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The 'Event as Event' and the 'Event as News': The Significance of 'Consonance' for Media Effects Research

*Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Rainer Mathes**

In 1970 Halloran, Elliott and Murdock published *Demonstrations and Communications* which, due to its methodological design, represents a pioneering study in modern mass communication research. The authors were able to demonstrate similarity among the various media's reporting of an anti-Vietnam demonstration in London and that the actual 'event as event' was completely different in nature from the 'event as news'. Recent studies show that when reporting is consonant the mass media have a considerable influence on society. The media have particular influence over the subjects discussed in a society, the aspects of and criteria on a topic which are considered important and the climate of opinion which the population perceives as prevailing on a given subject.

Introduction

Modern mass communications research was for a long time based on two assumptions which have now been called into question. The first assumption is that the media convey a true image of reality on a reduced scale and that there is an immediate, mirror-image, relationship between events and media reporting. This assumption explains why media reporting is frequently seen as an indicator of reality and why it is included in the analysis of social change (Tilly, 1970; Brinkgreve and Korzec, 1979; E. Block, 1984; P. Block, 1984; Goldmann, 1984; Nowak, 1984). The second assumption is closely related to the concept of selective perception and holds that recipients select those items from the mass media which confirm their views (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Festinger, 1957; Katz, 1968; Freedman and Sears, 1965; Sears and Freedman, 1967; Sears and Abeles, 1969). The idea of selective perception—and our concept of

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journalistic variety—are based on the premise that in a free, pluralistic communications system the media report on important events not in a uniform manner but from a variety of perspectives and with a varying focus.

Both these assumptions were called into question by a trend-setting case study which was conducted by James D. Halloran, Philip Elliott and Graham Murdock, entitled *Demonstrations and Communication* (1970). The importance of this study for modern communications research has not really been recognized to date. The impression of something new and avant-garde was the result of certain elements in the study which influenced research in the 1970s. First of all, instead of limiting themselves to a single medium or a small group of communicators, the authors included large segments of the media system—newspapers of various quality-levels and political slants, as well as public and private television—in their analysis. Second, instead of being limited to a short period of time, the investigation included the whole spectrum of reporting on an event, beginning with its first occurrence and continuing over a period of many weeks.

As a result of this 'historical' dimension of the investigation, attention was drawn to a phenomenon which is of critical importance with regard to media effects—the consonance of reporting, and, related to this, the opinion-leader role of certain media. Third, and perhaps most important, a 'multi-method approach' was attempted. The investigation combined numerous methods which had previously been used only alternatively or individually, namely the documentation of the event, interviews with experts and with representatives of the parties in conflict, participant observation of the editorial work on two newspapers and two television networks, and quantitative content analyses of the print media and television reporting.

In this article we would like to elaborate upon some particularly important findings of this pioneering study, and relate them to other studies in the field of communications research. The first section will discuss studies dealing with the relationship between reality and media reality. The second section will point out the importance of the frame of reference adopted by journalists when they are reporting. The third section will deal with the influence opinion-leaders in the media have on the diffusion of topics and arguments in the media system. In the fourth section, attention will be drawn to the pheno-

menon of consonance, which must be clearly understood if future research is to study it systematically.

Reality and Media Reality

By choosing the method of comparing extra-media data (participant observation of the demonstration and interviews with experts), and intra-media data (content analysis of news coverage by the press and television as well as participant observation of editorial work), Halloran and his colleagues were continuing an approach first taken by Lang and Lang in the early 1950s (Lang and Lang, 1953; Rosengren, 1970). This enabled them to deal with the following basic questions: what course did the demonstration take ('event as event') and how did the mass media cover the event ('event as news')?

The situation as reconstructed was as follows. On Sunday, 27 October 1968, a protest march against the Vietnam war was held in London. The march began at approximately 2 p.m., starting out at Charing Cross and moving toward Parliament Square and Hyde Park. About 60,000 demonstrators, most of them young people, took part in it. The course of the demonstration reflected the pains taken by the police and the demonstrators to avoid conflicts and violent clashes. In handbills and over the microphone, the organizers urged demonstrators not to stray from the official route of the demonstration and not to let anyone provoke them to get involved in violent confrontations. The leader of the demonstration, Tariq Ali, presented a brief resolution at the seat of government, 10 Downing Street, requesting Prime Minister Wilson to discontinue support for American policies in Vietnam. There were no clashes with the police in the three hours or so it took the demonstration to reach Hyde Park. Following the final rally, the demonstration ended at around 6 p.m.

At the beginning of the demonstration, however, radical and anarchist groups had used fliers to call upon the participants to leave the official route of the demonstration and march to the American Embassy, the 'den of the aggressor'. Some 2000 to 3000 demonstrators responded to this suggestion and marched to the American Embassy, where there was a violent confrontation with the police at around 4.40 p.m. Various objects were thrown at the police, who cordoned off the American Embassy. The window panes of a store and a bar were broken and an American flag was set on fire. About 50 demonstrators tried to drive back the police cordon, and at one point they succeeded in making a breakthrough

for a short period. It was during these clashes that an incident occurred which was to appear as a ubiquitous photograph in the press the next day. A policeman named Rogers was pushed down and kicked in the face by a demonstrator: a scene which was documented in a picture later chosen as the press photo of the year. During the confrontation at the American Embassy, 11 demonstrators were arrested; a total of 96 demonstrators and 74 policemen were injured; and 8 policemen and 22 demonstrators were given hospital out-patient treatment (Halloran et al., 1970: 33–51).

A content analysis of press coverage revealed that the violent confrontation in front of the American Embassy dominated all the newspapers. In comparison, coverage of the largely peaceful course of the main demonstration became of secondary importance.[1] Somewhere between only 9 percent (*The Times*) and 35 percent (*Daily Mirror*) of the total coverage of the demonstration was devoted to the main procession of 60,000 demonstrators and to the goals of the demonstration. Press coverage of the violent confrontation in front of the American Embassy ranged from 41 percent (*The Guardian*) to 87 percent (*Sketch*) of total coverage. Forty percent of the BBC newscasts and an average of 47 percent of the newscasts and special programmes on ITN were devoted to the subject. The aspect of violence was emphasized by the titles of the contributions. The cover-page headlines of most newspapers described the demonstration as a violent confrontation between police and demonstrators (Halloran et al., 1970: 109–26). On the whole, a discrepancy between the 'event as event' and the 'event as news' was evident. Although the overwhelming majority of the demonstrators had marched peacefully, most newspapers published the picture of the policeman lying on the ground and being kicked by a demonstrator, and usually on the front page. Even though only about 5 percent of the demonstrators were involved in the confrontation in front of the American Embassy, an average of 67 percent of the entire reporting on the demonstration was devoted to this. Thus, media coverage focused on the violent events which were marginal to the demonstration. Reality and media reality were poles apart.

This finding confirmed a result that Lang and Lang had arrived at in the USA in 1953 by using a similar investigative design but applying it to a completely different case. At the public reception for General MacArthur on his return from East Asia, the minutes of the observers differed considerably on one point from the image presented in the media. While observers recorded a reserved

reception with relatively limited participation by the general population, the television screens showed a dense and cheering crowd giving the General an enthusiastic welcome. In this case, reality and media reality were again poles apart (Lang and Lang, 1953).

With these two case studies, modern communications research embarked on a course which proved to be well chosen in the years following. This eventually resulted in a different approach to effects research. The old question, 'How do the mass media influence the recipients' attitudes towards reality?', was supplemented by two new ones: 'How do the mass media influence the recipients' notions of reality?' and, 'What effect do these notions of reality have on reality, and what are the ramifications thereof?' (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Kepplinger and Roth, 1978).

These new mass communication research issues were treated by G. Ray Funkhouser in the 1970s and Hans Mathias Kepplinger in the 1980s, among others (Funkhouser, 1973; Kepplinger, 1975). Funkhouser compared news media coverage of major issues such as race relations, student unrest, inflation, crime, the Vietnam war, and drug abuse in the USA with the realities underlying these issues and public opinion on how important they were. To describe the realities, Funkhouser used indicators such as the number of crimes per 100,000 inhabitants, the purchasing power of the dollar, or the number of American soldiers stationed in Vietnam. The amount of coverage was determined by the number of articles published in *Time, Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*; public opinion was determined using representative opinion polls.

The study arrived at two major conclusions. First, there was little if any relation between coverage of these issues and the problems in reality. Only in two of the nine cases investigated—drug abuse and inflation—was the amount of media coverage representative of the seriousness of the issue. When it came to the Vietnam war, race relations and student unrest, the peak period in reporting preceded the peak of the real social problem, in some cases by several years. With respect to the topics of crime, pollution, racial integration and poverty, the amount of coverage was not clearly related to the way the issues developed. Second, there was a close relationship between the public's view of how important certain issues were and the amount of media coverage of those issues, even though the media presented a very much distorted image of the situation. This meant that the more coverage the three most important US news magazines gave to a problem, the more serious it was considered, quite apart

from the actual seriousness of the issues (Funkhouser, 1973: 62–75).

The influence of the mass media on the public's perceptions was shown in a panel survey conducted in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1966 and 1967. People who bought a television set between 1966 and 1967, and relied on television as their main source of information on political events, developed an unrealistic notion of politics, considering it an entertaining game rather than a serious business. People who, in addition to television, regularly read the daily newspaper, had a more realistic view of politics. In word association tests they associated characteristics such as 'significant' and 'familiar' with the term 'politics' and, in contrast with people who did not read much, had the impression that politics is a difficult business (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 1968).

Kepplinger took this a decisive step further in two studies of the media during the oil crises of 1973/74 and 1978/79 (Kepplinger and Roth, 1978; Kepplinger, 1983). An important feature of these studies was that they not only analysed the influence of media coverage on the population's image of reality, but went on to consider the effects this image had on reality itself. Both studies used the same methods. Kepplinger used statistics on oil supply to establish actual events and employed a quantitative content analysis of quality and tabloid newspapers to determine media reality. The public's perception of the situation was determined by representative polls, and consumer behaviour was ascertained by using statistics on the sales of crude oil products. Statistics showed that in Autumn 1973 the Federal Republic of Germany imported considerably more oil than in previous years. In spite of the decision by petroleum-exporting countries to limit output and sales, the Federal Republic of Germany's supply was not endangered. The media overestimated the influence of the OPEC decisions and published essentially negative—that is, incorrect—speculations about the oil supply. The reports maintaining that the oil supply was endangered caused great concern, resulting in panicked buying and hoarding. The drastic and unexpected rise in demand for oil and oil products then led to actual shortages in October and November, forcing the government to take steps to deal with the problem, and thus appearing to confirm the notion of an 'oil crisis' (Kepplinger and Roth, 1978: 337–56).

In contrast to the developments in Autumn 1973, the Federal Republic of Germany's crude oil imports dropped considerably in Spring 1979 following the Iranian revolution and Saudi Arabia's decision to reduce its production. Although the situation could have

been deemed a crisis, it was not presented in the media as such. The contradictory reports about the supply situation resulted in consumer behaviour remaining relatively normal. Since demand was not artificially increased, actual shortages remained 'invisible' (Kepplinger, 1983: 22–49).

Both examples represent 'self-fulfilling prophecies' initiated by the media. The media's respective forecasts, that there would be a crisis or that a crisis would not take place, were in both cases a critical factor in determining whether a crisis occurred or not. Situations which were initially similar—both in 1973/74 and 1978/79 a political crisis led to a drop in oil production and to a substantial increase in the price of oil—took different courses due largely to different kinds of media coverage. By expanding the investigative design and the questions used in the *Demonstrations and Communication* study, a new class of media effects, which might be termed social effects, has been drawn to our attention in the 1980s.

The Frame of Reference of Reporting

What might explain the selective perspective adopted by journalists in the cases described? How does the discrepancy between reality and media reality develop? Halloran and his colleagues explained this discrepancy as resulting from a newsmaking process that is controlled by a frame of reference and by news factors, a process in which opinion-leaders in the media system play an important part.

The news coverage of the anti-Vietnam war demonstration investigated by Halloran and his colleagues is characterized by three phases. In the agenda-setting phase a frame of reference is created for an event; in the second phase certain perspectives of news coverage are elaborated successively; finally, in the third phase, the actual coverage of the event takes place (Halloran et al., 1970: 85–109).

Two national daily newspapers selected the anti-Vietnam war demonstration as a topic at a very early stage. In *The Times*, coverage began about eight weeks prior to the event scheduled for 27 October, and in *The Guardian* about three weeks earlier. This agenda-setting phase not only drew the public's attention to the demonstration; it also represented the first politically shaped interpretation of anti-Vietnam protest in London. After the *Evening News* had come out with the banner headline 'Terror, Bombs, Guns Feared at London Rally' on the evening of 4 September, *The Times* headlined its first report on 5 September 'Militant Plot Feared in

London'. On 11 October an anonymous leaflet calling for violent action against the police and public buildings was covered by *The Guardian* in an article headlined 'Bombs and Arson on March'. In general, it is fair to say that both the purported and the actual militant preparations made by extremist groups ruled the headlines as well as the reports in the daily newspapers during this agenda-setting phase. On 14 October, two weeks before the demonstration, arson was responsible for a fire in the Imperial War Museum, confirming the fears expressed by the media.

In the newspaper reports the London demonstration was compared to the May 1968 revolt in Paris, student unrest in Berlin, and the big demonstration during the 1968 Democratic national convention in Chicago. These demonstrations, in which serious confrontations with the police took place, had the effect of creating a stereotype. The frame of reference created in the media thus represented an initial basic decision that the subject of the public debate was not the war in Vietnam, but the violent confrontations anticipated in the course of the demonstration.

The phase of continuous coverage began about two weeks prior to the event. While the newspapers had initially only picked up the subject now and then, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* and later the *Daily Express* and *The Times* now covered the event continuously. In the pre-coverage phase, the frame of reference established by the media was elaborated further. In addition to the element of violence, which dominated all the pre-event coverage, reporting now also picked up on the possible participation in the demonstration of militant foreign students.

This fitted into the frame of reference of foreign models and foreign influences which had been established from the very beginning by references to Paris, Berlin and Chicago. In developing new reports some of the media adopted the function of opinion-leaders: *The Times* and *The Guardian*, in particular, introduced new aspects and perspectives in their coverage, which the other media then picked up in a sort of chain reaction. The reports focused on the leaders of the demonstration and on dissension between the groups participating. Only marginal attention was given to the political message of the demonstration: the rejection of the American policy in Vietnam. By the end of the pre-event coverage the demonstration had been defined as a violent confrontation with foreign influences. Attacks on public buildings and street fighting between the police and the demonstrators were expected (Halloran et al., 1970: 106–7).

On 27 October, the day of the demonstration, the stage was set as if for a war. With the exception of the *Daily Express*, the newspaper buildings on the demonstration route in Fleet Street had barricaded their windows with wood, cardboard and wire. More than 100 police were on guard at Broadcasting House and the tapes of all afternoon broadcasts had been sent to Birmingham so as to continue broadcasting from there in the event of an emergency. Beginning at 1 p.m. a first-aid station was set up at the London School of Economics, where many of the 2000 foreign students who had travelled to London had spent the night; some forty physicians and nurses were on duty there.

Coverage of the demonstration fitted right into the frame of reference established in the pre-event phase. Even though the demonstration remained peaceful for the most part, media reporting stuck to the violent course of events predicted by the pre-event coverage. The journalists' filtered perspective is described by Halloran and his colleagues as resulting from their perceptual predisposition. This predisposition was determined by two complementary and related factors: the frame of reference and the news value. The journalists' frame of reference pre-structured subsequent reporting one-dimensionally to emphasize the anticipated confrontation. The news criteria internalized by journalists served as an additional selective filter.

The analysis of the demonstration by Halloran, Elliott and Murdock follows the four specific news values listed by Galtung and Ruge—frequency, reference to persons, reference to something negative, and consonance—which we can describe briefly. First, the more the media take up and report events as they are actually occurring, the more likely these events are to become news. According to Halloran, Elliott and Murdock, this meant that a demonstration might have the right 'frequency' as news, which the political movement behind the anti-Vietnam demonstration did not. The second news value, 'reference to persons', serves to reinforce the first: abstract events have barely any news value, unless they can be represented as being the result of human action. Furthermore, events which are negative in character (i.e. which involve conflicts) have greater news value than positive events. Galtung and Ruge describe the fourth factor, consonance, as follows: 'The more consonant the signal is with the mental image of what one expects to find, the more probable that it will be recorded as worth listening to.' To characterize the results of this perceptual process, Galtung and

Ruge coin the following catchy phrase: 'Here "news" are actually "olds", because they correspond to what one expects to find' (Galtung and Ruge, 1965).

Thus, according to Halloran, Elliott and Murdock, the political movement behind the anti-Vietnam demonstration did not have the right 'frequency' (1970: 301–2). Due to the interest in human agents of action, coverage focused on the leaders of the demonstration; and due to the greater news value of negative events, coverage emphasized the aspect of violence (106, 301–2). Finally, the journalists' behaviour seemed to confirm the assumption that consonance is a news value.

The study by Halloran, Elliott and Murdock focused attention on an important factor of news coverage which had already been a focal point of Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion*, published in 1922. Lippmann had even used the expression 'news value', very much in the sense Östgaard, Galtung and Ruge employed it forty years later (Ostgaard, 1965; Müller-Klepper, 1981). Lippmann points out that not even the eyewitness has an unprejudiced image of the event he or she observes. What the observer takes to be his or her report of an event actually constitutes the metamorphosis of that event. Lippmann argues that a perception inevitably constitutes an interpretation of reality, 'for the accepted types, the current patterns, the standard versions, intercept information on its way to consciousness' (Lippmann, 1922: 65). If we apply this perspective to communication research with any degree of consistency, it is not enough simply to adduce value-free news factors such as frequency and negativism to explain how journalists select and interpret news. Journalists' political attitudes, values and opinions as well as the oversimplifications resulting from their preconceived ideas, also exert a considerable influence on this process.

Processes of *political* selection are not taken into consideration by the news value theory nor by the institutional approach of 'gatekeeper research'. The news value theory takes the level of events that are being reported as its point of departure. It assumes that the quality of events (the likelihood of conflict, the importance of the events, cultural, physical, or psychological proximity, etc.) is the decisive criterion of selection by journalists (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976). The institutional version of the gatekeeper theory takes the level of news organization (news editing, news agencies) as its point of departure. It makes the assumption that the organizational and technical pressures on the news editor are what

determine the selection of events and the way they are interpreted as news (Robinson, 1973). Both these research approaches fail to focus analytically on the individual journalist. However, the study by Halloran, Elliott and Murdock, as well as the pioneering study of gatekeeper research by David Manning White (1950), which focuses on the individual, demonstrate that the journalists' perspective on a problem and on reality constitutes an important criterion for the selection and interpretation of news.

Despite the many points observed and the many methods used in the study by Halloran et al., one omission is evident at this point: a prior structured survey of the journalists, investigating their view of the event, its probable course, and its goals and consequences, as well as their view of those in charge. We can thus only surmise that, in the view of the journalists, it was not American intervention in Vietnam but the demonstration itself, as well as the anticipated behaviour of the demonstrators, which constituted the essential problem. It appears that, to journalists at the time, demonstrations represented a violent confrontation between anarchy and government rather than a conventional means of political articulation (Noelle-Neumann and Kepplinger, 1982).

Opinion-leader Media

Halloran, Elliott and Murdock also investigated the diffusion of topics in the media system. They found that two daily papers with great prestige, *The Times* and *The Guardian*, functioned as opinion leaders. *The Times* and *The Guardian* were the first to report on the demonstration that had been announced. They provided the first interpretation of the event, thus determining the shape of subsequent coverage, which was then adopted by the other daily papers. In the subsequent course of pre-event coverage, first *The Times* and later *The Guardian* covered new aspects and topics in their reporting, which were then taken up by the other daily papers. The opinion-leaders set off a chain reaction in the media system in each instance: the reporting perspective or the topic of an article in *The Times* or *The Guardian* was first taken up by one or several of the daily papers in question and eventually by all of them (Halloran et al., 1970: 99).

The phenomenon of reciprocal influence in setting up a frame of reference for reporting was not limited to the press. When television began its coverage of the demonstration it adopted the 'image' of the event which the press had established beforehand. This, in turn, very

likely served to confirm and reinforce the views of newspaper journalists. Halloran, Elliott and Murdock report that the newscasts and special programmes by the BBC and ITN were followed closely by the newspaper offices, and journalists were sometimes assigned especially to them. Television usually served as a supplementary source of information for the press reporters, but whenever they missed an event it frequently also served as the primary or only source of information.

It was also observed that newspaper journalists evinced a special interest in the events which television covered and gave preference to (Halloran et al., 1970: 307). Television reporters thus seem to use the press as their frame of reference, while newspaper journalists use television as theirs. The result is a frame of reference which is self-reinforcing and leads to the escalation of a chosen course, which, in turn, quite probably serves to heighten mutual reinforcement even more.

The opinion-leader concept has to date been applied mainly to the recipients, that is, to the media public. In Lazarsfeld's concise definition, ideas and arguments often flow from the radio or the press to opinion-leaders and from the opinion-leaders to the less active groups of the population (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Merton, 1949; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Berelson et al., 1954; Noelle-Neumann, 1963). In their study, Halloran, Elliott and Murdock show that the concept of opinion-leaders can also be applied to the internal process of opinion formation in the media system. Media opinion-leaders are those media with high prestige which are used by other journalists as a source of information and as a frame of reference for their reporting. Opinion-leader media have a trend-setting function, presenting topics and interpretations which set in motion a chain reaction in the media.

The diffusion of topics and arguments can therefore also occur in a two-step or multi-step flow of communication within the media system: One or more topics or arguments are introduced into the media system by the prestige media, and these are taken up by other media, which, in turn, leads the others also to report on the topic. The opinion-leader media therefore serve as multipliers whose effects go far beyond their audience, and may include the whole media system. The significance of opinion-leader media thus does not reside in the number of their readers but in the position they occupy within the media system.

The fact that the media public essentially does not serve as a refer-

ence group for journalists may explain their orientation toward fellow-journalists and their intense scrutiny of the competing media. As a rule, mass communication is one-sided communication, i.e. the communication runs from communicator to recipient and—with the exception of letters to the editor, etc.—not the other way around. The journalist therefore has little information about his or her success with the public, and what information there is tends to be incomplete. The reporting of other journalists thus fulfils a sort of ersatz function, serving as a gauge for the journalist's own reporting.

In Summer 1984 the phenomenon of German journalists taking their fellow-journalists as a reference group was investigated in the context of a major research project (Kepplinger, 1984). During an extensive face-to-face interview 217 journalists from the press, radio and television were asked the following question:

> In their reporting, journalists take as a frame of reference not only their own medium but also reporting by the other media. This helps provide ideas for articles and familiarizes one with other arguments and opinions. Here on these cards are various newspapers and magazines. Could you please distribute the cards on this list according to whether this newspaper or magazine is very important for your own work, or somewhat important, or not so important?

The results show that opinion-leader media can be found in all media categories. Of the daily papers, two national newspapers with high prestige, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, especially performed this function. In each case, 68 percent of the journalists considered these newspapers 'very important' for their reporting, and a further 24 percent and 22 percent, respectively, considered them 'somewhat important'. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* and *Die Welt* were classified as 'very important' by noticeably fewer journalists (45 percent and 29 percent), or as 'somewhat important' (33 percent each). Only 30 percent of the journalists stated that a regional newspaper was 'very important' for their reporting.

Among the weeklies, it was especially *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit* which were heeded by journalists; 54 percent of the journalists designated *Der Spiegel* as 'very important' for their reporting, as 52 percent did for *Die Zeit*. The opinion-leader function of these two weeklies is particularly significant in that both follow a moderate-to-definitely progressive, left-wing editorial line in their reporting.

When using television as their source of information, journalists

essentially rely on the daily newcasts and not the political programmes in their reporting. The news programme of the ARD, 'Tagesthemen', was termed 'very important' by 66 percent of the journalists and 62 percent said the same about the 'Heute-Journal' of ZDF. In contrast with television, only the morning news broadcasts on the radio were considered important (65 percent). Table 1 provides a summary of the results.

Consonance of Media Reporting

The pattern of newsmaking which Halloran, Elliott and Murdock establish in their case study shows how the opinion-leading media establish the stereotype of an event as a general frame of reference for it, how news values function as selective filters focusing attention on aspects which fit the frame of reference and how the event which is defined in this way structures the reporting of the actual event.

Furthermore, the *Demonstrations and Communication* study showed that there are obvious parallels between the way this process of newsmaking occurs in all the different media investigated, thus establishing the consonance of media content: All the media—with the exception of the Communist *Morning Star*—created the image of a demonstration characterized by violent conflict. In conclusion, the authors summarized their study as follows:

> In our case study we have shown differences between different newspapers, between the two television channels, and between the press and television. However, we have also shown a more important and fundamental similarity between practically all branches of both media. In all but one case the story was interpreted in terms of the same basic issue which had originally made it news (Halloran et al., 1970: 300).

Rather than presenting different interpretations of reality, the media interpreted reality quite similarly and, in each case, focused on the aspect of violence.

In the further course of the scholarly debate, this 'similarity of media content' came to be defined as 'consonance' (Noelle-Neumann, 1973).[2] Consonance in this sense can be described as uniform or similar tendencies in reporting by different media. Identical or similar tendencies in reporting are not to be equated with complete agreement or uniformity. In pluralistically structured media systems the consonance of media contents can only be taken as an indication—as the results we have reported on indicate—of the clear preponderance of a topic, a point of view or a judgement.

TABLE 1

Colleagues as a Reference Group for German Journalists

Percentage of journalists who consider the reporting in these media 'very important', 'somewhat important' or 'not so important' for their work (June 1984)

	'Very important' (%)	'Somewhat important' (%)	'Not so important' (%)	No reply (%)	Total (%)
Daily newspapers:					
Süddeutsche Zeitung	68	24	5	3	100
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	68	22	6	5	101
Frankfurter Rundschau	45	33	20	3	99
Welt	29	33	36	2	100
Regional newspapers	30	36	32	1	99
Weeklies:					
Zeit	52	36	9	4	101
Spiegel	54	25	16	6	101
Stern	13	26	56	5	100
Rheinischer Merkur	5	25	66	4	100
Television:					
Tagesthemen (ARD)	66	16	14	4	100
Heute-Journal (ZDF)	62	20	15	3	100
Political programmes	23	31	41	4	100
Radio:					
Morning news	65	18	18	1	102
Evening news	25	25	50	0	100
Political programmes	24	29	47	1	101

Consonance in media content can basically be established at three different levels. At the level of agenda-setting a decision is made as to which topics are to be reported and, vice-versa, which topics and events are not to be reported. At the level of focusing, the perspectives to be adopted in reporting are determined. The mass media have the function of huge concave mirrors, which focus attention on certain dimensions and aspects of an issue. At the level of evaluation, a decision is made as to how reporting by journalists is to evaluate events and which lines of argument are to be used. This evaluation is usually pre-structured by decisions at the agenda-setting and focusing levels.

The results of the *Demonstrations and Communication* study show that the reporting by the media investigated is characterized by uniform and similar tendencies on all three levels:

1. The topic was successively taken up by all the media; by the end of the pre-reporting phase the event had been given attention in a consonant fashion by all the media.
2. Coverage was consonant in limiting itself to a few aspects of the event, with the aspect of 'violence' dominating.
3. Coverage was consonant in tending towards a negative evaluation of the event, with predominantly negative visual commentary (Halloran et al., 1970: 85–145).

In 1971 Doris Graber published her investigation 'The press as opinion resource during the 1968 presidential campaign' in *Public Opinion Quarterly*. She investigated election campaign reporting by twenty American daily newspapers during the last four weeks preceding the presidential election of 1968. As is evident from her initial comments, she was just as surprised as Halloran and his colleagues to discover that

> the study revealed an astonishing similarity in the campaign news presented to readers throughout the country by each of the twenty papers. . . . The nature and distribution of all types of stories, with few exceptions, varied within an extremely narrow range. This held true even for stories which were not taken from shared wire services or syndicated columnists (Graber, 1971: 171).

The same year that Doris Graber conducted her study during the American presidential election campaign, a study undertaken in the Federal Republic of Germany also drew attention to the phenomenon of consonance. In this pilot study of 1968, published in 1973,

the senior author of the present article related survey results to content analysis (Noelle-Neumann, 1973). The content analysis was conducted for the period from February through April 1968. Both the political television programmes of the ARD network and coverage in the high-circulation right-wing tabloid *Bild* were investigated. The discussion of two different topical areas was coded: first, statements about the German national character and second, statements about the recognition of the Oder–Neisse line (created after the German defeat in 1945) as the new German–Polish border. For both topics regularly conducted surveys had indicated a shift of opinion among the population. The question which had been posed since 1952, 'Speaking very generally, what do you think are the best characteristics of the Germans?' showed a steady increase in the response, 'I don't know of any positive characteristics of the Germans', from 4 percent in 1952 to 20 percent in 1972. Only 31 percent responded positively to the question about recognizing the Oder–Neisse line in 1967, while the majority (50 percent) rejected recognition at that time. Three years later the situation was just the reverse: now 50 percent of the population were in favour of recognizing the Oder–Neisse line and only 26 percent were opposed. We tested the possibility that these opinion changes might be the effect of a negative-consonant representation of the German character, and of a positive-consonant line of reasoning in support of the Oder–Neisse boundary.

The findings of content analysis fitted in with this hypothesis. Eighty-two percent of the evaluative statements about German national character on the political television programmes and 62 percent of the statements in the right-wing newspaper *Bild* were negative. Seventy-five percent of the arguments presented on the political television programmes favoured recognition of the Oder–Neisse line; in contrast to this, the right-wing tabloid *Bild* argued consistently against such recognition (Noelle-Neumann, 1979).

In a recent study at the University of Mainz the role of the mass media in political controversies was investigated. In this analysis, media coverage of the controversy surrounding the premature discharge of the deputy commander-in-chief of the NATO forces in Europe, General Kieβling, was compared with the public's views of and attitudes towards the controversy. The study yielded three important findings. First, the percentage of the population saying that the discharge was the most important event of that week

increased in proportion with the amount of reporting devoted to it. Second, the population most often described the aspects of the controversy emphasized in the media as important. Third, there was a distinct connection between the bias against Defense Minister Wörner in the press and on television and the call for him to resign: those who derived much of their political information from television, which was very critical of Defense Minister Wörner, favoured his resignation more than those who rarely or seldom relied on television for information (Mathes, 1986). It is evident from this result that consonance research is essential to effects research. Where conditions of consonance prevail—as Tocqueville had already argued more than 100 years ago (Tocqueville, 1945)—the strong effect of the mass media on opinion formation can be taken for granted.

Different assumptions may be formulated about the effect and social function of consonant reporting on the levels of agenda-setting, focusing and evaluation. On each of these three levels decisions are made about the interpretation and evaluation of social reality. Agenda-setting refers to observing the topics and events in the media. The social function of this process of selecting the issues is evident in the setting of a 'public agenda'. Reporting by journalists is responsible for deciding which topics are discussed and thought to require a political solution (Luhmann, 1971; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Weaver, 1984). Focusing means that particular aspects or dimensions of an issue are emphasized in reporting. The aspects and dimensions of the issue given prominence by the media are thereby defined as socially relevant, and serve as criteria for society at large (Benton and Franzier, 1976; Kepplinger and Roth, 1978; Kepplinger, 1979a, 1981). Depending upon the particular point of view and criteria applied, events can be placed in very different contexts and interpreted very differently. The anti-Vietnam demonstration, for example, can be interpreted as a conflict over American intervention in Vietnam or as a domestic conflict between anarchists and the British government. In the present case the demonstration was defined as a conflict between anarchy and the state, with an additional foreign element. Evaluation refers to the values and the position adopted in reporting. The evaluation may originate from journalists themselves, or it may originate from politicians and interest groups who have the opportunity of expressing their opinions and judgements in the media. The social function of evaluative reporting is that it creates a positive or a

negative climate of opinion, for or against an issue, respectively (Noelle-Neumann, 1977, 1983). Figure 1 summarizes the aspects of coverage by journalists and the social function they fulfil.

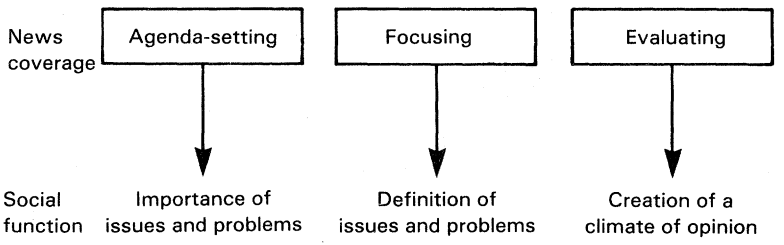
The unexpected discovery of consonance in media contents raises the question of how it is to be explained. What are the factors and mechanisms leading to media consonance in a pluralistically structured media system?

Halloran and his colleagues provide two possible explanations. First, they point to the existence of influential opinion-leaders in journalism. The consonance of media reporting, in this view, is due to opinion-leaders and followers in the media system. Second, consonance can be explained by the consensus among journalists on the news value of events. The news value 'reference to persons', led to concentrated news coverage on the leaders of the demonstration. The news value 'reference to something negative', led to a focus on the aspect of violence in the coverage. From the point of view of news the demonstration had the right 'frequency', but the political movement on which it was based did not (Halloran et al., 1970: 106, 301).

Clyde and Buckalew (1969) studied the choice of news by eighteen news editors in the press and television. Their research addressed the question: 'Do journalists select different news items or identical news items for their coverage?' The news editors were presented with sixty-four 'artificial' news items, that is, items put together by the researchers. These sixty-four items represented thirty-one combinations of the following five news factors: high impact element, conflict element, known principal element, proximate element and timely element. The news editors were to set up the sixty-four items on a continuum extending from 'very likely that I would include the news item' to 'unlikely that I would include the news item'.

FIGURE 1

Aspects of Reporting and their Social Function



The results show very considerable agreement between the editors. Forty-nine of the total of sixty-four items proved to be consensus items: there was very little variation in the way their news value was judged. On the whole, Clyde and Buckalew established an 'over-all similarity' between the eighteen editors in their choice of news (1969: 351). From this perspective the consonance of media contents can be explained as a result of consensus among journalists about the news value of events.

In addition, several studies indicate that journalists' attitudes and opinions are homogeneous compared with those of the population at large (Noelle-Neumann and Kepplinger, 1982). The relative uniformity of journalists' attitudes and opinions is, in part, a consequence of the specific conditions of the profession. Journalists produce for an anonymous public; professional colleagues are thus their most important reference group (Kepplinger, 1979c; Donsbach, 1982). Close private and professional contacts between journalists are a characteristic feature of this professional group (Tunstall, 1971). From this point of view, the consonance of media content is to be explained by the tendency among journalists to observe and influence each other, as well as by the great homogeneity of their attitudes and opinions in comparison with the total population.

Communication research has done little to pursue these findings on the consonance of media content. Current research assigns an important role to the concept of consonance in effects research without providing extensive empirical evidence for this factor. The study *Demonstrations and Communication* suggested a direction in research which has not yet been followed up seriously.

Notes

1. The only exception here is the *Morning Star*, which is very much cast in the mould of a left-wing, counter-culture paper.

2. Consonance is defined as 'the essential similarity in the presentation of an issue in all the media . . .'. Similarity is defined as 'uniformity of facts and arguments which do not result from reality but from a choice made by the communicators . . .'. The consonance of media content must be differentiated from the news factor of consonance, as described by Galtung and Ruge (1965). The concept of the news value of consonance seeks to compare the coverage of a medium at different points in time (intra-media consonance). The news value of consonance is based on two assumptions: first, that journalists try to establish consonance between their views, values and attitudes on the one hand and their reporting on the other; and, second, that they will structure their regular reporting on events so as to make it uniform and consistent. Interest in reporting which is as consistent as possible, in 'having assessed the situation

correctly from the beginning', means that—as the news value of consonance assumes—journalists will maintain the point of view they adopted at the outset. The concept of the consonance of media content, in contrast, aims to compare the coverage provided by different media at one point in time (inter-media consonance).

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