

Media Logic and Culture: Reply to Oakes

David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow

"By level of reality we mean a mental climate developed in every society in which certain facts and their interrelations are considered fundamental and 'real' whereas other ideas fall below the threshold of the reasonably acceptable and are regarded as fantastic, utopian, or unrealistic."

Hans Gerth (this volume)

"Learning to fly when you don't have wings, coming down is the hardest thing."

Tom Petty

As fantastic as it may seem, in an electronic media age, media logic is implicated in our culture's "reality level." We do not have metaphysics; we have the Simpsons! Political life in the United States is explained less by "hegemony," corporate control," or "late capitalism," than it is by TV programs like "America's Most Wanted," "COPS," and the nightly network and "local" TV newscasts. Anyone who thinks that the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* or the *Wall Street Journal* contributes more than an iota to the political views of Americans had best view a bit more "Oprah," "Geraldo," or "Murphy Brown." Fantastic! Any student of social life who is unaware of the mass media's impact is in for a rough landing!

The essays in this volume directly or indirectly discuss the communication process in general, and mass communication in particular. However, like most of social science, the authors treat communication as a *resource* that is somehow involved in a particular facet of social life, rather than as a *topic* of investigation in its own right. This general tendency has led many to presume that the mass media are important mainly as conduits or channels, and that except for certain "content," the major media are somehow neutral to the really "important" logics and principles involving politics, organization, social stratification, and social change. Indeed, Max Weber deserves part of the credit for this point of view, including an implication that the "Protestant Ethic" constituted a kind of cultural logic in its own right! Many of Professor Oakes' comments about our book, *Media Worlds in the Postjournalism Era* (MWPJ), reflect this view about communication. Born of nearly two decades and several volumes, MWPJ represents our

thoughts—and those of numerous colleagues throughout the world—about the relevance of communication and media logic for social control.

We choose to study the mass media as a *topic*. In contrast to the Weberian approach of Oakes, we follow George Simmel's directive to investigate the sociology of social forms which essentially define and shape culture as content. Now articulated in the tradition of symbolic interaction and the general approach more recently referred to as the "social construction of reality" perspective, this perspective leads us to examine how mass media have developed as a social form through which culture emerges. Through this approach, media are not independent or dependent variables, nor are they separate institutions in interaction with other institutions in a self regulated system. Rather, media constitute a form or process through which experience is interpreted and phenomena are presented.

In *Media Worlds in the Postjournalism Era* (MWPJ) we present a perspective, extensive materials, and a research agenda in support of an argument that the logic and formats of mass media, and especially electronic media, have become the dominant form in the on-going construction of Western culture. Communication and culture are reflexive. This means that social order is a communicated order. Theoretically, then, we have studied communication because its process, technology, logic and organization influence the social construction of reality. From this angle, culture can be viewed as a reflexive process of form constituting content, which turns into yet other forms. Stated differently, the organization of communication, which we define in terms of formats, becomes *folded* into the content of what is being communicated. For example, presidential debates, which we will comment on below, are "folded" into television production, programming, logic and formats. In the United States and throughout much of Western Europe, the mass communication forms, and especially those found in electronic media, are the significant content for millions of people. For example, organizational identifications, e.g., A. B. C., becomes a recognizable logo "ABC Sports," which can be quickly flashed on a TV screen during Monday Night Football. In turn, it becomes a symbol of identity proudly worn on hats, T-shirts and jackets by youth throughout the Western world! This is folding!

There are two basic parts to our argument in MWPJ. First, we offer a concept, "media logic," to capture the procedural features of the form, i.e., the rather complex array of perspectives and considerations which contribute to the shaping of programming and a wide range of mass media content and material. Second, we show how audience familiarity with this logic and especially the various formats (see below) leads to certain changes in how news and public information, politics, sports, and religion are presented and experienced.

The logic of media as a social force is not static; it has been developing over time, and continues to do so, as changes occur in the nature of organization, including funding and commercialism, technology, control, and audiences. An important part of this logic consists of the *format*, or *how a particular medium's material is defined, selected, organized and presented, as well as the grammar of the medium*. MWPJ delineates the concept format in some detail. For example, (and relative to Oakes' review), the melodrama as farce or musical was a popular format during the 19th century for interpreting and presenting the struggle between good and evil. Today the same struggle may appear more acceptable through music video, plotless movies, and post modern theatre. Television formats have become pervasive throughout the media spectrum, although formats vary among media. Nevertheless, formats constitute the major unifying perspective for joining a medium, a technology, a program or subject matter, to an audience. While each medium has its distinctive formats, examples in American TV include the newscast, sitcom, talk-show, game show. Central to all, of course, is entertainment, which we devote considerable attention to in MWPJ. As media agents and various audiences (and other interests) become familiar with these, other changes occur in social life: soon, it is the structure and organization for formats that attract rather than the content. In fact, the content no longer exists on its own, uninformed by media formats. For example, major college and professional football is no longer simply a sports contest or even an entertainment event. It is a spectacle of continuous and mutually reciprocal interaction between television format criteria and sports norms, values and mystique. Indeed, this phenomenon has become so powerful that a new national holiday ("Super Sunday") has become firmly established in American culture. Moreover, the Pentagon recently made a business arrangement with National Football League films to develop a 60 minute documentary on the Persian Gulf War. Why NFL films? We think that media logic provides an answer, including the skill in promoting instant replayed "high lights" with rhythmic key plays, the look and sound of bone crunching tackles, up-close-and-personal-combat, and of course, long bombs! In sum, media logic is a rather simple concept and reflects, on the one hand, how the nature, mode and style of communication influence what is actually selected and presented to an audience, while on the other hand, how the audience member's expectations, preferences, and experience with such logic informs other activities and involvements.

Nowhere do we suggest that this logic is deterministic, or that all members of the culture share it equally. To the contrary, if one is not regularly involved in using mass media in their lives, and especially certain electronic media, the impact will be less noticeable. However, research shows that most people use media extensively in their everyday life routines

and rituals. As a result, radio, television, and print media have become more than information or entertainment devices used for pragmatic ends. They become environments of experience and ends in themselves, as Gary Steiner showed in a study of what missing the newspaper meant to daily readers. What they missed was not the various content; they missed the newspaper! Even so, in *MWPJ* our emphasis was not on single individuals, but rather, on institutional strategies.

Media logic is not any kind of a formal logic, as viewed through a logical positivist's grimy lenses. While a number of testable propositions and hypotheses can be—and have been—derived from our rendering of media logic, it was never intended to be subjected to the symbolic logician's bag of tricks, nor was it intended as deterministic or metaphysical in any sense. (It is unfortunate that Professor Oakes preferred to demean our effort as "metaphysics" à la Hegel. The good news is that such rhetoric is an apt illustration of standard academic review formats.) Anyone who has read any of our work over the years recognizes that the claims and arguments are quite specific, and can be easily checked with other materials, as numerous researchers have done in several countries. (See the materials at the end of the essay.)

When activities and events are organized, transformed, created and presented in order to comply with "broadcast" or "entertainment" requirements and guidelines, we have an instance of media logic. Of course, it always entails careful study of changes over time, as well as detailed documentation of the motivation and perspective of the human actors involved. The media logic thesis is that an expanding array of social life, and in particular certain social institutional logic, has been influenced by media formats.

If one accepts this view, then informed social science can no longer study a particular topic, e.g., presidential politics, without being aware of the ways in which media format criteria are followed in constructing political reality. For example, Ronald Reagan cannot easily be separated from his communication style. To write about "Reagan's appeal" or "Reagan's politics" as though these existed as "ideas" and "content" divorced from the operation of mass media perspectives, logic and technology, would seem to be as short-sighted as anyone who tried to understand how American TV networks operated without considering their commercial interests!

When politicians and others plan their every move on the basis of "media play," (and "big plays") as Reagan's and then Bush's advisors did, it seems to us that far more is involved here than "mere manipulation" as Professor Oakes suggests. To the contrary, the American TV networks have seldom been manipulated, in the sense of being "duped," "tricked" or "used" in a way they did not fully understand. As Deaver, Gergen, and other Reagan aides clearly understood, it is a rather simple formula to get

coverage on network TV news, but one must understand the dominant format or logic which governs story selection and presentation: The networks want reports that can be visually represented as drama, conflict and action, that will resonate with a mass audience, and that can be quickly covered, and then presented in 1:30-2:00 minutes. The notion of the “sound bite” (10, 20, 30 seconds) is now taken for granted, as illustrated in numerous discussion by both TV and newspaper journalists (even as they continued the process!) during the 1988 presidential campaign. Sound bites are part of the “logic” and “format” of network TV news; to be included means simply putting your event together in a way that will satisfy this requirement. Just as a generation of young social scientists have been taught by their mentors to “give the granting agencies what they want in order to get funded,” the actions of the Reagan team could also be viewed as “competence” with format criteria. Reflexivity, or the way in which the product reflects the process and logic, is apparent in both cases: In the first instance, we get the mind-numbing social science that makes the American Sociological Association proud; in the second-instance, we get the quality of Presidents we’ve come to expect. The point is that these communication considerations are legion and sanctionable. Any media advisor—and they are now included in most major organizations and corporations in the United States (including pristine universities!)—who did not know such things, and could not deliver the “events” that fit the format, would soon be out of a job. This cannot be understood as merely manipulation, no matter how we may personally object to this kind of media-politics; it is “good work” in our day because this is now definitive of “big time politics.”

The astute politician attempts to direct an emotional identity that resonates with the mass mediated—and usually televised—“social reality” that viewer-voters receive on a nightly basis. This is the context for the infamous Willie Horton add during the 1988 campaign. We devote several chapters in *MWPJ* to how this has changed American political life, including a fresh interpretation of how voting behavior is now a reflection of this entertainment and media logic. Unfortunately, virtually none of this material is discussed by Oakes.

Perhaps one reason our essential argument about media logic and political life was not examined by Oakes is that he reflects some very fundamental misreadings of the mass media’s contribution to politics. One need look no further than the last few pages of Oakes’ review essay to find examples (some of which are also used in *MWPJ*!) of the way in which political behavior and especially campaigning have changed. Of course, we would suggest that Professor Oakes’ statement is incorrect that the infrastructure of politics continues to work as usual in spite of the media presence! Consider the phenomenon of “leaks,” which have skyrocketed.

We doubt that the nearly institutionalized process of "leaks" is done independently of journalistic pursuit of "inside information," "dirt," "scandal," and "scoops." One need look no further than the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Judge Clarence Thomas in October, 1991, when a well-placed strategic "leak" of information (that remains unconfirmed to this time) that he had "harassed" a woman ten years ago by "talking dirty" to her, nearly cost him the nomination. Few students of communication think that the live TV coverage by major networks, and strategic planning by Thomas and his accuser, for prime-time periods of subsequent senate hearings on his confirmation occurred for any other reason than that the subject was sex. (By way of contrast, the reader is asked to recall that these are the same TV networks that refused to cover the senate debate live on the Gulf War Resolution!) Most importantly, does anyone believe that Thomas would be sitting on the Supreme Court today had he delivered a less convincing performance, e.g., "this is a high tech lynching"? The point here is that political and judicial criteria vanished during those final days, and every senator polled on the live telecast of the final vote addressed the issue of "credibility" primarily according to the television criteria of performance, particularly who appeared to be credible and who was not.

Interestingly, there are numerous examples in other essays in this volume which illustrate the media logic thesis. Oakes' competent essay in this volume shows how cold war propaganda involving the nuclear deterrence strategy was organized around what he terms a "cold war system of emotion control." The tactics were very much informed by the major thrust, which was print (linear) oriented. What could be done emotionally was partly a feature of the formats available. Media logic of today would dictate a much different approach, not unlike that used by the moral entrepreneurial claims makers who are skilled in various media formats, including the Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the missing children problem, and our latest "drug war." The upshot is that while all campaigns to influence attitudes and behavior can be viewed as a "marketing effort," as Oakes suggests, there is far more to it in a media age. Advertising and other forms of propaganda are media specific. Marketing efforts have themselves been altered in order to embrace their audience members' dominant media formats.

There remain other examples in this volume where cogent analysis of a substantive issue neglects the overwhelming significance of media formats. Cantrell's essay on polling shows very clearly how the perspective of news organizations have fundamentally altered the organization, structure and control of opinion polling, and how this in turn reflects on politicians' strategy, including what they will stress in their made-for-TV-sound bites! But it is interesting to us that even this insight is not carried over into the

rest of Cantrell's analysis. For example, he notes that during one of the Reagan-Carter debates, a Carter quip was followed by Reagan's characteristic statement, "there you go again." Professor Cantrell then suggests that Reagan proceeded to decimate his opponent's statements! That is a bit of an overstatement since Reagan never decimated anyone with logic or an articulated analysis: what Reagan did do was say, "there you go again," give a nod and a nice "all knowing smile," all of which had been carefully rehearsed prior to the debate. It was disarming, but it was not his words, but his style, that "dance" that spoke volumes! It was the look of amused confidence, like a grandfather smiling at a grandchild who searches the "other" hand for candy. This is what they teach actors. It was decimating because his advisors understood the TV format of such "debates." In our day, the criteria of competence and acceptability are increasingly those associated with the TV visuals, including whether a candidate, issue, problem or claim "looks" and "sounds" right. The emotional response of millions of viewers of the "Thomas-Hill" exchanges during the former's Supreme Court confirmation hearings illustrate the point: Numerous individuals, and particularly academics, were "certain" that he or she was telling the truth, largely on the basis solely of TV programming criteria.

Communication in our electronic age has transformed the time, place, manner and style of conduct in virtually every realm of American culture. Marketing and products, including advertising logic and approaches, have all been changed to incorporate media logic and formats for more effective communication (for their purpose). Today AT & T uses a nonlinear music video advertising format to capture viewer attention. The content of the ad is still the value of family life, but it's the music video format that captures attention. And, while marketing certainly remains a critical part of a capitalist economy, marketing criteria are informed by media format criteria. When these criteria are ignored or applied poorly, products, programs, and candidates fail.

When one takes seriously the social constructionist position that communication is reflexive, then it is hardly surprising that the major forms of communication are of significance to social life and social institutions. While our work documents the impact of such reflexivity on institutions like sports and religion, nowhere has the impact been so well documented as it has with news and journalism.

We were somewhat perplexed why Professor Oakes dismissed out of hand our claim that organized journalism is dead. (He correctly points out that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are still published!) Journalists still have jobs, still produce copy, and occasionally, even provide worthwhile information, but this is more often than not akin to what we

term "information mechanics." Organized journalism is dead; we are post journalism for two reasons. First, journalistic practices, techniques and approaches are now geared to media formats rather than directing a perspective or craft at a topic; second, the topics, organizations, and issues that journalists report about are themselves products of media, journalistic formats and criteria. Media logic, and its attendant news formats, were constructed by journalists who succumbed to routines to order and control their world, which soon gave rise to formula news. This became institutionalized and very fine tuned with television. The news sources learned about the formula, the underlying media logic, which soon became institutionalized for journalists as well as public relations specialists. Today this knowledge is widespread and taken for granted; network TV reporters even do an occasional report on how the very report they are presenting to the public is orchestrated and produced by news sources who are using media logic! The result is well known to every person who has bemoaned the quality of journalism, both in print and TV, namely that the reporter and the reported share perspective and approach. One no longer needs to manipulate the other; they are co-communicators working with shared rules and perspectives. Journalism's object disappeared as a result of journalism's culture; what was once part of an occupational culture is now a key feature of organizational culture, and increasingly, a media culture as well.

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