-or, two-valued orientation was at the root of many of the world's problems. In a letter to psychiatrists in 1944, he wrote, "We are living in a world of chaos in which the racial and interracial mutual understanding looms as one of the most important problems. The Indo-European Aristotelians are a marked minority in the world, and yet they are to a large extent in control. It is predictable that if the Aristotelians do not alter their premises, attitudes, etc., and in general become more scientific, and therefore non-Aristotelian, nothing but further conflicts can be expected. Scientists, which include psychiatrists, should be aware that we are living in a period of passing, unavoidably and irrevocably, from the anthropomorphic, antiquated, `objective', two-valued, Aristotelian orientations to the infinite-valued, modern, scientific, process, non-Aristotelian orientations."

The news media frequently fall into two-valued traps in news judgment and reporting methods. We will deal with these areas, as well as other language and structural problems in media messages, in a later chapter.

**Elementalism**

General semanticists use the world elementalism to describe the tendency of the Western World to divide "reality" into separate, and seemingly unrelated, parts or categories. Korzybski argued that human behavior and nature are "inseparably united" and that we "split them only verbally." Milton Dawes, a Montreal lecturer, applied principles of differential calculus to this concept. Dawes points out that we must differentiate when confronting reality. We must understand the parts or components of the whole, but then we must integrate those parts into a whole again. The news media often differentiates, without ever integrating again. Stories are told piecemeal, in no larger context. Relationships between peoples, countries, issues seldom are demonstrated.

Events are covered, but the issues discussed at those events seldom are interpreted or reported in any larger perspective.

**Challenging Paradigms**

We all set paradigms. They are needed because they give us boundaries, guidelines for our behavior. However, problems can set in when we suffer "paradigm paralysis." Under the influence of this disease, our ideas, or mindsets, can become rigid, dogmatic, paralyzed. In a world of process, rigid ideas soon become anachronistic. The news media often suffer from paradigm paralysis. News judgment becomes rigid and hackneyed. Reporting methods become entrenched and no longer challenged. General semantics offers a variety of ways to avoid paralysis and develop an adaptable approach to any endeavor.

Once again, many more ideas could be listed here. However, the intent of this chapter is to simply give you an overview, a brief explanation of general semantics principles. As we deal with specific areas of journalism, these and other principles will be applied in more depth.

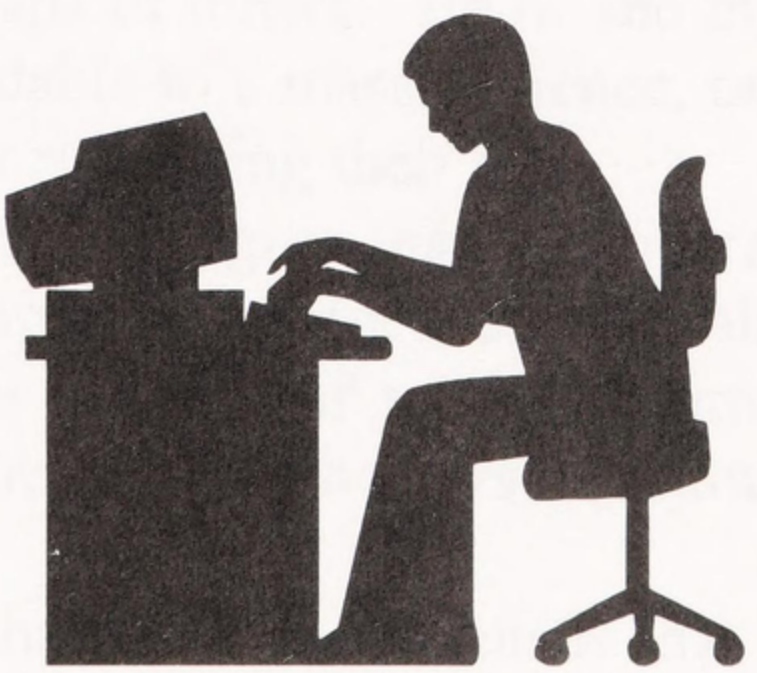
*etc.*

**End Note**

Much of the information on general semantics in this chapter was taken from the books, ***People in Quandaries*** by Wendell Johnson, ***Making Sense*** by Robert Potter and ***Alfred Korzybski: Collected Writings, 1920-1950.*** Specific references can be found on pages 18-19 of ***Making Sense*** and pages 21, 701 and 898 of the ***Collected Writings*** book. More specifics of these books can be found in the bibliography of this book.

Chapter 3

# What Is News? Searching for Alternatives



Those charged with reporting the news ideally should create a map -- a news story -- that is as close to the territory -- the event or issue being covered -- as possible.

*gregg hoffmann*

The standard excuse that news reflects what people want might be stated more properly as 'the news reflects what people prefer among those choices we find profitable and convenient to offer them.'

*w. lance bennett*

## Chapter 3

## What IS News? Searching for Alternatives

What is the news? That's a question that can stir debate among journalists and non-journalists. Many journalists will say they'll leave the formal definitions of news for the academics. They, meaning the journalists, contend they simply know the news when they see it.

Members of the public and journalism critics might dispute the claim by journalists. They don't always see the same criteria for news as journalists.

For our purposes, we'll look at the news as a general semantics map. Those charged with reporting the news ideally should create a map -- a news story -- that is as close to the territory -- the event or issue being covered -- as possible. Of course, as all good general semanticists understand, the map will never match the territory. It also might not match the map of the next person, be that person another journalist or reader or viewer.

Let's also agree, for our mutual benefit, that mapmaking is not an easy task. A journalist's mapmaking becomes even more difficult because he or she must use symbols, most noticeably words, to create the map. A journalist also must often report the perspectives, or maps of others. He or she must also try to make the map understandable to a mass audience, or at least a fair share of that audience, or risk losing their job.

So, now that we agree that our operational definition of news will be a map of a territory, and we also have engendered some sympathy for the task of us poor journalists, let's examine what a journalist means when he says he knows the news when he sees it.

I believe what he or she means is that the event fits his or her preconceived definition of news. It fits into the set of values that journalists learn from the first day they enter a classroom, or newsroom, and hear about the five W's -- who, what, where, when

and why. (We'll discuss later how the "why" often gets shortchanged in newsmaking.)

Early in my career, I was told by an editor that I had a good "nose for news." I was rewarded for the next couple decades because of that nose. I realize now that what the editor meant is that I had learned my lessons well. I had learned the set of values that traditionally have been considered newsworthy. I had also learned the all-important business rules of the game. Let's look at those values first, and then examine them in the context of the business rules.

**Timeliness**

News, perhaps most of all, is timely. That same old editor once told me "news is new; old news is ancient history." I remembered that lesson. I spent many hours trying to scoop my competition, by being first with a story. Most journalists do this, and are rewarded for scoops. What they sometimes do, and yours truly sometimes did, however, is put timeliness ahead of other elements. I went with more than one story without taking the time to thoroughly explore all sides and dig deeper. Sometimes, I made up for those shortcomings in a follow-up. Sometimes, I didn't. Other journalists fall into the same traps.

Timeliness will always be a big factor in the news. The very deadlines all journalists must live by will make that a fact. However, over-emphasis on timeliness can lead to poor news judgment. We'll discuss that contention in more depth later in this chapter.

**Prominence or Celebrity**

When socially or politically prominent people do things, or say things, it is more likely to become news than if the "average" person, whoever that might be, does or says something.

Leon Sigal addressed this issue in his study of news content of the ***New York Times*** and ***Washington Post***, arguably two of the country's finest newspapers. If any newspapers would be resistant to the pressures to select news from socially or politically

prominent individuals, these papers would be -- or at least one would think so. Yet, government officials (either domestic or foreign) were the sources of news in nearly three quarters of all news, and only one sixth of the news could be traced to sources outside government. The breakdown of news sources looked like this:

| | |
|---|---|
| U.S. officials, agencies | 46.5% |
| Foreign officials, agencies | 27.5% |
| U.S. state & local officials | 4.1% |
| Other news organizations | 3.2% |
| Nongovernmental Americans | 14.4% |
| Nongovernmental foreigners | 2.1% |
| Nonascertainable | 2.4% |

Entertainers and the "elite" also make the news. Almost every newspaper in the country now includes an entertainment section, or has a "people" section, which is dominated by entertainers. This emphasis seemed to grow when a former entertainer occupied the White House. (That is primarily a personal impression, although some content analyses have indicated likewise.)

Look at the coverage given to Donald Trump and his marital problems in 1990. Trump arguably is one of the most "elite" individuals in the country; if you agree that $$$ often define elite. Ted Turner and Jane Fonda also made headlines when they were seen together at a number of elite functions. Many newspapers still maintain a society section, and more than one columnist makes a living off gossip about the rich and famous.

Critics argue that emphasis on the politically and socially prominent tend to emphasize the values of those people. And quite often, those values favor the status quo in our society. After all, if you've made it why change anything? We'll look at those criticisms, and other pitfalls of over-emphasizing the prominent in the news later.

**Proximity**

News close to home is the best news. That's another saying from my first editor which stuck in my head. What he was saying is that local news sells newspapers, and many surveys show that is true to a degree. People like reading about their neighbors. They, or at least some of them, want to stay up on what is happening with local taxes, development and other issues.

In part, geographic proximity in news judgment stems from a business factor. With the exception of USA Today and a handful of large daily newspapers that publish national editions, newspapers are parochial. Their circulation area is limited by delivery time and transportation limits. Thus, they sell advertising in that somewhat limited area. Naturally, they want their readers to look at the ads, so they also cover news in that area, with hopes it will attract readers.

There is another type of proximity that is harder to measure. That is emotional proximity. Does a mother emotionally become close to another who loses a child, even if they are in different states? Didn't the nation mourn for the families of the Challenger astronauts? Emotional proximity is tough to measure, but could be an even more important factor in news judgment.

**Personal and Dramatic**

W. Lance Bennett argues in his book, ***News: The Politics of Illusion***, that the media concentrate on "personalized news." By that term, Bennett means that journalists tend to concentrate on the people engaged in issues rather than the power structures and institutional factors. Bennett's contention sounds very close to the celebrity and prominence factors in news judgment, but he adds another element.

Bennett believes that personalization of the news leads journalists to select those aspects of events most easily dramatized in short capsule stories. Drama most certainly is a good element in any story. While journalists are dealing with those ever elusive "facts," they also conform to certain "formulas" of story-telling that often are similar to techniques used in fiction writing. It was

dramatic when Reagan and Gorbachev met in a summit, with the peace of the world hanging in the balance. It was dramatic when Lech Walesa stood up to the Communist leadership in Poland. What more dramatic image could there be than the instance when the lone Chinese student stood before a tank in 1989? Whether these dramatic stories get at the facts, and tell why things are happening in our world, are debatable.

**Business Factors**

These news judgment values are fueled in part by inherent demands of the news business. Let's discuss some of those before moving on to the faults and criticisms of the values.

First, most newspapers try to maintain a minimum of a 70-30 split, with advertising taking up the 70 percent of total column inches. Many papers are at 75-25.

This very factor limits the number of stories that can be run in the newspaper. Some stories simply do not run because there is no room. There are those in the field and out who suggest that the ***New York Times*** slogan, "All the News That's Fit to Print" might be changed to "All the News That Fits We Print."

Time limitations fuel the emphasis on timeliness, and frankly also make journalists select news that might be more convenient to obtain by deadline. For example, I covered the Milwaukee Brewers for a Wisconsin daily newspaper for over a decade. The average game lasted around three hours, which means a night game was over around 10:45 p.m. My newspaper had an 11:30 deadline. That left me little time to do interviews, race back to the press box and write a story. In all honesty, my news judgment often was influenced by which player took the quickest shower and was ready to talk. I also had little time to do sidebars or in-depth stories, which could add information for the reader. If I tried to do one in the next day's paper, it often was killed because it no longer was timely.

I've already mentioned the parochial nature of newspapers. Their circulation area is limited and they sell ads primarily within that area. Not many New York retailers think it makes sense to

advertise in Milwaukee newspapers, for example. This ad factor makes it only natural to also emphasize news that falls within the circulation area. Those advertisers want people to see their ads and buy their products. The theory is that local news attracts local readers, who also look at the ads.

A final business factor worth mentioning is that newspapers have traditionally remained a "general store." Unlike targeted magazines, tightly formatted radio stations or cable TV channels, newspapers traditionally have not been aimed at a specific audience. They have truly tried to reach the masses. That translates into news that usually remains in the "middle" of the social and political spectrum. Fringe viewpoints usually don't get as much play.

Some of this general store element of newspapers is changing with more influence of market research. More papers are shaping their news content for their specific demographics, or the demographic group that they would like to reach. This approach also can have its pitfalls, as we will discuss later, but first let's look at some criticism of the traditional news values.

**Scoop Mentality**

An over-emphasis on timeliness of the news can lead to a "scoop" mentality. As mentioned earlier, journalists often are rewarded for being first with a story. However, rushing a story to print, or onto the air, before all the facts have been learned, or even sought, can lead to major inequities and inaccuracies. A student told me the worst incident I have ever heard of this.

A pastor in a Wisconsin town was accused of molesting a 13-year-old boy. When the allegations were first made, and legal action was about to start, the local newspaper reported the story. However, during the legal investigation, the boy admitted he had fabricated the incident, because he was angry that the pastor had counseled his mother and step-father through some marital strife. When the truth was admitted, the newspaper also reported it, but as so often is the case the second story did not get the play of the

first. His reputation and career ruined, the pastor fell into a deep depression and committed suicide.

Legally, the newspaper had not acted improperly. Court action had been initiated, and the paper wanted to get the story before other media jumped on it. However, if the paper had done some independent investigation, the damage might have been minimized.

**Forest-For-the-Trees**

Bennett makes several convincing arguments against the emphasis on celebrity and prominence in personalized, dramatic news. He primarily addresses the problem in regards to political news.

"Personalized news encourages people to take an egocentric rather than a socially concerned view of political problems," Bennett writes. "Moreover, the focus on attractive political personalities encourages a passive attitude among a public inclined to let those personalities do their thinking and acting for them. In general, the media preference for personalized human-interest news creates a 'forest-for-the-trees' information bias in which it becomes hard to see the big institutional picture that lies beyond the multitude of actors crowding center stage."

Bennett further argues that personalization of the news leads to dramatized news that is not always an accurate picture of the event. "With actors at their center, news dramas emphasize crisis over continuity, the present over the past or future, and the impact of scandals on personal political careers rather than on the institutions of government that harbored them," he writes. "Lost in the news drama -- melodrama is the more appropriate term -- are the persistent problems of our time, such as inequality, hunger, resource waste, staggering levels of military spending and political oppression."

The media also tend to tell these dramas without context, Bennett argues. "The fragmentation of information begins by emphasizing individual actors over political contexts in which they operate. Fragmentation is then heightened by the use of dramatic

formats that turn events into self-contained, isolated happenings. News stories would become undramatic and too complicated to grasp if their plots were strained to include multiple issues and explanations of larger institutional processes. The fragmentation of information is exaggerated still further by the severe space limits imposed by nearly all the media for fear of boring readers and viewers with too much information. Thus, the news comes to us in sketchy dramatic capsules that make it difficult to see the connections across issues or even to follow the development of a particular issue over time."

In my own career, I have a glaring example of what Bennett is referring to. During my years of covering municipal government, I did a stint for a daily newspaper in an area where development was infringing on rural land. I covered meeting after meeting in which residents complained about sewers, road access, dwindling resources, etc. Several made for good stories, with heated exchanges and accusations being leveled. As municipal government goes, that's dramatic.

I came to realize that these complaints, and the almost daily stories I was writing about them, fell under the broader issue of land use. How do we choose to relate to the land? And, what kind of conflicts can varying approaches to land use lead to?

I proposed doing a series on the broader issue, in an attempt to integrate the issues I had been reporting in piecemeal. My editor initially killed the idea -- saying land use would be too boring, it would take me away from my usual beats, etc. I hounded him for months, and finally only through exhaustion, he okayed the series, if I and another reporter would do it on our "free time."

The other reporter and I were young and naive enough at the time to tackle the project, although the so-called free time was really only time donated well beyond our regular working hours. The result was a 19-part series, entitled "This Land Is Your Land." My editor, still not convinced the series would be read, held it for weeks, to the point that once it was ready to run my colleague and I had to do hurry-up updating of some facts and figures.

To my editor's amazement, the series was extremely well read. One reader even wrote, "This series put things I have been arguing with my neighbors about into perspective. I really look outside my window at the farm field in back of my house in a different light these days."

The series won first place from the American Planning Association in 1981 for in-depth reporting on land use and environmental issues. It only appeared after months of arguing and hounding, frankly to the point of almost losing my job. I only wonder how many other series have died because of the same news judgment my editor initially displayed.

**Market-Driven News**

In the last decade, more and more newspaper journalists have come to realize the need for a second-look at how they make news judgments. They have seen newspapers slip to second place, behind TV, in most audience polls asking where the public gets the news. The common response has been to survey readers, asking them what they'd like to see more and less of in the newspaper. This technique commonly is referred to as market-driven news.

There are good and bad points to market-driven news. Most certainly, the days of the crusty old editor, who said "news is anything I damn well decide to put in the newspaper," should be behind us. It is important for any good communicator to understand the audience, and become close to the public. Some marketing surveys have helped journalists accomplish those goals, but there also are some pitfalls in how research has been commonly used to shape news judgment and content.

The results of any market survey can easily be skewed by the questions that are asked, who is questioned and how and for what purpose the input is processed. If readers are asked how their newspaper can better serve them through different approaches to the news, the input can be invaluable. However, if the questions are designed only to find out how the paper can maintain or increase profits, the results can actually be destructive in the long run. There are differences in what people LIKE to see in a

newspaper or NEED to see in order to function intelligently in our world. Also, we in the media set the menu of choices from which the reader can choose.

Again, drawing from Bennett: "It is doubtful that current marketing surveys really measure popular demand at all. For example, most media surveys are designed with the assumption that formula news is a given. Audiences are not asked if they would prefer alternatives to formula news, they are simply asked which news formulas they like best. Market research that might turn up results damaging to produce efficiency would defeat the purpose of the news doctors. Thus, the standard excuse that the news reflects what the people want might be stated more properly as 'the news reflects what people prefer among those choices we find profitable and convenient to offer them.' This is not the same as saying that the news is responsive to popular demand. Whether we look at standard organizational routines or the efforts of news organizations to 'upgrade' their product, we find factors that reinforce the familiar trends toward more normalized news, more fragmented news, more dramatic news and more personalized news."

Large corporations, which own the vast majority of newspapers in the country today, make great use of market research. As Michael Josephson, founder of the Josephson Institute for the Advancement of Ethics, points out, large corporations tend to share paradigms, or outlooks, on their holdings. Often non-journalistic priorities can be set by corporate boards with stronger backgrounds in business and entertainment than journalism.

What Josephson refers to as a "profit center mentality" can become the dominant paradigm. After all, why should the newspaper be run any differently than the shipping company that Corp. X owns?

Large conglomerate owners often look to maximize profits through a number of moves:

** installing business-oriented editors, who have more concern about the bottom line than journalistic quality.

** cutting newsroom personnel, travel, etc. It's cheaper to rely on news services and consolidation with sister organizations.
** use of a marketing approach in news judgments. Josephson believes this approach can lead to "dumbing down" of content to the lowest common denominator, sensationalism, an over-emphasis on titillating private facts, basically giving people more entertainment and less news.
** demographic targeting. Demographic undesirables, such as the poor, are abandoned in favor of persons who are more appealing to advertisers.

All of these approaches can lead to short-term profits, but when they become dominant, and go unquestioned, they have negative effects, such as:
** loss of independence. News personnel, facing fewer job options, are more likely to go along with business decisions.
** blurring of news and advertising/entertainment lines.
** conflicts of interest. Conflicts arise between parent company and journalistic goals. Self-censorship, spikes and diluted stories and blackout areas of coverage occur.

Josephson maintains, and this writer concurs, that the long-run effect of the above paradigm could be loss of credibility, a hostile legal climate and eventual loss of readership and business. If the members of the public really believe their newspaper is there to serve them, they will support it, back First Amendment rights, etc. However, if they think their newspaper is simply another business, why should they care if it survives any more than Chrysler? Why should they support First Amendment rights?

We have seen increasing incidents of business interest affecting news judgement in recent years. Did the Detroit newspapers, facing a merger in the '80s under a Joint Operating Agreement (JOA), go easy on investigative stories about then Attorney General Edwin Meese, because of fears that he could influence the merger?

In an incident related to the JOA, ***The Miami Herald***, a Knight-Ridder paper, admitted pulling an editorial cartoon critical of Meese during a crucial period in the JOA approval process.

Knight-Ridder and Gannett owned the Detroit papers that were involved in the merger.

Did ***Time Magazine*** back off a story about a hostile takeover attempt of Time Inc. by Paramount Communications and its own merger plans with Warner Communications?

In my hometown of Milwaukee, how much coverage of the Diane Dew incident appeared in ***The Milwaukee Journal*** or ***Sentinel*** in 1989? Dew was a news clerk who was dismissed for an alleged ethics code violation after she demonstrated against abortion. Journal editor Sig Gissler was later found to be a financial supporter, with his wife, of Planned Parenthood, another ethics violation.

When demonstrators marched in support of Dew, the story received major play in other Milwaukee media, but was downplayed in the ***Journal*** and ***Sentinel***, which are both owned by Journal Communications. It seems covering a march, when it was against the editor of your newspaper, simply was bad business.

These are just a few of many examples of a growing business paradigm affecting news judgment. They are outgrowths of a market-driven approach to the news. In each case, the incidents had the opposite effect of what market-driven advocates want to see. Each example served to erode credibility of the respective news organization. And, credibility might be the best long-run selling point any newspaper has.

Bennett talks about another pitfall of market-driven media -- the susceptibility to "spin doctors." When journalists are overly concerned about what readers seemingly "want", they can become less likely to critically examine messages from public relations types. They also tend to rely on news doctors, who claim to know the audience.

Not all market-driven approaches are negative. Any attempt to bring the journalist closer to the public is needed. The keys are:

** What questions are being asked? Are we asking "how could we present local government so it had some meaning for you?" Or are we simply asking "Of the stories below, which would you read?"

The second question is firmly rooted in a paradigm. We are limiting the selections for the reader.

** For what purposes are we asking the questions? Are they really intended to help us improve the quality of our journalism? Or are they simply intended to keep the short-term profit margin up?

** Are we trying to use the data from our surveys to mold our readership into a homogenous mass? If so, we are defeating our own purpose. When you try to lump individuals into a group, you ultimately eliminate aspects of news that might appeal to individual segments of your audience. You cut down on the very diversity that newspapers can offer.

General semantics and critical thinking offer techniques, approaches and suggestions for truly getting closer to those readers and coming up with unique, creative news judgments.

**The Map & the Territory**

Perhaps the simplest, and yet most important, principle of general semantics is that the map can never equal the territory. Because of the abstracting process, our perspective or account of an event will never actually be the event. Limitations of our nervous system eliminates some of the territory from our map. Our backgrounds and previous experiences leave us with biases or viewpoints that make it difficult to see parts of the territory. Finally, the very fact that we cannot concentrate on any one thing without ignoring another limits our maps.

Learned values, such as those we discussed earlier, also can shape our maps and prohibit us from seeing all the territory. Bennett alluded to this with his forest-for-the-trees analogy. When those values become norms, and go unchallenged, they can prohibit us from exploring new, and perhaps better ways, of doing things. Our maps become etched in concrete. If we dare to deviate from them, we break professional ranks, and challenge the hegemony of the accepted way of doing things. That can have its consequences.

As we've discussed, journalists have their maps of what IS the news. Those maps are shaped not only by individual

perspectives, limitations, etc., but the norms of the profession. Yet, can a journalist be an effective communicator is he or she does not check the map with the territory? Will he or she be read if they do not check their maps with those of the readers? And, are the current marketing surveys and research an effective way of checking those maps?

My answers to those questions are NO, NO, NO. You can choose the order. Journalists should constantly be checking what they determine to be news with the territory. That same editor who resisted the land use series I previously mentioned omitted a reference to coyotes living in the area, simply because he did not believe coyotes roamed the territory. Wouldn't he have created a better map if he had checked with the naturalist, whose job was to create maps of the wildlife territory by actually beating the bushes and counting animals? That naturalist had been my source.

That's just one example. What about journalists' frequent judgments to give crime stories "good play?" Crime stories often make "good copy." They are personal and sometimes dramatic. The details can be obtained from official, or credible sources. There is an either/or, good/bad element to them.

However, several sociologists have found that heavy news consumers have fears of crime that are out of proportion to their actual chances of becoming victims of a crime. They develop what sociologists term a "mean view" of the world. Wouldn't journalists create a more accurate map of the world if they would try to balance their reporting of crime stories with the actual instances?

Journalists also create a distorted map when they sensationalize an individual crime. For example, big play was given to a mugging of a female jogger in Central Park in 1989. The jogger, an attractive white woman, was attacked and sexually molested by a group of black teenagers. The story created an outrage. Donald Trump, who already has been labeled in this work as one of the country's elite, took out a full page ad in the ***New York Times***, urging people to take back the streets of New

York. Calls were issued for tougher laws, including the death penalty for rapists.

Without trivializing the terrible event, the sensational coverage of it created a map that was not accurate in a specific way, which also made a broader statement about our society. Several civil rights activists pointed out that five such attacks a night occurred against black women in certain areas of the New York metropolitan area. Some were reported in the ***Times*** and other media, but the vast majority were not. None received the extensive coverage of the Central Park attack. By playing up the specific attack, journalists further fed racial stereotypes of black men attacking white women. They also created an inaccurate map of the proportion of such incidents. Finally, they tended to downplay the crime when the victim was black. Here was a news judgment that cried for some checking with the territory.

These are just a couple examples. Dozens more could be offered. The main point is that journalists at times select events as news because those events fit into their existing maps of what news should be. At times, journalists do not see if their news maps fit the territory.

**My Map, Your Map**

Another important element of general semantics is that one map does not match another map. Korzybski used indexing to demonstrate this principle. For our purposes, we will sum it up as Reader 1 does not equal Reader 2. Just as individual journalists have their own perceptions, physical limitations, backgrounds, etc., so do the people they are trying to communicate to.

This causes a problem for mass media. It is much easier, especially for the supporters of market research, to be able to define the audience in homogenous terms. "Our readers want this." Or "Our readers say this." Actually, the readers as a mass say very little in unison. Instead, the mass is made up of thousands of individuals, who say many things.

Media have tried to address this with the so-called demassification of the audience. Cable TV offers specialized

channels. Radio stations are formatted for specific types of listeners. Magazines are extremely specialized.

Newspapers have a tougher time doing this, since their advertising base must be broader. Perhaps the answer for newspapers is not to try to specialize, at least not with the entire publication. Instead, the newspaper can be the last general store, or more like a giant department store, where customers might buy from several departments.

In that regard, special sections like those on lifestyles, housing, business, sports, etc. have appealed to specific readers for years. However, much of the general news judgment has been based more on traditional news and the treatment of the audience as a mass.

Perhaps general semantics offers some possibilities. For example, certain aspects of a state government story might have different significance or meaning for different individuals or segments of the overall readership. Why not report the story in somewhat traditional style, but then run an interpretation piece giving a variety of impacts of the action or decisions?

**Process vs. Closure**

Another very important general semantics principle is that we can never say everything about anything. In part, that's because things constantly are changing. The world is in process, not stagnant. Therefore, events, people, issues, etc. change day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month.

General semanticists certainly didn't discover this concept of process. As one philosopher was fond of saying, "No man ever steps in the same river twice." The river has changed since the last time the man entered it. New molecules of water are flowing by, the stream bed has been eroded, etc. The man is not even the same man. Other philosophers have pointed out that the only constant is constant change.

While general semanticists didn't invent the philosophy, Korzybski used a technique called dating to make his students aware of this world in process. Under dating: Gregg Hoffmann

1967 is not Gregg Hoffmann 1993. Many things have happened in those years to contribute to change. I've graduated from college, become a husband and home owner, started a second career as a college instructor, etc. I've changed.

The same can be said for any event or issue a journalist might cover. The housing issue does not stop with the Common Council decision. The environmental problems do not stop with the passage of a clean air act. Race relations do not stay the same as neighborhoods change. Yet, we tend to cover only the events that deal with these issues, and cover them as if they say all that is to be said about the issues.

In part, we decide to cover these events because they are convenient. We know the Council is meeting at 8 p.m. Tuesday and will discuss that housing issue. In part, we decide to cover these events because they provide some action, perhaps even drama. The debates, etc., are acted out in front of us, and we are much better at covering something that happens before us than we are at digging out the intangibles of an issue.

However, the decision to cover the event leads to the fragmented news that Bennett and other critics mention. We give the issue closure. We cover the event and then often drop the issue for weeks, months or perhaps forever. We tell stories piecemeal rather than give people the bigger picture, the more complete perspective they need to make intelligent, informed decisions in their everyday lives.

Thus, the impression is that the housing issue has been taken care of when the Council passes the ordinance. Why then are those people asking for more housing six months later, the reader asks. Perhaps because the ordinance was never enforced, or just wasn't adequate. Or perhaps because circumstances have changed since the passage of the act. Those points weren't addressed in the story about the Council action on the ordinance.

The environmental issue provides a classic example of closure and fragmentized coverage by the news media. Earth Day 1970 drew a ton of coverage. However, for the next 20 years, with the exception of some excellent environmental writers around the

country, the news media concentrated their environmental coverage primarily on events -- anti-nuclear protests, oil spills, etc. These were events that provided drama and opportunities to personalize coverage. They should have been covered. But the environmental problems went well beyond these individual crises. The problems were evolving, changing, etc. on a much more subtle level. We continued to depend on fossil fuels. Farmers continued to use outdated land management techniques that led to harmful runoff. We were slow to develop markets for recycled products. The environment continued to be harmed by our daily living styles and craving of convenience.

That aspect of the issue went virtually uncovered until Earth Day 1990. During the 20th anniversary of the first Earth Day, the media covered some of those daily, more mundane issues. They also covered the speeches and events which commemorated the anniversary. But, literally only weeks after Earth Day, during the time I was working on the first draft of this project, coverage started to dwindle. Yet, environmental problems will not go away. They call for changes and adaptations for the remainder of mankind's history.

**The Why Portion**

We in the news media could tell that story by concentrating more on the why portion of the issue. Why does a portion of the corporate world resist making the necessary changes to improve the environment? We could explore that. We could provide regular updates on the environmental status of our respective communities. But, that doesn't make great copy, or provide very interesting visuals.

By applying dating, and accepting that this issue will be with us forever, we could help the public understand the need for adaptations. The same could be said for many other issues in our society. If we covered them as constantly changing and evolving, rather than give them one shot and then drop them, we could provide a much better service.

**Shared Maps, Narrow Viewpoints**

If you've ever watched more than one local TV newscast, you can't help but note the similarities in news selection and sometimes even in placement. At times, only the camera angles differ, and even those only slightly. Newspapers fall into the same trap for a variety of reasons. The results of shared news judgment usually are a reduction in perspectives on an issue, a narrowing of viewpoints, a limiting of the marketplace of ideas and a homogeneity to the news. One of my colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee refers to such news as "Big Mac" news. When you've had a Big Mac, you've had one -- whether you're in Denver, Milwaukee or Moscow. The same can be said for many newscasts or newspapers. Their stories simply are too similar.

Several factors can lead to this Big Mac syndrome. We've already mentioned shared news values. Even though editors work at different news organizations, they often share similar training backgrounds.

Competitive reasons ironically can lead to similarities in news. While news organizations still pride themselves in getting the exclusive stories, the scoops, they also fear not having what their competitor has.

A growing reliance on wire service copy also can lead to homogeneity in the news. As more MBA types become editors and news directors, staffs tend to be cut, travel limited, etc. It simply becomes more cost efficient to use wire services. No matter if that gives you the same story as every other news organization in the country.

Finally, the growing willingness to follow the leads of "spin doctors" and public relations people leads to a growing sameness in news judgment. If the leading PR person for the mayor or local senator, tells you there's a press conference at 10 a.m. you know he's also told your competitors. Therefore, you're likely to be there, standing right next to the competitor. The growth of public relations has led to a correlated growth in news conferences, pseudo-events and pack journalism, especially in the

fields of politics and sports. The result has been similarities in news judgments.

Perhaps editors and news directors would be better off applying some general semantics/critical thinking principles. If indeed, my readership or audience is made up of individuals, why feel that I must give them the same map as my competitor? Why not skip the press conference, if I already know it's just to get Senator X in front of the cameras, and instead explore Senator X's stand on the environment or jobs creation?

Next, if I understand the abstracting process, and realize that for my readers or listeners a flawed map still becomes the territory if it is the only map used, why use the same wire service story if I possibly can give a story a different twist?

Finally, why rely on the pitches of spin doctors when I know they are giving the same pitch to my competitors, and basically seeking to get favorable publicity for their candidate or company? Wouldn't I be better off asking some critical questions in an exclusive interview? Or simply asking some critical questions about the input after the press conference stories have run?

**Extensional vs. Intensional**

I have mentioned the terms extensional and intensional in passing earlier in this chapter. They are worth defining and looking at in more depth as we wrap up this portion of our writing because I believe it is very important for journalists and their readers/audience to work on developing an extensional orientation.

Basically, by an extensional orientation I mean the ability to check the map with the territory. An extensional individual is aware of and challenges his own assumptions. He does not simply accept what he is told, even if the information comes from an authoritative source. He checks what he is told with his own observations and by seeking additional data and information about the subject.

An extensional individual tests premises and conclusions by comparing them to other premises and conclusions. If he

decides a conclusion is correct, he accepts the possibility that it might not be correct forever. This also applies to a method or way of doing something. An extensional individual knows what works today might not work tomorrow. He does not shy away from trying new methods.

That does not mean that an extensional individual automatically substitutes the new for the old. What it does mean is that he is willing to try a new way and compare its effectiveness with an established method. Finally, an extensional individual is aware of his environment, observant, alert, sensitive to what is going on around him.

An intensional individual has different traits. He tends to accept the map as the territory and not necessarily feel the need to check it. His assumptions and conclusions are the RIGHT assumptions and conclusions. He tends to become comfortable with the traditional ways of doing things and sees nothing wrong with hegemony. He often is not very observant or alert, tends to be insensitive to his environment and people around him. He also lacks a certain curiosity and appreciation for the joy of discovery.

Of course, I am using extremes here to illustrate a point. Few of us are entirely extensional or intensional in orientation. Most of us have the tendency to be both at times. However, I believe we can become more extensional, and it is my contention that too many journalists, and even more of their readers/audience are trapped in intensional orientations.

As we have already discussed, journalists often accept certain values and definitions of news with very little questioning. While I have found journalists as a whole more observant than many members of the general public, some tend to do their observing and form their conclusions within a dominant framework. They engage in what many communication experts refer to as selective perception.

Translate these tendencies to news judgment and you get stories that stick by traditional and conventional frameworks. You get editors who don't look beyond their own assumptions and outlooks on the world when deciding what will go into the

newspaper or newscast. You get an editor who simply refused to believe there are coyotes.

While journalists can fall into the intensional orientation trap, I believe it is even more prevalent among their readers/audience. A recent survey of people under 30 showed them to be the worst informed generation in decades. The study, conducted by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, and sponsored by the company that owns the Los Angeles Times, showed that only 24% of people under 30 said they read a newspaper "yesterday." Only 31% said they watched TV news. Those figures compare to 67% and 52% in 1965.

Educators tell us that young people regularly fail geography and current events tests. Such ignorance and concern for the world are not restricted to the young. Voter participation, primarily an activity of older adults, has plummeted. Adults regularly show ignorance and lack of regard for the environment. The 1970s and 80s produced the so-called "Me Generation." It primarily is a generation that asks first "what can this do for me?" or "how will I be affected by this?" Social concerns, and a broader perspective, have taken a back seat to personal concerns.

A general semanticist might call this an intensional orientation. The individuals primarily are concerned about self, and their own maps. They are not outward-oriented, and do not check their maps with the territory often enough.

It would hardly be fair to blame all of this on the news media. Educators, sociologists and others struggle to pinpoint the factors. They list many: a growing feeling of threat in the world which forces people to turn inward and seek personal, escapist rewards; an increasingly complex world that frustrates and confuses people; the dominance of a competitive, dog-eat-dog mentality fueled by our economic system; a feeling of "what can I do about it anyway."

Many of the reasons for these factors are beyond the control of journalists. The education system must start relating "book learning" to the real world more. If you use the world as your lab, your students are more likely to explore it.

Families must explore the need to understand and participate in the world. They cannot simply escape into their leisure activities and the hottest sitcom. A change in overall mindset, including an acceptance that America is just part of a global system, not an island, is needed. The media can't make these changes alone.

However, isn't it ironic that this intensional orientation comes at a time when there actually is more information about the world available than in any other time of man's history? Some mass communication researchers say we have created an "information overload." There is too much information for people to digest, so they don't try at all. I believe there is some truth to this theory.

I also believe that the way we present the news -- which is the map of the world for many -- has led in part to this intensional orientation. The personalization of news mentioned by Bennett helps fuel the intensional orientation. The market-driven mentality of giving people what they WANT rather than what they NEED to function in the world.

I believe the news media can play a part in changing the orientation through changes in what we decide is news. I feel the following internal changes could help:

1) Becoming more extensional ourselves.

2) Break out of the conventional news judgment traps and be willing to explore new approaches.

3) Rather than simply feed the readers/audience intensional orientation by giving them escapist, infotainment, we should find out what people really need to function effectively and fully in the world.

4) We should do more perspective pieces, even if it means straying from the long-held ideal of objectivity. Every report really is a map anyway. Why not tell the reader that? Present a story as our map and let the reader make up his or her mind. Maybe with this approach, we could deal more with the why of things.

5) Choose stories that deal with the bigger picture and not only with piecemeal events. We still have to cover the daily news, but run more stories that tie those pieces into a larger puzzle.

6) Choose news that cuts across conventional local, national and international lines. A change of government in Eastern Europe can mean more jobs for the local car plant, which starts marketing autos in that part of the world. In turn, the increased revenue could affect local taxes. Show how these international and local events are inter-related and perhaps we could make better sense of the world for the people we are serving. We live in an inter-related world, not departmentalized.

7) Break out of the two-value orientation. All issues cannot be told in either/or, right/wrong, Democrat/Republican, liberal/conservative terms. Stop choosing stories that over-simplify issues into those terms. By doing so, we almost ask the reader to choose between A and B, which feeds the intensional orientation. Am I more like A or B? By no means, can the news media change the orientation alone. However, it can have an impact.

In summary, I believe the news media must look at new ways of deciding what is news. I do not think the current market-driven methods provide true alternatives because: a) we tend to ask what the public WANTS rather than what it NEEDS, and b) we control the questions and options for the readers/audience.

I believe general semantics can provide some guidelines for exploring alternative ways of news judgment. In some ways, it can lead to specific methods, and in other ways, lead to general changes in paradigms and mindsets.

*etc.*

**End Notes**

** The study of the news sources from the ***New York Times*** and ***Washington Post*** was taken from research by Leon Sigal, who is the author of ***Reporters and officials: The organization and politics of newsmaking.***

** All references to W. Lance Bennett are taken from ***News: The Politics of Illusion.***

** References to Michael Josephson come from his address at the 1989 Society for Professional Journalists national convention in Houston, Texas.

# Chapter 4

# A Critical Look At Reporting Methods



**Journalists like to claim they only report facts. "Tell It Like It Is" -- a phrase popularized by sportscaster Howard Cosell -- is a tenet of many journalists. However, the phrase might more accurately read "Tell It Like It Seems to Me" or "Tell It Like It Seems to My Source." So much of what we deal with are inferences, conclusions, assumptions, etc., drawn from details by our sources.**

***gregg hoffmann***

## Chapter 4

# A Critical Look At Reporting Methods

After the news judgments and assignments have been made, the reporter must go out and actually gather the information for the story. Many news judgments are made in the field by the reporter. In fact, the so-called gatekeeping often starts in the relationship between the reporter and source.

No two stories are worked exactly the same way. However, there are some longheld methods that are common. Let's examine them first. Then, we'll take a critical look at them and suggest ways that general semantics/critical thinking principles might offer some alternatives or suggestions for improvement.

### Objectivity

The reporter is expected to gather the information and report in an "objective" manner. The dictionary definition of objective is "based on observable phenomena; presented factually, uninfluenced by emotion, surmise or personal prejudice." The definition is closely related to objectivism, which is defined as "any one of several doctrines holding that all reality is objective and external to the mind, and that knowledge is reliably based on observed events and objects."

General semanticists could have some problems with those definitions of objectivity and any methods based on them. To begin with, a GSer would question if objectivity is even possible to attain. He or she also might question if reality exists for anyone externally of the mind, without any regard for the individual's abstracting process. A GSer would agree with reliance on observable phenomena, but might resist the tendency to talk about presentation of factual material with certainty. Most GSers consider a fact to be information that has a high degree of predictability or probability rather than certainty.

How journalists traditionally have used objectivity is to acquire information and evaluate it without influence of an ideology...or at least an overtly apparent one. For example, journalists try to keep their political views, etc. out of a story as much as possible.

Another method based in large part on the journalists' concept of objectivity is to present a balanced report. Thus, a journalist will usually seek "both sides" of a story. If he interviews Politician A, he likely will try to balance out the story by talking to Politician B, who opposes A.

The journalist also seeks factual information, which can be verified. That likely would sound good to a GSer, but the journalists' definition of verifiable might differ from that of GS. Quite often, the journalist verified the facts by checking them with "credible" sources. Those sources might include so-called experts in a field, elected officials, police, etc. Credible often becomes translated into "official" sources when the journalist actually starts writing a story.

**Get Those Quotes**

Reporters often are taught early in their careers to seek direct input from sources, through the collection of direct quotations. A direct quote allows a journalist to give his readers/audience information directly "from the horse's mouth." It allows the source to tell the story.

Quotes are gathered sometimes by tape recorder and sometimes by note-taking. They are not always used in the exact order they are given. In fact, a quote can be broken up to make it fit in the "right" spots of the story. More than one source has argued that he or she was misquoted, when the actual words uttered were accurate. What has been changed is the context, simply because the words are appearing in a different place of the story.

**Interviews**

The interview is a very important source of news. One of my first editors told me, "News is told through sources, people who either participated in the event or witnessed it." Thus, we interview those participants and witnesses.

Journalists interview sources in press conference settings, where quotes and input might be used by several reporters, or in one-on-one situations. The questioning process is at the guts of the interview. The journalist often has control of the process by the very fact he or she is asking the questions.

Unfortunately, relatively little time is spent in most journalism schools on interviewing, and less is spent on evaluating the input from the interviews and asking follow-up questions.

**Observation and Description**

Some of the newsgathering process is done through direct observation and description of an event. Most journalists will tell you they would like to do more of this kind of reporting. They feel they can actually get closer to the event by being there and directly observing.

At times, the journalist will actually be allowed to become an observer/participant in a story, but, with the exception of commentary pieces and columns, the journalist as observer usually is restricted to objectively describing the event. Open interpretation can be considered crossing the line into advocacy journalism.

**Scanning of Records & Statistics**

Many of the "facts" in certain types of stories, such as political and economic stories, come through the checking of sources input with official records. Legal battles have been fought over access to public records, such as meeting minutes, financial records, personnel files, police and court proceedings, etc. A general assumption often is made that input from a source might be prejudiced by that source, but the records contain the unadulterated facts.

Many of these reports deal with statistics, which often are considered unbiased. Journalists also like to collect statistics through surveys and polling. In fact, this method has become the "hot method" in the late 20th Century to factually pursue voting patterns, public opinion and other stories.

**A Critical Look**

These are some of the most common methodological approaches to the gathering of information that is then processed into the news. Let's take a critical look at them in the next several pages.

First is the practice of so-called "objective reporting." GSers would question if anybody can be objective because of limitations of our own nervous system, the paradigms which we form from our own backgrounds, etc. We inevitably make selections. No matter how fair we might try to be our selection process includes subjective decisions. Those decisions also can be influenced greatly by demands of the system within which we work. We'll give a demonstration of that contention a few pages from now.

A GSer also might argue that reality tends to become a product of what is "out there" and our own abstracting process. We make maps of the territory. We inevitably must function with our maps rather than the territory itself. I have seen this point illustrated repeatedly during my years in journalism. Many times, I was surprised by a report from a reporter who had covered the same meeting, press conference or game I had covered. His or her abstracting process had differed from mine considerably. Thus, the map was different.

The concept of objectivity has long been illustrated by the so-called "mirror analogy." In this analogy, journalists are looked at as creators of mirrors, simply reflecting the "reality" that occurs out there. I like to bring a mirror to my classrooms and walk around the room, asking individual students what they see in the mirror. Of course, they see something different depending on their position in the room. Then, I start to twist or slant the mirror. Of

course, that action affects what is seen, much like the very involvement of the reporter in a story affects the story. Finally, I ask the students about all that falls outside the borders of the mirror. That is not part of their reality as they see it. What falls outside the journalism mirror does not become news.

I also like to debunk the mirror analogy by tracing a story through the process it would go through in a "typical" newspaper. I choose an accident story, with the following details:

**A 1987 Chevrolet, driven by Jerry Smith, 30, Milwaukee collides with a 1988 Olds, driven by Mabel Jones, 61, West Allis, on southbound I-94 in Milwaukee. Smith was uninjured. Jones received fractured ribs. A passenger in Jones' car, Annabel Brown, 77, also of West Allis, received cuts and bruises.**

The typical story from these details might read:

**Two West Allis women were injured in two-car accident on southbound I-94 about 9:30 p.m. yesterday, according to police. Mabel Jones, 61, the driver of a 1988 Oldsmobile, received fractured ribs. Annabel Brown, 77, a passenger in Jones' car, received cuts and bruises to her forehead. Both are listed in serious condition at Memorial Hospital.**

**Police said Jones' car was headed south when it collided with a 1987 Chevrolet, driven by Jerry Smith, 30, Milwaukee. Smith was uninjured in the accident. Authorities are still investigating for further details.**

Now, how would that story be worked? Often, the accident would not be covered by a reporter at all. Instead, he or she would learn of the accident when making his or her daily rounds on the police beat. The main source of information would be a police report, prepared by witnesses who likely obtained their information by talking to victims or witnesses.

For the purpose of this exercise, let's say the reporter has been sent to cover the accident. When the reporter arrives at the scene, the victims have been taken to the hospital and cleanup is underway. The reporter hurries into action, questioning some witnesses.

Those witnesses likely wouldn't be considered to be enough. The reporter would have to talk to "credible" sources. He or she likely would talk to the police, who might have obtained their information from the same witnesses.

After he or she has completed the work at the scene, the reporter would return to the office and write. A space limitation -- let's say five column inches -- would be given to the story. A deadline would be set. The reporter would contact the hospital to get the condition of the victims and do any other follow-up information gathering.

He or she then must write the story, making decisions on what and what not to use, how to organize information, how to write the story in a way that will interest readers, etc. The reporter also must be very careful with word choice. For example, to write "Smith's car hit Jones" could imply guilt that has not yet been determined.

After the reporter writes the story, it will go to a copy editor, who will form some abstractions and write a headline. At larger papers, more than one editor might work on the story. Abstractions are being added. Maps are being made.

Of course, when the readers see the story the next morning, they also will abstract. By now, I hope you can see that there is a whole lot of abstracting going on, and the map that is represented in the story is several levels removed from the accident -- the territory itself.

When using this in my classroom, I usually add a couple details. I tell my students that in the hours from the time the newspaper was put to bed, and the time the readers sit down to read the story, things have changed. Brown has had convulsions and has slipped into critical condition. The police have found pot in Smith's car. These details are not in the story. Therefore, they

are not part of the readers' reality at all. Now, is this story a mirror of what happened?

TV coverage of the event would have additional factors. Were the visuals good? Did the event happen so it fits into the newscast schedules? Etc.

**Getting Meaningful Quotes**

The use of direct quotations in stories is an excellent idea. However, the way we use them, the way we collect them and the way we give them meaning could use improvement. Too often, reporters become obsessed with quote collecting rather than reporting. In fact, often in my career I have become aware of what I like to call "the commodity of communication." By this I mean the use of human communication, direct quotes, as a commodity. I often found myself saying, "I need two graphs from so and so." Usually it was because that was how much I needed to fit into my space allotment. At times, I wasn't really that concerned about what was said, as long as it fit.

Many of the quotes were gathered in press conferences or group interviews. Politics and sports are perhaps the two worst areas for so-called pack journalism. Questions are asked in a group forum. Answers are used by several reporters in the group. Of course, those reporters might have different interpretations of the same answer.

I know I was not alone in the use of quotes in this manner. It is an entirely too prevalent use of direct quotes...and it becomes relatively meaningless for the readers/audience. It reduces the reporter to a quote collector, without the time to evaluate and give meaning.

Over the years, I also noticed many instances of the use of quotes out of context. For example in 1990, a black Milwaukee alderman named Michael McGee formed a Black Panther Militia in protest of what he saw as racism in city policies. He warned that if conditions did not improve for blacks and other poor people violence could occur. He did not say he was forming the militia to carry out the violence, only that it seemed inevitable if things did

not get better. Most of the reports took his statements out of context and linked the forming of the militia with a "promise of violence." The statements were out of context and became much more inflammatory than when McGee actually said them. Such use of quotes amounts to a restructuring of "reality." And, as GSers realize, structure and context are what impart meaning. A final common fault in the use of direct quotes is linked to the "credible source" syndrome mentioned earlier in this chapter. Frequently, the quote is taken as the gospel if it comes from a credible, or official, source.

I believe journalists could more effectively use direct quotations if they became better interviewers and evaluators of communication. As mentioned, very little time is spent on asking questions in journalism courses. Yet, a question might be the most important tool of a journalist.

**It All Starts With A Question**

Reporters must ask questions to get their information. Interviewing truly is an art form, which must be customized for each individual. I have seen true masters of the art. But, I also have seen many who ask poor, unclear, meaningless or unfair questions.

Poor questions seem to fall into a couple categories. First, you have the overly general question: "Can you give me your impressions of the bill?" or "Your impressions of the game?" The question simply is too broad to get down to any specifics. It inevitably leads to a broad, general answer that has little meaning or information content for the reader/audience.

You also have leading questions, which are intended to lead the source into a certain pre-determined direction. These are extremely unfair. They impose a structure or context upon the source's input.

Sometimes, the question is not asked in a clear manner. Wendell Johnson has noted that it is nearly impossible to give a clear answer to an unclear question. He writes:

**"In the meaningful use of language it is a cardinal rule that the terminology of the question determines the terminology of the answer. One cannot get a clear answer to a vague question. The language of science is particularly distinguished by the fact that it centers around well-stated questions. If there is one part of a scientific experiment that is more important than any other part, it is the framing of the question that the experiment is to answer."**

Follow-up questions also can be very important, yet they often are not asked in a logical sequence. Or sometimes they cannot be asked at all in a press conference setting because another reporter has jumped in with his or her question.

A few very simple follow-up questions could make a big difference in the depth of the information you receive in return. For example, "How do you know that?" That question forces the source to give some background on where he obtained his information and also might force him to establish his credentials for making the statement at all. The reporter might be able to get an idea of other sources to check out the information simply by asking that question. He or she also might be able to evaluate the validity of the statement if the source says how he "knows it." If he simply says "because so and so said it" or because "it's common knowledge", the reporter can pursue further.

Another handy question is "what do you mean?" Too often reporters take information without clarifying it in their own minds. If it is not clear to the reporter, it will not be clear in his or her story. By asking the source "what do you mean?" you are asking for more explanation, background and clarification. You also are likely to force the source beyond the use of buzz-words, one of the banes of modern journalism.

The reporter also can move from more general or abstract to more specific questions. A GSer might call this moving from higher to lower abstractions. Prof. Kenneth Johnson has called it a "roller coaster" model for asking questions. For instance, you might ask the source "Do you think the proposed budget will cut

taxes?" After getting the response, you might ask a more specific question like "In what specific ways will taxes be cut?" Then, you could move to another more general question, such as "What programs will need to be cut?" Then, the more specific question of, "Will aid to welfare mothers be cut and by how much?" You have sought details, but also served to give them a broader context or meaning. Johnson writes:

**"Frequently questions cannot be answered because they contain high-level abstractions that cannot be reduced to lower level abstractions. If you cannot reduce them to lower level abstractions (preferably examples or descriptions), for all practical purposes you do not know what you are talking about.**

**"Unless the terms in these questions are defined in such a way that specific observations can be made or experiments performed, they are unanswerable, except in terms of opinion or belief."**

Many questions asked by journalists leave the source no other option but to give his or her opinion or belief. We as journalists must ask questions that will prompt verifiable answers more often.

**A Factual Report**

Often the reporter must scan records or reports to obtain information. A potentially serious assumption often is made when looking at those reports: that the information in them indeed is factual.

Statistics tend to impress people as factual, yet they can be used to misrepresent or manipulate many things. Most records and reports are full of stats.

The fact that reports and records are "official" and kept by "unbiased" record keepers also can lead one to believe that they are factual. However, many reports and records are full of inferences rather than facts. They also are the product of the abstracting

process of the people who reported the stats or kept the records. For example, kill counts were kept during the Vietnam War and often were used as evidence of how the struggle was going. If we killed more than the enemy, we generally were thought to be winning. However, we now know that those kill counts were artificially inflated under the orders of commanding officers. Were they fact?

Let me give another example. In the early 1990s, there was a big scare about Lyme Disease, an infectious illness, transmitted by a tick, that could cause symptoms ranging from flu-like symptoms to heart problems. The disease reportedly was reaching record levels. However, what was not pointed out was that many of the cases reported as Lyme Disease could have been caused by other viruses, etc. The blood test for the disease was not that reliable, according to several medical sources.

Another example. The Census Bureau statistics are regularly used to determine levels of aid and to assess incomes, ethnic breakdowns, etc. of the population. However, it was revealed after one of the recent surveys that many Census takers avoid poorer, crime-ridden neighborhoods. Therefore, many of the statistics on the poor in the country were underestimated.

Polls also could be considered reports. However, their methodology seldom is explained. Often the size and breakdown of the sample are not included in the report. Finally, they often ask people to give an opinion on future action or voting patterns, without taking into account that things could change by the time the action or vote is taken.

These factors prompted one ***New York Times*** executive to call a poll "news that might never happen." Yet, the Times and other news outlets across the country continue to use polling to predict results of elections or to assess public opinion.

There are several problems with the use of statistics or official records as facts in stories:

1.) The statistics can be skewed depending on the methodology used in collecting them, the individuals doing the collecting and the size of the sample, etc.

2.) The statistics often are not verifiable, without taking the word of the official record keepers.

3.) The conclusions about the records or stats often actually are inferences or interpretations drawn by the collectors or keepers of the records. Yet, they often go reported as facts.

4.) Statistics often are used without proper context. For example, are there more cases of child abuse, or have we simply become more aware of the problem and report it more often? Also, do we consider the old-fashioned paddling abuse?

5.) Do we update the statistics often enough to consider the change in circumstances that might affect them?

We have taken a look at some of the more common methods used by journalists to collect information. We have also taken a critical look at those methods and touched upon some weaknesses. I believe General Semantics offers some ways to strengthen these methods. In the final section of this chapter, I will put forth some of those ways.

**General Semantics Suggestions**

I believe the best way general semantics can help journalists is to increase awareness of the abstracting process and to help the individual become more aware of extensional vs. intensional orientations. Many journalists still think of themselves in the role of that mirror. They accept the standard methods of reporting because they are rewarded with promotions, raises, praise, etc., if they master those methods. However, they often do not check with their readers/audience to find out if they are effectively communicating.

I believe increased awareness can help on two levels: making the individual a better reporter and making the news gathering system better. Let's start with the individual.

If the individual reporter starts to realize his or her limitations of perception, he or she is more likely to take care in making their map more accurate. For example, if the reporter realizes that his nervous system filters out 95 percent of the information it receives, he should become more prone to double

check facts and seek alternative sources. He will never be able to absorb all of the information, but he can take more care in making sure what he does have is accurate and fair.

I believe the so-called extensional devices can be very helpful on an individual basis. Here are some:

**Indexing** - The device of indexing basically helps one realize that no two individuals, or any two entities, are alike. Issue 1 is not Issue 2. Black 1 is not Black 2. Politician 1 is not Politician 2.

It becomes very easy to fall into the trap of identification and lumping, especially when the main tool of your craft is our language. By its very nature, our language tends to categorize individuals into groups and assign common attributes. The issues are alike. All blacks do this. All politicians are crooked, etc. I have seen reporters fall into these traps many times. When that happens, the individual entities of each issue are not considered in enough detail by themselves. Blacks suddenly become a homogenous group, often represented by one or two outspoken individuals. Politicians are looked at with distrust as a group. These stereotypes often can be communicated in the reporter's story.

**Dating** - The principle of dating basically is a device to demonstrate that the world is in process, constantly changing. Journalists have a tendency to give closure to stories. We cover an event, perhaps do one or two follow-ups and then drop the topic. We take reality and divide it up into increments, often to fit our deadlines. If you're with a daily newspaper, reality becomes chopped up into 24 hours increments. If you're in radio, it can be in half hour segments. In TV, it can be at 6 and 10 p.m. However, reality is constantly moving and changing. Issues are constantly developing. The tax issue in 1987 is not the tax issue in 1989. The homeless problem in 1980 is not the same as in 1990. Yet, we often do one story on the topic and then pretend to have told it all. More follow-ups are needed. Reporters should constantly be checking back on the latest developments in issues.

**Multi-Ordinality** - Words or terms are multi-ordinal, meaning they have different connotations or impacts in different contexts. Many of the words and terms we used, especially those from technical, medical or governmental areas, are not put into a context for the reader. An assumption is made that the term itself tells the meaning. Actually, the term might be clear for the technician, medical researcher or zoning expert, but not for many other readers of the newspaper or viewers of the newscast. We need to use more operational definitions when using terms like Star Wars, etc.

Ken Johnson writes:

**"The degree to which communication occurs depends upon the degree to which the words of the speaker (writer) represent similar experiences to the listener (reader). Strictly speaking, words don't `mean', people `mean'."**

We also need to put more stories into context. With the concern for brevity in recent years, inadequate background often is presented for a story. Such inadequate context gives the impression that the issue or event happened in a vacuum. We need to put stories into a historical and issues-oriented context. Without such context, the meaning of the information often is lost.

We have already mentioned the use of poll results and statistics in stories. Without proper context, those numbers can be meaningless, or even more dangerously misleading. We should give readers the size of the sample in the poll, our methodology and other details so they can decide for themselves the validity of the poll results. Too often, the results are presented without such context. The ***New York Times*** perhaps does the best job of establishing such context, and it does so with a small box, inserted near the story, that can't take up more than 2-3 column inches. Surely, this much space is worth clearer communication.

A final specific type of story worth mentioning in this section is the medical story. So often, medical researchers will come up with a new finding that is encouraging, but not

conclusive. Most researchers present their findings in such a manner, since scientists tend to talk more in terms of probabilities than certainties. However, when those findings are reduced to a news story, and a headline written, the message can be misleading and can build false hope.

Cancer research might fall into this category more often than any other. My own family dealt with this problem when my mother suffered from cancer, which eventually took her life in 1988. I gained insight into what a headline, claiming a breakthrough in research, can do to a family in that situation. False hopes can be raised. Proper context, with terms of probability, is very important in stories about this disease and others.

**Fact-Inference Relationships** - Journalists like to claim they only report facts. "Tell It Like It Is" -- a phrase popularized by sportscaster Howard Cosell - is a tenet of many journalists. However, the phrase might more accurately read "Tell It Like It Seems to Me" or "Tell It Like It Seems to My Source." So much of what we deal with are inferences, conclusions, assumptions, etc. drawn from details by our sources.

For example, when Candidate A makes a claim about Candidate B, based on some details he has obtained from an inside source, do we know if his claim is a fact? No. Yet, we often report it in a fashion that can be taken as fact by our readers/audience.

When President Bush maintained in 1990 that Hussein's aggressive take-over of Kuwait merited sending in thousands of troops to the Middle East, did we know that as a fact? Again no. But, we reported it as such because the President was saying it. Very few media outlets challenged the contention.

GS emphasizes that a fact is verifiable. A fact also can change from moment to moment as circumstances that produced it change. We seldom deal with facts in this manner.

The scientific model, as presented in GS, could help journalists verify facts from assumptions and inferences. It also

could help journalists evaluate input from sources as factual or inferential.

Basically, in the model, the researcher starts with observation and exploration, moves to formulation of a hypothesis, then tests the findings of the exploration, reaches conclusions and then revises the hypothesis. The cycle is made again and again. In journalism terms, the model could include: 1. observation and collection of data and information, 2. formulation of a story angle, 3. testing or double-checking of the data and information through other sources, additional investigation, etc., 4. revision of story angle. And, the journalist would continue to explore as much as possible before deadline and also in follow-up stories. This cycle is done by some investigative reporters, but not in many other stories.

Let's take that accident story we related earlier in this chapter and apply the scientific method. We would start by observing the accident scene itself and then compare our observations with those of witnesses. We would be more diligent in asking the witnesses to describe what they saw, without overt prejudice or opinions if possible.

We then would come up with a scenario, or hypothesis, on the accident and compare that with the police reports, etc. If there was time, we might try to call people who know the victims and get more information. We would try to lobby our editors to give us sufficient space to write a complete story. Perhaps most importantly, we would insist on doing a follow-up, so details that happened after our deadline would be included in another story. In many instances, an accident like this might not get a follow-up, because the people involved were not deemed celebrities or prominent enough.

This is just one example of how scientific method could be applied to an event. In covering issues, it can be even more valuable.

These are just some of the ways general semantics could be applied to reporting methodology. A summary list appears at the end of this chapter.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution GS can make, however, cannot be translated into a specific method. It deals with an overall heightening of awareness of the reporter. Reporters should be the most curious, active truth seekers in our society.

They should thrive on asking questions and then evaluating answers. They should be in tune with the concerns and needs of their readers/audiences and go as far as they can in meeting those needs. GS can help them do that job.

**Reporting Methods List**

1. Become more aware of the abstracting process and the pitfalls that can lurk within it.

2. Be aware of dead level abstracting and avoid getting stuck in the verbal level, where words become the things.

3. Apply indexing to stories. Story 1 is not Story 2. Source 1 is not Source 2. Subject 1 is not Subject 2. Issue 1 is not Issue 2.

4. Apply dating. We do not adequately tell many stories by covering a meeting or other event and then dropping the subject. Things change. Keep up on those changes.

5. Apply the principle of multi-ordinality. Realize that there is little meaning without context. Put stories into historical and semantic context.

6. Explain methodology at times, especially when using polls and statistics in stories.

7. When questioning sources, move from lower to higher order abstracting levels and then down again. Ask for description and details and then some conclusions.

8. Ask questions like "Why do you say that?", "What do you mean?" or "How do you know that?" These questions can get the source beyond the assumption or generalization stages of abstracting.

9. Use the scientific method in exploring details of a story and in evaluating input from sources.

10. Develop extensional vs. intensional orientation.

***etc.***

**End Notes**

** Quotations from Wendell Johnson were taken from ***People In Quandaries*** (Institute of General Semantics), pgs. 52-53.

** Quotations from Kenneth Johnson were taken from ***General Semantics: An Outline Survey*** (Institute of General Semantics) pgs. 22, 27.

# Chapter 5

# Covering Diversity; Overcoming Stereotyping



**Twenty years after Kerner, the newspaper industry remains largely segregated within its pages and its staffs. All Americans should press for change, because it is they who suffer from a narrow, ingrown, sterile press.**

*les payne*

**(The Kerner Commission reported on racism and segregation in the nation, including the media industry.)**

## Chapter 5

# Covering Diversity; Overcoming Stereotyping

Diversity is a fact of modern life, yet we are still grappling on how to handle it. Too often, we fear diversity simply because we fail to understand it. We fall back on stereotypes of ethnic groups, cultures and others who are different than we are.

The news media have the power to be catalysts for positive change in many areas of our culture. Among those areas is stereotyping. Instead, the media often perpetuate stereotypes.

Many of the images of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Native Americans and people from cultures other than middle class, white America are shaped by the news media. I believe many of these images are based on stereotypes. A variety of factors promote this perpetuation of stereotypical images.

In this chapter, I will explore some of those factors and offer some general semantics alternatives that could help journalists change their role. Much of what is in this chapter also could apply to coverage of gays, feminists, foreign cultures and other diverse peoples and groups. We will concentrate primarily on race.

## Applicable Studies

A study in a 1990 issue of ***Newspaper Research Journal*** looked at coverage of so-called minorities -- primarily African-Americans -- in four major newspapers in the country. I will concentrate on some of the findings for the ***New York Times.*** The researchers found that during the 1950s the Times devoted 6 percent of its coverage of minorities to what was termed "stereotypical coverage." This type of coverage was defined as portraying African-Americans in antisocial behavior or as athletes and entertainers. During the 1980s, the Times devoted 12 percent to stereotypical coverage.

In the 1950s, the ***Times*** devoted 29 percent of its minorities coverage to "everyday life" coverage -- African-Americans involved in careers, community functions, etc. In the 1980s, 68 percent was devoted to this type of coverage.

The researchers also found that the ***Times*** devoted 65 percent of its minority coverage to civil rights issues in the 1950s, but only 20 percent in the 1980s.

The conclusion reached by the researchers was that the changes in "everyday life" coverage were positive moves. African-Americans were being portrayed as "regular people" doing "regular things" more often. However, the rise in stereotypical coverage was disturbing, as was the drop in civil rights coverage. The image conveyed was that African-Americans were engaging in more antisocial action while many civil rights problems had been solved. That reported trend was in itself a stereotype.

My own research has shown stereotypical coverage in many of the 400 hundred daily newspapers examined for this book. African-Americans most often are covered when they engage in crime or are on welfare. Photo coverage also is weighted toward portraying African-Americans as criminals, athletes or entertainers.

One could argue that this evidence is primarily anecdotal, but these are only two of many studies that indicate stereotyping is prevalent in news. This proves true not only in reporting on African Americans, but most other people from cultures other than white, middle class.

Why does stereotyping exist? I believe it can be attributed to four major factors:

1. The lack of ethnic diversity in most newsrooms.
2. The lack of sensitivity or awareness of cultures different from white, middle class.
3. The business demands and professional values of the news media.
4. The expectations and biases of major segments of the public.

The lack of diversity in the newsrooms is well documented. At the time of this writing, more than 50 percent of the newsrooms in the United States were all white. Minority makeup of newsrooms in 1993 was reported to be 10.3 percent, according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors. That was up from only about 7 percent a few years earlier. Fewer than 5 percent of newspaper executives were minorities. This was in a country that at the time had an overall minority population approaching 25 percent.

These statistics come long after the Kerner Commission study that cited a lack of minorities on news staffs. "Twenty years after Kerner, the newspaper industry remains largely segregated within its pages and its staffs," wrote Les Payne, managing editor for national and international news at ***Newsday***. "All Americans should press for change, because it is they who suffer from a narrow, ingrown sterile press."

It should be noted that while these statistics, and Payne's comments, pertain to newspapers, television and radio stations have not done much better. A variety of factors can be blamed for these imbalances, but they cannot be used as an excuse for the fact that an "old boys" network still exists in the news media -- and those old boys more often than not are white.

**Lack of Sensitivity**

In addition to the lack of proportionate numbers of "minorities" on news staffs, I believe many people in newsrooms lack sensitivity and awareness of cultures and individuals who differ from themselves.

Almost 85 percent of young journalists hired today come from journalism schools. I teach at one and believe the education obtained at such schools is essential to produce journalists who can report about our ever-changing and increasingly complex world. However, I also fear that we are creating a middle-class, professional mentality among journalists that does not include an appreciation for differences or diversity.

Consequently, many journalists don't think about contacting an African-American college professor as an expert source unless the topic of the story is about African-Americans. Many journalists don't think to check on how many incidents like the much-publicized Central Park jogger incident happen nightly in Harlem or the Bronx.

Many journalists don't solicit wedding photos from minorities, or run announcements of church dinners and community events. At a recent American Press Institute seminar, such slights were cited as one reason African-Americans do not find the mainstream news media relevant to their lives.

When we as journalists make these insensitive news judgments, we tell members of the minority community that they don't count as much. We also present stereotypical images to the white community.

Finally, too many journalists are not sufficiently aware of the incredible power of the words and images they create. For example, in the early '90s, former Milwaukee alderman Michael McGee, a subject of a "60 Minutes" report in November of 1990, formed a "militia" to protest what he felt was poor treatment of African-Americans. The group wore militia garb, and McGee said that violence is inevitable if conditions did not change. However, the group also served as a fund-raiser for African-American groups in Milwaukee's inner city.

The latter role was lost in the stories on McGee. What was emphasized was his military image and most inflammatory remarks. That emphasis transmitted a stereotype.

**Business Demands and Professional Values**

Some of the business and professional factors mentioned elsewhere in this book also play a role in producing stereotypes. Prime among these values is what I consider a misguided concept of objectivity. The old mindset of a journalist being a mirror of reality is still very prevalent. Under that mindset, journalists are discouraged from deeply becoming involved in a story for fear of bias.

But, journalists must make subjective decisions all the time during the news-gathering process. The mirror image is unrealistic and inaccurate, and can lead the journalist into simply becoming a quotation- and data-collector, without critically examining the input he or she is receiving. What happens then, when that input is stereotypical? In too many cases, it is simply passed on to the readers and viewers.

The timeliness value and short deadlines in the daily news business also can lead to perpetuation of stereotyping. When a journalist has a half hour to write a story, stereotypes simply can become more convenient. Often the journalist is not given the time to critically examine the image.

Conflict also makes good news copy. Although journalists work with facts, they frequently must use story-telling devices. Anybody who has taken Creative Writing 101 knows that the protagonist and antagonist are needed for a good dramatic story. However, when the news media slip into this structure, they put forth two-valued, either/or, black/white images that often are stereotypical and oversimplified.

Another major professional value in news making is the use of credible sources. "Credible" often is translated into official sources -- police, elected officials, etc. What happens when those sources communicate in stereotypes? Often their opinions and images are passed on to the public, and because they are in positions of authority their word is taken as the truth.

The news media often designate spokespersons for groups. Therefore, Michael McGee becomes the credible source for all African-Americans in Milwaukee. Saddam Hussein becomes the spokesman for all people of Iraq. Jesse Jackson becomes the political spokesman for all African-Americans. Yet, can one individual possibly be representative of all members of any group?

I believe the news media fall into an allness trap when they try to define the "mass." I like to call the media's desire to homogenize their audience as the "myth of the mass." What is a mass except a collection of individuals, all of whom have different nervous systems, different personal and cultural backgrounds.

Yet, the news media spend a great deal of money surveying audiences to find out what the mass public wants. That might sound very extensional, and if done correctly, the surveys can help journalists stay in touch with the public. What happens, however, is that media messages end up tailored for the majority of the respondents in the survey.

Therefore, people who do not fit into that majority -- in regard to political or social opinions or socioeconomic status -- often end up ignored or stereotyped.

The factory-like news process itself contributes to stereotyping. A news story is told through sources, who often witnesses but did not participate in an event. A reporter interviews those sources, produces the story and then passes the product on to a series of editors.

A great deal of abstracting is going on during what is often called the gatekeeping process. Stereotypes can be added or perpetuated as the map becomes further removes from the territory.

**The Public**

Any analysis of stereotyping in the news would be incomplete without a look at the public -- the receiving end of the news product. Many studies have found that the public selectively perceives the news. Individuals read and watch stories they are already interested in. They bring their own biases and stereotypes to the material.

Many do not understand the newsmaking process and therefore do not really know what they are receiving when they read the newspaper or watch a newscast. Thus, when stereotypical images are transmitted, many members of the public either agree with them or do not critically consider them.

Even if care is taken by the journalist not to stereotype, readers and viewers bring their own myths to the message. The public biases also carry weight with the financial leaders in market-driven media.

## Consequences

What are the consequences of stereotyping in the news? Marilyn Gist of the University of Washington concludes that stereotyping limits the self-images of many minority youth.

**"To the extent that it is a common practice to portray African-Americans most frequently is a negative light -criminals, drug addicts, etc. -- or as positive examples from a negative context, strong signals are being sent to African-American youth about what they can become," writes Gist. "If a youngster wishes a more positive path, which models provide data? Again for most minority subgroups, there are extremely few positive role models in the news; for African-Americans, sports and entertainment are the fare."**

Dr. Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP addressed the stereotyped images of many minority public officials: "I have the impression that some in the press would have us believe that before blacks assumed control of cities everything ran peacefully, marvelously, and only heaven could do better. There was no abuse of public trust, no robbery, thievery, thuggery, plundering or pillaging, no crooked contracts, no killing."

***USA Today*** found in a 1990 study that urban African-Americans were detained as suspects in drug arrests in numbers far exceeding their involvement. Could stereotyped images, perpetuated by the news media, influence the psyches of officers detaining those people?

Extending the discussion to world coverage, how often do images of other cultures and countries come from stereotypes news coverage? Using the Persian Gulf crisis as an example, how much of the coverage was two-valued, ethnocentric and stereotyped? As I argue in another chapter, I believe a great deal of the coverage fell into those traps. Much of the early coverage bordered on outright cheerleading for U.S. military involvement. Little critical analysis of the extremely complex political and cultural situation in that area of the world was conveyed through the news media.

Coverage of the changes in the former Soviet Union often was stereotypical. Oleg Pocheptsov of Kiev University, who spent time at the Annenberg School of Communication and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, pointed out how much of the coverage centered around Moscow and Russian leaders. Little insight was given into the Baltic Republics, Ukraine and other areas once under the flag of the USSR. Little understanding of the sizeable Muslim population was shown.

This same lack of knowledge and resulting stereotyping can be applied to coverage of gay lifestyles, one-parent families, feminist believes, the values of most Christians (who often are stereotyped as extreme right wing), Islam, Japan, etc. When the media do not understand a culture or lifestyle or issue, they fall back on formulas that often are stereotypes.

**General Semantics Alternatives**

I believe knowledge of general semantics principles could help journalists avoid stereotypes and become agents of change. I also believe many members of the media audience could benefit from knowledge of general semantics. Here are 10 general semantics alternatives:

1. I believe journalists could increase their awareness of higher order abstractions, where stereotypes often lurk, and become more conscious of the gap between the map and the territory.

2. Journalists could become more extensional through studying general semantics. Journalists should be the explorers of our culture and other cultures. They should be on the streets, talking to people and interpreting events. Surveys, no matter how sophisticated, cannot replace simply getting out into the world. Too many modern journalists are tied to their phones and offices and do not get out into the field enough.

3. Through indexing, journalists could remind themselves that no all members of any ethnic group are the same. African-American 1 is not African-American 2, etc.

4. Through dating, journalists could get more of a feeling for process and concentrate less on closure and elementalism in their stories. We tend to tell stories piecemeal and break up reality into time segments. If we are in newspaper work, reality is told in 24 hour segments. If we are in television, reality is divided into newscasts at 5, 6 and 10 p.m. Consequently, we have trouble reporting on issues that continue on and on. We don't do a good job of exploring why racial and ethnic division exists. We simply report it, often in stereotypes.

5. Using differential calculus principles, journalists could differentiate between members of a group. They also could learn to break complex topics into small, understandable parts and then integrate them into a story that tells the so-called big picture. Journalists also could use these principles to understand that diversity can exist, and a society hold together. Too often, diversity is portrayed only as a dividing element. It is portrayed as something to mock or fear, not something that adds richness to life.

6. By understanding abstracting, journalists could realize that they produce maps, not the territory. They could avoid allness and identification traps. They could learn to communicate more in terms of probability than certainty.

7. Through general semantics, journalists might become more aware of the needs of their audience. Needs often are not the same as desires. The members of the public need certain information, reported in a manner as free of stereotypes as possible, to be able to function in the world.

8. Journalists could become more aware of our language and its pitfalls. Journalists could become more aware of multiordinality and relativity of terms among individuals and cultures. More descriptive language and operational definitions could be used in stories.

9. Journalists could re-examine the concept of objectivity. Is objective reporting simply reflecting back information in an unchallenged manner, with the premise that we can actually capture the territory and the truth "out there?" Or is objective

reporting trying to produce a map as accurately and fairly as possible, even if the process calls for critical analysis and questioning? I believe many journalists must become better question askers, with emphasis on questions like "how do you know that?" or "what do you base that on?"

10. I believe journalists could break out of old, hackneyed paradigms through the use of general semantics. For several years, newspapers, for example, have redesigned their layout in an attempt to be more visually attractive and give a new look. But, redesign with the same news content is old wine in a new bottle. Content also must be made more relevant and less stereotypical.

**Summary**

I acknowledge that I have fallen into some stereotyping in this chapter. Certainly, not all journalists go about doing their work in the same manner. Not all share the same views on race and multiculturalism. However, the goal should be for all to avoid stereotyping, because through stereotypes come unfair and inaccurate maps of the world.

To quote Walter Lippmann:

**"The subtlest and most pervasive of influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And, those preoccupations, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception."**

If we continue to report news in stereotypes, we will never convey the information people need to truly understand other cultures, ethnic groups, lifestyles, etc. If people do not understand diversity, they likely will continue to fear it, and lash out at it, or run from it. We will never learn how to live together, despite our differences.

*etc.*

## End Note

** References to the ***Newspaper Research Journal*** work includes studies by Carolyn Martindale, "Coverage of Black Americans in Four Major Newspapers, 1950-1989," by Ted Pease and Guido Stempel, "Surviving to the Top: Views of Minority Newspaper Executives," and by Marilyn Gist, "Minorities in Media Imagery: A Social Cognitive Perspective on Journalistic Bias." The Summer 1990 ***Newspaper Research Journal*** was devoted entirely to the issue of minorities in media.

** The roundtable discussion about coverage of minorities took place at the American Press Institute Journalism Educators Seminar in Reston, Virginia, Oct. 12, 1990.

** Patricia Hastings, a senior lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has researched the portrayal of Jesse Jackson as a "black candidate."

** Dr. Benjamin Hooks remarks were made at as Associated Press Managing Editors forum in Dallas and reported in "Covering the Black Community," ***Editor and Publisher***, Nov. 17, 1990.

# Chapter 6

# Alternative Ways Of Covering Politics



**Better political coverage is very important to our society. If citizens do not consume political news because they consider it too boring or unrelated to their lives, they cannot make informed decisions at the polls or elsewhere. If citizens do not become better informed about how their government works, the roots of democracy itself will rot. Journalists must find some ways to bring good, informative, meaningful information about politics to people.**

*gregg hoffmann*

## Chapter 6

# Alternative Ways of Covering Politics

Covering government and politics might be one of the most important traditional jobs of journalism. Yet, such coverage has been poorly read in newspapers and often poorly watched on television. Why?

News people often blame it on an under-educated, apathetic public. Some of the blame does belong there. Americans have been increasingly cynical and unwilling to become involved in their own political system, while people in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world are willing to die for the right to vote.

All the blame cannot be put on the apathetic public, however. In fact, I believe some of the blame for that apathy, and a good part of the blame for poor readership and viewership of political coverage, must be shouldered by the news media themselves.

We simply have not covered government and politics in a way that makes them meaningful for the average reader or viewer. This failure stems from a variety of factors.

Often, those reporters who cover politics become insiders themselves. They come to understand the issues and characters involved so well that they fail to realize the person who has spent all day at the office or plant has not had the opportunity to gain that same knowledge.

When reporters become insiders, they often write their stories for those who also are on the inside. Terms are used that only insiders understand. The angles of stories are geared more towards what impact the issue or decision will have on the political fortunes of those making the decisions rather than those citizens who will be impacted by the decisions.

This is especially true of coverage of Washington politics. Much of Washington coverage becomes like an account of a soap

opera or drama involving characters who seem far-removed and remote from the average member of the public. Is it any wonder that those citizens feel detached from the process and thus have no interest, when actually they are impacted greatly?

Some journalists do not become insiders, but they fail to understand the issues well enough themselves to explain them to readers or viewers. Their accounts then become superficial.

At times, this superficiality can be encouraged by that misguided concept of objectivity we have discussed elsewhere in this book. Rather than risk the charge of being biased in a story, the journalist will stay on the surface and not explore an issue deeply enough to gain a thorough understanding. Such a journalist simply becomes a quote collector or data taker. The statements from the various political sources are not examined closely enough for validity.

Much of the political coverage falls into either/or, two-valued traps. Issues are divided into liberal/conservative, Democrat/Republican, Congress/President, etc. Actually most issues have many sides, and often divisions can occur not based on strictly party affiliation or political ideology. To fall into a two-valued orientation over-simplifies issues.

One need only look at the independent candidacy of H. Ross Perot in 1992 to see an example of the two-value orientation of the news media. Journalists did not really know how to cover a three-person race. Perot at first was considered an outsider. Later, he and the incumbent, George Bush, were portrayed as two combatants while Democratic candidate Bill Clinton was seen as an outsider. When Perot pulled out of the race, the move was reported primarily in terms of how it would affect the two-party candidates, not in terms of what it might do to the voting turnout and general election process.

Another fault of some political coverage is a failure to explore higher order abstractions and rhetoric. We will take a somewhat in-depth look at George Bush's rhetoric in the 1988 campaign later in this chapter. Terms like "thousand points of light," "L-word", etc, need to be brought down to lower order,

more meaningful levels. Political philosophies should be explored in terms of what actually will be pragmatic outcomes if this platform or philosophy is followed. How does that philosophy differ from others in real, meaningful ways? Or does it?

Finally, I believe that some political coverage goes too far in its adversarial role. That might sound like a contradiction to much of what I write in this book, but it really isn't. Adversarial journalism can go too far in designating bad guys and good guys and not exploring issues deeply enough. For instance, who are the good and bad guys in debates over the environment, poverty, etc.? Often there are simply politicians with different philosophies over what is the best way to tackle these problems.

If taken too far, adversarial journalism also can label all politicians as being the same. I believe that has contributed greatly to the public cynicism about politics. So many stories have centered on scandals, etc. that the image has become "all politicians are on the take" and fooling around with somebody else's wife. When a politician is found to be doing wrong, it is a story that must be done, but to look for those stories at the expense of explanatory, in-depth journalism can detract from the important role the media have.

**What the Readers Need**

Many of the changes in journalism in recent years have been done under the concept of providing what the readers or audience want to see in the newspaper or on the air. Overall, this concept should be applauded. For too long, too many journalists thought that their values and wants were shared by the people they were writing for or producing TV stories for. That often is not true.

However, I like to repeat the argument that it is not enough to simply ask the readers what they WANT to see or read. We also must ask them what they NEED to know to function intelligently in today's complex world. That leads to some troublesome, pragmatic problems. How do we find out what the so-called mass really needs? What type of questions do we ask?

The industry has used surveys and focus groups for years to try to ascertain what the readers or audience want to see or read. These have been somewhat effective, but have been more useful for advertising than for editorial functions. Often questions in the surveys are closed-ended, and force the readers into answering in yes or no terms. Too often the questions do not encompass enough of the concerns of the very people being surveyed.

Focus groups can lead to more in-depth input. I have been particularly impressed by some of the focus group research done by a colleague at UW-Milwaukee, George Bailey, for public radio. However, again questions can be asked. What are we asking the public? To what purposes are we using the input?

To truly blend the need for a new, "relevant" journalism with some of the traditional functions -- like the coverage of government and politics -- we must ask people what they need to know. And, we must allow them to offer their own opinions, without the confinements of too-tightly structured questions. Let's ask questions like:

What would you like to know about how the federal tax system affects your financial life?

What do you need to know about the sewer referendum and how it will affect you?

How can we help you better understand the state educational policy and what effect it will have on your children's education?

What do you want to know about local impacts of the current Administration's environmental policy?

Questions like these, structured in a way to allow open responses, could give the media a much better understanding of how to cover so-called public affairs beats. Many people simply do not understand the important link between government and their lives. If we focused questions on those areas, and asked clear questions that allowed them to elaborate, we might come away

with information that is useful to the editors and reporters, not just the advertising and circulation departments.

In recent years, too many media managers have concentrated on the latter departments and have ignored the important link between a quality news product -- that provides people with useful and meaningful information and perspective -- and the financial success of their particular medium.

While asking better questions in surveys and focus groups can help, the individual journalist can get in better touch with his or her readers or audience simply by becoming more extensional. Spend more time among the people you are serving. Understand their needs. Participate in their lives rather than simply observe them.

Over the 20-plus years I have spent in journalism, I have always been surprised at how few times I've seen professional colleagues at plays, festivals, community activities unless they are working. I believe this occurs for a couple reasons. First, many news organizations prohibit or discourage participation in such activities because of potential conflicts of interest. Most certainly this is a valid concern in certain areas. Journalists should be cautious in participating in political activities, if they also cover politics. They should not become drinking buddies with the mayor and aldermen.

However, journalists should participate in the community they cover. How else can they know it? That means they should be allowed to join groups like Rotary and others. They should be allowed to speak out on community issues, if they do not cover those issues. If potential conflicts arise, they should simply be removed from that particular story.

Another reason many journalists do not participate in the community is that they often take heat for what they produce. Journalism, by its very nature, can be a controversial line of work. A good journalist, who is doing his or her job, will be criticized at times. It is not an uncommon response to withdraw from people who are critical. What can happen is you start to hang out with people who can empathize with your situation -- which means you

start to hang out with other journalists. That can be deadly to understanding the community. You simply swap values with people who already are very similar to you. You write stories for them, rather than for your readers.

Journalists cannot be robots, who simply observe and don't partake of life. To do so produces superficial, detached, meaningless journalism. Most of the topnotch working journalists I know, the people who enjoy the field, would die for a chance to mingle with people on a regular basis. They should be allowed to do so.

In fact, if I served as a managing editor, I would insist that my reporters -- and especially editors -- spend two days a month simply out on the streets, with no specific story assignment. Their tasks simply would be to listen, observe, talk with and get to know the very people they are supposed to be serving. This extensional orientation, in my opinion, would produce journalists who better understand what their readers and audience need, as well as want. Once journalists get in better touch with their public, they can write and produce stories that are geared towards those individuals. Instead of writing an obscure story about the sewer referendum, using only governmental sources, they can write about what impact it will have on people who live on Main Street. The budget with tax cuts becomes a story about increased potholes on Maple Drive. The cutback in financing for public land acquisition means the bluffs above the Wisconsin River will have homes rather than trees the next time John Q. Public brings his kids to hike and fish. I believe people will respond to this type of journalism.

**Understanding Issues**

Another reason for incomplete, meaningless political and governmental reporting is that reporters and editors don't always know the issues well enough themselves. Many public affairs issues are rather complex. The approach in journalism has traditionally been to ignore those areas of an issue that are too complicated. "You'll only confuse or bore the reader," editors often tell reporters grappling with a complex issue.

Yet, we can do a disservice by over-simplifying complex issues. What we can do is apply some critical thinking principles to better understand those issues ourselves. The differential calculus approach can be very helpful. Rather than try to immediately understand the whole issue, break it down first into smaller, more understandable parts. We differentiate by taking apart the issue. Then, once we understand those individual parts, we integrate into the whole. We can repeat this same process in how we write our stories.

We also can understand complex issues better by having a good grasp of the fact/inference relationship. Can a certain claim be substantiated or documented through public records or other sources? Does the statistical claim on reduced unemployment agree with the stats of other organizations?

Political reporters have to especially be cautious of so-called "spin doctors." More and more politicians have people, trained in journalism, who are excellent at providing slanted information. Journalists must understand issues well enough to question the spin doctors' information.

In addition to the techniques already suggested, reporters can better understand complex issues by realizing they do not pop out of a vacuum. They develop, sometimes over years. Therefore, extensive background work -- homework -- on the histories of issues is very important. For every hour spent writing or covering an event, a good journalist should spend at least an hour or two researching the topic.

A final trap that journalists often fall into is that two-valued, either/or mindset. Issues become framed in terms of Republican vs. Democrat, liberal vs. conservative, right vs. left. Sources are sought from "both" sides of an issue or controversy. A point/counter-point format often is used in covering debates. However, by falling into this two-valued trap, we ignore the fact that an issue might have many sides to it.

This trap is very easy to fall into because our very language is two-valued. An exercise I regularly do with my students demonstrates this limitation to our language. I write words like

white, right, good, conservative on the board and tell them to write the opposites and the "middle" word. Most have no problem with the opposite. White vs. black, right vs. left, good vs. bad, conservative vs. liberal. But, the students have a much tougher time coming up with words that fall in the middle of the spectrum, between the two extremes. They have an even tougher time when I ask them to define right or conservative political terms.

Journalists who are not aware of language limitations fall into these same traps. Therefore, a third party candidate is virtually ignored. Or, so-called radical fringe groups are ignored or labeled. Issues become portrayed in an over-simplified, often divisive manner. Some will even argue that this two-valued orientation helps support the status quo in American politics because the two major parties, which really are not that different anymore, are constantly looked to as sources. Stories are told within the framework of the two-party system.

**Political Rhetoric & Images**

Higher order abstractions often are used when a communicator really doesn't want his or her audience to have a detailed understanding of a message. They can be very effective in communicating an image or a vague feeling. Politicians win elections on images and vague feelings, thus frequently use higher order abstractions through TV commercials, sound bites, speeches, etc.

I will use the 1988 election year as examples. George Bush faced an image problem going into that election. He had been labeled a wimp, who vacillated between conservative and liberal philosophies. Bush changed that image to a great degree by making liberal a dirty word. He referred to it as the "L-Word" and equated liberal philosophies with many of the social and economic problems that faced the nation.

It was an effective use of higher order abstractions, without use of operational definitions or coming down to more defined lower order abstractions. Bush never defined "liberal." He never formed a clear link between liberal philosophies and the economic

problems, drug crisis, crime rise and other difficulties facing the country.

In some well-crafted commercials, he appealed to stereotypes. He used the now infamous Willie Horton commercial to further fuel fears of whites about blacks. He played off the stereotypes of racism. The commercial also indicated that the Willie Hortons of the world were set free because of liberal philosophies, like that held by his opponent, Michael Dukakis. It was never defined what actions had led to Horton's release. Horton also was used as a symbol for all black offenders.

Bush also created an image of an environmentally-concerned candidate with his Boston Harbor commercial, in which he was filmed touring through the harbor examining polluted areas. Of course, the harbor just happened to be in Dukakis' home state. The images were strong: Bush would clean up things, and how could Dukakis clean up the country if his own state was a mess. Of course, no clear link between the pollution problem and Dukakis' record as governor was ever developed. Bush's environmental record, which never matched his rhetoric, also was never examined in any depth.

Dukakis also used higher order abstractions in his commercials. Some backfired on him. For instance, a commercial showing him riding in a tank, which was intended to show he was tough on defense, made him look like a kid with a new toy he couldn't work.

The rhetoric in the campaign also went well beyond the L-word. For instance, Bush's "thousand points of light" was never defined. What his "kinder, gentler nation" would actually be like was never pursued, even after the country invaded Panama, went to war in the Persian Gulf and experienced record murder rates.

Of course, vague, image-laden commercials have been part of American politics for decades, and vague rhetoric goes back even farther into history. But, the 1988 Presidential campaign can be used as a good case study.

In 1992, Bill Clinton ran a campaign based largely on some broad-based, higher order images. He became the candidate of

"change", without defining that change in any specific way. He also developed a generation gap. Once again, the "baby boomers" were portrayed as challenging an entrenched system, created by their elders.

The Democrats also were able to play off stereotypes of Bush and vice-president Dan Quayle to portray them as visionless men, without well-defined leadership. Probably no political figure since Richard Nixon was portrayed in a more stereotyped manner than Quayle. He did things to feed the images, such as the infamous "potatoe" incident, but overall his image of a stupid, vapid individual was unfair and stereotypical.

Republicans' "family values" issue also was based on a vague, higher order abstraction. What made up a family? What income level and race were this family? Whose values were at the base of this family?

In many ways, the issue backfired on the GOP. Many media portrayals of those who supported family values centered around stereotypes of the Christian Right. Christianity was portrayed as synonymous with intolerance in many media images. Again, this was an unfair stereotype, but one that some Republicans actually helped create.

The Ross Perot phenomenon also was interesting to observe in 1992. The media, entrenched in an either/or structure, didn't know how to portray a third candidate. Some analysts feel he was superficially attacked. Others believe he had it easy with the media. This writer would classify the media reaction to Perot as confused.

A final development in the 1992 campaign worth mentioning was the so-called "new media." The candidates bypassed the traditional "journalist as interpreter" formats and went right to the public in televised town hall meetings, talk shows, etc. This had a variety of effects. People felt they became more a part of the process. They were able to ask their own questions. However, they still received packaged, higher-order responses. Few follow-up questions were asked in the format. Few terms were defined.

The development could be looked at, however, as further proof that political journalism needs reform. People wanted to ask the questions they were interested in, and hear the responses themselves. They responded with a much better turnout at the polls than in previous years. Inter-active media likely will lead to increased use of the format in future elections. So, journalists should have learned something. They also should ask questions that connect with what people need to know.

Higher order abstracting does not stop at Presidential politics. Candidates at all levels are using such techniques. Again, we will take one as an example. In 1988, Herb Kohl, a millionaire heir to a grocery empire and then owner of the Milwaukee Bucks' pro basketball franchise, ran for the Senate. Kohl used his own, ample resources to buy extensive TV air time and basically produce commercials that said nothing specific. Laden with visuals of Kohl shaking hands and looking concerned, the commercials strengthened the image of a man who could afford to be independent and would be "nobody's Senator but yours." No place in these commercials did potential voters learn anything about the political philosophies, proposed programs or even past political support of Kohl, who was a newcomer to the political arena. The commercials obviously worked well, since Kohl was elected.

Do such higher order images and rhetoric really damage the political process? I believe they do. Voters go to the polls knowing little or nothing about the records and stances of candidates on the issues. They make decisions based on vague, ill-defined images or concepts they have of the candidates. Then, when the candidate does not live up to that vague image once he or she is in office, the citizens become disillusioned. They might stop voting entirely or take a cynical stance toward the democratic process. I believe that the disillusionment and apathy among voters are caused, in part, by the fact that they are not allowed to really participate in the process in any meaningful way.

What can the media do to change this? Only so much, but they could have some impact. First, journalists should ask

politicians to define their terms. What did George Bush mean by liberal? How would his liberal vote or what stance would they take on issues, and how has it hurt the country? From where were his thousand points of light emanating, and what specifically made them glow?

Journalists also can do more in-depth analysis of commercials, and be more aggressively critical of those that deceive or play off unfair stereotypes. Willie Horton commercials are destructive to race relations beyond just the election. We would never want to ban their running, because that right is protected by the Constitution, but we could better exercise our rights of criticizing the images portrayed in such spots.

TV journalists and photographers should be very wary of so-called photo-ops. They often are used to only manipulate the media or to simply get the candidate's mug on the 6 p.m. news. They do very little for the substance of campaigns or political discourse.

Finally, journalists should break out of the traditional role of objective observers and collectors of information to examine the gaps between the higher order images being put forth in political rhetoric and what really seems to be happening. Separate the map from the myth; explore the territory and try to create a more accurate map. We will wrap up this chapter with a review of general semantics principles, which I think could help.

**Applicable GS Principles**

Several general semantics/critical thinking principles could be helpful for media covering politics. First, once again, is to develop an extensional orientation, to simply check the map (what is being portrayed or put forth by politicos and their spin doctors) with what really seems to be happening in society. Political journalists must remain extensional with the general public. They must keep in touch with how political decisions affect citizens. They must not become too intensional within the political system itself and end up communicating primarily for the decision-makers rather than those affected by the decisions.

Application of differential calculus principles again can be helpful, especially when dealing with rather complex political issues. The best way for a journalist to approach a complex issue is to break it down into its individual components and try to reach an understanding of those components. Then, the individual components can be integrated into a whole. This same process can be followed when telling or writing the story for the audience. Often the tendency is to try to over-simplify issues for the public. That does a disservice. A better job of clearly explaining complex issues must be done.

Several extensional devices -- indexing, dating, etc. -- can be helpful in political reporting as well as other areas of journalism. A reporter must not approach issues as if they are all alike, or politicians as if they are all crooked or alike in other ways. Issue 1 is not Issue 2. Politician 1 is not Politician 2.

Issues also are constantly changing as circumstances in the territory change. Journalists must try to avoid reporting issues in a static manner, as if we have said it all in one story. We must to a more astute job of keeping up with the changing nature of political issues and relate those changes to the public. Issue 1988 is not Issue 1990.

Politicians also change over time. They may change their viewpoints on certain issues or modify their political agenda. Journalists should be wary of political chameleons, but we also must understand that Politician 1988 need not be Politician 1990. We should try to understand why a politician seems to have changed philosophies, and explain those reasons for the changes to our audience.

Analysis of political rhetoric is a skill that journalists will need to improve. We must become more aware of the levels of abstracting in our language. We must realize that a word is not the thing, and that a word might not mean the same thing for different individuals. We cannot let clever politicians use the language to create abstract images that might have little, if any, foundation in the truth. We must challenge politicians to define their terms, or

give practical examples when they start to use vague terms, such as kinder and gentler nation, liberal, conservative, etc.

These same kind of analyses and challenges should be mounted against abstract visuals, which create images that have little or no foundation in the truth. Those higher order images should be compared to the actual records and actions of the politician. Underlying assumptions of the messages, fallacies, information that is missing on purpose, and jumps in logic, should be pointed out when they appear in political commercials, speeches, etc.

To do this, a journalist will need some background in logic and rhetorical analysis. I believe news programs in mass communication schools should offer such courses as electives, if not required courses. I also believe that an understanding of the abstracting process, as taught through general semantics, can be extremely helpful.

Last, but certainly not least, journalists need to learn how to ask better questions of politicians. Follow-up questions can be as important as the original questions. For example, when a politician claims his bill will do this or that, the journalist can ask:

-- How will the bill accomplish that?

-- On what do you base your projection since the bill is not yet law?

-- How much research has your office done on this subject?

-- What are other possible effects of the bill?

Of course, such in-depth questions are not easy to ask in today's world of press conferences and pack journalism. But, we should ask them whenever possible, and as often as possible, try to ask them away from the pack. As one crafty veteran journalist in Wisconsin once told me, "I ask my best questions after the TV lights have gone off."

There are some good guides on critical questioning available. They are listed in the bibliography section of this book.

**Better Coverage Is Important**

Better political coverage is very important to our society. If citizens do not consume political news because they consider it too boring or unrelated to their lives, they cannot make informed decisions at the polls or elsewhere. If citizens do not become better informed about how their government works, the roots of democracy itself will rot. Journalists must find some ways to bring good, informative, meaningful information about politics to people.

I believe this can be done by doing more analysis rather than less. Citizens need analysis, especially if it can be shown that an issue is important to their lives. I also believe we can provide better coverage simply by changing who we produce our stories for. We must write and report for those who are affected by the political decisions rather than those who make the decisions. I believe we also must cut through the abstract rhetoric that turns off and confuses citizens.

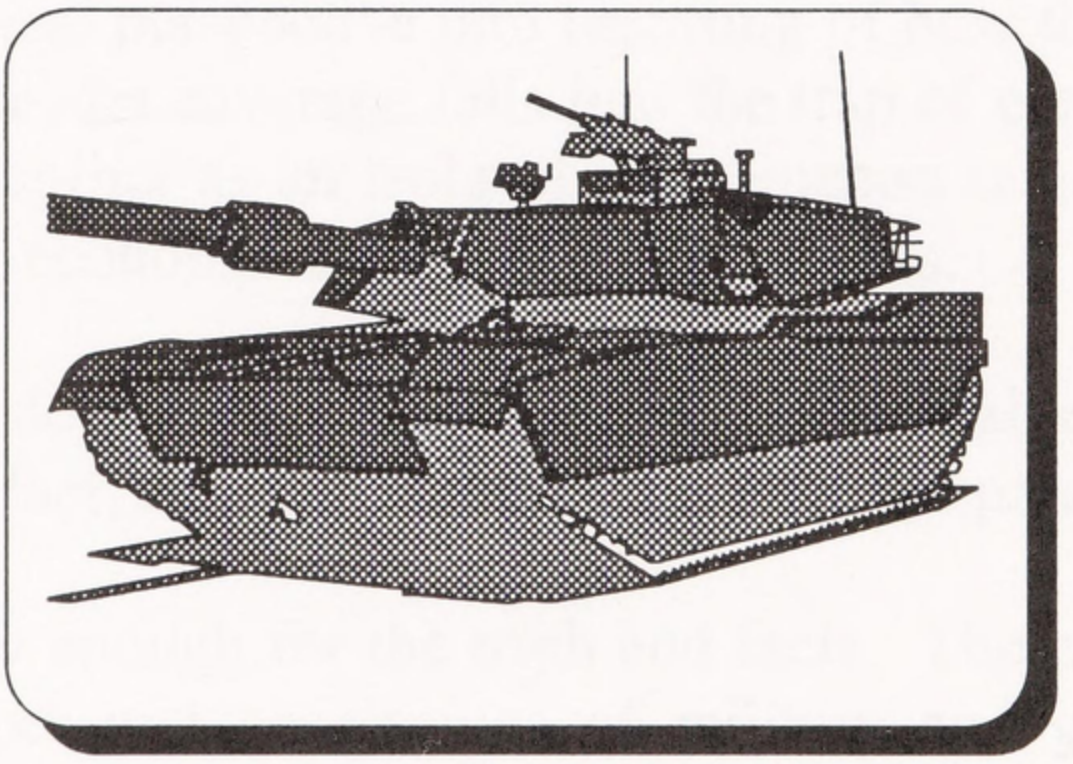
I also believe that under the current media structure, this job belongs primarily to print journalists. TV, with a few exceptions, simply will not devote the time to such in-depth analysis. An analytical story does not provide enough visuals or action for the medium. Print journalists should become the interpreters and analysts of our political system. We should change our theory and mindsets on objectivity. We can probe beyond the role of the detached observer. If we do that probing, we can use general semantics principles to still produce a fair story that gets as close to the truth as possible. The truth cannot always be found in simply balancing off one source against another. It cannot always be found in simply collecting quotes.

Improved political reporting -- that captivates and informs the public -- is one of four important areas of journalism that must be improved, in my opinion. Environmental reporting, about times of conflict and reporting about multiculturalism without stereotypes are the other three. If we do not make these improvements, I believe our society will suffer.

*etc.*

# Chapter 7

# Media During Times Of Conflict





**When truth is the first casualty of war, we all become victims.**

## Chapter 7

# Media During Times of Conflict

At no time is the need for critical thinking and analysis more acute than during times of conflict -- wartime and international crisis. When thousands of men and women are being asked to "demonstrate their patriotism" by possibly giving their lives, the reasons given by their governmental leaders should be examined in depth and questioned.

Yet, critical thinking and analysis often take a back seat to emotionalism and flag rallying jingoism. Higher order abstractions and myths are tossed about. As the old saying goes, "truth often is the first casualty of war."

This chapter will primarily examine the 1990-91 Persian Gulf crisis, but will also touch on the 1990 invasion of Panama by U.S. forces and the Vietnam War. My main points are that during times of conflict, the media fail:

** To put historical perspective into reporting of how the conflicts develop. Most media coverage falls into the trap of elementalism, looking at the conflict as an isolated phenomenon rather than the climax of social, economic and other developments.

** To challenge dominant paradigms of governmental leaders until it is too late. In fact, the media often promote those paradigms.

** To dig deeply enough for the truth and facts. The media often rely on inferences and conclusions of military and government officials and do not challenge the underlying assumptions of those inferences and conclusions.

** To explore higher order rhetoric and propaganda of war.

** To take anti-war protestors seriously. Those who challenge the dominant paradigms often are ignored, isolated or denigrated.

**Persian Gulf Buildup**

An examination of coverage of the Iraq-Kuwait crisis before Aug. 2, 1990, when Saddam Hussein's troops invaded, shows few, if any, stories that analyze the U.S. relations with Iraq and virtually no stories about the traditional border dispute between the Iraqis and Kuwaitis. One must turn to so-called "alternative publications" for some background.

For example, the ***Village Voice*** pointed out that the Reagan Administration, in apparent violation of federal law, engaged in a massive effort to supply arms and military supplies to the regime of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. The ***Voice*** also reported that while there is no evidence that then Vice-President George Bush knew directly of the covert efforts to arm Saddam, Bush was a behind-the scenes proponent of a broader policy that tilted U.S. policy toward Iraq.

During the same time frame, Sarkis Soghanalism, a Miami-based arms dealer helped former Nixon Administration officials sell military uniforms and arms to Iraq. Some of the supplies were sold through a purportedly independent trade organization, called the U.S. Iraqi Business Forum. On Nov. 14, 1987, the group held a symposium to encourage American companies to expand their trade with Iraq.

According to the ***Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,*** between 1981 and 1988, Iraq purchased an estimated $46.7 billion worth of arms and military equipment from foreign suppliers, the largest accumulation ever of modern weapons by a Third World country. These were during the Reagan years, with George Bush, the man who later would lead the U.S. to war, as vice-president.

These facts, and many others like them, went virtually unreported in the mainstream media. The ***New York Times*** and a few other major newspapers ran some stories about concerns with Saddam's arms buildup.

On Feb. 10, 1990, a story by Alan Cowell, quoted a report by a group called Human Rights Watch:

**"Despite Iraq's use of chemical weapons and its human rights abuses, the United States resumed credit guarantees to Iraq for the purchase of American agricultural products.**

**"The Bush Administration has given only lukewarm support to Western efforts to condemn Iraqi abuses before the U.N. Human Rights Commission," it said. However, those stories were picked up by very few other media.**

**Kuwait-Iraq Relationship**

Another aspect of the pre-invasion period that went under-covered was the relationship between Kuwait and Iraq leadership. The border between the two countries had long been a point of dispute, since the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. For years, Iraq also had complained about slant drilling by the Kuwaitis that drained oil fields on the Iraqi side of the border.

During the Iran-Iraq war, the Kuwaitis had promised to pay for protection by Saddam Hussein's forces. But, after the war, when a war-poor Iraq attempted to collect, Kuwait refused to pay. After that episode, relations between the two countries deteriorated even further. Hussein talked about some type of invasion as early as spring, 1990. But, the Bush Administration maintained a "neutral" stance on the dispute. This period was virtually ignored by the mainstream media.

Kuwait's own human rights violations and that country's tremendous financial influence also went under-covered. The ruling al-Sabah family had a long history of questionable human rights and had virtually abandoned attempts at a democratic government. Yet, their record was ignored by both the Administration and the media. Why? Kuwait's tremendous financial influence likely was a factor. One of the few mainstream publications to explore this influence was ***Business Week***. On Oct. 1, the magazine ran a story "Kuwait Puts Its $100 Billion War Chest to Work." In the story, it was reported that Kuwait had full

ownership of Santa Fe International, Occidental Geothermal and the Atlanta Hilton in the U.S., several holdings worth billions in Europe and percentages of other companies world wide. The total conservatively was estimated at more than $80 billion. Again, that story did not get picked up by many mainstream media outlets. ***Business Week*** ran it, but two months after the troop buildup had started in the Gulf.

**The Invasion**

When Iraqi forces went into Kuwait, the media did what they do best -- respond to a breaking news story. However, they followed tradition by relying on official sources. For example, Bush justified the immediate sending of troops to the Gulf because intelligence reports showed that Hussein planned on also moving into Saudi Arabia. However, at least one report contended that aerial photos showed no such massing. Jean Heller of the ***St. Petersburg Times*** wrote that satellite photos taken of Kuwait the same day Bush addressed Congress failed to back up his claim of an imminent Iraq invasion. In fact, there was no sign of a massive Iraqi troop buildup ready to invade Saudi Arabia. The national media chose to ignore Heller's story. ***St. Petersburg Times*** editors approached the Associated Press twice about running the story on the wire, but to no avail. The Scripps-Howard news service, of which the Times is a member, also refused.

The tone of the coverage from Aug. 2 until Nov. 8 was that of saber-rattling and patriotic response. Every local station and paper covered their local units being called up. The media jumped on Bush's characterization of Saddam as another Hitler and the Iraqi invasion as naked aggression. They extensively reported atrocities that were being performed by the Iraqis in Kuwait.

The ***New Republic*** ran a cover picture of Saddam with his mustache trimmed to make him look more like Hitler. The ***New York Post*** ran a front page headline that read "Whack Iraq."

"Journalists got so carried away by the blare of the bugles that instead of being honest, skeptical brokers of information,

many fell into the unseemly role of Pentagon cheerleader," wrote author/journalist Mark Hertsgaard.

"The journalistic saber-rattling got so out of hand that ABC's Sam Donaldson lambasted his colleagues on the air for what he called the `war psychosis,' and suggested that the gung-ho types put down their notepads and join the grunts in the front line.

"Dissent from official policy was all but non-existent. The media did, however, rediscover the United Nations. For years, the U.N. had been regarded as a backwater beat and lambasted on Op-Ed pages as a collection of anti-American troublemakers.

"For example, when the UN voted 75-20 to condemn the US December 1989 invasion of Panama as a `flagrant violation of international law,' the NBC Nightly News ignored the vote entirely while CBS lavished a full 10 seconds on it. But now, the UN was suddenly churning out resolutions favored by American policymakers. It was rewarded with decorous front page coverage and tirelessly praised by pundits and politicians alike for its new-found strength and maturity."

What went virtually unreported was the arm-twisting by the US as the Bush Administration built its coalition. ***The Guardian***, a London-based publication, did take a look at the Bush Administration's lobbying with a critical eye. ***The Guardian*** reported that a deal was struck with the Soviet Union to support Mikhail Gorbachev's declining political situation if the Soviets voted for the UN resolution authorizing force.

The Arab allies, which traditionally were countries that sided with rich segments of the Arab world against the poor, were bought through forgiveness of debts and other financial incentives. Washington wrote-off a $7 billion Egyptian debt. Saudi Arabia wrote off another $4 billion. ***The Guardian*** estimated that in all $14 billion in incentives was provided for Arab countries that allied with the U.S.

**Examination Period**

After Bush called up a second wave of troops on Nov. 8, 1990, the media started to take more notice. In Milwaukee,

considerable coverage was given to a threatened lawsuit, to be filed by Congressman Jim Moody and others, seeking to require the President to ask Congress before going to war. Polls were taken, most of which showed up to 71 percent opposed going to war. (These polls completely reversed once war did break out.)

Coverage also was given to the growing anti-war movement. Much of the coverage was balanced during this period, although there were numerous cases of stereotyping. That would become more prevalent once war did break out, and will be dealt with later in this chapter.

Hertsgaard wrote, "The single most surprising thing about recent news coverage of the Persian Gulf crisis is how much criticism of Bush administration policy it has featured. In the two weeks following Thanksgiving, the wisdom of making war on Iraq was disputed virtually every night on network television newscasts, and again the next day on the front page of newspapers. Americans were hearing that such a war would be very, very bloody, and furthermore, that the better course of action would be to give international economic sanctions more time to work."

This period of critical examination lasted through the Congressional debate. After that weekend, the tone of the coverage returned to "supporting the troops" and the President. As one senator said, "the debate is over." Little attention was given to the closeness of the vote, especially in the Senate. Few questioned if Bush had received enough of a mandate to send people to war.

This shift in media coverage comes as little surprise. The industry has been more worried about what the market is saying for years. When that market showed support, the media coverage also shifted. The media also were playing their usual role, as a mouthpiece for officials.

As Hertsgaard wrote, "Their (news executives) practice of framing the news according to what the movers and shakers of official Washington are saying, rather than thinking through the relevant issues for themselves, holds the national political dialogue hostage to the debate within the Washington policy elite. If

Vietnam teaches us anything, it is how disastrously misguided the elite debate can be."

**We're At War**

Once the bombing started, all rational debate over the merits of the war seemed to cease. TV covered the immediacy of the war, showing tracer rounds in the black of the night as US bombers blasted Baghdad. The public received report after report about the so-called smart weapons and how precise they were. (Only after the war did reports about the imprecision come out.) TV journalists talked about the "eery beauty" of the bombing.

The media complained about the press pools and restrictions -- the strictest of any war in history. The Pentagon obviously had learned that films and reports of death and destruction do not "sell" wars to the public. Instead, the media were provided aerial tapes of bombs going through air shafts and blowing up seemingly unoccupied bridges and buildings.

While the media complained, few really tried to challenge the rules and explore deeper. As the San Francisco Examiner reported, "A colonel commanding a US air base in the gulf last week decided it was time to `honor' the pool reporters who had been attached to his fighter-bomber squadrons since the day the war broke out.

"He produced for each of them a small American flag that had been carried in the cockpits of the very first US jets to bomb Baghdad. `You are warriors too,' he told the journalists as he handed them their flags.

"The incident said a lot about the new cozy, damaging relationship between reporters and the military in the gulf war. The military preparation for handling this war has been so thorough, and journalists have become so dependent on information dispensed by Western military authorities in Saudi Arabia that reporters have found themselves trapped.

"Journalists are now talking of Iraq as `the enemy' as if they themselves have gone to war -- which, in a sense, they have."

When reporters like Peter Arnett and others did provide alternatives to mainstream coverage, they were criticized or

labeled as propagandists for the Iraqis. Perhaps the best example of this came when a plant that the Iraqis claimed was a "baby milk" plant was bombed. Arnett, being more extensional than any reporter, toured the plant and said "from what he could tell it looked like a baby formula plant." He did not say it "was" a plant only that it looked like one from what he was allowed to see. Reporters and others criticized Arnett after US officials said the plant was a front for military activities. Yet, Nestles and others in the formula industry said they knew that the plant at least at one time was indeed used to produce formula.

The paradigm of the mainstream media could be seen when nine news organizations sued, challenging the press restrictions. ***Harpers*** was the closest to a mainstream news organization. The others would be classified as "alternative media."

As Robin Anderson wrote in ***The Guardian***, "Only certain journalists will be included in the pools, and in various other ways the military has given preferential treatment to select news organizations. It has paid travel expenses `for local media with the objective of promoting morale-boosting coverage of war preparations' and has intervened with Saudi government officials to expedite visas and transit papers for some correspondents `anticipated to favor the US military.' Journalists who have filed unfavorable reports have been blacklisted.

"It is not surprising then that given special treatment, no television network or major daily paper, has joined the suit. Indeed, neither the ***Washington Post*** nor the ***New York Times***, or any major TV broadcast carried a report about the suit. Their own legitimacy would be called into question if the public knew the news had been `fixed'."

War always produces heroes. Nobody came out looking better during the actual conflict that H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the four-star general in command of Operation Desert Shield. "Stormin' Norman" handled the press conferences with a mixture of force, charm and seeming candidness. He became a media idol. But, Norman had a rather checkered past that went unreported by the mainstream media. ***The Progressive*** reported in January,

1991, that some who served under Schwarzkopf in Vietnam called him "The Bloody Butcher." Others who were involved in the Grenada invasion in 1983 reported that what occurred "was a case study in military incompetence and poor execution." None of these facts were reported as Schwarzkopf was built into a hero.

The Schwarzkopf case is just one example of image building through use of higher order abstractions. Additional images and the higher order language of the war will be explored in a separate area of this chapter.

**Returning Home**

While the media became wrapped up in wartime fervor, they also became immersed in the euphoria over the return of the troops. Most certainly, the tearful yet joyous return of the men and women from the Gulf created many human interest stories. Those were definitely worth covering. However, taking a backseat to the scenes of embraces was the fact that there was still a mess in Iraq and Kuwait.

Atrocities by the Kuwaiti regime, once it was back in power, went under-reported. While the Kurds' rebellion and suppression in northern Iraq received considerable media attention, the sorry state of Baghdad and other bomb-destroyed parts of Iraq went virtually uncovered. One had to ask if the media were being steered away from the scenes by the military. When Amnesty International decried the destruction, and even Pentagon officials admitted the damage had been more extensive than originally reported, the stories were not given major play in many news outlets.

Even when Jeffrey Zahn, one of the POWs who had been paraded in front of Iraqi TV, said he had second thoughts about the war, many outlets minimized coverage. The mainstream paradigm obviously was "we got the job done; now welcome home the troops." Once again, the media were trapped within that paradigm and did not do enough critical analysis of what had been -- or had not been -- accomplished by the war.

**Hegemony**

The reasons for the lack of critical challenges to the dominant paradigms have been addressed earlier in this book. Market considerations, learned cultural values, lack of access to alternative sources, pack journalism and its effects on critical question asking and other factors led to a hegemony among much of the media coverage. The clever, and borderline manipulative, use of higher order abstractions -- manufactured images and rhetoric -- also played a role. For example, did anybody ever define what Bush's "New World Order" would be like.

Noam Chomsky wrote in the ***Manchester Guardian***, "In Bush's New World Order, the Third World domains must still be controlled, sometimes by force. This task has been the responsibility of the United States, but with its relative economic decline, the burden becomes harder to shoulder. One reaction is that the U.S. must persist in its historic task, while others pay the bills ....The vision of the future helps illuminate Washington's reaction to the Gulf crisis. It implies that the U.S. must continue to enforce the obedience (called order or stability in the doctrinal system), with the support of other industrial powers. Riches funnelled by the oil producing monarchies will help prop up the troubled economies of the guardians of order. To be sure, force is only a last resort. It is more cost effective to use the IMF than the Marines or the CIA if possible, but it is not always possible.

"For the traditional victims...the New World Order is not likely to be an improvement on the old, and the prospects for the citizens of the mercenary states are also less than attractive, if they permit this scenario to unfold."

The language used during and after the war provided a study in linguistic abstracting. It was purposively vague and antiseptic. Edward Herman published a "Doublespeak Appendix" in ***Z Magazine***. Here are a few examples:

**Collateral Damage** - Civilian casualties and non-military related property destruction from artillery, rockets and bombs that are alleged by military authorities to be unintended and regrettable,

even if inevitable and large scale based on ordnance volume, accuracy levels and statistical probabilities.

**Desert Shield** - The label for the first phase of the US attack on Iraq, designed to convey the false impression that the US move of forces into the area was for defensive purposes only.

**Desert Storm** - The label for the open war against Iraq, designed to suggest that impersonal forces rather than human agencies were leveling the Third World country.

**Smart Bombs** - Bombs intelligent enough to fall only on military targets and to avoid civilians and civilian structures.

**Sorties** - A bombing mission by an aircraft that carries numerous bombs which explode and dispense death-dealing metal fragments and materials that burn human flesh.

Herman also included a definition of the adversary press: one that fails to serve as a pure and unquestioning press agent and cheerleader for the government and corporate establishment. His definition might go a tad overboard, but there certainly were too few members of the press who did question enough.

George Lakoff, a University of California linguist, wrote a piece in the ***East Bay Express*** that explored the use of metaphors during the war. "Metaphors can kill," Lakoff started his article. "Secretary of State Baker sees Saddam as `sitting on our economic lifeline.' President Bush sees him as having a stranglehold on our economy. General Schwarzkopf characterizes the occupation of Kuwait as a `rape.' The President says that the US is in the Gulf `to protect freedom, protect our future and protect the innocent'." Metaphors are regularly used in communication of all kinds, but when they are so vague -- so high in the order of abstraction -- that they can be used to manipulate they can be very dangerous. As Lakoff wrote, "The use of a metaphor, however, becomes pernicious when it hides realities in a harmful way."

Lakoff identified several metaphors that were used to describe the Gulf war:

**State-As-Person** - People are replaced by states in this metaphor. Therefore, Iraq and Saddam Hussein is bombed, not more than 100,000 people.

**Just War** - A hero goes to war to rescue the victim of a villain. The US and allies go to war to rescue Kuwait from Saddam.

**Competitive Game** - Sports metaphors frequently are used to describe war strategies, etc. Schwarzkopf talked about his strategy as an "end around." Bush talked about a frontal attack and "kicking some ass", a frequent sports saying. "This metaphor is taken very seriously," wrote Lakoff. "There is a long tradition in the West of training military officers in team sports and chess. The military is trained to win."

**Irrational villain** - Saddam was characterized as a mad man, as irrational. This fits the classic villain metaphor, in which the villain can be cunning or clever but cannot be rational.

These and other stereotypes and metaphors were transmitted through TV tapes, newspaper photos and the language used in various news reports. They were seldom challenged, seldom examined to see if they really fit the territory. As Lakoff wrote, "Metaphors can kill, and sometimes the first victim is truth."

Stereotyping, metaphors and unchallenged paradigms were not exclusive to the Persian Gulf War. They have been part of war for as long as man has gone to war and communicated about it. They have been a big part of modern war, which often is covered by modern media. We will take a brief look at two other "recent conflicts" -- the Panama invasion and Vietnam.

**Panama**

The invasion of Panama, under the expressed purpose of nabbing drug czar Manuel Noriega, was a blip on the screen as wars go. But, it might have been a warm-up for the Gulf war in that the media were manipulated in much the same way. Overall, reports on the invasion were uncritical and bordered on cheerleading. The paradigms were set by the Bush Administration and the military. The few critical reports came out only after the conflict.

The media once again had its villain in Noriega. Reported to be a double-crosser, who once helped the U.S. Noriega became portrayed as a despicable character -- one who made it worth invading a country and killing hundreds or thousands of innocents. Clifford Krause of the ***New York Times*** wrote that Noriega "began as a CIA asset but fell afoul of Washington over his involvement in drug and arms trafficking." ABC's Peter Jennings reported, "Let's remember that the United States was very close to Mr. Noriega before the whole question of drugs came up." Actually, US intelligence asserted that Noriega was involved with drugs in the early 1970s, but then CIA-director George Bush made sure the relationship continued.

Noriega was portrayed as slimy, low-life. ABC's Peter Jennings called Noriega "one of the more odious creatures with whom the United States has had a relationship." Dan Rather of CBS said Noriega was "at the top of the list of the world's drug thieves and scums."

How about this description of a meeting between Noriega and Bush: "The two intelligence chiefs contrasted in style and substance: Bush was lanky and refined, raised by a Brahmin New England family. He towered over the five-foot-five inch Noriega. Noriega was mean-streets Mestizo, the bastard son of his father's domestic. Noriega offered his usual damp. limp handshake to Bush's firm grip."

These and other subjective descriptions of Noriega and his activities made him a very easy target for disdain, just like Saddam

Hussein would become later. Therefore, a move to eradicate him met with few questions.

Reports of the invasion were that it was a precision affair, meeting little resistance. Only after hours and days went on, with no Noriega, did the media start to report casualties, and even then only US casualties were emphasized. CBS's Kathleen Sullivan talked about the "nine killed, more than 50 wounded" and asked "How long can this fighting go on?" Dan Rather talked about "our fallen heroes." Later reports showed that 50 Panamanian civilians were killed to every US casualty.

TV journalists personalized the conflict and made no attempt at fairness in their language. Tom Brokaw of NBC said on day one, "We haven't got [Noriega] yet." CNN anchor Mary Anne Loughlin asked a former CIA official, "Noriega has stayed one step ahead of US. Do you think WE'LL be able to find him?" The paradigm quickly became us vs. Noriega, with little attention being made to the killing of innocent civilians. Print journalists did venture from the theme a little, but still did not print much about the actual toll of the conflict until after it was over.

Once Noriega was captured, the new Panamanian leadership was portrayed as somewhat weak but honest. Actually, many also had drug ties. The ***Oakland Tribune's*** Jonathan Marshall was one of the few journalists to pursue this fact. Marshall reported that President Guillermo Endara was a wealthy corporate attorney who served several companies run by Carlos Eleta, a known drug importer. Other officials also were linked with drugs, but Marshall's reports were not carried by most major media.

Perhaps most disturbing about the media coverage of Panama and the Gulf war was the media should have learned to avoid the traps from their experience in Vietnam.

**Vietnam**

Coverage of the Vietnam conflict followed much the same pattern as coverage of Panama and the Gulf War. The main difference was that Vietnam was the longest war in U.S. history

while Panama lasted a few days and the Gulf War a few weeks, with the ground war often referred to as the "100 Hour War."

During Vietnam, the conflict lasted long enough that significant segments of the U.S. population started to question it. The media responded to that shift and took a critical look at the conflict. But, that critical look came only after years of cheerleading and lack of questioning of the American leaders who consistently escalated the conflict.

In the early years of Vietnam, the media primarily relied on the Kennedy and Johnson Administration spokesmen and Pentagon sources. The media were content to rely on these official sources, often basically re-doing Pentagon press releases. Only after reporters started to get out of Saigon, and became extensional enough to actually go into the battlefields, did the American public receive the truth about what was going on. As more and more people joined the anti-war movement, it could no longer be ignored by either the media or government. Credibility was finally gained, but this took years. The Panama and Gulf conflicts did not last long enough to even get to this stage of inquiry and examination.

Before the Vietnam War got to this stage, much of the coverage was decidedly one-sided, ethnocentric and myth-filled. For example, many felt that U.S. troops were fighting with "one arm tied behind their backs," a myth that George Bush invoked again during the Gulf War. Anti-war protestors weakened the resolve of the troops and politicians did not give them the resources to fight were the paradigms reported.

While 55,000 U.S. troops died in Vietnam, just under 2 million Vietnamese died. That is hardly the work of a military that had its "arms tied." As the Center for Studies in Communication reported during the Gulf conflict, "What this (the myth of Vietnam) suggests is that the ideological proposition `we fought the war with one hand behind our backs' has induced us to rewrite our own history. The devastation inflicted upon the Vietnamese has been shrunk drastically so that it fits more easily with the image of an irresolute, half-hearted military campaign, made

impotent by the objections of the anti-war movement. The news media, by reporting the Bush (and Reagan) view rather than appraising the actual facts, are directly culpable for this rewriting of history."

Vietnam also was seen as a "just war" in its early years. It was a war to fight Communism. It was a war to stem the domino effect which eventually could reach our own West Coast. Of course, these images, which readily were transmitted by an uncritical media, were also myths.

The Vietnamese were stereotyped as demons and villains. The American public was told that every effort was being made to hold down civilian casualties while actually blanket bombing was going on.

After the media took a more critical view of the conflict, they came in for harsh criticism by Nixon officials and others. But, their credibility and popularity among the general public increased. People liked being told the truth by somebody. They admired the press for bringing them information they found useful in making important decisions. Again, this shift came only after years of conflict, and relative unquestioning media coverage.

**Anti-War Protestors**

In Vietnam, Panama and the Gulf War, anti-war protestors were ignored and stereotyped by the media. Again, the Vietnam conflict lasted long enough, and the anti-war movement became large enough, that the media shifted its coverage. But, in the early stages, the media coverage was either non-existent or stereotypical. As an example, I will digest a work I did for a masters degree in 1985 which concentrated on the anti-war movement at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a campus which got the reputation as one of the more "radical" in the nation. In the early years of Vietnam, anti-war protestors received little news coverage. As they became more vocal, and resorted to more flamboyant and at times violent methods of protest, they were labeled and stereotyped. A look at the language of coverage during that time period will see the words radicals, hippies, leftists,

terrorists, Communists, etc. frequently used. Often emphasis in the coverage was on the protestors' dress or hygiene (or a claimed lack of it). Photo and TV coverage often concentrated on the most "radical" looking individuals. They became the spokesmen and examples of the anti-war movement. Of course, this ignored the fact that protestors came in all shapes and sizes, with a variety of viewpoints. Protestor 1 was not necessarily Protestor 2.

Demonstrations often were reported as police news. The political viewpoints of the protestors seldom were explored in any depth or examined for possible validity. Police officials were usually quoted and used as sources for crowd estimates, claims of violent behavior, etc. The "official response" to the demonstrations often was played high in each story.

This coverage did switch as the conflict continued, and more and more people joined the anti-war movement. For years after the war, press critics, academics and even media study groups, often commissioned by the industry itself, found that much of the coverage had been stereotypical and slanted toward the official viewpoint. One would think the media had learned a lesson from Vietnam.

However, the lesson apparently did not stick because during Panama and the Gulf War, the anti-war demonstrators were again ignored or stereotyped. Frequent references were made to "60s type demonstrators." Again, the minority of demonstrators who resorted to violence or vandalism received the most coverage. The messages of the anti-war movement were given secondary coverage to the dominant paradigm.

Let me give just a couple examples from a piece I wrote for the ***Shepherd Express***, a Milwaukee alternative newspaper, on Jan. 10, 1991:

**The rapidly growing anti-war movement has been poorly covered. Unfortunately, the Milwaukee media can provide two prime examples of such poor coverage. For example almost 2,000 people marched and attended an anti-war rally on Saturday, Dec. 8. However, the *Journal's***

**coverage estimated the crowd at 750, in large part because the reporter covered only the beginning of the rally...The sources quoted in the *Journal* story were officials -- Congressman Jim Moody and Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist. However, the organizers of the rally were ignored. Several people in the crowd, who had taught in or visited the Persian Gulf, were not tapped as sources.**

**"Finally, the photo used with the story showed a protestor with a radical, spiked hair-do. The protestors actually included people of all ages, with a variety of hair-dos. A few were even bald. But what image was portrayed of the protestors by the selection of photos? Very stereotypical."**

Another example of where many of the news media stood politically on the war came when several stations across the country refused to run an anti-war commercial, featuring Ron Kovic, the Vietnam vet who was the subject of the award-winning movie, ***Born on the Fourth of July***. The stations argued that the commercial was too political, but what about the daily coverage of Bush and officials? Weren't they, too, making political statements about the war? The media had fallen into the same trap as they did in Vietnam, of appointing credible sources and advocates. An official also is an advocate of a political viewpoint.

These are just some examples of stereotyping of anti-war protestors. Overall, the movement received more coverage during the Persian Gulf crisis than it did in the early years of Vietnam. There were also more attempts to treat the individuals in the movement fairly, but the most prevalent paradigm still created a myth.

## General Semantics Alternatives

How could knowledge of general semantics principles influence coverage of times of conflict? In several ways, but I will list six broad areas. First, the concept of **process vs. static orientation**, if internalized, could prompt the media to put conflicts into some type of historical perspective. Few members of

the public understood the complex and long-lived history behind the cultural and political differences in the Gulf. Few knew of the history of the U.S. relationship with Saddam Hussein. Perhaps if the media had done a better job of presenting that history, Americans would not have been so gung-ho to wage war. The same could be said for Panama and Vietnam. However, all of these conflicts were covered as if they had "sprung up" in recent years out of a vacuum.

The concept of **time-binding** could have helped the media learn from its mistakes in covering Vietnam. Perhaps they could have been more aggressive earlier, even before the conflict actually broke out. Perhaps they could have questioned the troop buildups earlier. Instead, they repeated many of the same mistakes they fell into in the early years of Vietnam.

General semantics principles also could help make the media **more extensional in checking the maps** of the government and military with the territory of the situation. More probing questions should have been asked. Dave Berkman, a colleague at UW-Milwaukee, suggested some in an article, "The Unchallenged Tyranny of Sanctimony", which appeared in the spring, 1991, issue of ***Media Ethics Update***. Among those questions were:

** How could you (the Bush Administration) ignore then what you so soundly condemn now? Berkman was referring to earlier gassing of the Kurds and oppression by Saddam's regime.

** Are condemnations of aggression by the world community to be cited only when they serve our interests?

** Why was five months all we would allow Iraq to observe a UN directive to vacate Kuwait, while for more than 20 years it has been permissible for two of our allies, Turkey and Israel, to ignore similar condemnation of their illegal occupations of Cyprus and the West Bank?

These and other questions could have gotten at some of the issues behind the conflicts. The media simply were too intensional, relying on traditional, sometimes hackneyed news frames for covering conflicts.

The media also could have become more extensional by **better application of scientific method** to explore relationships between what were presented as facts and what actually were inferences and assumptions by the Bush Administration and military. Too many paradigms of officials were accepted without challenge, when the media could have turned to other sources, such as Amnesty International, Yemen, etc., to at least explore the truths of those paradigms.

When some of the assumptions were challenged, the media were accused of being disloyal or endangering the safety of the troops. They then would back off. Instead, the media could have taken the assertions of the military and Bush Administration and tested them against whatever observation they could do under the tight restrictions and by checking the assertions with other sources -- even if those sources were not considered on "our side."

Through some **knowledge of higher order abstracting**, the media could have challenged the language and metaphors used to describe the war. Images were cleverly manipulated to portray the Iraqis as evil murderers and to make the U.S. and its allies' bombardment seem as antiseptic as possible. Only after the conflict did reports of higher civilian casualties and slaughterhouse actions (such as those alleged when Iraqi prisoners were taken from an oil platform on the second day of the war) surface. By then, the truth was too late.

The media must do better jobs of **exploring stereotypes and rhetoric**. This applies to all wars. In every conflict, propaganda becomes as strong a weapon as guns. However, by applying dating, indexing and other general semantics principles, the media could become more aware of the stereotypes. They could avoid "us-and-them traps."

Covering times of conflict is not easy. Journalists often have risked their lives to pursue the truth in past wars. They face a

better trained military -- better trained at obscuring information from the media and public. So, any criticism must be tempered with an appreciation for the very difficulty of the media's jobs.

However, the media also fall into traps of ethnocentrism, relying on official sources, covering the action rather than the issues and other pitfalls that tend to lead to biased, incomplete coverage of times of conflict. During such times, the media should be more probing and questioning than at any other time.

Knowledge of general semantics principles cannot eliminate censorship and media restrictions. It cannot eliminate the difficulty of gathering information during battle. But, it can help the media challenge entrenched paradigms and question the images and propaganda of war. When truth is the first casualty of war, we all become victims.

***etc.***

**End Notes**

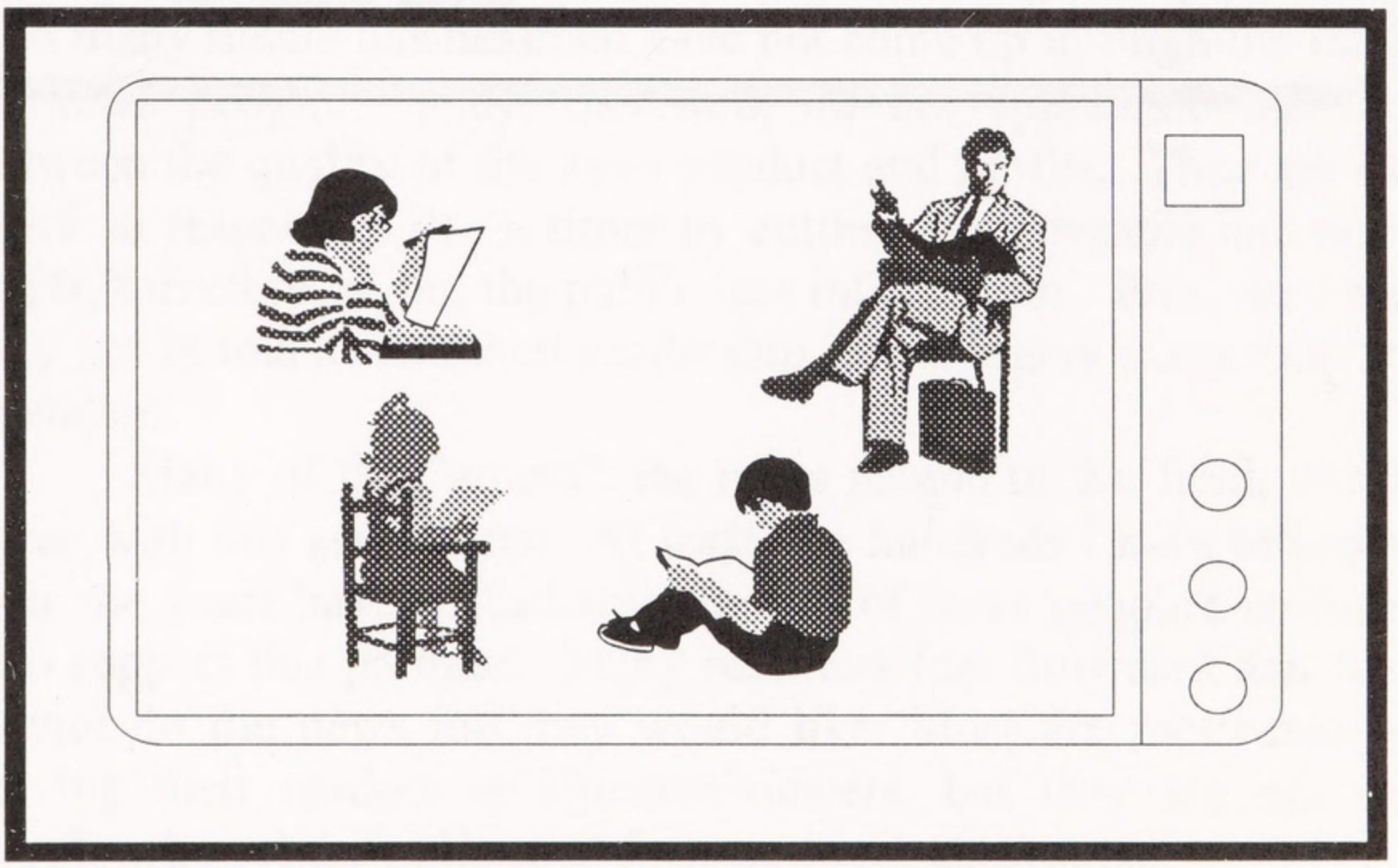
** Many of the references to specific news clippings and writings came from three collections -- ***The Persian Gulf War: Background & Analysis, The Persian Gulf War: Iraq Under Fire and The Persian Gulf War: The Media and Our Right to Know*** -- available through DataCenter, 464 19th St., Oakland, California, 94612.

** Other references to specific writings came from publications of ***FAIR/Extra*** (Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting), 130 W. 25th St., New York, N.Y. 10001; ***Propaganda Review***, Fort Mason Center, Building D, San Francisco, California, 94123; ***Center for Media and Values***, 1962 S. Shenandoah, Los Angeles, California, 90034'; and an analysis of several newspapers by the author.

** The references to coverage of the Vietnam War came from the author's research for a masters thesis at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

## Chapter 8

# The Public's Responsibility



The communication process also must include the receiver of the information. That's you, the member of the public. If you remain a passive receiver, giving little feedback to the senders, the system will not change.

If you help the senders understand what you need to know, and tell them the questions you would like to ask, the news media could play a more effective role in our democratic system.

*gregg hoffmann*

## Chapter 8

## The Public's Responsibility

Most of this book has been intended for journalism students and those in the media who have open minds and are willing to change. However, I must admit I fear that many of the changes in news judgment, reporting methods and general ways of doing business in the media will not occur unless the public demands them.

Those large corporations which own most of our media are not likely to change unless their profits slip considerably. During the recession of the early 90s, media profits did drop, but overall media companies have enjoyed profits that are exceeded by only the pharmaceutical industry.

Even when media business leaders have initiated changes, they often have been in circulation, advertising and production. Too many media businessmen have not come up through the ranks as news people. They, therefore, do not appreciate the link between the quality of the news product and profits. They are too quick to respond to down times by cutting the newshole and news staffs, therefore giving the public less information. Plus, they feel they are in touch with their readership, but in many cases they are mistaken.

Many of the "grunts", the news people in the field, would agree with this assessment. At least, the hundreds I have talked to over the years have. Academic surveys of news people's attitudes also support this premise. Many reporters feel frustrated that they cannot do the news job they would like. Most are motivated by serving their readers or listeners/viewers, but they are not the people who set the policies at their news organizations.

Many modern editors have bought into the corporate approach to news. They have done too little to resist cuts in the newshole. They have compromised news judgment for business reasons. They have embraced infotainment and cite the public's

desire to be entertained as the reason. Other editors have not changed enough. They have dogmatically hung on to their old definitions of what makes the news. They have blamed the public for not knowing or caring enough about significant information.

Neither approach is working. Newspapers continue to become less relevant in people's lives. TV news isn't really doing much better, if you look at ratings for the three major networks.

I am operating with a different premise. I believe most members of the public do want to know information that is relevant to their lives. They do not want to live in an intellectual vacuum. They realize that our world has become smaller, and that global events impact on what happens in Hometown USA. The problem is that the public finds little relevance in how news has been traditionally presented. And, the infotainment alternative is looked at as trashy, tabloid journalism. Only a very small segment of the public really wants that type of information. Most realize they need information to function in the world today.

So, this chapter is aimed at you members of the public who do want significant, relevant news that will help you make intelligent decisions in the late 20th century and 21st century. I hope to give you guidelines on how to critically consume the news, to recognize when the media maps include myths. I also hope to give you some ideas on how you might force the media corporations that control those maps into change-- meaningful change that will help you become a better citizen, businessman, parent, etc.

**Critically Consuming the News**

Many members of the public have responded to their dissatisfaction with the media by not consuming news at all. I have had many people tell me they no longer watch the news or read a newspaper because they do not find the information relevant, or find it depressing. This is not a wise response, in my opinion. First, many newspapers and electronic media are doing good jobs, at least within the restrictions of the paradigm of the industry. Second, to stop consuming news entirely can only lead

to further ignorance of the world and issues facing people today. Instead of turning off news entirely, learn to consume it critically. Here are some tips on how you can do that:

1. Acquaint yourself with ideas of general semantics and critical thinking. Become more aware of the gaps between perception and reality, our maps and territory. Understand the abstracting process that goes on when you participate in the communication process on any level.

2. Understand the news process. I believe strongly that a media course should be required at the high school, or perhaps even elementary, level of our education system. So many things we think we know about the world actually are based on information we received via the media -- either by firsthand consumption or by talking to somebody who saw or read a news story. If we do not understand the process that a story goes through, we too easily fall into the traps of accusing the journalist of being biased, or simply out to make money. Journalists, for the most part, are caring, dedicated people. Most try to produce as accurate maps as possible, but they must do so within the framework of their industry, and from a set of values that are prevalent in that industry.

3. Question the information you receive from a fact-inference-assumption standpoint. Is the information verifiable through the observation of the journalist, or perhaps even your own observation? Is the information being presented as fact actually an inference drawn by a source quoted in the story? Can that source offer factual support for that inference? Ask yourself, "How does he know that?" or "What facts are at the root of that conclusion?" Learn to recognize value assumptions. Is a statement presented as fact actually reflective of a certain set of values or assumptions, and can those values be supported through observation, exploration of the territory?

4. When watching TV news, don't become too fascinated by the images on the screen. Also, notice the information being presented in the story. Do the images add to that information, or

clarify it? Or, do the images simply stir the emotions and create visions or impressions in your head that aren't necessarily verifiable by the facts of the story?

5. Become aware of the sources in a news story. Do they support the current power structure in society? What do they have to gain or lose personally by conveying the information in the story? Do they use obscure language and buzzwords? If so, do they seem to be doing it on purpose?

6. Question the questions asked by the journalists. Do they seem clear to you? Are they leading questions, intended to steer the answer in a certain direction? Do the follow-up questions seem to be in a logical sequence?

7. Apply dating and indexing to the information in news stories, especially stories dealing with social issues. Is one African-American being portrayed as the spokesman for all of his race? Is Boris Yeltsin seen as speaking for all of the former Soviet Union? Is issue 1 really related to issue 2 in the story? Does the story include adequate background to give you an idea of the process? Do you understand how the issue progressed to its current point? Or is it simply reported in a vacuum?

8. Does the story center on an individual event, rather than the development of the issue? If so, it could be an example of elementalism. Does the reporter give you a feeling for how the event fits into the whole development of the issue?

9. Become more aware of the two-valued structure in our language and in news stories. Is the story presented by giving "both sides of the story"? Could there be more than two sides? Is the language in the story reflective of a two-valued orientation? Is it either/or, right/left, black/white terminology?

10. When dealing with economics stories, or any stories that include numbers, ask yourself if you really understand what those numbers mean. Does the reporter give you an idea of how the number fits into a trend? Does he or she reveal the source of the number? Does he or she explain the methodology used to come up with the number? This is especially important when consuming stories about polls. Ask what methodology was used?

Who asked the questions? Who was asked the questions? How many people were included in the poll? How were the questions structured?

11. When watching TV interviews, be aware that some of the statements aired are taken from longer interviews. Rather than strictly accept the statement as presented, consider the possibility that it might have been offered in a larger context, some of which was left on the editing room floor. This is the TV version of the abstracting process.

12. Try to watch more than one newscast from different stations, or read more than one newspaper per day. Notice the differences between maps of the same event or issue. Consider the various maps when making your evaluations of the news story.

In addition to becoming a more critical news consumer, you can influence how the media report the news. It may seem fruitless to write letters to the editor, or go on call-in shows, but if enough people do so the media leaders will listen. Those of us who work for the media are not bad people. Some of us just get out of touch, and need input from the public we serve.

**Things You Can Do**

1. Let the media know what you NEED to know. If you are surveyed by a media outlet, or if you simply want to write on your own, distinguish between programming or news stories that you enjoy and those that can help you make more intelligent decisions in your life.

2. Write letters-to-the editor airing your views on certain stories. Also urge others to do so. There is strength in numbers. If a media outlet receives enough letters on a certain subject, it will take notice.

3. Urge your community schools to include at least one "understanding media" course in the curriculum. Young people, who are being raised in a TV culture, need to understand the messages they are receiving.

4. Invite your local editor or news director, or a reporter, as a guest speaker to your community group meeting or luncheon. Or

better yet, organize a "day on the town" -- during which you or a group of people will accompany a journalist on a tour of the community. Include all segments of the community and talk to people about their needs and concerns.

5. Urge your local media to include a news critique column, or TV segment on the evening newscast. Local college professors might be willing to write such a column or produce such a segment. If your commercial newspaper, or TV station isn't interested, try the public access channel on your local cable station, or the alternative press. If you can't get somebody to write the column, or produce the segment, think about doing it yourself.

6. Form a media "watchdog" group, and periodically send a list of concerns of the group to your local media.

7. Support the First Amendment. Trying to censor, or stifle media messages is not the way to make the industry more responsive. In fact, through the freedom of expression, and free enterprise system, more voices can be heard in the marketplace of ideas. That inevitably leads to better journalism.

8. Get involved in local government and politics. Understand the issues your community faces, then urge the media to do a better job of covering them.

9. Find out who owns your media. If it is owned by a large corporation, and the local publisher or station director is not responsive, write the corporate headquarters with your concerns.

10. Don't media bash. Too much media-bashing has gone on in recent years, often from people who had a vested interest that was not necessarily in the public's best interest. You can urge change, and help journalists become more in touch with the community, without taking cheap shots, or criticizing in an unconstructive sense. Bashing simply leads to a defensive stance by the journalists themselves. Constructive criticism might make them think.

These are 10 things you can do, as a member of the media-consuming public, to help your local media do a better job of covering your community. There are others. Be creative in coming up with some ideas on your own.

You may ask, "why make the effort?" You may say "why not just cancel my subscription, or turn off the channel?" Those are options, but in my opinion they are not as good as becoming more involved in your community and recognizing that the media play an integral role in shaping the values, and conveying information, about that community. You can bring about more change on the grassroots level than on the national level. And, who knows? If enough people became more involved around the country, maybe change could be brought about nationally.

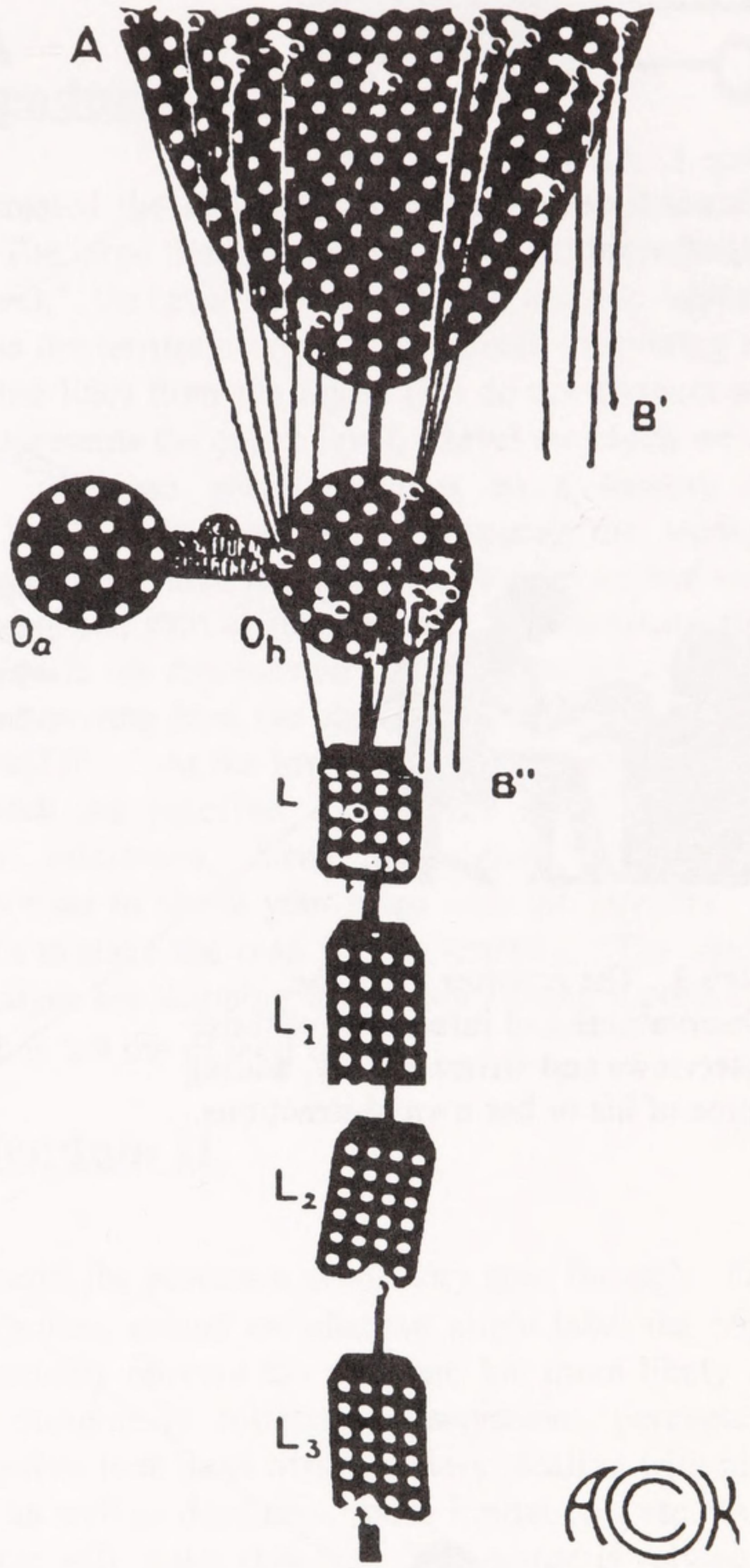
As stated in the first chapter of this book, I believe aggressive, active, critically-thinking media are essential to bringing our society into the 21st Century. The current media industry is not doing an adequate job. Many members of the industry realize that and are considering ways to better do their jobs. New technologies will bring you the news in the next century. You will be able to dial up specific information over the telephone, or receive specialized publications via a FAX machine, or receive visual and graphic explanations of the news. However, the vehicle conveying the information does not make that info more valid, truthful, accurate or relevant to your lives. How the information is gathered, from whom it is collected, from what values does it evolve and through what human methods is it reported determine how significant the information turns out to be for you. The content is still the most important part of the news.

Hopefully, more and more journalists will consider the ideas that can be found in general semantics and critical thinking. But, the communication process also must include the receiver of the information. That's you, the member of the public. If you remain a passive receiver, giving little feedback to the senders, the system will not change. If you help the senders understand what you need to know, and tell them the questions you would like to ask, the news media could play a more effective role in our democratic system.

*etc.*

# Addendum I

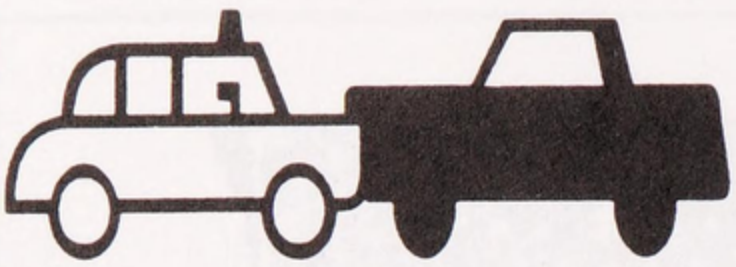
Structural Differential




The structural differential served as Alfred Korzybski's main model of the abstracting process. An explanation of the model and Addendum II can be found on Page 135. The above diagram originally appeared on page 393 of Korzybski's **Science and Sanity**. It is used here through permission of the Alfred Korzybski Estate.

# Addendum II

## Abstracting Process In A News Story



Step 1. An accident occurs. This is the event level. Yet, the reporter did not likely witness the event.



Step 2. The reporter interviews participants, witnesses, police and others to gather information. The reporter might record the interview or take notes.



Step 3. The reporter takes the observations and inferences of those interviews and writes a story, adding some of his or her own abstractions.



Step 4. An editor edits the reporter's story. The editor must consider space and time restrictions, as well as other factors.



Step 5. The reader decides whether to read the story. Even if he does, he likely will selectively perceive the information. He is the last step in a process of abstracting.

## Explanation of Addendum I

Alfred Korzybski created the structural differential to represent the human abstracting process. The large figure at the top of the diagram (labeled A) represents the "atomic level," the level on which "things actually happen." It also could be referred to as the territory. We cannot absorb everything that happens, therefore some of the lines from the figure (B') do not connect with the circle (Oh). The circle represents the object level, a level on which we can observe things happening. We can perceive things on a sensory and neurological basis on this level. We have started mapping the territory. Animals also perceive on this level, which is represented by the second circle (Oa). After this level, we label and start to linguistically communicate about what has happened. These levels are represented by the various Ls. Please note we leave things out when moving from the object level to the labeling and linguistic level, represented by B". At the lower linguistic levels, we might describe or report about what we perceive. At higher levels, we might theorize, generalize, draw inferences, form assumptions. Korzybski emphasized it was very important to check your maps with the territory. He also said it was dangerous to mistake the map for the territory. The senders and receivers of media messages are mapping the territory being reported on. Are they aware that so much is left out of their maps?

## Explanation of Addendum II

Addendum II represents the process a news story goes through. First, the event, in this case an accident, occurs on what we might label the object level. The reporter might actually observe the accident, but more likely will have to gather information about it by collecting observations, perceptions, inferences of others. The reporter then must write the story, dealing with his or her own abstracting process as well as deadlines, space limitations, etc. After the story is written, an editor will make changes. The editor is relying on abstractions of the reporter. The editor likely did not even leave the office that day. After the story is in the newspaper, the reader also abstracts. He or she draws inferences and forms assumptions about the report. He or she might not even read the story at all. TV news adds other dimensions to this process, since visuals lead to additional abstracting.

Everybody involved in this process is going through the abstracting represented in Korzybski's model. They also are involved in an industry process, which includes many other factors that contribute to the shaping of the story. How aware are they of these processes?

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Those wishing to learn more about general semantics also are encouraged to read ***Etc. Magazine***, published by the International Society for General Semantics.

**The Institute of General Semantics is located at 163 Engle St., #4B, Englewood, New Jersey 07631.**

**The International Society for General Semantics is located at P.O. Box 728, Concord, California 94522.**

**

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The author also suggests the following:

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A study of the attitudes of 400 newspaper managing editors was conducted by graduate research assistant ***Scott Latus*** for this book. Results are available upon request.

# Notes

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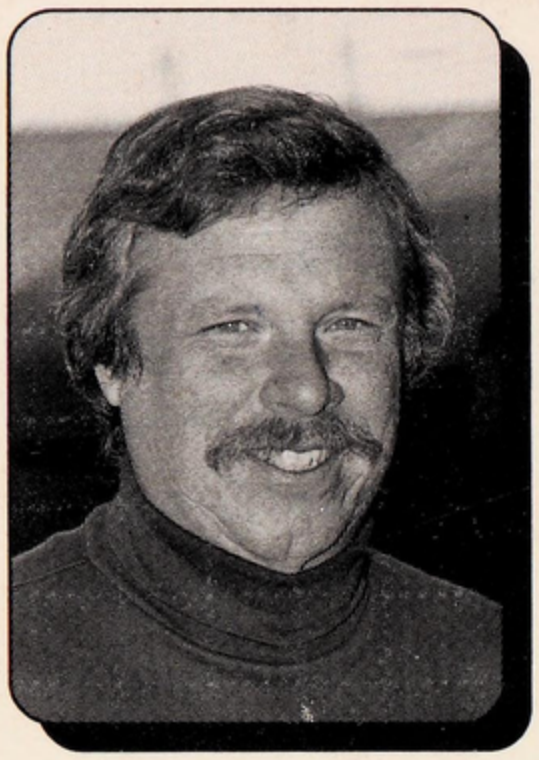

## About the Author

Gregg Hoffmann has been an award-winning journalist for weekly and daily newspapers in the Midwest and serves as a senior lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Hoffmann's journalism work has been cited by the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, Associated Press Sports Editors Association, American Planning Association and the Freedom Foundation.

He has done award-winning series on topics as varied as alcoholism, teenage runaways and land use. A previous book, ***The American Challenge***, written with Dr. Robert Spitzer, won the Freedom Foundation's George Washington Medal of Honor in 1981.

Hoffmann was introduced to general semantics while a graduate student. He has gone on to be published in ***ETC. Magazine*** and other publications on the topic and has lectured at Columbia University, Roosevelt University in Chicago, Yale University and in Sydney, Australia. He was awarded the Sanford Berman Research Grant in 1989. That grant was used to start research for ***Media Maps & Myths***. Hoffmann is a board member of the Institute of General Semantics and the International Society for General Semantics. He is the founder of the Midwest Society for General Semantics.

## General Semantics Organizations

The **Institute of General Semantics** is the original organization for research and support of general semantics work. Founded by Alfred Korzysbki, the Institute is located in the New York area and publishes the ***General Semantics Bulletin*** and other materials and hosts seminars and conferences. The Institute also is affiliated with the Midwest Society for General Semantics.

The **International Society for General Semantics** was founded by S.I. Hayakawa and is located in the San Francisco area. The ISGS publishes ***ETC. Magazine*** and other materials. It too hosts seminars and conferences around the world.

***Media Maps & Myths*** may be purchased through these organizations or by writing M&T Communications, 4842 N. Shoreland Ave., Whitefish Bay, Wi. 53217. The price is **$15**.

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