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WATCHING NEWS

**A STUDY OF TELEVISION NEWS
RECEPTION**

A thesis
submitted in fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Waikato
by
JOHN FORBES BOSOMWORTH



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ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis is an investigation of the relationship that exists between viewers and television news. As an inherently reflexive thesis, the research process itself is also critically examined. This duality is reflected in the basic structure of the thesis, with Part One – Praxis – focusing on various aspects of the research process itself, and Part Two – Analysis – dealing with the nature of the viewer-news relationship. Adopting a discourse-oriented approach, the analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with eleven individual viewers. Originally conceived as an exercise in elicitation, the introduction of feminist research perspective's in conjunction with a growing sense of reflexivity led to a transformation whereby the interviews were reconfigured instead as sites of meaning construction. As discourses of reception, the interviews showed the news-viewer relationship to be characterised by a dynamic tension between being pulled into the encounter and pushed away from it. A bi-dimensional framework of analysis is employed, with one dimension focusing on the relational aspect of the viewer-news relationship and the other on the interpretive aspect. Using this framework, the discourses of reception are then contextually (i.e. as specific case studies in reception) and thematically analysed. The thesis concludes by suggesting that reception, as a specific example of cultural consumption, can be seen as a form of guerrilla warfare where the strategies of news producers are confronted by the tactics of viewers.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Television News — A Popular Failure

As the twentieth century draws to a close, it is abundantly clear that television occupies a central role in the lives of most New Zealanders. In fact, for many people it is what they spend most of their time doing besides sleeping and working. On average across the whole of 1994, New Zealanders aged 5 years and over watched 2 hours and 42 minutes of television per day. In the same year, 97% of New Zealand's 1.2 million households had at least one television set, with 43% having two or more. Of those households, 93% were able to receive transmission signals from all three of the country's free-to-air channels¹.

Within the meta-schedule of television, news bulletins are consistently among the top performers in terms of ratings and as such they are one of the most commonly used and widespread sources of information about local, national and international events. In 1995 a single bulletin of Television New Zealand's *One Network News* (6.00PM) was watched by 1,086,884 people, placing it second only to the second Bledisloe Cup rugby test match between New Zealand and Australia as the top rating television programme for that year (AGB McNair, 1995). While that figure represents the highest rating single news bulletin of the year, the average audience size for television news at 6.00PM (for both *One Network News* and *3 National News*) was approximately 834,000 (Smith, 1996).

1 Source: AGB McNair survey figures as published in *TeleVision: The New Zealand Television Broadcasters' 1994 Yearbook* (Television Broadcasters Group, 1995: pp. 18-19, 33).

These numbers, based as they are on survey data, only tell part of the story². All that can be said for certain about these figures is that an estimated number of television sets were tuned to a certain channel at a specific time. But what really goes on in front of those television sets each night? Ratings do not — indeed cannot — provide answers to many questions concerning the relationship that viewers have with TV news: Why do they watch it in the first place? How is it watched? What do the viewers think of the news that they watch? Operating within a qualitative paradigm, and drawing from a variety of approaches and methodologies (Grounded Theory, feminist research perspectives, discourse analysis, computer assisted qualitative data analysis), this research provides some answers to these questions.

Within the viewer-news engagement there exists a relational dimension whereby viewers continuously oscillate between a close engagement with the news and more peripheral forms of engagement. In addition to this, there is also an interpretive dimension to the engagement whereby viewers make both referential and critical interpretations of the news. These two dimensions come together in the act of reception to create a potential space within which viewers adopt a variety of positions in relation to the news. The analysis presented in the second half of this thesis is an examination of how that space is occupied by viewers. As the analysis is based on a discursive reconstruction of reception as opposed to the actual lived process, the various positions that are identified represent discrete points within that space that viewers have (discursively, at least) occupied. While

2 New Zealand's television ratings figures are generated by way of the AGB McNair PeopleMeter system. Viewers use a remote-control device to indicate when they are watching a programme. The system identifies which channel is being watched, and who in the household is watching. This information is automatically uploaded to the AGB McNair database every 24 hours. The sample size is approximately 400 households, representing about 1000 people aged 5 years and over (Television Broadcasters Group, 1995: pp 50-51).

some of these positions appear to be contradictory, the idea of reception as a series of discrete ‘contradictions’ effectively denies the act its inherent dynamism. As a way of ensuring this dynamism is retained, the concept of vectors is introduced. A vector has direction and magnitude, and in the context of this research project they are classified as centrifugal or centripetal, either pushing viewers away from or pulling them into an engagement with the news.

What can be identified from the various discrete positions, however, are the underlying dimensional reference-points that indicate how the viewer arrived at that particular position. In other words, is the relational direction towards or away from the engagement? And is it a critical or referential interpretation that is providing the magnitude? Using this bi-dimensional analytical framework, the individual discourses of reception (i.e. the interview transcripts) are thoroughly mined for evidence of these vectors and their operation on viewers as they engage with the news. These indications are presented in the second section of this thesis, and are arranged according to a broad thematic schema of: Why? (Chapter Seven); How? (Chapter Eight); and What? (Chapter Nine). The final analytical chapter (Ten) presents a return to the first question of why do people watch television news, and it suggests there may be an alternative reason than that initially suggested by viewers in Chapter Seven.

What emerges from this analysis is the idea that the reception of television news is a site of constant tension between the forces of creativity and the forces of constraint. The discourses of reception in this study provide ample evidence of the creativity that viewers employ when engaging with television news. But what is also equally clear is the fact that these creative tactics are often stymied by the inherent structural limitations of television news. The analysis in Chapter Seven provides what is perhaps the clearest evidence of how these limitations constrain the engagement. When first asked why they watched the news, ten of the eleven viewers immediately responded along the lines that they did so to “keep up” with things. Close analysis of the ensuing discourses of reception, however, revealed a variety of ways in which this goal was seldom — if ever — met. The most

common complaint was that the news simply failed to provide enough information, and variations on this included unrepresentative coverage and a general lack of depth. The narrow scope of broadcast television news was cited by several viewers as another shortcoming. Other criticisms included irrelevancy of most of the news, presenting information out of context, and presenting a distorted view of certain events.

Creativity in terms of how viewers engage and disengage with the news is highlighted in Chapter Eight. The news is more often than not watched within the wider domestic realm, and in this context the engagement will vary from a regular, predictable activity to a more or less sporadic and infrequent encounter. In addition to this, there are also differences in how news watching is integrated into the daily routines of viewers' lives. For some, news watching is seamlessly incorporated into the various other activities of everyday life with little or no disruption. For others, however, the integration is more discontinuous. They must stop whatever they are otherwise doing in order to accommodate the activity of news watching. The tension between creativity and constraint within this dimension of the viewer-news engagement hinges on two specific forms of temporal organisation. On the one hand there is the always-contingent nature of peoples' day-to-day routines, and on the other there is the always-fixed broadcast schedule of television news. The tension between creativity and constraint can also be observed within the interpretive dimension of reception where viewers engage with the news as a textual construction. Viewers use the various segments of the bulletin (headlines, international stories, sports, weather, advertisement breaks etc.) like platforms at a train station, as points of departure and arrival for their engagement with the news. Contrasting with this explicitly critical form of interpretation, a referential mode of interpretation gives rise to a more arbitrary form of viewer-news engagement. Viewers are either drawn into or pushed away from an engagement with the news depending on the actual content of specific stories (it may be something which interests or fascinates them, or it may be something which bores or disturbs them). Thus while the news attempts to impose constraint on the viewer through a regular and predictable structure, viewers respond creatively by determining their own individual structures of engagement. This tension is further problematised when the

content of news stories is added to the mix. While the news producers control what the viewer will see, they have no control over how that content will be interpreted by the viewer.

In Chapter Nine the tension between creativity and constraint is explored through an analysis of how viewers interpret the news from an aesthetic perspective. Attention here is placed on the discursive constructions of what television news is, because as discourses of reception the interviews are as equally constitutive of what is being 'received' as they are of that actual process. While the distinction between referential and critical modes of interpretation will have been presented as reasonably clear-cut in the preceding chapters, the analysis presented in this chapter is based on a more complex interrelationship. In discussing the aesthetic form of television news (i.e. employing a critical mode of interpretation), viewers are also implicitly commenting on the specific kinds of referentiality that the news produces. The commercial necessity of attracting as many viewers as possible has resulted in a specific aesthetic form that tends to adversely affect the news' referential performance. The paradox here is that in developing these strategies of containment (the focus on a strong visual element, the reduction of discourse to a snappy sound-bite, the elevation of news readers to celebrity status), news producers are acknowledging the inherently contingent nature of reception. In doing so, they are also acknowledging that their strategies will only ever be partially successful in containing the creative tactics of resistance that viewers employ. The concept of 'professionalism' provides a case in point. Although two particular viewers expressed a preference for the same news bulletin, their choices were driven by quite different interpretations of the concept of 'professionalism'. Dean (not his real name) said that he preferred *3 National News* because of its "professional presentation" [31-32], and yet Malcolm chose to watch the same news because he perceived the alternative bulletin to be **too** professional. In both cases, however, there was agreement that in referential terms the news fails to live up to the promises implied by such professionalism.

The experiences of some viewers, in particular those detailed in Chapter Nine, suggest that watching television news is perhaps more about form than it is about function. The importance of ‘the look’ of television news in drawing viewers into an engagement with it contrasts with the criticisms that arise over its actual performance in fulfilling the promise to inform. What is the point of watching a news bulletin that lacks depth and merely provides superficial coverage of events, even if it looks ‘professional’? Perhaps the answer lies in watching a bulletin that at least fits viewers’ expectations of what a news programme **should** look like. In Chapter Ten the argument is put forward that watching television news — as a specific form of reception — has its own aesthetic form. Watching television news can, like the news itself, take on a particular form that gives the **appearance** of “catching up” or “keeping up” with things. One viewer in particular provides a striking example of this. Through a very peripheral level of engagement with the news she manages to maintain at least the impression of keeping up to date with things. The discourse of another viewer suggests that the **act** of watching the news is perhaps more significant than what is actually watched. Given viewers’ own criticisms of the news as a source of information (as detailed in Chapter Seven), the question is what is the significance of creating and maintaining this impression? Why is “keeping up to date” with things so important when the means of achieving this is so obviously flawed? Several viewers hinted at an underlying imperative that suggests that the news is something that **should** be watched. One viewer’s ironic response to the question of why people watch the news — “Cause they think they have to?” — is perhaps closer to the truth. The analysis in Chapter Seven showed that the imperative to watch the news (as encapsulated in the desire to keep up to date with things) is contradicted in practice by the inability of the news to provide viewers with satisfactory levels of information. However this represents a strictly informational perspective of reception. A more social, popular understanding of the centripetal vector that continually draws viewers to the news can be arrived at by stepping outside this exclusive understanding of news reception. All of the viewers said they often talk with their friends, family members and work colleagues about the news. This ‘discursive continuation’ of the reception process requires at the least an

awareness of what was on the news, and this is where the impression of news watching has significance. The act(ivity) of “watching the news” is a prerequisite for participating in these discussions. Irrespective of what meanings are made (or if they are made at all), it is their functionality that matters. As two viewers acknowledge, while the news may not actually provide them with much useful information, the act of news watching can help them avoid feeling inadequate or ignorant.

In terms of the creativity versus constraint dynamic, there is a certain irony at work in this situation. The advertised strategy of the news producers to inform the public and keep them up to date is threatened by the constraints of operating within a highly competitive commercial broadcasting environment. The unspoken strategy of delivering as large an audience as possible to the advertisers who provide those producers with revenue is similarly threatened by those same constraints. As the analytical chapters of this thesis show, viewers are more often than not aware of the strategies of containment at work within the news and through the creative mobilisation of various tactics of resistance they subvert these centripetal forces. Ultimately, however, this never-ending battle is of little significance. Understanding how the news functions within the wider network of social relations that constitute the everyday lives of viewers provides us with a more compelling reason why television news consistently pulls in more viewers than any other programme, despite its apparent failure to deliver what it promises.

1.2 Background to the Research

This research project did not have as its initial goal the exploration of the viewer-news relationship. As originally conceived, the goal was perhaps more expansive in its scope, and certainly more traditional in its approach. Before outlining the structure of this thesis, therefore, I wish to indulge in a little autobiographical history in order to provide the reader with an understanding of how this change came about.

Following the completion of the Degree of Master of Social Sciences, where my thesis had looked at the narrative structure of television news (Bosomworth, 1993), I was fortunate to

be awarded a University of Waikato Postgraduate Scholarship. Although I was keen to continue research in the area of the mass media, I decided to forego research on television news for something a little different. At that time (mid-1993) the New Zealand health care system was undergoing a series of radical changes. As part of its overall restructuring plan the National Government initiated an advertising campaign to inform the public on how the new system was going to work, and why these changes were necessary. In the face of intense public scrutiny the high profile Saatchi & Saatchi advertising agency was awarded a \$3 million contract to produce the advertising campaign. Accordingly, I decided to conduct a reception analysis of the advertisements as a way of assessing the campaign's impact. Due to a variety of factors, however, this particular research goal was abandoned.

One of the reasons was that in the process of evaluating material pertaining to the health reforms my attention was drawn to another, altogether more intriguing, area of inquiry. During this early data-gathering exercise it had become clear that the Government was spending vast amounts of money on advertising and public relations, with one estimate suggesting some \$33 million had been spent between 1990 and 1993 (Harris, 1993). The purpose behind this, or so it seemed, was to ensure that the public of New Zealand were not only informed about what was happening in terms of institutional restructuring (within the health system, as well as education and other areas), but that they were informed in a particular way. Unfortunately the very real difficulty of gaining access to sensitive Government information on this issue proved to be such an obstacle that the research soon ground to a frustrating halt.

Throughout this entire period, however, I had been speaking with as many people as I could about the health reform advertising campaign. Conversations and discussions with family, friends, and colleagues led to the development of a new line of inquiry. Despite intense news media coverage of both the reforms and the associated advertising campaign (and despite even the advertising campaign itself), many people appeared to know very little about what was actually happening within the health system. People were aware of, and generally expressed opposition to the proposed restructuring, but that seemed to be the

extent of their knowledge. When asked to explain in more detail what exactly they disagreed with, most were unable to. It was these responses, combined with my own developing thoughts and perceptions of how people actually become informed about such issues, that directed me toward a new research goal: an examination of the relationship between the news media's portrayal of political issues and the viewing public's understanding of those same issues.

1.2.1 The Original Research Statement

To that end, the following research statement was developed: "Television news based perceptions of political issues among selected groups of people in Hamilton." To further clarify the research aims and procedures, I followed Dey's (1993) suggestion that to find a focus for this kind of qualitative inquiry the researcher must first answer a series of questions concerning not only the aims and objectives of the research but also what kinds of things are going to be examined.

The questions that he proposes researchers ask of themselves are:

- 1/. **Why** is the research being done?
- 2/. What **kind** of data will be analysed?
- 3/. How can the data be **characterised**?
- 4/. What are the **analytical** objectives?
- 5/. Why have **these** data been selected?
- 6/. How are these data **representational/exceptional**?
- 7/. **Who** wants to know?
- 8/. **What** do they want to know?

At the time, my responses to these questions were as follows:³

³ The use of a different font for these responses is not just a stylistic aberration. This was the format that I adopted for the research proposal from which this section originates. I have deliberately chosen to retain the original format as a

1

My aim is to determine if a relationship exists between the media-generated picture of political issues and a public-generated picture of those same issues. The intention of this is not to replicate agenda-setting experiments which attempt to link media content with what the public think about,⁴ but rather to gain an insight into how the public's perception of political issues is shaped by their portrayal in the news media. If people do in fact construct their own reality by using news media content, and given the undeniable popularity of television news as a prime source of information about the world, then surely it is important to: a). understand how this process works; and b). examine this process in terms of relationships of power (e.g., the power of news media organisations, as one small section of society, to define the issue for a much larger section of society).

2

The analysis will involve two types of data: firstly, video recordings of television news stories that deal with certain political issues; secondly, the tape recorded comments of various groups of people as they talk about those issues. In terms of the issues themselves, these will to a large extent be determined by what events were being covered by the news at the time of the interviews. Both types of data

way of explicitly identifying it as belonging to an earlier period of the research project. For an illuminating discussion on this practice, see the chapter on "Feminist Research" in Banister et al. (1994).

⁴ See, for example: Haney (1993); McCombs et al. (1995); Protess and McCombs (1991); Ward (1995).

are essentially documentary, although within this broad definition there will be some variation. For example, the news stories will consist of both audio and visual elements, while the interviews will be analysed as transcripts of verbal conversations.

3

The data can be characterised as qualitative, although there will be a small amount of quantitative analysis undertaken. This will be in the form of statistics on the number and length of news stories dealing with the political issues in question, and the viewing patterns of the interviewees. If anything, the content analysis of news stories will be 'harder' than that of the interviewee responses.⁵

This is only because of the nature of news discourse: news stories are tightly edited and scripted and as such have a different form from that of naturally occurring conversation. In television news stories, themes, actors, and events usually appear within a clearly defined narrative structure (Bosomworth, 1993). Natural conversation is also a highly structured phenomenon, yet its 'unscripted' nature means that topics and themes are far less likely to follow identifiable patterns.

⁵ Hard, in this instance is used somewhat pejoratively in relation to the often used although overly simplistic (and inherently sexist (Morgan, 1981)) dichotomy that equates hard data with positivist/quantitative analysis and soft data with naturalistic/qualitative analysis (see also Richards and Richards, 1991).

4

The analytic objective in undertaking this research project is to determine if a relationship exists between news media portrayals of political issues and people's perception of those issues, and if so, to explicate the nature of that relationship.

5

Selection of data will ultimately be determined by the limited resources (both physically and financially) available. I have chosen only one type of news media – television – mainly because it is the source of most people's information regarding the world around them, but also because an exhaustive analysis covering television, newspapers, news magazines and radio will require far more resources than I am currently capable of providing. Limited resources are also responsible for restricting the geographical range from which interviewees will be drawn from to the immediate environs of Hamilton.⁶

6

The question of how representational or otherwise the selected television news stories will be is not particularly significant given the type of research that is planned. As the aim is to understand the nature of the relationship between news coverage of issues and viewer perception of those issues, selection of appropriate

⁶ The lack of concrete details (numbers and characteristics of interviewees, specific news stories) in this (and a number of other) response(s) must be understood in light of the fact that this section was originally written prior to commencing what would traditionally be considered the 'fieldwork' stage of the research.

examples will be driven by the content of the news. There is little point in choosing an “issue” (e.g. education reforms, law and order, tax cuts etc.) if that issue is not covered by the news during the period under study. The people who will form the interview groups may perhaps be seen as unrepresentational in that they will all be from the Hamilton area (see point 5 above). Since, however, I will primarily be involved in a process of discovery rather than verification, seeking results that are valid rather than reliable and replicable (Stainback and Stainback, 1988), the issue of representativeness assumes rather less significance than it would in research of a more quantitative nature. Nevertheless, steps will be taken to ensure that a suitably heterogeneous mix of people will be interviewed.

7 & 8

The questions pertaining to who wants to know the results and why are presumably aimed at researchers working in applied fields, such as policy analysis, market research or therapeutic (e.g., health) research, where there is usually a ‘client’ who has either commissioned the research or will in some way benefit directly or indirectly from the research. As a doctoral candidate the situation is a little different. Obviously I want to know what will eventuate, and no doubt so will my supervisor!

1.2.2 The Original Intention

Over a period of four to six weeks I will conduct a series of interviews with various groups of people in Hamilton in order to determine how their perception of political issues is shaped by television news coverage of those issues. Initially, a questionnaire will be sent out to a wide range of individuals (drawn from the

electoral rolls) in order to determine such demographic and social characteristics as: age; ethnic group; sex; occupation; socioeconomic status, educational level; level of political activity; political affiliation (if any); length of residence in New Zealand (if not born in New Zealand), etc. Information will also be sought on their television viewing habits, such as how often they watch it and which programmes they prefer. The aim of this questionnaire is to ensure that the interviewees are representative of as wide a cross section of the population as possible. This will be achieved by selecting from the responses an appropriate mix of people based on the variables noted above. The actual interview groups will consist of between four and six people, with their specific make-up being finalised using this same information. Once the groups have been organised, meetings will be held on a regular basis during the time period under investigation. Discussion will focus on what they have seen on the news concerning politics, politicians and the government. These meetings will be videotaped and/or audio taped so that the complete range of responses can be transcribed for later analysis. At the same time, the main evening (6.00pm) news bulletins, TVNZ's *One Network News* and TV3's *3 National News*, will be videotaped. Preliminary analysis will be conducted in order to identify those news stories concerning select political issues. Detailed content analysis will then be conducted on those stories. From this a picture will emerge as to how those issues are portrayed in television news stories. Another picture of those issues will have emerged from the group discussions. The relationship between the media-generated picture and the public-generated picture will then be analysed.

1.2.3 Looking Back

It is perhaps appropriate at this stage to indicate the various ways in which this initial conception was based on a number of assumptions, some tacit and others more explicit, that were drawn for the most part from the tradition of reception analysis (see Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5 for discussion of reception analysis). One of those unspoken assumptions concerned the status of the viewer as active. The argument put forward by Roscoe et al. (1995) that the extensive use of the term “active audience” within media research has seen it become taken for granted is rather appropriate in this context. As a student of the media for a number of years, and with a Master’s dissertation behind me, it is reasonable to suggest that I was indeed taking the idea of audience activity for granted. The dialectical nature of the audience-text relationship (Silverstone, 1994) is clearly assumed to exist, expressed in the aim of seeking to understand how the viewing public use media representations to make sense of the realm of politics. If anything, this formulation is reminiscent of the first of Corner’s three aims of audience reception (see Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5.1) in which the research seeks to determine the extent to which media messages propagate a dominant set of ideas and values. Despite being expressed in a rather rudimentary way (reflecting the embryonic nature of these aims) the issue of power was also made explicit. From a methodological point of view, the intention to analyse data from both the audience and television news itself met Jensen and Rosengren’s (1990) call for reception research to combine content analysis with audience research in the same study. The final, and unspoken, assumption that this early incarnation of the research was premised upon concerns the nature of the viewing context itself. At the time I was operating with the assumption that because television news featured representations of political issues (which in itself was based upon a variety of assumptions on my behalf as to what constituted such an issue), and because people watched the news, then they would necessarily have a perception of those political issues. It was also assumed that these perceptions were in fact based on such representations. Furthermore, it was assumed that they **would** be found.

If that was the original intention of the research, how then did I arrive at the goal around which this thesis is now based? Charting the transformation in step-by-step detail is difficult. What is clear, however, is that a defining moment in that process was the reflexive acknowledgment that I was assuming an unproblematic audience-news relationship: people watch television news, therefore it is simply a matter of comparing media discourses and audience discourses in order to understand the process of reception (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990). As a relative newcomer to qualitative research, I was very much engaged in a process of learning-by-doing. In particular, there was a growing critical awareness that as the principal measurement device (Miles and Huberman, 1994), I would be an active contributor to the context within which the data would be gathered (the interview). Added to this was the fact that I was researching a social practice (watching television news) in which I was actively engaged. Chapter Four, Section 4.2 explores the methodological consequences of reflexively acknowledging this duality whereby I am both researcher and practitioner of the activity in question. For now, however, I want to focus on how this acknowledgment led to the abandonment of the issues-based research in favour of the current project. Reflexivity has been described as “thinking about thinking” (Myerhoff and Ruby, 1982: 1), and in this instance a consequence of that process was a critical re-examination of the assumptions around which the research was formulated. In thinking about my own experiences of watching television news, and in analysing the discourses of reception that were produced as a result of the interviews conducted with viewers, it very soon became clear that what had originally been taken for granted (that people watched television news) was in fact a much more complex and ultimately more interesting area of inquiry.

It should be made at this point clear that the original goal was not abandoned because it was unresearchable but rather because it was based on an assumption that was found to be inconsistent with the experiences of both myself and the people that I interviewed. From a broader research perspective, this raises an important issue. I would argue that issues-based research that rests on the underlying assumption that people watch television news faces a significant challenge. The problem confronting researchers now in this field of

enquiry is how to account for a viewer-news relationship that is clearly problematic. I believe that there are two possible options open to them. The first is relatively simple, although ultimately it is more a sidestep than a way forward. Researchers can continue to conduct issues-based studies along current lines provided they acknowledge that their findings are based on a reception context that is either assumed to be unproblematic or that the context has been specifically created as a consequence of the research design (see Chapter Three, Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 where this second situation in particular is discussed). The second option represents a much more challenging task. In order to better understand the viewer-news nexus, new and innovative research strategies have to be developed that will account for a reception context that is complex, contradictory and always contingent.

1.3 A Brief Chapter Outline

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two provides a review of audience research as a particular field of study. Five research traditions are examined in terms of their historical development, underlying concepts, and methodological approaches. They are: Effects Research, Uses and Gratifications, Literary Criticism, Cultural Studies, and Reception Analysis. Given that this research project falls within the scope of this last tradition, a critical examination of Corner's (1996) summary of the aims of reception analysis is included at this point. Two opposing tendencies that have emerged within the five research traditions are then examined. The first of these represents a convergence of methodological approaches, while the second is representative of a diffusion in terms of how both audiences and texts are conceived of. A recent critique of developments in audience research is then assessed, with the conclusion being drawn that while certainly useful, such debates can ultimately divert attention from the very thing that audience research should be most concerned with: the audience-media nexus.

Chapter Three focuses on the interview as the method employed to gather the data upon which the analysis in part two of this thesis is based. The first section (3.2) outlines the particular type of interview that was adopted, and includes a return to Corner's (1996)

assessment of reception analysis. Two issues that he addresses are discussed in relation to this research project: the question of employing group or individual interviews; and the use of experimental or naturalistic research settings. Section 3.3 then moves on to look at the kinds of questions that were employed in the interview and how they were organised into a schedule. The discussion in section 3.4 centres on the process of selecting appropriate viewers and the arrangements that were made to then interview them. Brief ethnographic details of the eleven interviewees are also included in this section.

Chapter Four shifts away from the empirical focus of the previous chapter to discuss a number of different research perspectives that were taken on board during the interview phase but which also had an influence on the preliminary stages of the analysis process. The first — and perhaps most problematic — of these is reflexivity, which impacted on this research in two ways. While one strand of reflexivity is addressed in section 1.2.3 above, the discussion in section 4.2 looks at how an increased self-awareness of myself as occupying a dual position of researcher and viewer affected both the interview and analysis phases. Section 4.3 takes up the issue of feminist perspectives on research, and in particular how these led to a reconceptualisation of the interview. From a relatively unproblematic exercise in elicitation, the interview instead became the site for the co-construction of meaning. Concepts from the third area of influence, discourse analysis, were instrumental in determining what exactly was being constructed during the interview. From a social psychological perspective of discourse analysis, the interviews were reconsidered as discourses of reception in which viewers constructed their own identity as viewers of television news. From this new vantagepoint, it became clear that this identity was far from stable, as viewers adopted a variety of positions in relation to the news. Discussing these influences in discrete sections does tend to render less visible the closely interrelated way in which they worked to inform the research. Placing the discussion between the chapter on the interview and the chapter on the methods of analysis is, however, symbolic of the way in which the concepts here informed both aspects of the research processes.

Chapter Five deals with methodological issues, with the first section exploring the issue of qualitative research. A number of basic features that characterise qualitative research in general are identified and these are discussed in relation to the current research. As a consequence of linking these characteristic features of qualitative research to the current research project several problematic issues are identified. Section 5.3 narrows the focus to look at how concepts from Grounded Theory informed the analytical methods that were adopted. The key factor here was the development of an approach that emphasised discovery rather than verification and that allowed for the conceptual categories to emerge from the data. In section 5.4, The Analytical Method, the discussion shifts to the area of computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA). A cornerstone of this project has been NUD*IST, a software application designed specifically for the analysis of qualitative data. A brief description of the application's capabilities is then followed by an account of how it was employed in this project. The section concludes with some cautionary remarks that have been expressed over the increasingly widespread use of computerised methods of analysis.

Chapter Six details the development of the bi-dimensional analytical framework that was applied to the discourses of reception in order to arrive at an understanding of what takes place when viewers and television news meet in the space that is reception. In the spirit of the grounded approach that lies at the heart of this research, the framework is in part derived from the very discourses of the viewers themselves. The first dimension — the relational — builds on the way in which the discourses revealed a contradictory dynamic at the heart of television news reception, with viewers alternating between close and peripheral forms of engagement. The second dimension — the interpretive — is derived from an earlier reception study that examined differences in how viewers interpreted or read a particular television programme. Some of their readings were characterised as referential, in that they referred to events in stories as if they relate to the world depicted within the fictional narrative. Referential readings also included those instances when viewers spoke of their own lives by reference to the way that the characters in the fictional narrative behaved. Viewers also made critical readings, where they interpreted the

programme in terms of its existence as a textual construction, as distinct from the reality that it depicted. The discourses of reception that were gathered in this study exhibit this same basic distinction. Viewers alternate between talking about the news in terms of the real-world events shown in the various reports, and talking about the news as a constructed phenomenon, a product of news media organisations with identifiable conventions, styles and modes of presentation.

The complexity of the viewer-news relationship and the relationship between the two modes of reception is explored in detail in Chapters Seven through Ten, the analytical heart of this thesis. The major themes of these chapters have already been outlined in the opening section of this chapter (see pp. 3-7).

Chapter Eleven concludes the thesis and is divided into two parts. The first section consists of a review of both the Praxis and Analysis parts of the thesis. The overtly reflexive stance that I have taken throughout this project is reiterated at this point. From this perspective an understanding of news watching has developed that is at odds with the relatively narrow definitions that characterise a number of recent reception studies. As a consequence of dissolving the distinction between 'public knowledge' and 'private pleasure' steams of reception research, an approach was sought that took into account a much broader view of television news reception. Applying a bi-dimensional analytical framework to the discourses of reception has produced the analysis that is presented in Chapters Seven through Ten. The first section of the conclusion ends with a reminder that research is effect a process of decontextualisation. Recontextualisation is achieved in the second section by bringing together the various ideas and concepts that are explored in Chapters Seven through Ten. Reception is cast as a form of guerrilla warfare where space (i.e. meaning) is fought for, and where forces of constraint (the strategies of the news producers) are met with forces of creativity (the tactics of the viewer), and where the outcome is never clear. In such a fragmented and diversified (and potentially contradictory) environment power has undergone a similar transformation, highlighting

the importance of close and detailed analyses of the micro- and mezzo-levels of viewer-news engagement as a way of revealing its operation.

PART I

PRAXIS

CHAPTER TWO

AUDIENCE RESEARCH — A REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

As an exploration of the engagement that people have with television news, this study comes under the broad umbrella of audience research. Accordingly, this chapter provides an outline of some of the key developments in audience research over the past half-century. As in most areas of academic research there is no clear agreement as to the path of this development. In basing the structure of this review on one particular ‘version’ of this developmental history, I am acknowledging the inescapably partial and situated nature of all forms of knowledge. Following the historical review I present a discussion of two trends that have emerged from the various developments in audience studies. The first is concerned with a convergence of methodological approaches, while the second examines the increasingly diverse conceptualisations of audience and text. Leading on from this last point, I also discuss a critique of recent developments in audience research. In concluding this chapter I draw attention to the fact that debates on the historical development of audience research, and on the merits or otherwise of different research methodologies, have tended to divert attention away from the very thing that audience studies has sought to comprehend: the nature of the audience-media relationship.

2.2 History, Concepts and Methods

Audience research covers such a variety of approaches, perspectives and methods that any attempt to provide an exhaustive account of its history and development would be impossible, given the limitations of the immediate context. Furthermore, it

is a field in which a variety of differing perspectives on the nature of its development have been proposed. Abercrombie (1996), for example, suggests that academic research into television audiences can be divided into three phases: effects, uses and gratifications, and decoding. In contrast to this tripartite model, Lorimer (1994) lists no fewer than seven approaches to the study of audiences: effects research, uses and gratifications research, cultural studies, feminist research, reception analysis, structuration theory, and institutional audience research. Occupying a position midway between these two examples, Jensen and Rosengren (1990) examine five traditions in their review of audience research, and it is their framework that serves as the model for the review presented here. The five traditions are: (1) Effects research, (2) Uses and gratifications (U&G), (3) Literary criticism, (4) Cultural studies, (5) Reception analysis. Each of these traditions will be treated as follows: a brief outline of the tradition's historical development will be sketched; their conceptualisation of the message, the audience and the contexts within which the process is embedded will be described; and the methodologies and modes of analysis will be noted.

2.2.1 Effects

Developed in America during the 1940s and 1950s, and deriving from the early survey work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (Lorimer, 1994), the central question that underpinned effects research (attributed to Halloran, 1970, in Morley, 1989) was “what does the mass media do to people?” Jensen and Rosengren (1990), however, suggest that the rise of effects research can be traced to the impact of the introduction of various forms of new media.¹ For each new medium, be it books, journals, newspapers, film, radio, or television, there was a widespread fear that its effects

¹ All further references in this chapter to Jensen and Rosengren (1990) will be identified by the use of the following abbreviation: (J&R).

might be harmful, “especially to supposedly weak minds, such as those of children, women and uneducated people” (J&R: 209). Effects research originally posited a hypodermic model of reception (Morley, 1989), with particular media messages ‘injecting’ audiences in such a way as to cause particular behaviours. Both media messages and viewers were treated unproblematically, the former as producing measurable effects on the latter. With regard to the message aspect of this relationship, the common understanding was of a basic self-evident message along the lines of an advertising or political (i.e., election) campaign. Analysis of the content of these messages could be characterised as the “quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, cited in Morley. 1992: 49). Later research (Bradac, 1989; Bryant and Zillmann, 1986) saw the message reconfigured to become a collection of “stimuli differentiated according to context” (J&R: 215).² A similar reconfiguration of the audience has also taken place, with more recent examples of effects research claiming substantially different effects for audience members that differ in their social and/or individual characteristics (Signorielli and Morgan, 1989; Noelle-Neumann, 1983). Similarly, the specific social context within which communication takes place is also understood to produce different effects.

Methodologically, effects research has generally drawn from the social sciences, employing a wide variety of methods and techniques. These include laboratory experiments, natural and field experiments, survey studies (using questionnaires and standardised interviews), participant observations and in-depth interviews. These techniques are common to both effects and U&G research, although in effects research there is an emphasis on “highly structured and standardised techniques”

² They argue that effects research has typically conceived of media messages “as symbolic stimuli having recognisable and measurable physical characteristics” (215).

(J&R: 220). Some have argued, however, that this very emphasis raises doubts about the validity of effects research. In seeking to determine if media messages change people's behaviour or beliefs (as opposed to reinforcing the status quo), researchers have generally adopted experimental approaches (Livingstone, 1996: 307). But the laboratory setting, although ostensibly a social situation, is not the same as the school play yard. Experimental results which imply that violence that is shown to be punished is less likely to be imitated, that violent images in the news affect older children more, and that younger children and more aggressive children are more influenced by antisocial behaviour, cannot be generalised to viewers' everyday lives (ibid: 311). Morley (1989) raises the interesting point that the effects model contains within it a contradictory notion of the kind of effect that is produced. On the one hand there is the perception that television reduces its audiences to a state of somnambulistic quiescence, incapable of little other than unquestionably consuming a steady diet of eye-candy. On the other, however, the same medium is also accused of causing people to react in all sorts of ways, with particular reference to imitating the violence that constitutes a large proportion of television's content. Perhaps the complexities and uncertainties of the effects of the mass media are still best exemplified in Wilbur Schramm's often-quoted conclusion that was first voiced in the early days of mass communication research — "that the media influences some people, some of the time, about some things" (quoted in Lull, 1995: 87).

2.2.2 Uses and Gratifications

If effects research was interested in determining what the media did to people, then uses and gratifications research turned the question around by asking what people did with the media (Katz, 1977, cited in Lull, 1995: 90). One strand of thought is that U&G emerged during the 1970s in response to the apparent failure of effects research in determining what effects, if any, the media had on people (Krippendorff, 1994). Others claim that U&G can be traced back to the early 1940s, and in particular to the work of Herzog who studied the gratifications that listeners derived

from daytime radio serials and quiz shows (J&R: 210) They also suggest that both U&G and effects are components of a broad, social science-oriented research tradition and that a convergence of the two approaches, under the banner of “effects and uses” (ibid.) has been under way for some time (see also Schröder, 1987).

Morley (1989) claims that the focus within U&G on differences in interpretation represents a significant advance from effects research in terms of how the audience is conceptualised. Instead of being passive recipients of media messages, people were now conceived as active users of these messages. U&G proposed that individuals used specific media messages to gratify specific human needs (Lull, 1995), and in so doing it brought to the fore the notion that the audience’s perception of messages could be radically different from that intended by the producer (Stevenson, 1995). Correspondingly, however, the message component of communication has by and large been overshadowed by this emphasis on the ‘active’ audience member.

A further consequence of this has been the conceptualisation of the audience as an “atomised mass of individuals abstracted from the groups and subcultures which provide a framework of meaning for their social activities” (Morley, 1992: 53). In other words, there is no link between the readings that people make of a television text and the wider social, cultural and ideological formations within which individuals exist. Hall (1980) addressed this issue by arguing that while media messages may indeed be open to interpretation, there is nevertheless a structure of dominance inscribed within the messages through their mode of production that works to limit, or ‘over-determine’ the potential readings. As Lorimer (1994) argues, given its roots in social psychology, U&G has concentrated mostly on the micro- and mezzo- levels of social existence with little or no attention paid to macro-level analysis involving ideological, cultural and political orientations (see also J&R). Like effects research, U&G research has relied primarily on the social science type of methodologies. This has given rise to two types of research efforts. Firstly, researchers will often incorporate a variety of techniques in the one project, combining, for example, highly structured and standardised surveys “with more or

less unstructured, conversational in-depth interviews” (J&R: 220). Secondly, there is a trend towards longitudinal studies, with phenomena sometimes being studied over considerable periods of time. Critics of the U&G approach have focused on the empirical difficulties that researchers face. Exactly how people ‘use’ media messages to ‘gratify’ their needs involves complex and uncertain cognitive and behavioural processes which are not well suited to empirical analysis (Lull, 1995).

2.2.3 Literary Criticism

The traditions of literary analysis and criticism can be traced back some 2500 years to the classical Greek scholars (Jensen, 1991b; J&R), and it has continued throughout the ages with the Bible and other assorted religious tracts as a major focus (Lorimer, 1994). The development of the modern social order brought about the redefinition of literature as a form of communication. The emphasis was now directed towards

demonstrating that, and explaining how, literature, as mastered by specific historical authors, may give rise to aesthetic experiences supposed to transcend time and place.

(J&R: 211)

Implicit in this, however, was the idea that in order to interpret the text the reader was required to understand what the author had in mind (Lorimer, 1994). In other words, like the conception of the message in effects research, the meaning of a text was taken to be immanent in the structure of its content (J&R). As for the audience within literary criticism, the reader was typically “a critical construct to be deduced from literary discourse or tradition” (ibid: 217). Actual readers have rarely been subject to empirical study within this tradition, and if they have, the focus has usually been on “general sociological or psychological” aspects (ibid.). The notion of specific historical and social contexts of both production and reception has typically been absent from much literary criticism, present only as an “abstract framework” or sometimes as “historical background” in an introductory section

(ibid.). This author-centred approach to the study of texts was challenged in the 1960s in the wake of Barthes' famous *Death of the Author* essay in which he argued that the source of meaning could only be the reader, as meaning could only ever be produced in the act of consumption (Lorimer, 1994). In place of the one true meaning of a text there was a range of possible meanings, and in this context the act of reading changed. Like the transformation between effects and U&G research, the act of reading went from the quiescent absorption of an imposed meaning to the active exploration of the text's indeterminacy. This shift in the understanding of interpretation proved influential for the development of audience studies. Indeed it was from this initial transformation within the literary field that many of the underlying assumptions of cultural studies and reception analysis, such as the active reader and the polysemic text, were derived. In terms of the methods employed within the traditional modes of literary criticism, there is usually no distinction made between "analysis of 'data' and the subsequent interpretation of aggregated 'findings'" (J&R: 221). A variety of methods that focus exclusively on the text, derived for the most part from "linguistics, literary theory and rhetoric", are employed in an "analysis-cum-interpretation" in which "one... [or] sometimes more, possible and reasonable readings" are substantiated (ibid.).

2.2.4 Cultural Studies

Lorimer (1994) suggests that cultural Studies has "two moments".³ The first refers to the work of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s and 1940s, while the second

³ I would argue that as we head toward the end of the century, cultural studies has moved into what can be called a third moment. This development is reflected in the plethora of studies of 'culture' that have been conducted under an increasing variety of labels, including feminism, post-feminism,

emerged from Britain in the early 1970s, exemplified in the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Despite these differences in temporal and geographical location, both movements shared a common commitment to a Marxist perspective on the analysis of modern societies. This commitment was carried through by these later researchers as they built on the classic works of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, as well as more recent thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1977), Hoggart (1957), and Williams (1977). They developed what has been labelled a Birmingham-Paris axis, which was later re-exported to the American market (J&R: 212-213).⁴ In essence, much of the impetus for British cultural studies derived from an assimilation of French social and psychoanalytic theory with the critical study of contemporary social issues (Hall et al., 1980). Work on communications from within a cultural studies perspective is in the main concerned with the construction of meaning:

how it is produced in and through particular expressive forms and how it is continually negotiated and deconstructed through the practices of everyday life.

(Murdock, 1989, cited in Golding and Murdock, 1996: 12)

gender studies, queer studies, postmodernism, post-colonialism, and post-Marxism.

⁴ See, however, Ang and Morley (1989) and Morley (1992) on the dangers of “transplanting... British cultural studies, through the publishing export industry, into a free-floating transnational academic paradigm for the field as a whole” (Morley, 1992: 2). Citing Turner (1992), Morley offers the United States as an example of a place where the idea of popular culture has a significantly different implication within dominant cultural definitions. He also suggests that Australia is another country where the notion of the popular carries an altogether different set of associations than it does in Europe.

In terms of audience research, and in particular television audiences, it is the second incarnation of cultural studies that is most widely referred to. Making a clear distinction between the three elements of message, audience, and context proves somewhat difficult with cultural studies, as it occupies a position somewhere between textual and social research (J&R; Potter, 1996). Nevertheless, as with literary studies, the message, or discourse, is still the primary focus within cultural studies (J&R). Unlike literary studies, however, it does not limit itself to examples of “high culture”, instead concentrating on “popular cultural discourses” (ibid: 217). With some exceptions (Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984), cultural studies have typically neglected to examine audiences in empirical terms, although references are made to “the social and historical context[s]... which... mediate the flow and interpretation of communications” (J&R: 217). Audiences are sometimes reconfigured as interpretive communities, which refer to various interpretive strategies that are shared by individuals belonging to specific audience groups or publics. Jensen prefers to use the similar term of interpretive repertoires, as this “implies that audiences are not formal groups or communities, but contextually defined agents who employ such repertoires to make preliminary sense” (1991b: 42) of media messages. Cultural studies raises both theoretical and political questions concerning the position of the audience. From a theoretical perspective a number of researchers have examined to what extent audiences have resisted the constructions of reality that are presented in the mass media (Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1980, 1986; Radway, 1984). What was at stake in these studies was the

relative power of different cultural practices [of the producers of media content
and of the audiences of that content] in the social production of meaning.

(J&R: 213)

From a political point of view the question is whether or not the presence of semiotic resistance, in the form of audiences which are in some way resistant to the meanings intended by the producers, is evidence of a long-term tendency towards social change (ibid.).

Stuart Hall is perhaps the best known exponent of the cultural studies approach (Stevenson, 1995). His encoding/decoding model of communication is regarded as a watershed in the development of audience studies, and it usefully illustrates the complex way in which message, audience and context come together under this research tradition. Hall developed his model as a response to the limitations of the U&G approach outlined above, specifically the fact that it tended to ignore the wider social, cultural and ideological formations within which individuals and texts existed. He took from the effects theorists their starting notion that mass communication is a structured activity which has the power to set agendas and define issues (Morley, 1989). From the U&G perspective came the idea of an active viewer, capable of making his/her own meaning from the various signs and symbols of the media message (ibid.). However, the idea that the audience is an active agent in the making of meaning differs in a crucial respect between the two approaches. As discussed above, one of the weaknesses of the U & G approach was its

rather triumphant, liberal-pluralist conclusion... that media consumers are 'free' or even 'powerful' — a conclusion which allegedly undercuts the idea of 'media hegemony'.

(Ang, 1989: 102)

From a cultural studies point of view, the 'activity' of the audience is reconfigured instead as evidence of "the relations of power [which] are organised within the heterogenous practices of media consumption" (ibid.). Power in this sense does not reside in either 'the text' or 'the audience'. Instead, by understanding the consumption of media as a site of cultural struggle — as literally the point at which 'culture' is produced — power can be thought of as a resource which is available to both sides in differing forms and amounts.

The development of cultural studies from the literary studies tradition can be seen in the way that analysis-cum-interpretation takes place through methods which take significant account of the various extra-textual frameworks of explanation. The

analytical categories are grounded in literary theory and also in theories of social structure and subjectivity (J&R). In contrast to literary theory, however, various ‘everyday’ cultural forms are subjected to interpretation. Things like oral storytelling, graffiti and even everyday conversation are invoked as instances of popular expression which serve to maintain the “social and cultural identities which are based in interpretive communities” (ibid.).⁵ Audiences are seen as actively participating in the social production of meaning, often challenging media-generated constructions of reality in the process. The primary tool of research in cultural studies is still the interpreting scholar, which has given rise to a number of debates centring on methodology. Ang (1989) has argued that in order to fully represent the complex and multidimensional activity of audiences, it is necessary for research within cultural studies to adopt qualitative methods. In particular she has emphasised the potential that ethnographic studies have for providing contextually grounded analyses of media engagements. Lull (1988), however, has been critical of researchers who claim to be undertaking ethnography without a clear recognition of what ethnography actually entails. In a similar vein, Jankowski and Wester warn of a tendency for the methodology to become “everything to everybody” (1991: 73). While they welcome the plurality of interpretation that qualitative methods promises, this does not mean that they are prepared to accept a principle of ‘anything goes’ (Feyerabend, 1975).

⁵ Other such cultural practices that have been studied include fan worshipping of the singer Madonna by young females (Fiske, 1987, 1992), picnicking (Hartley, 1992a) and the tactics of youth shopping in suburban malls (Fiske, 1996).

2.2.5 Reception Analysis

The distinction between cultural studies and reception analysis is sometimes difficult to determine, as work carried out in the mid 1980s by Ang (1985), Morley (1986) and Radway (1984) has illustrated. Lindlof (1995) in fact considers reception analysis as a sub-discipline of the much wider realm of cultural studies. On the other hand, Kavoori and Gurevitch make the claim that because reception analysis attempts to understand how people deal with different media contents, it is actually close to the

study of **effects and uses and gratifications** — [as] both [have] studied media consumption in terms of the definitions provided by the consumers.

(1994: 419, emphasis in original)

Jensen and Rosengren (1990) contend that reception analysis has developed through the convergence of two distinct approaches. One root can be traced back to the traditions of reception aesthetics and reader-response theories of literary analysis. The other derives from U&G research that at least one current reception analyst (Elihu Katz⁶) helped to found. Corner (1996) supports this view by pointing out how reception analysis has combined elements from both approaches. From U&G comes the importance of directly investigating actual groups of media audiences and, from literary criticism, there is an increased emphasis on interpretation. Building on the pioneering work of Stuart Hall, Morley is credited as a decisive figure in the development of reception analysis (Corner, 1996). His *Nationwide* study has been hailed as one of the most significant reference points in the evolution of this strand of

⁶ In conjunction with Tamar Liebes, Katz has conducted a major investigation into the cross-cultural reception of the US prime-time soap opera *Dallas* (Liebes and Katz, 1989). See Chapter Six for a more detailed account of this work.

audience studies, despite the fact that it has since been subjected to a number of criticisms, including from Morley himself (e.g., Corner, 1991; Dahlgren, 1988; Jensen, 1990; Moores, 1993; Morley, 1992).

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of reception analysis is the way that it perceives the relationship between text and audience. Drawing from both the humanities and the social sciences, reception analysis holds that, like cultural studies, media messages consist of culturally and generically coded discourses and that, as in U&G studies, audiences are active in terms of their consumption and interpretation of these discourses (J&R). A major distinction of work in this area is the way that it rests on the notion of the 'contingent' nature of meaning production. Whereas earlier research tended to consider the viewer and the text as discrete entities, each with their own defining characteristics, reception analysis instead treats the relationship as dialectical (Silverstone, 1994). In this relationship meaning is not an inherent property of the text, instead it is "the product of viewer interpretation working upon significations" (Corner: 1995: 136). Text and viewer are

complementary elements of one area of inquiry which thus addresses both the discursive and the social aspects of communication.

(Jensen, 1991c: 135)

As the most recent development in the area of audience studies, reception analysis has taken as its point of departure what it regards as limitations in both the humanities and the social sciences (J&R). In terms of the former, it questions the validity of interpretive content analyses as a source of knowledge about the uses and

effects of mass media content. In terms of the latter, it questions the predominant methodologies of empirical social scientific research.⁷

Thus, reception analysis develops what may be referred to as audience-cum-content analysis which is both qualitative and empirical in nature. While producing empirical data about the audience through in-depth interviewing and observation, studies normally apply qualitative methods in a comparative analysis of audience data as well as content data. The immediate aim, then, is to examine the very processes of reception, which, further, have a bearing on the use and impact of media content.

(Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 214)

Jensen raises an important point when he speaks of the inherent difficulties in researching audiences since reception itself as a process “does not exist in the historical record”, and as such “it can only ever be reconstructed through the intervention of research” (1994: 262). It is in this sense that he and Rosengren talked of “audience-cum-content analysis” since the researcher must effectively analyse the discourse of the audience, as recovered through interviews, observation and textual analysis, in order to interpret and explain the process reception.

2.2.5.1 The Goals of Reception Analysis

In his discussion of the aims of reception studies, Corner begins by drawing on his earlier distinction between two broad categories of study: the ‘public knowledge’ project and the ‘popular culture’ project (Corner, 1991). The first of these is primarily concerned with how information is produced and disseminated throughout society. Included in this category are news, current affairs and documentary-style television programmes. The research is generally centred on specific themes, such as

⁷ Not surprisingly, this has led to debate across the field about the nature and purpose of media scholarship. See, for example, the volumes edited by Dervin et al. (1989) and Levy and Gurevitch (1994).

war reporting, economic news, policy issues and other areas of public concern like health. Studies in this area have tended to be characterised by their emphasis on the cognitive aspect of reception (Corner et al., 1990; Jensen, 1986; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Morley, 1980). In contrast to this, studies that have emerged from the ‘popular culture’ project are more concerned with issues of taste and pleasure in the reception of contemporary media. In other words they tend to be concerned with “what people **like** and why” (Corner, 1996: 284, emphasis in original). Not surprisingly, the range of media products studied is far greater within this area, with special emphasis being placed on the dramatic and entertainment genres (Ang, 1985; Hermes, 1995; Radway, 1984; Stacey, 1994). Having made this distinction explicit, however, Corner is quick to point out that there are significant interconnections between public information and popular culture. He cites work by Liebes and Katz (1990), Livingstone (1991), and Schlesinger et al. (1992), as examples of research that shares a concern with the ‘public knowledge’ project in the way that “power relations are reproduced through mediated meanings” (Corner, 1996: 284).

Within (and across) both strands of research, Corner identifies three main aims of reception studies:

- (1) confirmation of the effective transmission of dominant political and cultural values;
- (2) the ‘counter-evidencing’ to this of levels of immunity and/or resistance among audiences; and
- (3) the indication of complexity and variety in the production of mediated meanings.

(1996: 284)⁸

The first of these aims appears to be derived from earlier effects research traditions which sought to trace the effects that media messages exerted on audiences. From the perspective of reception analysis, the problem with the effects model was that it

⁸ He is quick to point out that this conceptualisation is indicative only of the “underlying hypotheses upon which investigations are pursued” (284).

presupposed a generally passive audience, unconsciously replicating media messages. Admittedly, this is something of a gross simplification, but it does throw into relief the emphasis that reception analysis places on the process of active interpretation by the audience. The problem for reception analysts, however, was to explain the persistence of unequal power relations.

Given that people work to make meanings from what they see and hear using their various interpretive schemas, how is it that what they finally end up making is so often conducive to maintaining inequalities and is so often antagonistic to clear, critical analysis of the way things are?

(Ibid: 285)

Rather than the earlier, and cruder, theories of ideological reproduction, reception analysis has a broader concern with the way that interpretive schemes and frameworks of understanding are distributed throughout society. This has seen reception analysis align itself with theories of hegemony, which propose a more subtle explanation than the Marxist notion of false consciousness, for how relations of power and domination are achieved and maintained within society.

The second aim is based on a reworking of the underlying assumptions that guide the first. Instead of conceiving the audience as victims of the media, both politically and culturally, it suggests a scenario that is at once less pessimistic and certainly more complex. This view stresses the independence of the audience by arguing that through active opposition or even scepticism, audiences subject “media output to a whole range of interpretive transformations” (ibid: 286). Thus while the first aim could be said to be a re-working of the effects tradition, this aim represents a similar re-working of the uses and gratifications approach. Corner raises an interesting point when he claims that the rejection of notions of ideological control that underpin work in this area necessarily “**assumes** that it is being tried for” (286, emphasis in original). Some studies operating in this area (e.g., Fiske, 1987) have focused less on what Corner rather simplistically calls the “bad” elements of a text and more on those elements “whose implications for politics and for culture are either far less

easy to judge or which are reckoned to have an emancipatory, democratic dynamic” (286).

Corner’s third aim is somewhat more problematic. Without indicating how it may in fact be achieved, he simply suggests that

[w]ork aiming primarily to show the complexity of reception process only carries any force when it is placed against theories taking a more simple view.

(286)

He is critical of much recent work in this area, arguing that the intellectual endeavour has become stalled. This has occurred as a result of increasing attention being paid to empirical methods of analysis, a development which has seen a concomitant reduction in the critical examination of the consequences of the viewer-media engagement. Despite this charge, Corner fails to provide any such examples. One can only presume that he is in agreement with Curran who argues that cultural and media studies have suffered from excessive fragmentation. In this new environment, the role of the media has been

reduced to a succession of reader-text encounters in the context of a society which is analytically disaggregated into a series of discrete instances...or in which power external to discourse is wholly evacuated.

(1990: 140)

This decentring of media research (Morley, 1992) has been attributed to the predominance of Foucauldian-inspired works that have emphasised the diffusion of power in contemporary society.⁹ The radical postmodernism (Curran and Gurevitch,

⁹ Morley is, however, critical of the partial nature of these readings of Foucault (Morley, 1992: 25-26).

1991) of Ang and Hermes' (1991) perspective on the gendered nature of media consumption would, in this sense, provide a likely target for Corner's criticism.¹⁰

Despite claiming that these aims represent the three main strands of reception research to date, Corner goes on to outline what is in effect a fourth direction. This approach has comprehension rather than influence, resistance or complexity as its central concern. Work carried out in this area seeks primarily to understand the processes whereby the diverse linguistic, visual and aural elements of media messages are made sense of, particularly in relation to the construction of public knowledge.¹¹ The complexity of reception is taken for granted in this approach, and with the question of influence still very much a central concern, the "openly constructionist" perspective of comprehension-based studies has seen them move beyond the simple dichotomy of power/resistance that characterises the first two aims outlined above (Corner, 1996: 287).

2.3 Opposing Tendencies

The review above has attempted, however briefly and partially, to sketch out the various developments that have occurred within the field of audience studies over the past half century. In this section I will discuss what I believe to be two of the more salient themes that run through this development. Although they have emerged concurrently within audience research, they are representative of broadly oppositional trajectories. In the first instance commentators have pointed to a centripetal tendency which has resulted in a convergence of approaches (J & R,

¹⁰ In the face of such criticism, Ang's later work (1996) represents something of an attempt to re-engage inquiry with the wider issues that surround the processes of reception.

¹¹ See, for example, Gamson and Modigliani (1989), Corner et al. (1990), Livingstone and Lunt (1994), and Philo (1990).

Schrøder, 1987). In the second, a centrifugal tendency has led to an increasing diversity in terms of how the various elements of the communication process — text, audience, and context — have been conceived.

2.3.1 Centripetal

Taking the idea of convergence first, and following on from the way in which cultural studies and in particular reception analysis have drawn from both the humanities and the social sciences,

there are further possibilities of convergence at several levels of analysis, not least in terms of interdisciplinary **theory development**".

(Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 229, emphasis in original)

Jensen and Rosengren also recommend that the “finely nuanced insights” characteristic of audience theory from a humanistic perspective be combined with the more formally oriented demands for “clarity, consistency and systematisation” that typify the social and behavioural sciences approaches. This can best be achieved by developing a

comprehensive theoretical framework for audience research that requires at least three components: (1) a theory of the social structures in which media and audiences are embedded; (2) a theory of discourse or communication which accounts for the nature of media representation (print, aural, visual); and (3) a theory of socio-cultural and social-psychological dispositions with which individuals approach and interact with media content.

(Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 229-230)

In terms of the necessary methodological techniques that such a convergence requires, they call for research designs that combine the elements of content analysis and audience research in the same study. Jensen (1990) has argued elsewhere that the relatively recent ‘qualitative turn’ in mass communication research is representative of such a convergence.

studies as an example of reception analysis that has succeeded in achieving this convergence (Jensen, 1989).

2.3.2 Centrifugal

In contrast to this centripetal trend which has seen various audience research traditions come together within the overarching framework of qualitative research, there has been a concurrent divergence in terms of how texts, audiences and contexts have been conceptualised. As the discussion above has highlighted, the early forms of audience research, in particular those coming out of the effects tradition, operated with what are now considered to be rather rudimentary concepts of audience and text. The U&G approach sought to rectify the earlier notion of the passive viewer by emphasising the way in which they actively made use of media messages. With the rise of cultural studies, the activity of the viewer was given a new twist. Following developments in literary theory, in particular Barthes' take on semiology that granted any text, "even the most humdrum realistic text... a modest plurality of meanings" (Lorimer, 1994: 190), the text-audience relationship began to be characterised by indeterminacy. The meaning of a text could no longer be imputed directly from its manifest content, as instead audiences took up a variety of positions in relation to it. The triumvirate of dominant, oppositional and negotiated positions that is traditionally attributed to Hall (1980) is perhaps the most well known articulation of this reconfiguration of the audience.¹² The contexts within which the texts are both produced and received also took on an increased significance within audience research during this time.¹³ Following the lead provided by discourse analysis, the

¹² Hall in fact borrowed this explanatory framework from Parkin's (1971) work on class-based value systems (McGuigan, 1992: 132; Moores, 1993: 18).

¹³ Zelizer (1994) suggests that the idea of interpretive communities can also be applied to the producers of media texts. Journalists, it is argued, "functioned

idea of an audience as an empirical object of study began to be supplanted by the notion of interpretive repertoires that were socially situated (Jensen, 1990). Social position, therefore, structures the viewer's access to the different discourses that are employed to make sense of media messages. (Morley, 1992). As for the status of these messages, since meaning was understood to be inherently contextual, the notion of a preferred or dominant meaning began to be undermined. Some researchers within the field took the idea of polysemy to an extreme, with Fiske's declaration of a "semiotic democracy" (Curran, 1990: 140) particularly emblematic of this trend. The twin interpretations of an open, unstable text and an active audience who are granted the autonomy to make their own sense of these texts that underpins much of Fiske's work,¹⁴ while representative of the evolution of a pluralistic understanding of audiences and texts that has transformed the field of audience research over the past few decades, have nevertheless been subjected to a spirited critique.

2.4 A New Revisionism?

Curran provides a highly critical account of development of audience studies in which he argues that (then) recent developments in audience research, which he

as an interpretive community in shaping the tale of John F. Kennedy's assassination into a story about the legitimation of television news, in fashioning stories of the Gulf War into celebrations of CNN, or in recasting stories about Watergate and McCarthyism into moral tales about appropriate journalistic practice". As an interpretive community, therefore, journalists are united by their "shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events" (326-327).

¹⁴ See, for example, *Television Culture* (1987) and "Moments in Television: Neither the Text Nor the Audience", in Seiter et al. (1989).

refers to as a form of ‘new revisionism’, were in fact nothing new at all. He claims that while this revisionism presented

itself as original and innovative, as an emancipatory movement that... [was] throwing off the shackles of tradition... [it was] none of these things.

(Curran, 1990: 135)

Although he includes ‘revisionist’ accounts of media organisations within his reappraisal, it is the assessment of audience reception that is of most interest to us. Revisionists have emphasised the autonomy of the audience in their engagements with relatively open and ambiguous, or ‘producerly’ texts of the mass media (Fiske, 1989). According to Curran, this has resulted in a reassessment of media influence, with the political aesthetic of the radical tradition of mass communication research giving way to a popular aesthetic. He argues that this had the effect of shifting the focus of attention away from whether or not media representations worked to promote or thwart political struggles. Citing (then) recent studies by Drotner and Kippax as examples, Curran suggests that the question became one of why the mass media were so popular, with research focusing on media content and the kinds of pleasure that such content gave rise to (Curran, 1990).

As far as Curran is concerned, research of this kind is nothing more than rediscovery masquerading as innovation, amounting to nothing more than “old pluralist dishes being reheated and presented as new cuisine” (1990: 151). His position has received support from a number of others,¹⁵ although as McGuigan (1992) illustrates, not everyone is as unconditional in their rejection of the ‘new revisionism’. Despite criticising Fiske for his “uncritical celebration of mass-popular cultural consumption” (45), McGuigan nevertheless brings to the debate a wider (and

¹⁵ See, for example, Corner (1991), Evans (1990), Rosengren (1994), Schlesinger (1991).

welcome) contextual dimension. He credits this particular strand of British cultural populism with rejecting the elitist pessimism surrounding mass culture that characterised the radical tradition as represented by the Frankfurt School. In admitting the ambivalency of his own attitude to research of this trajectory, he is certainly more charitable than Curran. He regards the work of some writers, such as Angela McRobbie and David Morley as “genuinely illuminating”, despite the fact that it “involves a retreat from more critical positions”.¹⁶ Given that a great deal of this work was produced during the height (or should that perhaps be the depths) of Thatcherism, McGuigan is understanding of this retreat, “considering how difficult it ha[d] become to challenge the [then] present conditions with theoretical and political conviction” (75).

In addition to Fiske (1987, 1989), Curran levels a number of criticisms at Morley’s work (1980, 1986, 1989). Not surprisingly, Morley has since come back with his own criticism of Curran’s assessment, claiming that there are two key problems with it. The first problem is one of historiography. Morley suggests that in attempting to highlight the faults of one particular version of the history of audience research, Curran is doing nothing more than advancing his own, equally partial, version. The

¹⁶ McGuigan does not specify which works in particular of these two are ‘illuminating’ in this respect, although a perusal of chapters (3) “Youth Culture and Consumption” and (4) “Popular Television” leads one to believe that he would, at the least, include McRobbie’s (1982) influential study of the ideology of adolescent femininity as expressed in the pages of the girl’s magazine *Jackie*, as well as her subsequent work covering such diverse areas as disco-dancing (1984), shopping for second hand clothes (1989) and teenage pregnancy and single parenthood (1991). In the case of Morley, it is the well-known *Nationwide* study (1980) and his later (1986) *Family Television* project that are subject to critical acclaim.

second problem is one of hindsight. Morley contends that Curran's version of the history of audience research

could not have been written (by Curran or anyone else) fifteen years ago, before the impact of the 'new revisionism' (of which Curran is so critical) transformed our understanding of the field of audience research, and thus transformed our understanding of who and what was important in its history

(Morley, 1992: 23)

To illustrate this, Morley uses the example of Merton's (1946) work which sought to address the question of how people reacted to persuasive arguments. However, a major problem facing these early American communications researchers, according to Geertz, was that "they lacked anything more than the most rudimentary conception of the processes of symbolic communication" (cited in Hall, 1974: 279). Morley contends that it was precisely this symbolic aspect of communication that cultural studies, by way of a semiological inflection, was able to address.

2.5 Conclusion

From the review and discussion presented above, it is clear that the study of the audience-text nexus is a dynamic realm of enquiry. Various traditions have emerged and developed over the past five decades, mutating and splintering to such a degree in recent years that it is now highly problematic to regard 'audience studies' as a unified body of research. Taking her cue from Hall (1986), Ang's reference to cultural studies in particular as "a mode of intellectual work which readily addresses the elusiveness of the postmodern in its ongoing commitment to interdisciplinarity and openness of theorising" (1996: 3) certainly exemplifies the difficulty in attempting to impose such limiting definitions as 'field' on research that has as its

focus the interaction of audiences and mass mediated texts.¹⁷ What this also points to is the strong centrifugal tendency that was alluded to above, with analysis increasingly focusing on the fragmentary and dispersed nature of these interactions. A less prolix, though equally compelling, assessment is provided by Lindlof who sees cultural studies as a “confluence of many different, but compatible schools of thought” (1991: 27). And here we can discern the concurrent centripetal tendency, whereby various theoretical and methodological approaches are drawn together in order to address the very “elusiveness” that Ang (1996) speaks of. As a researcher situated at the nexus of these opposing forces, I am somewhat ruefully tempted to follow Ang’s advice when she remarks that

the territorial conflict between ‘mainstream’ and ‘critical’ research, quantitative and qualitative methods, humanistic and social-scientific disciplines, and so on, should perhaps not bother us too much at all in the first place.

(1996: 45)

Neither uses and gratifications nor cultural studies research approaches have succeeded in dealing adequately with the complex dimensions — social and psychological, ritual and ideological, active and passive — of the audience’s engagement with television (Morley, 1992). In light of such an assessment, it could be argued that Jensen and Rosengren’s call for an increased convergence of approaches in audience research was perhaps in vain. Similarly, Silverstone (1994) has suggested that the various reviews and critiques such as those of Jensen and Rosengren, and Curran, have certainly played their part in documenting the array of

¹⁷ Despite the confidence suggested by its title, a fairly recent special issue of the American-based Journal of Communication, *Defining Media Studies: Reflections on the Future of the Field*, (1994) has provided similar evidence of such difficulty within the more wide ranging realm of communication studies in general.

disputes between researchers from competing positions.¹⁸ What they have failed to do, however, is resolve the indeterminacy that lies at the heart of everyday audience encounters with mediated texts. As a result there has been a tendency to lose sight of the actual audience, as issues of methodology have taken precedence over those of substance.

As Ien Ang points out (1991), the audience has become increasingly problematic, not just for academic researchers, for whom it has tended to become de-reified to the point of invisibility, but also for commercial concerns, for whom it must be re-reified for them to maximise their share of it.

(Silverstone, 1994: 132)

This problem of the disappearing ‘audience’ is echoed in the very title of the Jensen and Rosengren study (*Five Traditions in Search of The Audience*), not to mention Ang’s (1991) work where she was *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. As the following chapters illustrate, through the use of an explicitly reflexive methodology derived for the most part from the reception analysis tradition, I hope to recover the ‘audience’ as an empirically visible phenomenon.

¹⁸ Other examples of such reviews that he refers to include Morley (1989), Fejes (1984), and Moores (1990).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the method used to gather the data upon which the analysis in part two of this thesis is based: in-depth semi-structured interviews. The first section (3.2) focuses on the particular type of interview that was adopted, and here we revisit Corner's (1996) assessment of reception analysis with a discussion of two issues that he addresses: the question of employing group or individual interviews; and the use of experimental or naturalistic research settings. Section 3.3 looks at the kinds of questions that were employed in the interview and how they were organised into a schedule. In section 3.4 the discussion centres on the process of selecting appropriate viewers. Ethnographic details of the eleven interviewees are included in this section.

3.2 The Type of Interview

Maccoby and Maccoby (1954) have argued that at its most basic level an interview of any kind can be defined as:

a face-to-face verbal interchange in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons.

(cited in Denzin, 1970: 123 and Minichiello et al., 1995: 62)

Of course within this rather broad ranging description lie many different possibilities in terms of how an interview may be conducted, and for what purposes. Interviews can range from structured questionnaires and surveys through to more open-ended encounters in which respondents are encouraged to talk at length about the phenomenon under investigation. This type of knowledge-seeking, or epistemic, interview is usually characterised by an absence of strict protocol (Jorgenson, 1992). I would suggest that there is almost universal agreement as to what a 'structured interview' is: a standardised

schedule of questions, asked in a carefully ordered and worded manner, and mostly of the closed-ended type (yes/no/don't know). But things become less clear-cut when one opts instead to use a less formalised interviewing structure. Depending on the researcher's particular approach or perspective, there appear to be many different ways of defining this kind of interview: it can be a conversation with a purpose (Khan and Cannell, 1957, cited in Burgess, 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Marshall and Rossman, 1995); or it may be an informal conversational interview (Patton, 1990); then again, it could be an informant or respondent interview (Lindlof, 1995). Marshall and Rossman (1989) talk about the ethnographic interview, the in-depth interview, and the phenomenological interview (although this is generally in the context of applied social research).

In adopting a particular interviewing strategy for this research project, a number of considerations were borne in mind. The research sought to explore the nature of the relationship between viewers and television news from the viewers' perspective. In other words, how did viewers themselves define their engagement with the news?¹ This meant that instead of a fixed list of pre-defined questions about how and why the news was watched there was instead a range of broad topics that would be explored with the viewers. Secondly, as a way of capturing the rich complexity of this activity, I was keen to provide viewers with an opportunity to discuss whatever aspects of the experience that they felt were significant, rather than simply limit the range of topics covered to those that I felt were important.

¹ This method of working from the viewer interpretation back to the textual depictions has been termed by Corner as a reconstructive approach. He cites Justin Lewis' (1985) study as an example of this type of research in which the analysis works back "from the meanings which respondents gave to what they saw and heard rather than attempting to assess whether or not certain meanings were transmitted" (Corner, 1996: 293).

With this understanding of the interview in mind, whereby the relationship between viewer and news could be explored in a way that facilitated the co-construction of that experience, the term ‘directed conversation’ was adopted. The term successfully captured the essence of the in-depth semi-structured interview that was employed. Aiming more for a conversation than a strict pattern of question-answer-next question allowed for the interview to be very much a two-way process, with both interviewer and interviewee contributing more than just questions and responses respectively. Thus a context was established within which I — as the interviewer — was free to express my own subjectivity as a fellow news-watcher². It was also a context in which the viewers were free to discuss issues that they felt were relevant. Complementing this conversational aspect which allowed for a more active role for both parties, the notion of ‘directing’ the conversation in a certain way still allowed for the introduction of specific issues that were relevant to the research.

3.2.1 Group or Individual?

As Corner rightly observes, the issue of using either group or individual interviews has been subject to considerable debate. As evidence of this debate he cites two studies that have taken opposing viewpoints on this issue. Lewis’ (1985) study on the reception of a specific news bulletin employed individual interviews while Richardson and Corner’s (1986) study on the reception of a documentary programme about nuclear energy used group interviews. A cursory glance at some more recent studies would appear to indicate that there has been little agreement, and nor is there likely to be, on the relative merits of group interviews (Liebes and Katz, 1989; Philo, 1990; Roscoe et al., 1995) and individual interviews (Höijer, 1990; Ward, 1992; Hagen, 1994; Dickerson, 1996). As methods of investigation, both have their strengths and weaknesses. Interpretations are no less ‘social’

² See Chapter Four, Section 4.3 for a discussion on how feminist research perspectives also contributed to this particular formulation.

in their nature if they are produced within an individual setting, although group dynamics can allow for more wide-ranging discussions, including expressions of disagreement (Corner, 1996). One disadvantage of groups, however, is that compared to individual interviews there is often difficulty in asking follow up questions of specific individuals. Höijer (1990) raises another distinction in that group interviews have the advantage of involving many research subjects at the one time compared to more time-consuming individual interviews. Against this advantage though, and in apparent contradiction to Corner's claim, there exists the possibility of group pressure, in which certain individuals may dominate, thereby lessening the possibility of disagreements being voiced (*ibid.*).

Turning to the current research project, the decision was made to use individual interviews for a variety of reasons. Certainly the problem of resources was a major factor in contributing to this. Despite suggestions that individual interviews are more time-consuming and therefore presumably more resource-intensive (Höijer, 1990; Morley, 1992), it proved in practice more economical to organise and conduct individual interviews. Of course as critics like Höijer and Morley rightly acknowledge, the downside of this is that one may end up with a narrower range of data per interview. Choosing to use individual interviews for pragmatic reasons effectively removed any practical necessity of having to deal with the issues discussed above. That does not mean, however, that these and other issues were not considered.³

The main area of concern that I wish to address centres on the question of group composition. Research on reception that has utilised group interviews has been based in part on an assumption that variations in interpretation are related to social variations.⁴ In

³ In fact some of the issues that Corner and Höijer raise, such as the question of what 'effects' the group context may have are essentially redundant in the current situation precisely because they did not figure in the research that was conducted.

⁴ See, for example, Morley (1980), Philo (1990), and Roscoe et al. (1995).

other words, it is the social characteristics of individuals that explain **why** variations in interpretation occur. Such a classification of variety, though, is not without its problems.

Although factors of class, race, gender and age are likely to bear on the reasons why people interpret things differently, it is far too crude to use them on their own as designations (e.g., classifying interpretations as ‘working-class’, ‘female’ or ‘youth’).

(Corner, 1996: 289)

An alternative way of categorising groups is in relation to the substantive topic of investigation. Corner and his colleagues (Corner et al., 1990) did this with their study on audience responses to television coverage of the nuclear issue, including both nuclear workers and environmentalists among their respondents. Roscoe et al., in their study of the reception of the drama-documentary *Who Bombed Birmingham?*, took a similar approach:

Some participants were invited to take part because they belonged to groups expected to have a particular interest in the issues, for example the ‘Irish’, ‘lawyers’, ‘civil liberties’ groups. ‘Non-interest’ groups also took part, comprising participants who were not necessarily expected to have any particular interest or specialised knowledge: for example ‘teachers’, ‘students’ and ‘engineers’.

(1995: 92)

The problem with this methodological decision is two-fold. Firstly the authors claim that if it is accepted that the audience comprises ‘active’ and ‘social’ viewers, then it must also be accepted that they will continue to be so, irrespective of the immediate viewing context. While this is essentially a valid point, I would argue that by disregarding the differences in context they are also disregarding differences in the **way** in which viewers may be ‘active’ and ‘social’. That “viewers will draw on knowledges as informed by various social positionings... whether in a family setting or a university campus” (ibid: 90) is not in question. What is being described here is the process of being ‘active’ and ‘social’, but my point is that there will always be differences in the specific articulations of this

process, and that these differences are inescapably contextual in their nature.⁵ The example of the lawyers' discussion that the authors utilise is a case in point. As lawyers, the members of this group drew upon their occupational experience to make sense of the presentations, and it would be fair to assume that they would have done so even if both the viewing and interview contexts had been different (i.e., if they had viewed the programme individually at home). However, as the authors rightly point out, readings can be informed by group membership, and in this particular instance it was "**shared knowledge** [that] gave rise to consideration of specific details" (ibid: 97, emphasis added). In other words, it was the contextual specificity of the viewing and interview context — in this case in a group with three other lawyers — that gave rise to (or at least reinforced) the particular sense that each member of the group made of the programme.

The second difficulty that I have with this study centres on this very aspect of the research: the various groups that the authors arranged their participants into. Despite allowing participants to indicate their membership of particular social groups that could be considered important or relevant to the research, the significance of the various groupings that were used stems from the fact that they were essentially constructions of the research team. When responding to the questions, were the individuals doing so as members of these groupings, or were they simply responding as individuals who happened to be in a group of people with similar occupations or of a similar nationality? This is something which the authors themselves acknowledge, as they provide a number of examples in

⁵ Admittedly Roscoe et al. do concede that research context will have some impact on how discussions proceed and that it will also affect the specific aspects of a presentation that are discussed (Roscoe et al., 1995). Given that the current research developed into a concern with the nature of news watching as an everyday activity (see Introduction for an overview of this development), their claim that there is "no basis for a prioritisation of one particular viewing context over another" (ibid: 90) becomes untenable.

which “participants... moved away from their classified group membership to make sense of an issue” (ibid: 98-99). Thus they claim that

the complex nature of the relationship between any one social group membership and interpretation of a specific programme makes problematic the notion of any finalised ‘group reading’”

(ibid: 99)

I would argue that what this in fact points to is the futility of constructing such groupings in the first place, since individuals will invariably conceive of themselves as belonging to a multitude of social groups. This is a fact which, despite their emphasis on using group interviews, the authors readily admit to when they concede that “participants never simply leave behind these other memberships as they enter the viewing context” (ibid: 98). One possible way of working through these difficulties is provided in the form of ‘interpretive communities’.⁶ Corner, however, objects to this way of connecting interpretive practices to wider social and cultural patterns because of the inescapably relative notion of such communities. In as much as we all belong to a diversity of such communities, including income level, occupation, nationality, sexuality, religion, leisure interests and so on, the problem then becomes one of precisely which interpretive community is being identified “in respect of its interpretive resources and its material social positioning” (Corner, 1996: 290).

Returning again to the specific context of the current research project, the focus was on how individual viewers occupied a variety of positions in relation to television news. While it is certainly plausible to suggest that similarities and differences in terms of the types of positions that viewers occupied may exist within and between various formulations of viewers, I would argue that it is at the individual level that reception as a process of interaction between viewer and news is actually experienced. In other words, it

⁶ See Chapter One for a discussion of this concept.

may indeed be possible to trace the various positions that viewers hold in relation to the news to differences in social positioning (Roscoe et al., 1995), but the moment-by-moment occupation of those positions vis-a-vis the news is an inescapably individual process.

3.2.2 Experimental or Natural?

The second area of methodological concern that Corner identifies concerns the context within which the reception process is studied. He points to the fact that questions have been raised in relation to ‘experimental’ types of research where viewers watch pre-recorded television programmes immediately prior to answering questions about, or discussing, them. The obvious point to be made here is that watching a television programme (or part of a programme) in the context of a university laboratory or classroom obviously constitutes a very different form of reception than watching the same programme within the normal context of day-to-day television consumption. The problem here, as Corner has earlier noted is precisely one of context. In arguing that all instances of media reception are contextually located, the difficulty for the researcher is summed up by the question: “What do you include in context and where does context stop?” (Corner, 1991: 278). In relation to the notion of ‘watching television’, this difficulty is heightened by television’s profound embeddedness in everyday life:

... the activity so often simplistically described as ‘watching TV’ only takes shape within the broader contextual horizon of a heterogeneous and indefinite range of domestic practices.... ‘Watching TV’ is... a shorthand label for a wide variety of multidimensional behaviours and experiences... [and] it becomes difficult to demarcate when and where we are not part of the television audience. In a sense we are, as citizens living in television-saturated modern societies, always inevitably incorporated in that category, even when we personally don’t actually watch it very often.

(Ang, 1996: 68)

In this perspective, ‘context’ becomes limitless (Corner, 1996) and there is a considerable risk of both text and audience all but disappearing (Brunsdon, 1989; Corner, 1991). In order to avoid this, reception analysts need to determine which specific aspects of a communicative context they intend to focus on, and also the specific level of generality

that will be claimed. Such decisions are not necessarily binding, however, and changes can be made throughout the course of the research (Corner, 1996).

Looking back at how this project evolved, there was indeed a narrowing of the contextual focus. This re-focusing centred on the status of the interview, which underwent a major conceptual transformation, which in turn led to a change in the overall aims of the research. In brief, the interview began life as an unproblematic way of obtaining information about how viewers responded to certain aspects of television news, only to become instead a discursive reconstruction of the process of reception.⁷ In terms of the context, then, this approach represents something of a hybrid. Like the more experimental designs, it can be argued that the context is essentially the product of the research exercise. In other words, the discourses that the interviews represent were the end result of what is essentially an artificial context: the ‘research interview’. The fact that the interviews were regarded as directed conversations and that I personally knew most of my ‘co-conversationists’ may have resulted in an encounter that was perhaps untypical of most research settings, but it was nevertheless a setting that was organised specifically for the purpose of conducting research.

3.3 The Questions

While it may appear obvious that an interview will out of necessity involve the asking of questions, there are issues to be addressed in terms of what kinds of questions are asked, and also how they are asked. A major feature of the semi-structured type of interview that was used in this research is that, while there was indeed a series of issues to be discussed, these were not necessarily covered in a set order. Furthermore, the questions were not

⁷ In referring to the idea of ‘reconstruction’ I am drawing on Jensen’s (1994) notion that reception as a process itself does not exist in the historical record and that it is only through research, in the form of interviews or observations, for example, that it can be “reconstructed” (263).

phrased in exactly the same way each time (Smith, 1972). A series of questions, or “account agenda themes” (Brenner, 1985: 153) was developed but instead of being used to determine the exact direction that the interview takes they were instead used as a guide. This interview schedule (Minichiello et al., 1995) was then referred to during the interview so a check could be kept on which topics had been covered, and which still had to be discussed (Burgess, 1991). Often the interviewees themselves brought up some of the points listed on the schedule, and rather than telling them to “wait until we come to that point”, I let the discussion work naturally through these points in whatever order they arose. There were times when I had to come back to the schedule, particularly when the discussion had moved off on a tangent.

The schedule was divided into two parts, with the working titles of ‘Approaching and Leaving the Encounter’ and ‘Encountering’. News watching was taken to be an encounter in which the viewer was a participant, and the approaching of the first part referred to ways in which they literally came to the encounter. What were their motives for watching the news? How often did they watch it? Which news bulletin did they watch? Was television news their only, or main source of information about the world? What did ‘news’ mean to them? ‘Leaving’ focused on viewers’ assessments of the news, on how they felt about it once the encounter was over. Did it provide them with enough information? Were there aspects that were dissatisfying? How well did they think it covered events? What sorts of things did they enjoy seeing? The second part of the schedule concerned the actual physical way they watched the news and was dealt with by getting them to describe their typical news watching scenario. This included asking such questions as: Do you talk about what’s on the news while you are watching it, and if so, what sorts of things do you talk about? Do you channel surf (switch channels) while watching the news? What other things do you do while watching the news? While the questions existed on paper in a set order, they were not confined to that strict, linear progression during an actual interview. In practice, none of the interviews saw the questions being asked in the exact order specified in the schedule.

The interviews varied quite considerably in terms of how close they followed the schedule. In general, the more voluble the interviewee, and the more freely they spoke, then the more likely it was that the schedule served as checklist. Not surprisingly, those interviews that involved less forthcoming interviewees tended to rely more on the schedule as a means of directing the conversation along a path that ensured that all the areas of interest were covered. Linked to the flexibility that the interview schedule provided was the fact that it was not set in stone. By this I am referring to the way in which the schedule was designed to allow for the inclusion of additional questions should they arise. Because the overall aim was one of discovery rather than confirmation, there were times when new topics of investigation manifested themselves within an interview. Accordingly, these were then integrated into the schedule and became areas of discussion for later interviews. In this way, the questions were able to reflect a growing understanding of the particular phenomenon under investigation.⁸

⁸ One such example occurred during the interview with Winona. In discussing why it was that some people tended to watch the news almost religiously (she herself was more of a casual news watcher) she said the following:

Winona: ... I don't know why, lifestyle wise, why I would feel the need to, it's — it's funny, it's like y'know if you go away camping or somewhere like you're really like out in the bush, out of touch. Sometimes when you come back you feel, it feels a bit bizarre. There's all this stuff happening, like the President of the States could have been shot, Bolger could have been shot y'know, and there's been all these things happening, and you don't know about them, and you feel weird. I'm not quite sure why, but you feel....

And I replied thus:

John: *Yeah, I hadn't thought of it that way...no, that's good....*

This is a good example of the interviewee bringing to light an aspect of the viewer-TV news relationship that I certainly had not thought about. Once it was mentioned, however, I realised that this was indeed an aspect of the relationship

3.4 The Viewers

The overall approach to the research at the time the interviews were conducted was influenced by Grounded Theory (see Chapter Five, section 5.3), which meant that, initially at least, the selection of suitable interviewees proceeded according to the methods outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In their approach, data collection is guided by theoretical sampling, or sampling on the basis of theoretically relevant constructs. In the early stages of a project, sampling of persons, sites or documents, involving purposive, systematic or fortuitous procedures, is used to discover and identify data which is relevant to the research question. In this case, most of the sampling was of a purposive nature, whereby I contacted people that I knew and asked them if they were interested in being interviewed. Virtually all of them knew me at least at the level of acquaintance, while some were more like casual friends, and others were co-workers.⁹ There were two reasons for selecting people that were known to me. Firstly it was felt that this would serve to reduce any possible interviewer effect,¹⁰ as viewers would perhaps be more willing to open up to

that was worth investigating as it raised some interesting points (see Chapter Eight for a full discussion pertaining to this issue). Accordingly, the remaining interviews that followed included a question that asked if viewers had ever experienced a similar situation.

⁹ The one exception was Tori. She had heard of my research through a mutual acquaintance and approached me directly, asking if I was interested in interviewing her. Once it was established that she did watch the news (obvious, considering that she already had an idea of what the research was about), it was agreed that I would interview her.

¹⁰ The notion of interviewer effect is a contentious issue, and depending on the particular research paradigm that one is operating within it can be interpreted in one of two ways. A more formal research design from the positivist end of the spectrum would conclude that any deviation from the position of a strictly

someone who was perceived more as a friend or acquaintance rather than as a 'researcher'.¹¹ Secondly, and related to that first point, since the intention was to conduct an interview that was more in the tone of a conversation, it was felt that this would be easier to achieve with individuals with whom there was already an element of rapport.

Once the initial inquiry was made of them, the usual response was along the lines of "Oh yeah, what do you want to interview me about?" Prospective interviewees were informed that they would be asked questions about television news, why they watched it, which bulletins they preferred, what sorts of things they did while watching the news etc. They

objective, neutral and uninvolved interviewer would constitute some form of 'effect'. In contrast, research from a naturalistic perspective, especially that which seeks to understand the nature of everyday occurrences, would interpret interviewer effect as arising from precisely such a formalised approach.

¹¹ Dahlgren (1988) provides a useful illustration of this in relation to reception analysis. Rather than establishing a dichotomy between 'authentic' and 'artificial' meaning "where the latter is an impure version or distortion generated by the research situation" (292) he instead takes the position "that all talk through which people generate meaning is contextual, and that the contexts will inevitably somewhat colour the meaning" (ibid.). Following Goffman's (1974) distinction between front stage and back stage talk, Dahlgren noted a basic distinction in the way that people responded to him. "Official discourse" most often occurred in situations which people defined as public. "Thus, in the research setting, for example", they spoke to him as a professional researcher, "about news, information, democracy, the state... etc.", and apparently they felt that they were "on stage" in terms of their citizen role" (ibid: 209). "Personal discourse", in contrast, was more prevalent in other, non-research settings, such as "social gatherings like dinners and parties, on buses, trains and in stations, with neighbours etc." (ibid.). Selecting viewers who knew me primarily as a friend or work colleague was an attempt to dissolve this dichotomy.

were told that the process would probably take between 30 and 45 minutes to complete, and that the interview would be recorded. Assurances were also given that questions of a personal nature would not be asked of them. As I pointed out, I was only interested in their thoughts and opinions on television news, and didn't everybody have an opinion about the news? In some instances there was either outright refusal, or an indication that they were perhaps uneasy about the prospect. In either case no further attempts were made to solicit their participation. For those who agreed to participate, a suitable meeting place and convenient time was arranged.

The interviews were conducted in a variety of locations including my office, viewers' homes and their work places. In the case of the one viewer who did not know me personally, arrangements were made to meet at a suitably neutral venue within the confines of the Waikato University campus (where she was a student). Those conducted in my office and in the viewers' homes posed little or no problems in terms of privacy from outside interruptions. However, some of the interviews which were conducted in work places were interrupted by such things as people walking into the room where the interview was taking place (a university departmental tearoom), or by excessive noise in the immediate environment (a carpenter's workshop). In such situations, the interview was simply put on hold temporarily until conditions returned to normal (usually no more than five minutes). Once the immediate locational problems had been sorted out and the interviewees and myself were seated comfortably they were once again informed that the interview would be taped. No one objected to this, although there were a number of comments along the lines of "Oh no, I hate hearing my voice on tape!" I assured them that their responses would be treated with the utmost confidentiality, and that their real names would not be used. I also explained to them that if they so wished, they could have a copy of the completed interview transcript, although as it turned out none of them took up this offer.

3.4.1 Ethnographic Details

Ethnographic details of all eleven viewers are included at this point. The demographic information and details of their television watching was obtained by way of a short questionnaire which was filled out immediately prior to the interview taking place.

Name: **Sian**

Age: 35

Occupation: Receptionist

Education: School Certificate

Hours/day watching TV: 2

News watched: 3-4 times per week.

Which bulletin: 2 *Newsnight*.

Programmes most watched: Movies on SKY, late evening news, documentaries (occasionally).

Number of TV sets: 2 - one main set in living room, one smaller set in bedroom.

Sian is a 35 year old who lives with her partner on a small farm. They have no children. She works as a receptionist for a faculty at a university, and is not a regular or habitual watcher of news. Sian lives quite a distance from her work place and consequently she seldom gets home in time to watch the 6.00PM news. If she does get home before then, she is busy doing chores and housework. Her preference for news (when she does watch) is the late evening bulletin (2 *Newsnight*) on TV2. Typically she watches this with her partner in the living room, or sometimes while in bed (they have a small television in the bedroom). News watching takes place at the 'end' of her day, more as an adjunct than as a specific activity. Sian also admitted that she watches the news more as a consequence of

her partner's control over the television. In this sense Sian very much a 'passive' news watcher, and she revealed that when she does respond to something on the news she is often told by her partner to keep quiet. This resonates with Morley's (1992) findings on gender-based patterns of television consumption.

Name: **Matt**

Age: 24

Occupation: Student

Education: BCMS (Software Engineering/Information Systems)

Hours/day watching TV: 3

News watched: Up to 3 times per week.

Which bulletin: *3 National News*.

Programmes most watched: *The Simpsons, Mad About You, Lois & Clark*, "Friday Night Trash" (his own description).

Number of TV sets: 1 - part of a large home entertainment complex, including hi fi stereo, video, Sony Playstation, personal computer.

A computer science student at university, Matt lives in a typical mixed-sex flat with three others students (one male, two female) of similar age. He also works part time as computer support person. He prefers to watch *3 National News* because of what he perceives as its greater 'depth' than *One Network News*. Matt admits to making an effort to catch the news at 6.00 pm, although this is often impossible to achieve in practice for a number of reasons: late lectures, going to the gym after lectures finish, socialising with friends, cooking dinner (he lives in an older style house, where the television cannot be seen from the kitchen). He does make the effort to watch it, but only if he's at home and

in a suitable mood. He associates watching television (including television news) with relaxation, and often he is simply not in the mood to sit down and watch it. Only himself and the other male in the flat watch the news as a distinct activity. Unlike a 'typical' family household, Matt's domestic situation is more a case of four individuals with their own distinct schedules co-existing. In this way there is no single 'unit' with a dominant (father/mother) person setting the agenda for the others (children) to follow. The television is merely one element in a range of different but connected domestic electronic devices (computer, video, stereo hi fi, game console) that form the central focal point of this shared household's living room. News is just one genre of one particular medium that competes for his time and attention.

Name: **Kane**

Age: 37

Occupation: Carpenter

Education: Trade Certificate

Hours/day watching TV: up to 6

News watched: Daily.

Which bulletin: *3 National News* and *One Network News* (he switches between bulletins).

Programmes most watched: Reality Television, News, Current Affairs, *Cops*.

Number of TV sets: 2 - one in the formal living room area, another in a rumpus room for the children.

Kane is a 37 year old Maori. A carpenter by trade, he works for a facilities management division of a university. He is married (his wife works as a housekeeper for a university hostel), with two children: one a 14 year old boy, the other a 10 year old girl. He lives in a suburb across the city from his place of work. Kane is a keen sports person, and regularly plays touch rugby and indoor netball. Expressing a preference for 'real-life' television over fiction, Kane prefers to watch documentaries, current affairs and reality television programmes. He is also a regular listener to talkback radio. The television that he watches is situated in a formal lounge, and he is often the only person watching it (the children have their own television in a rumpus room, and he said that his wife does not like watching the news). Typically Kane will be working in his garage or around the house, and he will stop what he is doing in order to catch the news at 6.00pm. He will then continue what he was doing once the news finishes, although he did say that during the winter months he will usually remain inside watching television for the rest of the evening.

Name: **Dean**

Age: 56

Occupation: Courier Driver/Printery Assistant

Education: MA

Hours/day watching TV: 0.5

News watched: Daily.

Which bulletin: *3 National News.*

Programmes most watched: News.

Number of TV sets: 1 - in the main living room.

Dean is a 56 year old courier driver and general assistant for a printing company. Originally from England, Dean immigrated to New Zealand some 10 years ago. He is married (his wife works as a clerk for a government agency) with an 11 year old daughter. While in England Dean spent many years in the merchant navy. Since arriving in New Zealand he has held a variety of positions, including senior management roles in a number of government departments. Following redundancy several years ago, Dean undertook tertiary study, where he completed a BA, followed soon after by an MA. While completing this graduate degree, Dean obtained part-time employment as a delivery driver for a printing company, a position that he took up permanently upon completion of his studies. Dean indicated that the news is about the only television that he watches with any regularity. Most of the time he manages to watch the 6.00pm news bulletin, but on those occasions that he misses it (working late, grocery shopping etc.), he will try and catch the late evening news bulletin. His wife and daughter often watch the 6.00pm news with him, and once it has finished the television is turned off. He will often discuss with them things that have been on the news while preparing and eating dinner. While the whole family watches the news, this unity does not extend to the rest of television, with Dean expressing a strong dislike for the American sit-coms that his daughter enjoys. His own preference is for British produced dramas.

Name: **Malcolm**

Age: 24

Occupation: Computer Technician/Support Person

Education: B.Soc.Sci.

Hours/day watching TV: 1-2

News watched: 4-6 days per week.

Which bulletin: 3 *National News*, *CNN*.

Programmes most watched: News, Motor racing, *Seinfeld*.

Number of television sets: 1(2), as part of a home entertainment centre (television, video, stereo, Sony Playstation, computer) in the lounge (the second set is at his workplace).

Malcolm is a 24 year old computer technician with a degree in social sciences. He shares a rented house with his partner who works as a librarian for the city council. They have no children. A keen musician, Malcolm is also very much a 'technical' buff. He builds his own computers from spare parts, and has developed a complete home entertainment system encompassing a large screen (29 inch) television, video, stereo, PC and Sony Playstation. This arrangement occupies a very prominent place in a relatively small living room. While work and social commitments sometimes prevent Malcolm from watching the news every night, he does manage to watch it most days of the week. Malcolm uses this 'post-work' time to relax, and will often be sitting with a cup of tea reading the paper when the news comes on. His partner will often join him for short periods of time, but she is usually occupied with household chores (preparing dinner, washing clothes etc.)

Malcolm does not stay watching the news for the full hour, as he will typically get up to assist with dinner preparations (the television cannot be seen from the kitchen). As a keen follower of sports, he will, however, make an effort to return to watch the sports section of the news. In addition to watching the main evening news bulletin, Malcolm will sometimes watch news during the day while at work, where he has access to the *SKY* network, including the all-news channel *CNN*.

Name: **Winona**

Age: 33

Occupation: Help Desk Co-ordinator

Education: Completing B.Soc.Sci

Hours/day watching TV: 1-2

News watched: 3 times a week.

Which bulletin: *2 Newsnight.*

Programmes most watched: *Shortland Street, 2 Newsnight.*

Number of television sets: 2 - main one in open-plan living area, smaller one in bedroom.

A 33 year old single (divorced) female, Winona is a computer Help Desk Co-ordinator and she is also completing a social science degree part time. Winona lives alone in a converted piggery on a small farm on the outskirts of Hamilton. She has two televisions, one in the main living room area (which is open plan) and a smaller set in her bedroom. As Winona lives by herself, she is the sole arbiter of when the television is turned on, and what is watched. She indicated that when she was living in Wellington several years ago, she used to watch the news every night, but for a number of reasons she has stopped doing so. At that time she was in a relationship and her partner was an avid news watcher. Another reason she cited for not watching the news as much as she used to was her preference for listening to music when she came home from work as a way of relaxing. The timing of the news is also something that acts as a detriment to watching it, as Winonna often does not get home until after 6.00pm. For Winona, watching television is regarded as a leisure pursuit, and not something that can be incorporated into the routine domestic activities of cleaning, cooking etc. As an avid fan of the soap opera *Shortland Street*, which screens immediately following the news (although on a different channel),

her post-work time tends to revolve around organising things so that she is free to sit down and relax specifically for that programme.

Name: **Barry**

Age: 24

Occupation: Graphic Artist

Education: Polytech Diploma

Hours/day watching TV: 3

News watched: 1-3 days per week

Which bulletin: *One Network News.*

Programmes most watched: *The Simpsons, Shortland Street, Seinfeld, Movies*

Number of television sets: 3 - one in the living room, one in his bedroom, and one in his parents' bedroom.

Barry is a 24 year old graphic artist, living at home with his parents and one younger brother. As a young man with a busy social life, Barry frequently misses catching the news at 6.00 pm. Barry has only recently returned to live at home with his parents, after a number of years of flatting, as he is saving money for overseas travel. In this household, the news generally coincides with the preparation and eating of the evening meal. While his parents usually sit at the dining room table (the lounge-dining area is open plan, and the television can easily be seen from the table), Barry prefers to sit in a chair or on the couch, eating dinner from his lap. Although he has his own television set in his bedroom, Barry's exposure to the news when he is home is almost entirely controlled by his father. It is the father who maintains control of the remote for the main television in the living room. Barry says that the TV is often switched on and set to channel One well before 6.00

pm, as his father does not want to miss the news. While his father will often assist with dinner preparation in the kitchen (from where the TV set cannot be seen), he will have the volume set at such a level that if he hears something of interest he will dash back into the living room to watch it. In contrast to his father, for whom the news would seem to be an important programme not to be missed, Barry has a much more relaxed attitude to it. If he's home, and not doing anything else, then he'll watch it. Otherwise he is not concerned about it. He states that the news is not his 'favourite' programme, and that he's not a 'big' watcher of it, although he does point out that he watches the news now more than he ever used to.

Name: **Bevan**

Age: 28

Occupation: Project Management Assistant

Education: Trade Certificate

Hours/day watching TV: 2

News watched: 4-6 days per week.

Which bulletin: *3 National News..*

Programmes most watched: News, sports, documentaries.

Number of television sets: 1 - in main (open-plan) living room.

Bevan is a 28 year old project management assistant for a facilities management division of a university. He is married and has an 18 month old daughter (his wife does not work). They live in a small two-bedroom flat, one of a block of four. Their TV set is small, but with the compact open-plan it is clearly visible from both the main living area and kitchen. Bevan says he will generally turn the television on around 6.00 pm, although he does not

specifically sit down to watch the news. Dinner preparation, feeding the baby, and reading the newspaper are all activities that Bevan will engage in when the news is on. The one exception he does make is for the sports segment of the news. As a keen follower of most sports, Bevan will typically go and sit in front of the TV and watch it intently, where distractions are less likely to occur. Although he gets home well before the news most evenings, there are occasions when this is not possible (grocery shopping, visiting parents and parents in-law). One interesting fact about Bevan's news watching environment is that his choice of channel is restricted not through choice but rather through the vagaries of technology. His residence is located in a part of Hamilton that is notorious for its poor signal reception. As a result of this he is only able to watch *3 National News*.

Name: **Chris**

Age: 19

Occupation: Student

Education: 1st year of LLB

Hours/day watching TV: 1.5

News watched: 4 days per week

Which bulletin: *One Network News*.

Programmes most watched: News, *Shortland Street*.

Number of Television sets: 1, in main living room.

Chris is a 19 year old law student living at home with both parents, an older sister and a younger brother. With both his parents and his sister working, Chris's family is seldom all home together. Most days Chris attends a gym between finishing his studies and arriving home, and depending on his work out routine he will occasionally miss the news. Chris's

news watching, however, is not purposeful. Rather, it occurs as a result of the television simply being on when he gets home. Although the family (or at least some members of it) eats their evening meal around a large dining room table from which the television can clearly be seen, the news serves more as a backdrop to this activity rather than an integral part. In contrast to Barry's family, there is no one in Chris's family who acts as an arbiter of what news is watched. *One Network News* is almost watched by default, as that happens to be the channel that the TV is set to when it is switched on.

Name: **Tori**

Age: 24

Occupation: Student

Education: 3rd year of a BA (Film and Television/Gender Studies)

Hours/day watching TV: 3-5

News watched: Daily

Which bulletin: *3 National News* and *One Network News* (she switches between bulletins).

Programmes most watched: *News, Roseanne, Grace Under Fire, Shortland Street, The Simpsons.*

Number of television sets: 2 - one in the communal lounge area, one in one of the flatmates bedroom's.

Tori is a 24 year old studying Film and Television and Gender Studies at university. She lives in rented accommodation with two other women. Tori — a self-confessed 'political animal' — is an active member of the Student Union executive, where she holds portfolios dealing with queer student issues and women's issues. Of all the viewers I spoke with,

Tori was the one person whom I did not know prior to our meeting. She had heard that I was conducting research about watching television news and made contact with me where she expressed an interest in being interviewed. As a self-confessed 'news junkie', Tori always makes an effort to watch the news every day. She is the dominant arbiter of what is watched in terms of news in her flat. She wields the remote control with consummate ease, constantly switching between *One Network News* and *3 National News*, often commenting on what she is watching.

Name: **Cathy**

Age: 27

Occupation: Graphic Designer

Education: BEd, Polytech Diploma

Hours/day watching TV: 2-4

News watched: Daily.

Which bulletin: *3 National News*.

Programmes most watched: News, *Shortland Street*, *The Simpsons*, music video shows.

Number of television sets: 1, on a cabinet that she wheels between the lounge and her own bedroom

Cathy is a 27 year old graphic designer. She shares a flat with one other person (male), although they both tend to keep very much to themselves. As Cathy is the main watcher of television in her flat, she is nearly always in control of what is being watched. The flat is small, and with the mobility of the television cabinet, Cathy is free to watch TV from either the lounge or her own bedroom. The only thing that limits the range of possible viewing locations is the length of the cable connecting the outside aerial to the TV set.

Cathy has a routine of coming home from work, making a cup of tea and sitting in her favourite armchair to then watch the news. As her flatmate works shift hours, she is able to enjoy this activity with little or no disturbance.

3.5 A Limitation

Before proceeding to discuss a number of critical influences that impacted upon this research, it is necessary to address a limitation of this study. As was revealed in the introductory chapter this research underwent a significant change, moving from a research question that involved a specific issue (how television news about political issues was interpreted by viewers) to one that examined the broader aspect of how viewers engaged with television news in general. As a consequence of this shift, the interviews as conducted were eventually employed for a purpose that they were not initially intended for. These interviews were originally planned to be the first in a series, with later interviews focusing on how viewers interpreted and made sense of particular news stories about selected political issues. However, in the process of analysing these initial interviews, it very soon became clear that what had originally been taken for granted (that people watched television news) was in fact a much more complex and ultimately more interesting area of inquiry. To that end, the questions asked within these interviews are reflective of that shift in their lack of depth in terms of the ultimate direction that this study took. Nevertheless, the resulting discourse does represent a rich and detailed account of how viewers engage with television news¹².

¹² Although these interviews are distinct from naturally occurring, everyday conversation, the point that Dahlgren has made concerning the validity of discourse that originates from non-research settings (see note 10 above) lends weight to this claim. As he reported:

Thus, after a while I abandoned the formal reception research in favour of more unobtrusive methods. I would merely make notes to myself of conversations and chats that I would have with people in a variety of settings: social gatherings like dinners and parties, on buses, trains and in stations, with

3.6 Conclusion

The aim of this research (understanding how viewers engage with television news) determined to a large extent the kind of interview that would be employed. The objective was to get viewers to talk about (and to talk **with** viewers about) their experiences of watching television news. An interview-cum-conversation was deemed the most appropriate method for achieving that goal. However some degree of direction was still necessary in order to ensure the relevant areas of interest were indeed covered and also to avoid excessive digression. This is where the interview schedule of questions came into play. Used at times as a checklist with successive topics crossed off as they were discussed, at other times it was used to bring the conversation back on track. In line with the iterative nature of qualitative research, the interview schedule was also modified to take into account issues and topics that viewers themselves raised.

The decision to use individual rather than group interviews involved pragmatic and theoretical issues. Individual interviews were simply more economical (in terms of resources) to organise and conduct than group interviews. From a theoretical point of view, the question centred on what the different interview types would reveal. Research using group interviews has clearly revealed that differences in the positions that viewers adopt to television programmes can be linked to differences in social positioning. However it has not adequately revealed **how** those specific viewer — programme

neighbours etc. I would try to steer the talk to TV news, but in a 'natural' way and without adopting the role of a researcher.

(1988: 209)

The discourses of reception that these informal encounters produced enabled him to draft a "preliminary typology of talk about TV news" (Ibid.). Obviously there are certain issues to be addressed here (e.g., methodological, ethical), but it is clear that given the embeddedness of television in everyday life (Ang, 1996), naturally occurring conversations about the medium are a rich, and as yet mostly untapped, source of knowledge about the various relationships that viewers have with it.

positions are taken up by individual viewers, which was the aim of this research project. In terms of an experimental or natural research setting, the central concern is one of context. Watching a television programme in a laboratory followed by an interview about that particular engagement is obviously very different to watching the same programme at home within the day-to-day routines of 'normal' life. The approach adopted in this study represents something of a hybrid. The specific context of the 'research interview' is perhaps quasi-experimental in that it is not a 'natural' context. On the other hand, the 'conversational' aspect of the interview and the fact that I personally knew most of my 'co-conversationalists' certainly helped to naturalise that context.

CHAPTER FOUR

A BRIEF LOOK AT SOME CRITICAL INFLUENCES

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses a number of different research perspectives (at both the conceptual and methodological levels) that were taken on board during the interview phase but which also had an influence on the preliminary stages of the analysis process. Bracketing these influences off in discrete sections is not indicative of the closely interrelated way in which these perspectives — reflexivity, feminist approaches to interviewing, and discourse analysis — informed the research. Placing the discussion between the chapter on the interview and the chapter on the methods of analysis is, however, symbolic of the way in which the issues here informed both aspects of the research processes.

4.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is both problematic as an experience and as a topic of discussion. As Mehan and Wood have so aptly commented:

There could be infinite sayings about reflexivity, and still reflexivity would not be captured. Reflexivity will exhaust us long before we exhaust it.

(1975: 159, in Ashmore, 1989: 26)

Myerhoff and Ruby talk of a “thick tangle of terms clustered around” the central theme of reflexivity.

In this case it is worsened by the very nature of the activity indicated by the term: consciousness about being conscious; thinking about thinking. Reflexivity generates heightened awareness and vertigo, the creative intensity of a possibility that loosens us from habit and custom and turns us back to contemplate ourselves just as we may be beginning to realise that we have no clear idea of what we are doing. The experience

may be exhilarating or frightening, or both, but it is generally irreversible. We can never return to our former easy terms with a world that carried on quite well without our administrations.

(1982: 1-2)

Woolgar has succeeded in capturing the vertiginous, exhilarating, and sometimes even frightening prospect of reflexivity when he calls for the exploration of “forms of literary expression whereby the monster can be simultaneously kept at bay and allowed a position at the heart of our enterprise” (1982: 489). Nevertheless, as reflexivity has indeed occupied a central position within this research project, it is now time to face the monster.

There are two ways in which reflexivity has woven itself indelibly into the current project: firstly as a growing critical awareness of the research process itself; and secondly as an increased self-awareness of myself as occupying a dual position of researcher and viewer. The first strand has already been discussed in the introductory chapter, where the fundamental change in direction that took place as the research progressed was outlined. In this section the focus is on how that second form of reflexivity impacted on the interviews and subsequent analysis.

The origins of this particular incarnation of reflexivity lie in an altogether different, and earlier, research project. In the course of completing my M. Soc. Sci. thesis (Bosomworth, 1993), I had read an article by Peter Dahlgren in which he acknowledged the sometimes problematic nature of studying reception, especially when the researcher is him/herself an active participant in the social phenomenon under investigation:

It seemed that we had some kind of ‘knowledge’ about television news that was falling by the wayside and not being incorporated into our work. We realised that this was the knowledge that we had gained about the phenomenon not as researchers, but rather in the role of culturally competent viewers who watched rather regularly and responded to the programme from the horizon of our very own everyday lives.

(1985: 236)

Looking back from my current position it is difficult, if not impossible, to think of a time since reading that article that I have not been aware of my position as both a researcher of the news and a “culturally competent” viewer. As the research progressed, though, and as the various issues discussed in this chapter began to exert their influence, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the artificial separation of these identities — of researcher and viewer — that had characterised the beginning of this project.

There are two identifiable ways in which this duality impacted upon the research process. The first of these involved the interview phase, where it served to problematise what had previously been thought of as a relatively straight forward process of eliciting information from willing subjects. In asking people about their experiences of watching television news, I was not seeking to explore some ‘alien’ cultural practice. Watching television news was something that both the interviewees and myself were (and still are) intimately familiar with. The problem here was how to deal with the consequences of this shared knowledge within the interview context. On more than one occasion, interviewees asked me about **my** own experiences with television news, and yet traditional approaches to interviewing offered little in the way of constructive advice on this issue¹. Brenner (1985), for example, warns against expressing one’s own opinion, as this could lessen the validity of the information reported. In this situation, however, a neutral, uninvolved stance proved untenable. The following section on Feminist Research Perspectives continues with this issue and discusses how this duality was ‘operationalised’ in practice.

The second way in which the reflexive acknowledgment of this duality shaped the research occurred during the analysis phase. Many aspects of the viewers’ accounts of their engagement with television news resonated with my own experiences, and this led to an increased sensitivity to the various activities and forms of watching news that viewers

¹ See, for example, Brenner et al. (1985), Marshall and Rossman (1989), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Walker (1993b).

spoke of. In this way, a protocol of interpretation was developed which drew significantly on my own experiences as a viewer to interpret and make sense of the experiences of the viewers I spoke with. Of course a necessary consequence of this is an acknowledgment that the analysis is only ever partial:

The ethnographer's account, then, must be reflexive about its own partiality, incompleteness, and structured gaps. Whereas what we describe is not raw social discourse, to which we do not have full access, 'this is not as fatal as it sounds, for... it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something' (Geertz, 1973: 20).

(Morley and Silverstone, 1991: 157)

Despite the fact that I am not strictly engaging in ethnography per se, the idea that full access to "raw social discourse" is not necessarily a prerequisite to understanding the nature of the situation within which that discourse is produced proved critical. By virtue of my status as a culturally competent (Dahlgren, 1985) viewer of television news, and by reflexively drawing on that, as a researcher I did not need to necessarily "know everything" about the experiences of the people I spoke with "in order to understand" those experiences. As a case in point, my own experiences of news watching enables me to understand what this viewer means when she says:

Tori: I'll be watching it, um I'll have the control in my hand, I'll be flicking... (laughs)... from Three to One because um, the story might be boring and they might have something better on the other side.

[82-86]

The sheer pervasiveness of television, and by extension television news, means that the behaviour that Tori is describing is not only familiar to me (from everyday observations of how other people watch the news) but is in fact an example of the very sorts of behaviour that I myself engage in when watching the news. I realise that such an approach is vulnerable to criticisms of arrogance on behalf of myself as the researcher in presuming to know all there is to know about watching news simply by virtue of being a news watcher

myself. To this I would respond by repositioning myself as a news watcher who happens to be researching the news-viewer relationship, and in doing so is drawing on his own experiences as much as those of the people he has interviewed.

4.3 Feminist Approaches to Interviewing (and Research in General)

In the previous section I indicated how the incorporation of a reflexive stance created something of a problem in terms of how to allow room for this within the interview context. Feminist perspectives on research interviewing proved to be a source of enlightenment in this respect. What I took from the feminist literature was not so much a distinct procedural way of conducting the interviews but rather an understanding that it was possible to move beyond the traditional stereotype of the detached, impersonal and objective interviewer to a position that was involved, personal and subjective.² Rather than deny the existence of shared knowledge and experiences, as more traditional approaches suggested, feminist interpretations of interviewing stressed the way in which the interview should be regarded as a joint exercise in the construction of meaning.

This transformation of the interview from an elicitive exercise, in which the researcher seeks to extract information from the interviewee, to a collaborative enterprise in which meaning is co-constructed provided the theoretical and methodological solution to the impasse that had developed. This dissolution of the “us/them” (researcher/researched) dichotomy is summed up by Ann Oakley’s remark that “a feminist interviewing women is both inside the culture and participating in that which she is observing” (1981: 57).

Ribbens articulated this duality of position when she asked herself the following question:

More crucially, am I myself an example of a mother doing my own ethnography within my peer group, rather than an outsider coming in to research a group that is not my own?

² See, for example, Cotterill (1992), Devault (1990), Finch (1984), Jorgenson (1992), Kauffmann (1992), Oakley (1981), and Ribbens (1989).

(1989: 589)

Without wanting to lessen the political implications of these questions in any way, there were parallels with my own research. As a researcher who was also a television news watcher, was I not seeking to understand how (fellow) viewers experienced a situation that I myself was intimately familiar with?

How then were these perspectives operationalised in the course of conducting the research? As with reflexivity, feminist research perspectives impacted on both the investigatory and analytical phases of the research. In terms of the interview, they played a significant role in developing the concept of a ‘directed conversation’. Adopting a more conversationally oriented interview provided a context in which the viewing experiences of **both** parties could be more freely explored than was possible within conventional approaches. The traditional dichotomy of the ‘expert’ researcher seeking to extract information from compliant interviewees did not apply in this case, and in a way I regarded the interviewees as the experts. In asking the interviewees questions like “Why do you watch the news?”, “Why do you prefer this particular news bulletin?” and “What are you doing when you watch the news?” I was also, in a sense, seeking my own answers to these questions. Creating a situation in which the orthodox roles of researcher and subject were much less clear cut also helped to abrogate the distinction between ‘official discourse’ and ‘personal discourse’ (Dahlgren, 1988)³. The analysis presented in Chapter Seven provides a clear demonstration of how this actually occurred. In all but one of the interviews the very first question that I asked was “Why do you watch the news?”. The responses were remarkably similar, with all ten interviewees offering a variation on the theme of wanting to keep up to date with what was happening. As the interviews progressed, however, and as we began to explore the viewer-news encounter in more depth in a conversational manner, many different reasons began to emerge why the news was watched (and why it was not watched). I would suggest that what this indicates is an

³ See note 10, Chapter Three for an elaboration of this distinction.

initial response that conforms to a perceived expectation of what an ‘appropriate’ answer to that question is (i.e. an ‘official’ response).

In terms of the analytical process, the impact was perhaps less direct, though no less significant. This indirect influence occurred as a result of re-assessing what the interviews represented in light of their status as sites for the co-construction of meaning. The question, of course, was what exactly was being constructed? As the discussion in the next section shows, ideas from discourse analysis provided a suitable means of addressing this issue.

4.4 Discourse analysis

Looked at from the perspective of discourse analysis, the interviews became much more than reports of ‘what happened’ when viewers watched television news. As I pointed out above, feminist perspectives stressed the importance of understanding the interview as a co-construction of meaning. Allied with a discursive perspective, in particular one that is derived from a social psychological approach (Burman and Parker, 1993; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Shotter, 1993a), the interview came to be seen as a site of discursive construction. Citing Foucault, Shotter points to the role that discourse has in such a transformation:

[Once] it was the task of language to represent... reality.... But now, many take seriously Foucault's claim (1972: 49) that our task ‘consists of not - of no longer - treating discourses as a group of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak’.

(1993b: 38)

In the interviews for this research there appeared to be a number of different ‘objects’ formed in the course of talking about television news and the watching of it. In the first instance, it was evident that at certain points throughout the interviews I was, through the discourse of research, constructing myself as the “interviewer/researcher”:

*John: One of the questions I ask people is do they, um
channel surf...?*

Here I am quite literally speaking as an interviewer (I ask questions of other people) who is seeking to confirm the existence of a specific behaviour (channel surfing). Similarly, viewers sometimes responded in a way that explicitly confirmed their status as interviewees:

*Sian: Yeah, well I can't remember what was on the news
last night. I thought that was what you might ask
me.*

By indicating that she was expecting to be asked a specific question, Sian succeeded in simultaneously constructing herself as an interviewee and me as the interviewer. In addition to these identities, and of greater significance to the outcome of the research, however, was the fact that in talking about how they watched television news, the interviewees were discursively constructing themselves as viewers of news. As Dickerson says:

identity can be understood not merely as a separate entity which is simply reported upon (accurately or inaccurately) within an interview context, but rather as something which is achieved and maintained, that is **constituted**, within the linguistic context in which it arises.

(1996: 59, emphasis in original)

In this sense their identity as viewers was constituted through the discourse that was generated within the interview context. As my earlier points (regarding the identities of interviewer and interviewee) illustrate, the “linguistic context” of the interview was one in which “identity” was a mercurial phenomenon. From interviewee, to viewer, to student, to son, to husband, to protester, to undecided voter, the specific identities that were discursively constituted ranged across a wide spectrum. A particularly useful concept with

which to comprehend this idea of a multiplicity of identities is position. Davies and Harré argue for this term

as the appropriate expression with which to talk about the discursive production of a diversity of selves, the fleeting panorama of Meadian 'me's' conjured up in the course of conversational interactions.

(1990: 4.6)

Their use of the term is derived from the work of Paul Smith who introduced

the concept of positioning by distinguishing between 'a person' as an individual agent and 'the subject'. By the latter he means 'the series or conglomerate of positions, subject-positions, provisional and not necessarily infeasible, in which a person is momentarily called by the discourses and the world he/she inhabits'.

(Smith, 1988: xxxv, cited in Davies and Harré, 1990: 5.1)

Considering the specific character of the interviews I conducted, it is hardly surprising that the viewers were "called" to a variety of "subject-positions". In line with labelling the interviews directed conversations, I emphasised to the viewers that I was more interested in having a conversation with them rather than simply asking them a series of questions. As a result the discussions often ranged over a variety of topics beyond the immediate concern of watching television news. Additionally, the prior relationship that I had with all but one of the viewers certainly contributed to the wide array of positions that were taken up in the discursive encounter between us.

The real utility of the concept of discursive positioning lies in the way that it can be applied to the encounter that viewers have with television news. At this point it is perhaps useful to re-consider the interviews as discourses of reception in which viewers not only construct their own understanding of television news but also their own identity as viewers of news (Jensen, 1990). A close inspection of this discursively constructed identity of 'viewer', however, quickly revealed it to be a far from stable object. As viewers, individuals took up a variety of positions in relation to the news. Sometimes they liked it, sometimes they disliked it. Sometimes they were critical of the way it covered things,

sometimes they were caught up in the drama of it. Sometimes they couldn't care less if they didn't watch it, sometimes they made a special effort not to miss it. In short, it was apparent that viewers adopted a multitude of positions in relation to the news, and that these positions were inherently unstable.

At this point I wish to link the idea of position with a number of points that were raised in the previous chapter. In Section 3.2.2 I was critical of those studies that adopt a more 'experimental' approach whereby viewers are shown a videotape of a particular television text and are then questioned about it. I would argue that reception analyses of this type have operated with an implicitly 'dramaturgical model' in which "viewing" is understood as a role:

In the dramaturgical model people are construed as actors with lines already written and their roles determined by the particular play they find themselves in.

(Davies and Harré, 1990: 6.1)

The particular play that viewers in these sorts of research settings find themselves in is one that necessarily insists that they watch and then respond to a particular piece of television. In other words, the researchers have created the role of 'viewer' and now it is up to the individual to play the part. By working with a discourse of reception that has not necessarily been pre-scripted, as it were, I believe I have succeeded in liberating viewers from the (over)prescribed 'role' in which research has typically cast them. The concept of position, therefore, emphasises agency as a fundamental aspect of the viewer-news relationship, something which has often been missing in other studies of news reception (e.g., Dickerson, 1996; Jensen, 1990; Philo, 1990). Although Davies and Harré are talking specifically about interpersonal communication, their theatrical metaphor is equally applicable to the complex relationship that viewers have with television news:

'Positioning' and 'subject position'... permit us to think of ourselves as a choosing subject, locating ourselves in conversations according to those narrative forms with which we are familiar.... We are thus agent (producer/director) as well as author and player and the other participants co-author and co-produce the drama. But we are also the multiple

audiences that view any play and bring to it the multiple and often contradictory interpretations based on our own emotions, our own reading of the situation and our own imaginative positioning of ourselves in the situation. Each of these will be mediated by our own subjective histories.

(1990: 6.1-6.2)

The multiple and varied ways in which viewers discursively (and ‘imaginatively’) positioned themselves in relation to the news (and also the different positions themselves) forms the core of the analysis that is presented in Chapters Seven through Ten. Applying ideas from discourse analysis to the interviews helped to focus attention on what was actually taking place within that particular context. In short, it helped to define what was being analysed. In talking about their news watching experiences, interviewees were continuously engaged in the discursive construction of the identity of ‘viewer’. And what was clear was that that identity was not a fixed, concrete thing. To be a viewer is to occupy a variety of positions in relation to what ever is being viewed.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how a number of critical influences impacted upon the research, in particular the interview and analysis phases. As mentioned in the introduction, bracketing off reflexivity, feminist research perspectives and ideas from discourse analysis into discrete sections in no way reflects the interrelated way in which these strands influenced and shaped the research⁴. In brief: reflexivity problematised the interview while at the same time it allowed for an increased sensitivity to the kinds of things that were revealed within the interviews; feminist research perspectives provided a new way of understanding the interview which then allowed reflexivity to be operationalised in

⁴ Unlike the doing of qualitative research, which is intrinsically iterative and cyclical, the reporting of that process is necessarily restricted by the linearity that conventional presentation methods impose (i.e. a printed, paper-based dissertation).

practice; discourse analysis provided a means of understanding what it was that was taking place within this 'new' form of interview.

Reflexivity impacted on this study in two distinct ways. The first has already been discussed in the Introduction, where a growing critical awareness of the research process led to a significant change in direction for the project as a whole. It is the second strand — an increased self-awareness of myself as occupying a dual position of researcher and viewer — that the current chapter has focused on. This in itself is subdivided into two sub-strands, involving firstly the interview phase of the research and secondly the analysis phase. In terms of the former, reflexivity served to problematise what had originally been taken for granted as a straightforward data gathering exercise. As a researcher AND viewer of television news, the challenge was how to deal with this shared knowledge within the interview context. In terms of the latter the impact was much less problematic. As a viewer myself, I had an increased sensitivity to the kinds of things that other viewers were talking about when they discussed their television news watching experiences. In this way a protocol of interpretation was employed which drew significantly on my own viewing experiences.

Feminist research perspectives provided an appropriate way to operationalise within the interview context the duality that (initially, at least) proved to be so problematic. Shifting from a perspective that regarded the interview as primarily an exercise in elicitation to one that recognised it as co-construction in meaning provided the necessary (discursive) space to allow both positions (researcher and viewer) the opportunity to take an active role in the interview. In addition to this, there has been another consequence of this shift in perspective. The very fact that watching television news was something that I had in common with the people I was interviewing (and in particular that I had openly

acknowledged this) has, paradoxically, led to the situation where it now seems impossible to simply “just watch it” without always being consciously aware of this very activity.⁵

Having moved to a position whereby the interview was regarded as a site for the co-construction of meaning, the question then was what exactly was being constructed? Discourse analysis provided a means of addressing this question. The interviewees (and at times myself) were involved in a process of discursively constructing a particular identity — that of television news viewer. What was clearly evident, however, was that this identity proved to be a mercurial phenomenon in relation to the object that was being viewed. While all the interviews revealed contextually unique experiences, what was common to all was that to be a viewer of television news involves the occupation of a variety of positions in relation to the news.

⁵ In a similar vein, Ribbens’ research on aspects of motherhood led her to ask the following question of herself: “Am I in fact increasingly a different sort of mother because I am doing the research?” (1989: 589). In that respect, I must ask myself: Am I in fact increasingly a different sort of news watcher because I am researching that very activity?

CHAPTER FIVE

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the methods of analysis that were employed in this research project. The first section explores the issue of qualitative research, and how this study is one such example. A number of basic features that characterise qualitative research in general are identified and these are discussed in relation to the current research. In linking these characteristic features of qualitative research to the specific study concerned here, several problematic issues are identified. The second section narrows the focus to look at how concepts from Grounded Theory informed the analytical methods that were adopted. Developing an approach that emphasised discovery rather than verification and that allowed for the conceptual categories to emerge from the data itself were the key factors in choosing to apply a methodology derived from Grounded Theory. In the third section the discussion shifts to the area of computer assisted qualitative data analysis techniques. An integral component of this project has been NUD*IST, a software application designed specifically for the analysis of qualitative data. A brief description of the application's capabilities is then followed by an account of how it was employed in this project. The section concludes with some cautionary remarks that have been expressed over the increasingly widespread use of computerised methods of analysis.

5.2 An Exercise in Qualitative Research

In stating that this research project is qualitative, it would be fair to suggest that this has been done so from what Bryman has coined a technical standpoint. In other words, the initial decision to adopt a qualitative approach was based more on "issues regarding the suitability of a particular method in relation to a particular research problem" (1988: 106), rather than from a purely epistemological basis "which has to

do with the question of what is to pass as warrantable, and hence acceptable knowledge” (ibid: 104). It is the nature of the problem under investigation which thus determines which approach is to be used. In other words, some questions cannot be answered by quantitative methods, while others cannot be answered by qualitative ones (Walker, 1993a). In this instance the questions had to do with the nature of the viewer-news relationship, and the kinds of things that I was seeking to discover (Why do people watch the news? What are they actually doing when they are ‘watching’ it? Why do they prefer one news bulletin over another? What do they not like about the news?) could only be unearthed through the application of a qualitative methodology.

Ironically enough, despite being aware that what I was doing was broadly speaking ‘qualitative’, I actually had a much clearer understanding of what constituted ‘quantitative’ research. This situation is reflected in Strauss and Corbin’s rather unhelpful definition of qualitative research as:

any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons’ lives, stories, behavior, but also about organisational functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships.

(1990: 17)

The elimination of any form of “statistical procedure”, and “quantification” does little to indicate just what exactly qualitative research is all about. In fact, what this statement does is really only say what qualitative research is **not** about. Jensen (1991a), using the German expressions of *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, has pointed to the way that the origins of qualitative and quantitative inquiry lie respectively in the humanities and the natural sciences. His summation of two perspectives is somewhat more informative than Strauss and Corbin’s definition:

QUALITATIVE**Geisteswissenschaften**

meaning
 internal
 occurrence
 experience
 exegesis
 process

QUANTITATIVE**Naturwissenschaften**

information
 external
 recurrence
 experiment
 measurement
 product

(Jensen, 1991a: 4)

Complementing these rather abstract notions, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest a number of recurring features that are indicative of the kinds of empirical activity that qualitative research involves. These include:

- An intense and prolonged contact with the field or life situation under study.
- The researcher's role is to gain a holistic (i.e., systematic, encompassing, integrated) overview of the context under study.
- Attempts are made to capture data on the perceptions of local actors from the inside, through a process of deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding, and of suspending or 'bracketing' preconceptions about the topics under investigation.
- A main task is to explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations.
- Multiple interpretations of the material are possible, but some are more compelling for theoretical reasons or on grounds of internal consistency.

- Relatively little standardised instrumentation is used at the outset. The researcher is essentially the main measurement device in the study.
- Most analysis is done with words. The words can be assembled, subclustered, broken into semiotic segments. They can be organised to permit the researcher to contrast, compare, analyse and bestow patterns upon them.

These features are indeed representative of the kind of activity and processes that were required to initiate, conduct, and complete this research project. What they also bring to light, however, are a number of problematic issues that arose throughout the course of the project. Through my academic background it would be fair to say that I possessed a critical understanding of television news, but it was my everyday experiences as a watcher of television news that truly constituted an ‘intense and prolonged contact with the field’. Acknowledging and incorporating this into the research was not without its difficulties, as the discussion in the previous chapter has indicated. Here the issue of ‘bracketing’ my own preconceptions about the topic under investigation proved to be especially problematic. As a viewer, I was only too aware that watching television news is a common enough part of people’s everyday activity. However it quickly became apparent that explaining their (and my own) understanding and management of this mundane, everyday activity would prove to be extremely difficult, in part because of its very taken-for-grantedness. The possibility of ‘multiple interpretations’, while theoretically liberating in that it opens the research up to a variety of directions, proved in practice to be something of a hindrance. While some of these directions were more compelling than others, there was still the problem of deciding which were of greater significance, and much time was spent pursuing the various lines of interpretation and then backtracking from those that ultimately led to a conceptual dead-end. The full implications of what it meant to be the ‘main measurement device’ really only became apparent as a consequence of engaging in the research

process itself. Brief and condensed as these points are, they nevertheless highlight some of the difficulties that were encountered during this research.

While qualitative inquiry encompasses a wide array of research types and methodologies, this particular project as a whole can be described as descriptive/interpretive. As Tesch explains it:

In descriptive/interpretive research the intent of the analysis is to gain insight into the human phenomenon or situation under study and to provide a systematic and illuminating description of the phenomenon.

(1991: 22)

The ‘situation’ under study in this case was the nature of the relationship that existed between viewers and television news. The aim was to produce a ‘systematic and illuminating description’ of that relationship. However, since the nature of that relationship had not been established at that time, it was necessary to adopt a methodological approach that would allow the development of the analytical and conceptual categories to emerge from the data itself (Filstead, 1970).

5.3 A Grounded Approach

Grounded Theory is a method of study originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and since developed by Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). As defined by the latter, a grounded theory is

inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, data analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge.

(1990: 23)

The decision to adopt a grounded approach towards the analysis of the interviews was based on a variety of factors. Filstead’s comments concerning the necessity of

finding a methodology that allows for the conceptual categories to emerge from the data itself encouraged me to look for a method that would support this. Related to this is the emphasis that Grounded Theory places on research as a process of discovery. Jensen has indicated that qualitative analysis “focuses on the **occurrence** of its analytical objects in a particular context” (1991a: 4, emphasis in original). Thus I was seeking to identify the occurrence (i.e., discover the existence) of a certain type of (or types of) relationship between viewers and television news. The reciprocal nature of data collection and analysis that characterises qualitative research in general is a specific feature of the grounded approach. As the research moves back and forward between data collection and analysis, certain categories, patterns and relationships emerge from that data. It was these (yet to be discovered) findings that would constitute the theoretical formulation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) of that relationship. In other words, it would only be possible to define what that relationship was once it had ‘emerged’ from the data. The grounding of the concepts and categories in the data itself also allows for a certain flexibility in terms of what can legitimately be discussed. While there were certain aspects of the audience-text relationship that I wished to explore, it did not mean that I would disregard other issues that emerged from the data.

5.4 The Analytical Method

In this section I will discuss some of the issues that relate to what is more traditionally known as the ‘analysis’ phase of the research. The qualification has been made in the understanding that analysis in qualitative research is not necessarily a distinct and isolatable part of the overall research process. In that sense, the analysis phase of this project has been, and to a certain extent still is, an ongoing process, beginning with the interview itself and continuing right through to the writing process. In terms of the amount of material that was gathered for analysis, this consisted of approximately 67,000 words of typed interview transcripts, representing eleven interviews of between 30 and 90 minutes duration. Despite being a relatively small-scale study, this was nevertheless a considerable

amount of raw data that needed to be interpreted and made sense of. To assist in this formidable task, I employed an analytical tool, in the form of a computer programme. It is to this tool that I now turn, and in discussing its use in the current project I will also be addressing a number of issues that pertain to qualitative analysis in general.

5.4.1 Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA)

If, as Ang (1996) has argued, we live in an increasingly television-saturated world, then it also true that we are living in an increasingly computerised world. Like television, computers are now becoming an inescapable part of everyday life for increasing numbers of people. As for myself, I would classify my own level of use as above average. As a part-time computer consultant for the University of Waikato's Information and Technology Division, it would be fair to say that I have more than a passing interest in, and more than a basic knowledge of, computers and their application. It was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that computers, in some form or other, would be an integral part of this research project. From very early on I was aware that I would be dealing with considerable amounts of information and so I immediately began to investigate potential ways of using computers to handle not just large amounts of data but data that was by its very nature notoriously difficult to systematically store, retrieve and analyse. Qualitative research often involves the analysis of various types of data, such as field notes, interview transcripts, official records, and even non-written forms such as photographs and video tapes. For many years it seemed that the only tools available to handle this kind of data were a photocopier, scissors, glue/Sellotape, a large filing cabinet and an endless supply of 3 x 5 index cards. While computers have been used in the social sciences for many years, their application was traditionally limited to large-scale quantitative surveys requiring statistical analysis. With the exponential growth in computing power during the 1990s, and the increasing availability of smaller, faster and more

powerful personal computers, qualitative researchers soon began to turn their attention towards ways in which they could make use of this technology.¹ The widespread and rapid adoption of computer-aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) methods is crudely but nevertheless effectively reflected in a comparison of early reviews of the field (Fielding and Lee, 1991; Tesch, 1990) with Weitzman's and Miles more recent (1995) appraisal. Typically those earlier works covered only a handful of applications, while the latter review contains detailed assessments of no fewer than 24 applications, ranging from relatively basic text retrieval programmes to sophisticated coding-based theory builders and conceptual network builders.

The main justification for using such programmes is primarily mechanical rather than analytical, although as I shall indicate below, the analysis is inevitably shaped by the methods used. By mechanical I am referring to the fact that considerable time and effort is saved by using the computer to do the mundane and often repetitive tasks that characterise the analysis of large amounts of qualitative data. Some of these tasks include: locating individual words and phrases; creating alphabetic word lists and counting the frequency of the occurrence of words; creating indices (attaching source information to each occurrence) and 'key word in context' occurrences; attaching key words to segments of text; attaching codes (categorisation symbols) to segments of text; and connecting codes (Tesch, 1990).²

¹ See, for example, Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Dey (1993), Fielding and Lee (1991), Kelle (1995), Richards and Richards (1987, 1993), Tesch (1990, 1991)

² Within the context of CAQDA the term 'text' has a specific meaning that is different from the way 'text' has been used within reception studies (and in the rest of this thesis). 'Text' in CAQDA is basically another term for data. It is derived from the fact that most software applications are only capable of processing ASCII, or text-only files. Throughout the rest of this chapter, therefore, the expression 'text' is used in reference to this meaning.

It must be stressed at this point that these programmes are not designed to do the ‘thinking’ for the researcher. As Tesch points out:

The thinking, judging, deciding, interpreting, etc., are still done by the researcher. The computer does not make conceptual decisions, such as which words or themes are important to focus on, or which analytical step to take next. These intellectual tasks are still left entirely to the researcher. Even artificial intelligence cannot yet recognise the meaning of human language, especially as it changes according to context. Thus all the computer does is follow instructions regarding words, phrases or text segments previously designated by the researcher as analysis units.

(1990: 25-26)

In short, the computer can be regarded as a kind of super research assistant. Given the correct instructions, it can complete the many time consuming mechanical processes of analysis in the blink of an eye, thus leaving (theoretically at least) the researcher more time and energy available for the actual interpretive process of analysing the data.

5.4.2 NUD*IST: An Overview

The software package that I chose to use is known by the rather unlikely acronym of NUD*IST, which stands for Non-Numerical Unstructured Data, Indexing, Searching and Theorising. In a nutshell, this programme allows the researcher to store all the relevant data in one place and from there s/he can, as the second half of the name states, index the data, search the data and even test the data for emerging theories and ideas. The decision to select this particular programme was based on a number of factors. Firstly, NUD*IST is a multi-platform application, which means that it is available for both IBM-compatible and Apple Macintosh computers. Since my own computer is a Macintosh, and also because the University of Waikato’s student computer facilities are predominantly Macintosh-based, it was essential that the application was available for this operating system. Secondly, the developers of the application provide an extensive after-sale support service for their product,

including a telephone-based help-line service, and conducting workshops for users of all levels throughout the world on a regular basis. Thirdly, there is a strong on-line presence in the form of a World Wide Web site, maintained by the developers, where users can access information regarding product updates and articles relating to CAQDA. There is also a moderated email discussion forum where users can post questions about the application in particular or about methodological issues in general.

Before highlighting the specific ways in which NUD*IST was used in the current study, it will first be necessary to describe how the programme works. Given its complexity this will necessarily be a brief sketch, although I hope to provide enough information such that a non-user will grasp the fundamentals.³ At the heart of NUD*IST there are two main elements: the document system and the index system. The document system consists of actual raw data, such as interview transcripts, field notes, bibliographic references etc. Once introduced into the programme, documents can be managed in a variety of ways: they can be stored and retrieved; information about documents and their context can similarly be stored and retrieved; document text can be edited at any time; new or additional documents can be appended to those already in the system. The document system can also be analysed by: adding and coding annotations to the original document text; coding segments of text at nodes by several different means; writing and editing memos that record developing ideas about the documents; searching for words or phrases in the text of the document and automatically coding the results; creating a report on the document system or any part of a document, with selected information about coding. The index system is used for the creation and management of conceptual categories and

³ The majority of what follows has been drawn from the User Guide provided with QSR NUD*IST 4. For an excellent review and summary of the programme, see the chapter on NUD*IST in Weitzman and Miles (1995).

it consists of 'nodes' which are effectively repositories for all information pertaining to whatever category is represented by a specific node. The index system can be used to: create 'free nodes' (free of organisation), for unconnected ideas; store nodes in a hierarchical index tree which helps in the organisation and clarification of concepts and their relationships; store information about cases, documents or project segments; store and edit definitions for the nodes; record emerging theoretical understanding and explanations by way of analytical memos that can also be stored at and retrieved from nodes. In addition to these features, the index system is also a dynamic structure. In other words it can be continuously updated and modified as the research progresses. This is achieved by: moving free nodes into category/subcategory relationships in the index tree as relationships between them are established; deleting or altering coding; shifting, copying or merging nodes; browsing all the passages of text coded at a node, from all or selected documents for interpretation and analysis; recoding and spreading existing coding to a wider context; jumping to the original source from the retrieved passages (i.e., coded text can be viewed in its original context); searching the index system for combinations of coding expressing answers to simple or complex questions (in this way expressing and testing theories or hypotheses); storing the results of text or index system searches as new categories for further exploration of the data; creating reports on any node or the text coded at it, which can be edited, saved or printed without affecting the index system. While all of the functions noted above are available via a traditional windows menu system, they can also be run by way of an automated command file. Although tricky to master, the advantage of the command file system is that any number of these functions can be combined to run complex enquiries. Furthermore, the customised command files themselves can be saved and retrieved for exploration of the index system at any time.

5.4.3 NUD*IST: Its Use in Context

From this quick description of NUD*IST, it is clear that it has the potential to be a powerful analytical tool. Initially, however, it appeared that I had failed to make full use of this potential. Despite having read widely on the subject (see the references cited above), I promptly forgot all about the very clear warning that while NUD*IST is a very powerful tool, it does not actually 'do' the analysis. I quickly became proficient at using the programme, understanding and even mastering the sometimes-complex operations that were required to manage the data.

Understanding the mechanics of the programme, however, is no substitute for understanding the conceptual framework upon which the programme is based. To cut a long story short, in my haste to use the programme I ended up with a very impressive looking index tree, a large number of nodes (i.e., categories) and a lot of data spread all over the place. Unfortunately it meant very little to me. The very flexibility of this powerful tool had, ironically, left me in what Waywood (1993) has described as a theoretical vacuum. Upon reflection, the problem stemmed from the fact that I had developed what amounted to a top-down index tree structure. In other words I had created a whole range of categories that basically replicated the questions that were on the interview schedule, or else were representative of the kinds of things I was interested in finding. Remembering that a grounded approach seeks to develop concepts and categories from the data itself, and heeding Richards and Richards' (1995) advice to follow a strongly bottom-up development path when constructing the index tree, I abandoned that first attempt and started over.

This time, instead of building an index tree and then going to the transcripts to see which bits would fit where (if at all), I simply created a flat index structure. The printed interview transcripts were carefully scrutinised, and anything that appeared to be an identifiable feature was noted as a concept. Obviously this involves considerable interpretive latitude in determining what constitutes a 'concept'. NUD*IST requires the user to define in advance the unit of analysis, be it a paragraph, an utterance, a line or even a single word. In the first attempt (see above)

I had chosen to use paragraphs. For this new attempt I instead opted for a finer grain of coding by choosing individual lines of text.⁴ In terms of determining these initial concepts, the basic method consisted of taking each spoken sentence and identifying its core characteristics.⁵ These core characteristics were arrived at by asking, in general, two questions of the text: What is being talked about here? In what context? In such a way it was possible to arrive at one or more categories for each sentence of text that was analysed. Following this initial and detailed combing of the transcripts, no fewer than 190 individual categories were determined. Once these were created as nodes in NUD*IST, and using the printed transcripts as reference, the on-line documents were coded at the appropriate nodes.⁶ The result

⁴ A line of text in NUD*IST is, depending on how the original data file has been formatted, typically 72 characters in length. Of course this means that in some cases a single sentence may consist of more than one text-unit (i.e., it is more than one line in length).

⁵ Sentences rather than text units were chosen as the basic unit of analysis precisely for the reason mentioned in the previous note. Of course this then necessitates defining what constitutes a sentence in terms of spoken language. The convention that I adopted used a combination of pauses and surrounding context to determine when one sentence ended and another began. In other words a lengthy pause between sections of speech on the same general subject was not interpreted as the end of one sentence and the beginning of another. Admittedly this led to some inconsistencies, but with individual lines being used as a basis for coding, it was always possible to expand the coding by one unit either side of the sentence to include at least the required context.

⁶ Given the incremental development of the categories each document was progressively more densely coded than its predecessor. The text-search function was therefore used to cross-check each document thoroughly for

was a flat tree structure with a depth of just one node, with all 190 nodes at the same level. By exploiting NUD*IST's powerful indexing operators, and also the basic 'cut and paste' functions, I began to build the index tree upwards from this bottom-level. Some of the categories were merged with others as it became clear that there had been the occasional replication of an earlier category. In other cases, individual categories were subdivided into more specific analytical groupings. Eventually I ended up with an index structure that was by no means definitive, but was nevertheless far more representative of the richness and complexity of the data than my original effort had been.⁷

instances of those categories which had been developed after that document had been initially coded. Pattern searches meant that combinations of similar words or the same word with different endings could be searched for. Even with this form of retrospective coding, there were occasions throughout subsequent periods of analysis when I would come across a particular comment that had escaped the earlier coding process. The dynamic nature of the index system meant that these new instances were simply added to the text already coded at the appropriate node. In this respect a potential weakness of this form of interpretive analysis is negated by the ability to continually add relevant text to that already coded at specific node. Thus increasing sensitivity to both the data and the concepts can be fed back into the analysis in a (theoretically) never-ending loop.

⁷ One of the strongest features of NUD*IST is its ability to support on-going development. The index structure is never fixed in place as a permanent representation of the phenomenon under investigation. Instead it exists as a dynamic 'work-in-progress', always capable of being further refined or developed in as yet new and untested directions. Ironically, this very flexibility can prove to be seductively problematic for the researcher. From my own experiences, I had great difficulty in leaving the analytical phase when it came time to begin the write-up. There was a strong temptation to

All through this initial process of data analysis I had been constantly noting down any ideas, thoughts and possible directions of investigation that had come to my attention. These too were added to the index structure, as a way of connecting them to the data itself. Ironically, however, I once again found myself facing a dilemma in terms of how best to proceed. Unlike the ‘theoretical vacuum’ of the earlier attempt, this time the problem could best be described as one of ‘theoretical excess’. Using NUD*IST had allowed me the luxury of following up on many different hunches, ideas and possibilities that I would never have even considered had I been using more traditional manual methods of analysis. Whereas previously I had been left asking “What is going on here?”, this time there appeared to be a multiplicity of “things going on”. The problem, then was one of how to make some sort of sense of this agglomeration of analytically promising concepts.

Through an intensely iterative process the number of possible directions eventually was narrowed down and refined to the point where the basic structure around which the analysis presented in Part II of this dissertation is woven became apparent.⁸ The cyclical process of developing theory from concepts and then returning to the data to check this theory, and in the process developing more concepts, lies at the heart of qualitative research, and NUD*IST has been designed to promote analysis in

just keep on ‘tinkering’ with the index structure, exploring new possibilities of interpretation. Of course this is still a possibility, despite an underlying feeling that in writing up the research one is, to a certain extent, closing off other avenues of analysis.

⁸ In much the same way that the software is not the agent of analysis (Jensen, 1990), so it is not the author of the written report either. The software “facilitates repeated coding and recording of the basic data as theoretical notions and concepts are reformulated and developed” (ibid: 66), but it is ultimately the researcher who must then transform such notions and concepts into a comprehensible narrative.

precisely this manner. To show how this process was experienced in practice, I will discuss the development of one of the key concepts that underpins the forthcoming analysis. Again, it must be noted that in talking about these concepts at this particular point I am preempting somewhat the discussion that takes place in Chapter Six. Throughout the analytical process I was aware of a recurring theme, and this was initially characterised as ‘contradiction’. Various segments of text from the interviews were coded as examples of specific contradictions, but it was proving difficult to move beyond the rather banal observation that viewers sometimes expressed contradictory positions in relation to the news. Re-analysing these specific segments in terms of how viewers interpreted the news added a new dimension to the analysis. Analysing the text units already coded at the ‘contradiction’ nodes and re-coding them according to how viewers interpreted the news served to illustrate how the viewers position vis-à-vis the news was related to how they interpreted the news. Extending this new coding schema to **all** instances of viewers talking about television news – in the form of asking what kind of interpretation is going on here and what kind of position is the viewer taking up – saw a much more detailed picture emerge of how viewers interacted with television news. Here, then, was a very real instance of multiple interpretations coming together to enhance the understanding of a particular phenomenon. NUD*IST’s role in the development and enhancement of that understanding cannot be underestimated. Even though it is just a tool, capable only of doing what the researcher instructs it to do, it has nevertheless contributed significantly to the ultimate direction and shape of the research. As Waywood puts it:

Tools are never neutral or passive, they have a reflexivity in their use which furnishes an ongoing opportunity to reflect (change perspective on, or be critical of) the doing of particular research.

(1993: 2.6)

5.4.4 Some Warnings

Like any tool, however, care must be exercised in its use lest it damages in some way that which it is being applied to. Luckily, in the case of NUD*IST, things are reversible. The already-mentioned theoretical vacuum is a case in point.

Understanding what the software is capable of doing, and knowing exactly what you want it to do are not necessarily the same thing. In my case I was perhaps initially attracted by the possibility of designing a detailed index structure without really considering what that index structure was intended to represent. In the end the first attempt at using the software produced an index structure that was representational of what I thought, perhaps even hoped, I would find. Through a better understanding of the conceptual rationale behind the application and its many functions, I was then in a position to make much more productive use of it.

Apart from this warning on the dangers of enthusiastically adopting the methods of CAQDA without a fully developed understanding of the concepts that underlie the methods, there is another, less immediately obvious reason to be cautious. In an article that addresses the analysis of qualitative data and the subsequent ethnographic representation of the social realities that the data is representative of, Coffey et al. (1996) raise a number of interesting points related to the increasingly widespread use of CAQDA methods. They argue that the “postmodern turn in ethnography, and the social sciences more generally” (1.1) has seen the proliferation of a “carnavalesque variety of approaches” (1.3). Contrasting with this increasing diversity of approaches, however, they note a

convergence, endorsed by some qualitative researchers and methodologists, toward a single ideal-type of data collection, storage and analysis. That model combines computing techniques with methodological perspectives claimed to be associated with ‘grounded theory’.

(1.4)

Pointing to the research community’s rapid and global adoption of computer-assisted methods of analysis, they claim that this represents nothing less than the emergence

of a new form of orthodoxy. The authors are particularly critical of what they regard as an unnecessary confluence between Grounded Theory, coding, and software. As they see it, the “association of CAQDA with a simplified ‘grounded theory’... can be misleading to students and researchers to whom it is introduced” (7.6).

Certainly a number of their concerns are warranted. The danger of implicitly, and uncritically, adopting a particular mode of analysis as a result of adopting a particular tool (7.4) is one that I myself am well aware of. However, to claim that CAQDA is representative of a new orthodoxy is, I believe, something of an overstatement. Given the very rapid advances in computing power, and the no less inevitable increase in digital literacy (Glister, 1997), it would be foolish to suggest that what we currently have before us in terms of CAQDA is in any way a finite body of knowledge and tools. The authors offer up the possibilities of hypertext and hypermedia as an alternative to what they see as the rampant colonisation of the qualitative realm by code-and-retrieve methods of analysis. In setting up this opposition, however, the authors have drawn a distinction that is simply unnecessary. The possibilities that hypertext and hypermedia open up are indeed innovative and exciting. Rather than see CAQDA and hypertext/media as alternatives, I would instead argue strongly for much a greater level of integration between the two. For anyone who has used NUD*IST, the possibility that such a convergence offers of a three-dimensional index structure that can be navigated through, around, up and down must surely seem attractive. Freed from the restrictions of having to present research in a strictly linear fashion, the researcher would be able to create an interactive analysis in which the reader/viewer could generate their own forms of knowledge. The addition of non-textual material, in the form of audio and video, provides even more possibilities for truly imaginative analysis and research.

5.5 Conclusion

Beginning with a discussion of qualitative research in general and then moving on to examine in detail a particular analytical tool, this chapter has focused on the method of analysis. The decision to adopt a qualitative approach was taken for methodological rather than epistemological reasons. The question was not so much which approach would produce the most valid form of knowledge but rather which approach was best suited to the kinds of knowledge being sought. Since the goal was to understand a particular social practice (watching television news), rather than prove (or disprove) its existence, a qualitative approach was deemed to be the most appropriate. A number of distinctive features of qualitative research were identified, and these were then discussed in relation to the current research project, where several problematic areas were highlighted. In terms of a specific methodology for the analysis of the interview transcripts, an approach was developed that was based primarily on the concepts of Grounded Theory. There were two reasons in particular for this: firstly, as the goal was to understand the nature of the viewer-news relationship from the perspective of the viewers themselves it was necessary to find a methodology that allowed for the conceptual categories to emerge from the data itself; secondly, the emphasis that Grounded Theory places on discovery as opposed to confirmation (or otherwise) of an existing hypothesis was complementary to the overall goal of the research.

The bulk of this chapter has been devoted to a discussion of the computer application that was used to perform the actual analysis. Fuelled by the rapid and exponential increase in computing performance over the last decade, and the subsequent availability of smaller, faster and more powerful desk-top machines, computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) has recently emerged as distinctive addition to qualitative research's methodological milieu. The impetus for this development has come from the computer's ability to perform tasks in a fraction of a second that previously took hours, or even days. As such CAQDA applications are extremely efficient research assistants, although it is still necessary to tell them

exactly what to do. The particular application chosen for this study was the Australian-developed NUD*IST, a code-based theory building programme (Weitzman and Miles, 1995). Conceptually, NUD*IST was ideally suited to the kind of grounded approach that I was embarking on. From a pragmatic point of view, there were a number of advantages to using this programme, including a comprehensive user-support structure.

In working with data that is by its very nature ‘messy’ (Richards and Richards, 1991), Coffey and Atkinson point out the necessity of finding different “ways of using the data to think with. We have to find productive ways to organise and inspect our materials” (1996: 2). NUD*IST was the tool that enabled me to do just this. By exploiting the programme’s powerful text-search functions, I was able to unpack the collected discourses of reception, and, with the indexing function, organise the ensuing fragments into various conceptual categories. Through this thoroughly iterative process of literally pulling apart and then re-assembling the discourse, I arrived at the analysis that is presented in Part II. Researchers need to be aware, however, that computer programmes like this are not some sort of ‘black-box’ into which data can be poured in the expectation that ‘the answer’ will somehow magically appear. As I discovered, there are a number of potential pitfalls for the unwary (or the unprepared) user. On the one hand, a less than complete understanding of the concepts behind these programmes can quickly lead to a dead end. On the other, the capacity of the programme to manage large amounts of data very quickly and efficiently can lead to the opposite situation, with the researcher being faced with an excess of conceptual possibilities. Some commentators have also warned that the increasingly widespread use of CAQDA methods could give rise to a new form of orthodoxy in terms of how data is both analysed and presented. One route that may counter such a development lies in combining CAQDA with new developments in the areas of hypertext and multi-media. Unfettered by the restrictions of the traditional linear structure that print imposes, researchers are now free to explore truly innovative ways of analysis and presentation.

CHAPTER SIX

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

6.1 Introduction

Preliminary analysis of the discourses of reception has shown that news watching involves the viewer occupying a variety of positions in relation to the news.

Questions still remain, however, as to the underlying conditions of the viewer-news relationship that give rise to these various positions. An analytical framework, grounded in the discourses of reception but also drawing on established concepts, is developed as a way of addressing these questions. In the first part the viewer-news encounter is considered from a relational perspective. Following the initial phase of analysis, the discourses of reception revealed the different ways in which viewers position themselves in relation to the news. As initially conceived, some of these positions were regarded as contradictions. By that I mean to say that when considered collectively, the various positions that individual viewers took in relation to the news were representative of a contradictory encounter. But to consider reception as a series of discrete contradictions becomes problematic because it represents an essentially static model. It must be remembered that these contradictions had emerged from the **discourse** of reception (as opposed to the actual lived process of reception). By thinking about research as a form of archaeology, it is possible to reconsider these discrete positions as “footprints” of a past journey. Attention is then switched to focus on the dynamics that give rise to this journey. Rather than considering the specific positions that viewers took in relation to the news, we instead look at how they got there. The concept of vectors is then introduced as a way of characterising the forces at work between the news and the viewer. Analysing the discrete positions in terms of where they situated the viewer in relation to the news, it is then determined that vectors can be broadly categorised

as either centripetal or centrifugal. Viewers are either being drawn towards an engagement with the news, or they are being pushed away from that engagement.

The second part of the chapter moves on to consider the viewer-news engagement from an interpretive perspective. Drawing on an existing approach to television reception, this section looks at differences in the way viewers interpret the news. Whereas part one deals with **where** viewers are in relation to the news, part two deals with **how** viewers relate to the news. Two modes of interpretation are considered: the referential and critical. While the first involves interpreting the news with reference to the world of the viewer, the second involves interpreting the news as a specific textual construction. In keeping with the emphasis on news watching as a lived, on-going process, the temporal dimension of reception is again highlighted. In this way reception can be reconsidered as a space within which there are an infinite number of possible viewer positions. As reconstructed through the research act, reception is shown to be a dynamic phenomenon, with the potential for viewers to adopt an infinite number of positions vis-à-vis the news, some of which appear to be contradictory. This reconfiguration of reception as a potential space represents a refinement of earlier theories of the audience-news relationship.

6.2 The Relational Dimension of the Viewer-News Engagement

As discourses of reception, the interviews represented reconstructions of the reception process (Jensen, 1994), and within these reconstructions viewers took up a variety of positions in relation to television news, many of which appeared contradictory. These contradictory positions vis-à-vis the news ranged across a number of facets of the engagement and included: being drawn to the news as a source of information despite the fact that it was seen as not providing either enough information or relevant information; structuring the viewing engagement around the predictable regularity of the broadcast schedule and the often unpredictable

irregularity of everyday life; being drawn to engage with the news by virtue of the content of specific news stories, or being driven from the engagement for the very same reason; being attracted by the strong visual impact of the news, and yet expressing dissatisfaction at shallowness of many news reports because of their obsession with the visual. However, to simply state that watching the news is a contradictory experience because viewers discursively constructed a variety of contradictory positions in relation to the news is insufficient. Questions remained as to how these contradictions come about, and in what circumstances.

Another difficulty with the notion of “contradiction” is that it is essentially represents a static model of reception. Discourses of reception can only ever recover discrete “moments” of the reception process, and the contradictions that had been identified came about through comparing such discrete moments. Furthermore, the particular context that gave rise to these discourses of reception – the directed conversation as detailed in Chapter Three – bore no resemblance to the temporal linearity of real-time reception. To consider reception as a series of discrete (and at times contradictory) viewer positions in relation to the news is to ultimately deny reception its inherent dynamism. To better understand this distinction between the lived process of reception and the discrete moments of that process as recovered through the act of research, I would suggest that we think of research as archaeology.

6.2.1 Reception Studies as Archaeology

If archaeology is the study of the material remains of past human life and activities, then I would argue that reception research represents a variation on archaeology in that it involves the study of the **symbolic** remains of past human activity. That activity, in the case of the current research project, is the reception of television news. What remains, as unearthed through the interview process, is the discourse of

reception.¹ Like an archaeological site, the discourse of reception is strewn with artefacts that require the work of interpretation in order to arrive at an understanding of their meaning. A broken axe, a piece of clothing, a collection of jars: these are discrete representations of the human life and activity that once inhabited a particular place. In their discovery there may be clues as to how they got there (thrown away, buried, or stored) but what cannot be determined is their specific use-in-context (What caused the axe to break? Who was buried in the clothing? Why were the jars stored?). What must be remembered here is that while these discrete objects provide considerable information, there are far greater amounts of information that they cannot provide. The discourses of reception are similarly composed of discrete instances of the discursive reconstruction of the reception process. The discourse of reception is therefore only ever a partial reconstruction of the experience of reception. Partial in that it is the product of socially situated individuals and partial in that it is a necessarily incomplete reconstruction of the actual viewing encounter. Reception studies have typically considered the first articulation of this fact by explicitly linking differences in interpretation to differences in the social situation of individual (and/or groups of) viewers (Morley, 1980; Philo, 1990; Roscoe et al., 1995). In terms of the second articulation, this has typically been of little or no concern, as the focus of attention has been on the meanings that have been made in specific research contexts. This may appear to be stating the obvious, but what I am trying to emphasize here is similar to the argument I have previously made concerning the use of group or individual interviews (see Chapter Three, section 3.2.1). What I

¹ But that is not all. The interview also produces a version of itself in that the discourse of reception is simultaneously the discursive representation of its very process of construction. Feminist discussions of research methodology have taken this fact as a starting point for a critically reflexive interrogation of the research process.

am suggesting is that the meanings that have been made in a research context are irrevocably constrained by that particular context. In terms of this current research project, the context was a conversation that was directed at getting the viewers to talk about their experiences of watching the news on television. This resulted in a series of individual discourses of reception. It needs to be pointed out, however, that each discourse of reception is itself a series of relatively discontinuous discursive reconstructions of the news watching experiences. From these discontinuous moments of reception an understanding of television news watching as an inherently contradictory experience emerged.

6.2.2 From Contradictions to Vectors

As discrete positions that viewers have taken up in relation to the news, be it at the level of a specific news item or at more abstract levels, these contradictions are symbolically representative of specific points on the path taken between the forces of creativity and constraint that underpin all forms of cultural consumption. What we have are some, but not all, of the footsteps in a journey that has no predetermined destination. This is not to suggest that television news reception is no more than an aimless wander through a mass mediascape. To a certain extent the direction of the journey, and therefore the potential destination(s), is (are) determined by a combination of these forces of creativity and constraint. In order to understand more clearly how these two forces combine in the quotidian experiences of reception, I will introduce the concept of vectors. A vector is a force with magnitude and direction. In terms of the reception of television news, vectors can be regarded as forces that act on the viewer with (un)certain strength in (un)certain directions. What I have done in this research is to identify how some of these vectors appear to work in contradictory directions, which is not to say that a contradiction is necessarily experienced as such, but rather that viewers follow (un)certain paths or routes through the space that exists between themselves and the possibilities **and** limitations of the text. What needs to be remembered, however, is that in the lived

process of reception, there are a multitude of such vectors whose impact, while certainly experienced, may never be consciously acknowledged. To watch television news, indeed television of any sort, is to carve a path through a realm of uncertainty. We know where we have been (we know what meaning has been made of a particular text), but we can never be sure of where we are heading (but that meaning is always contingent).

6.2.3 The Push-Pull of News Watching

By looking at the various contradictions in terms of how viewers discursively positioned themselves in relation to the news, it became clear that vectors were operating in two broad directions. Some of the viewers' ways of talking about news watching were indicative of a vector that worked to draw the viewer in to the engagement, a 'pull' if you will, which not only brought viewers to the news but also kept them there once they were watching it. Competing with this, however, were a number of statements that pointed to the presence of an opposing vector. This could be characterised as a movement away from the news, either in preventing the establishment of the relationship all together and/or working to 'push' the viewer away from the news during the process of engagement itself. Evidence of this push-pull relationship was clearly present in the discourses of reception of all the viewers I spoke with. Each individual's experiences were, however, contextually unique. From this it was concluded that watching the news was an inherently dynamic process that saw viewers irregularly oscillating between a proximal and a peripheral engagement with it. It was also concluded that these oppositional vectors could best be characterised as centripetal and centrifugal.

6.2.3.1 Centripetal/Centrifugal

The use of the terms centripetal and centrifugal in relation to television can be traced back to Newcomb's (1984, cited in Fiske, 1987) discussion of television's multivocality. Using Bakhtin's distinction between 'heteroglot' (composed of many

voices) and 'monoglot' (singular in its discourse and view of the world), Newcomb argued that the televisual text was composed of a variety of discourses.

Furthermore, this composite necessarily includes a number of contradictory discourses. Following Bakhtin's argument, the heteroglossic text is representative of the point at which centripetal and centrifugal forces collide (Fiske, 1987). A more useful way of understanding the collision of these forces as they pertain specifically to television is to consider the relationship as a tension between the two forms of 'glossia'. Fiske summarises the differences thus:

A single voice, or monoglossia, is one that attempts to exert control from the centre and to minimise the disruptive and vitalising differences between groups.

Heteroglossia not only results from a diversity of voices emanating from a diversity of social positions, it also helps to maintain this diversity and its resistance to the homogenisation of social control.

(1987: 89)

A centripetal force operates by drawing toward the centre, while a centrifugal force is exerted in the opposite direction and manner, from the centre out to the circumference. As far as television is concerned, there are a number of ways in which this dynamic can be interpreted. A shift in the emphasis from ideology to pleasure provides one way of understanding how these forces work. By considering a text as having a preferred ideological message, one is essentially acknowledging the centring, or centripetal, power of the text as working to close off other, potentially oppositional, readings in favour of a singular unified reading. Replace ideology with pleasure, however, and the idea of one central meaning or message becomes much more problematic. Pleasure cannot be produced or experienced centrally (Fiske, 1987), and because pleasure exists at the moment of reception the text can now be considered to possess a centrifugal force. Moreover, pleasure as a centrifugal phenomenon provides the necessary space in which a wide array of diverse pleasures can be experienced circumferentially. Pleasure in this sense

operates in radial opposition to the centripetal forces of ideological and social unity (Fiske, 1987).²

While the argument as developed so far has had the text as its main focus, there is a more encompassing way in which the idea of simultaneous centripetal and centrifugal forces operate in relation to television. Corner argues that the relationship between television and society and culture in general also operates along this axis. Television exerts its centripetal power by “drawing towards itself and incorporating (and therefore transforming) broader aspects of the culture” (1995: 5). The net effect of this is a culture which possesses an extraordinarily “comprehensive ‘staging’ area upon which (and through which) selective instances and modes of public and private living are displayed” (ibid.). In this sense, television can be regarded as a densely packed site of cultural ingestion as it literally collects and displays a multitude of ways of being. And it is this ‘displayable’ aspect which represents the complementary centrifugal force.

[Television] projects its images, character types, catch-phrases and latest creations to the widest edges of the culture, permeating if not dominating the conduct of other cultural affairs.

(ibid.)

Such a view of television, as a simultaneous process of ingestion and projection, or as one critic has rather graphically expressed it, as a site of “cultural bulimia”

² In citing Fiske’s work at this juncture, I am of course aware that in celebrating the pleasures that can be derived from the interpretation of a text he is not without his critics (e.g., Condit, 1989; Curran, 1990; Seaman 1992). The point I have tried to emphasise here, however, is that the viewer-text interaction can be interpreted from a number of different perspectives. Some of these will effectively limit the potential of that engagement, while others will open the engagement up to any number of possibilities.

(Rushkoff, 1994: 20), also serves to emphasise the complex nature of the audience-mass media relationship.

For now though I wish to apply the concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces to the relationship that viewers have with television news. My interest lay in the variety of ways in which viewers were drawn both into and away from the web of engagements that collectively constitute the activity known as ‘watching the news’. This conceptualisation of the news watching experience as a tension between two opposing vectors — a centripetal vector that draws viewers to the news and a centrifugal vector that pushes them away from the news — represents one dimension of the analytical framework. What is still required, however, is a way of understanding how and why these oppositional vectors occurred in the first place. For that, it is necessary to shift the analytical focus to look at the question of interpretation.

6.3 The Interpretive Dimension of the Viewer-News Engagement.

6.3.1 Two Modes of Interpretation

During the interviews, and in the initial stages of coding their responses, it was obvious that viewers regularly interpreted the news on the basis of its reference to the world(s) of which they themselves were socially active members. The news was regarded as a provider of information about the world of the viewer: government policies, increases in interest rates, road accidents, the weather. These are all things that may affect the individual viewer, directly or indirectly. Of course the news also reports on events and occurrences that the typical viewer will in all probability have little or no experience of: civil war in Rwanda, terrorist activities in the middle east, the sexual adventures of ‘celebrity’ stars. In both cases, however, the assumption exists that the phenomenon being reported actually took place and is therefore ‘real’.

In addition to this ‘real world’ interpretation of the news, viewers were eminently capable of interpreting the news as a constructed phenomenon, as a product of news media organisations, and as something which possessed identifiable conventions, styles and modes of presentation. In fact this ‘critical’ ability of the viewers was something which I had taken for granted from the very beginning of the project. As a researcher who was/is aware of the potential for myself or anyone else to be reflexively self-aware, I instinctively recognised this capability in myself. Given the fact that I have been involved in the academic study of television and audiences over a number of years this is hardly surprising. What I was also aware of, through a combination of my own personal experience and the work of other researchers was that lay viewers were quite capable of demonstrating this kind of ‘critical’ position in relation to the news, and indeed to television in general.³ From before the very first interview then, I had already “upgraded” the status of the viewer from that of the mistaken but nevertheless commonly held view of a mindless, indiscriminating, and vulnerable dupe (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 71).

6.3.1.1 The Referential and The Critical

The structuralist Roman Jakobson has been recognised by a number of media researchers (Corner, 1995; Dahlgren, 1985; Liebes and Katz, 1989) to be the originator of this distinction between

the way in which a particular communication may both refer to things in the world and at the same time have its own character as an artefact - an object of significant form, attracting appreciation and perhaps producing pleasure.

(Corner, 1995: 6)

³ Work which has illustrated the ‘critical’ capacities of audiences includes Himmelweit et al. (1980), Fiske (1987), Liebes and Katz (1989), Livingstone and Lunt (1994), Morley (1980), Radway (1984), and Roscoe et al. (1995).

Although Jakobson used the term poetics when addressing the question of verbal structure (1972), other commentators have tended to use a variety of terms, such as the aesthetic (Corner, 1995), the metalinguistic (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994) or the critical (Liebes and Katz; 1989) when discussing the way that a text refers to its own structures and conventions (Fiske, 1987).

While there appears to be little debate as to what constitutes a referential reading, the same cannot be said of the critical. Depending on one's perspective, a critical reading can be invoked in a number of different ways under the popular, and somewhat taken-for-granted label of the 'active audience' (Roscoe et al., 1995). Livingstone and Lunt (1994) in their analysis of the television talk show genre refer to three such invocations of the critical viewer: the evaluative, the interpretive and the political. The study by Himmelweit et al. (1980) on viewers' reactions to television as entertainment is cited as an example of the first case. According to the authors, their research sought to position the audience as critics, evaluating popular television programmes by employing "attributes commonly used in literary criticism" (ibid: 69). Liebes and Katz' study of how international audiences interpret *Dallas* provides an example of the second formulation of the critical viewer. They regard a critical viewer as one who can draw upon different interpretive frameworks in order to make different readings of programmes. In this way, critical viewers will experience a much greater variety of modes of involvement and gratifications than their non-critical counterparts (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). The cultural studies approach, in the form of Morley (1980), Fiske (1987) and Radway (1984) furnishes us with the third type of critical viewer. According to Livingstone and Lunt, this is a viewer who is "politically resistant to hegemonic meanings, being motivated for socio-political reasons to make oppositional or subversive readings 'against the grain'" (1994: 72). Given that the term 'critical' has been applied to television viewers in a variety of ways, a necessary task is the elaboration of the particular version that I have chosen for the purposes of this study. For the analysis that is presented in part two of this dissertation, I have appropriated the interpretive understanding of

‘critical’ as applied by Liebes and Katz. As with any form of appropriation, it was not just a case of transposing their analysis onto my data. Contextual differences have necessitated some modifications to their original formulation, although these do not involve any significant departures from the foundations upon which their analysis is based. These modifications are outlined in section 6.3.1.4 below.

6.3.1.2 Liebes and Katz’ *Dallas* Study

The research from which this analysis is derived was conducted by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz in the early 1980s and involved a cross-cultural investigation of the reception of the American soap opera *Dallas*⁴. Their aim was to compare the critical abilities of six culturally differentiated groups of viewers based on their responses to questions about a just-viewed episode of the soap opera. As an example of the different forms of interpretation that took place when viewers engaged with a television programme, they asked the question: “Why all the fuss about babies?” As they report:

Some participants told us that the programme dotes on babies “because they are needed by dynasties as heirs” - a statement we coded as referential.

(206)

Referential readings are not just restricted to instances like these where viewers refer to events in stories as they relate to the world depicted within the fictional narrative. Viewers will often talk about characters and events as they relate to their own lives, or this may be inverted as they talk about their own lives by reference to the way that characters in fictional narratives behave (Abercrombie, 1996).

⁴ Although published in 1990 under the title *The Export of Meaning*, the aspects that I refer to are from an earlier (1989) paper of theirs entitled “On the Critical Abilities of Television Viewers”.

As to viewers' critical readings of the issue of babies, they provided the following as an example of such a metalinguistic response:

There are a lot of problems around babies in such a family - the real identity of the baby, sicknesses, kidnappings - which provide a lot of possibilities for the writer of the series in constructing the plotline. (Ahavonchitz, Kibbutz Group #81)

(Liebes and Katz, 1989: 206)

This ability to interpret the content of a programme in terms of its existence as a construction, quite separate from the reality that it depicts, is further subdivided into three categories. Firstly there are semantic readings, where the viewer perceives either a theme, message, or issue within the text. In the case of *Dallas*, the authors show how, for example, Arab Israelis see the programme as a whole as representative of "moral degeneracy", while Russian émigrés see it as an example of "rotten capitalism" (ibid, 209). The second form of critical reading is the syntactic. This involves identifying the various elements of a genre of media, and also understanding the specific relationships among these elements. Readings of this nature reflected an awareness of a number of features: the repetitiveness of the stories; the characteristics of the soap opera as a genre of programme; reasons why *Dallas* was not a typical soap opera (which was considered to be a more sophisticated reading); identifying characters according to their dramatic function (the wronged father, the vengeful son etc); identifying organisational and business constraints which determined the story progression (Abercrombie, 1996). The third variety of critical reading is the pragmatic, where viewers "express an awareness of their involvement in the characters or narrative" (Liebes and Katz: 192). Pragmatic criticism calls for a self-reflexive connection between the experience of the viewer and the various semantic and syntactic elements of the text. Thus some viewers may engage with the text in a playful, or "ludic" fashion (ibid, 217) as they attempt to predict what will happen. Such predictions involve an understanding not just of the narrative but also of the conventions of the genre ("Of course they will get divorced. There's no such thing as a happy marriage in a soap opera"). Alternatively, some

viewers who may have produced a semantic reading like the one noted above (“moral degeneracy”) display their self-awareness of themselves as viewers by discursively excluding themselves from such effects (ibid, 218).

6.3.1.3 From *Dallas* to The News

Before examining the complex way in which the relational and interpretive dimensions of reception come together in the process of news watching (see section 6.4, below), I will discuss why an analytical framework that was developed to study the audience reception of an American soap opera by ethnically and culturally diverse groups of viewers is equally applicable to the study of how New Zealand viewers engage with television news.

6.3.1.3.1 News and Soaps as Forms of Communication

Dallas and the news are both examples of a particular form of communication that, like any form of communication in general, possesses its own characteristics as an artefact - as an object of significant form (Corner, 1995). Like soap operas, the content of the news is structured in particular ways. These conventions, styles and modes of address are recognisable in and of themselves as characteristic of the news as a genre of television. In addition to this poetic aspect of communication, the news also possesses a referential aspect. Corner rightly argues that the distinction between the poetic and the referential is heightened in the case of television because

its mode of being referential involves such a detailed reproduction of the likenesses and sounds of the real world. At times this referentiality appears to attain to the level of ‘transparency’ — what you see on the screen is real.

(ibid.: 6, emphasis in original)

The news, as a form of documentary television, further emphasises this distinction because the concept of referentiality is the primary organising framework around which the news is constructed. News differentiates itself from other, fictional, forms of television because its intention is not to create an imaginary world that looks real,

as is the case in *Dallas*. The objective of television news is to represent the actual 'real' world through a combination of sound and image⁵.

6.3.1.3.2 News and Soaps: Similarities (and Differences).

Aside from their basic commonality as forms of communication there are a number of other similarities between news and soap opera which I believe make it appropriate to use the analytical framework in question. Although Lewis argues that television news, to a large extent, abandons narrative conventions, he nevertheless points out that there are a number of structural similarities between soap operas and news:

The cast of characters may be a little larger, but it still relies, to a great extent, upon the vicissitudes of a small group of people (a particular section of the elite) to keep the viewers entertained. Like soap opera, stories will last for days, months or even years.

(1991: 129)

The continuation of stories, which is a hallmark of the soap genre, has also been commented on in relation to news by Corner. Even though they may be very brief, individual stories often form part of a much longer narrative thread. In addition,

their endings, though shaped by conventional journalistic devices of closure (e.g., stock reportorial phrasings, cadences, 'finishing shots'), do not usually involve any 'satisfactory' resolution, either aesthetically - in terms of the status of reports as artefactual constructions - or referentially - in terms of the events which they describe and depict.

(1995: 57)

⁵ As I shall illustrate in the next chapter, this is an objective that, in the eyes of some viewers at least, is not always successfully attained by the news.

Lack of narrative closure is de rigueur in the soap opera genre. In the universe of soap operas, time rolls endlessly forward towards an indefinite future (Abercrombie, 1996). This description of limitless temporality could equally be applied to the news. No matter what has transpired today, there will always be more drama, more anguish, more crime, more war, more human-interest stories tomorrow. This unending stream of narratives also points to another similarity between news and soap opera. Discussions of American soap operas, such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, have drawn attention to their overtly melodramatic nature (Ang, 1985; Gripsrud, 1995). British soaps, on the other hand, are usually characterised by their heavy reliance on the conventions of realism (Jordan, 1981).⁶ Australian soaps (and, in the case of *Shortland Street*, a New Zealand addition to the genre) generally veer toward the realist end of the spectrum, although the distinctly different realities that these antipodean versions depict compared to their northern hemisphere counterparts only serves to underscore the point that realism is as much a convention as any other technique of television production (Abercrombie, 1996). It is precisely a mixture of these two conventions — melodrama and realism — that can be found in abundance in television news. I have already addressed the primacy of realism as an organising framework around which the news is constructed. And while melodrama may not necessarily be a driving force behind the production of news, it is certainly present in most bulletins. Melodrama in the news can be seen in coverage of major international events, such as the Gulf War (Weigman, 1994), but it can also be seen

⁶ These distinctions are not necessarily absolute. Abercrombie (1996) notes that British soap operas are not universally realist in form, as on occasion they will employ other forms such as caricature melodrama and fantasy. A recent advertisement on New Zealand television for a special feature-length *Coronation Street* episode is a case in point. Not screened as part of its

in coverage of relatively minor, local events too. Stories about missing persons, struggles against ill health, natural and man-made disasters, sporting achievements and even politics, which are all part of the staple news diet, will often involve elements of melodrama⁷.

One final way in which news and soap operas can be regarded as similar can be found in the way that viewers attend to them. Silverstone argues that the soap opera is principally a female genre, created

for women at home who were perceived to be the principal audience of the radio programmes and the principal consumers of the soap powders that were advertised within them [and] they were scheduled at times when the housewife could listen without being too distracted from the chores of her daily routine....

regular schedule, the episode involved a number of the main characters on holiday in Las Vegas.

⁷ Gripsrud (1995) provides an interesting, and compelling, twist to this perspective by arguing that soap operas can also be regarded as sources of information in much the same way as news. Daytime soaps in particular “work as continuous’ coverage’ of ongoing events, as *information*, not narratives. They are then practically inseparable from television’s obsession with ‘now-’ and ‘live-ness” (252, emphasis in original). He goes on:

From this point of view, it is in fact possible to regard soap opera form as a useful vehicle for a sort of journalistic running commentary on social life, social conflict, social change, as these phenomena affect people at a personal level, in a degree of accordance with the melodramatic spirit.

(ibid.)

Thus while the news may provide viewers with continuous coverage of a range of events from the essentially ‘out there’ realms of politics, economics, crime ,and sport, soaps can function in much the same way by providing viewers with coverage of events that are drawn from the ‘inner’ realms associated with emotions: love; jealousy, trust, betrayal etc.

(1994: 73)

With their never ending yet constantly evolving narratives, multiple and simultaneous plot lines and, compared to most other forms of television at least, a certain degree of correspondence between “soap time” and “audience time” (Abercrombie, 1996: 49), soaps do not require constantly attentive viewers. Indeed, there are those who would argue that these programmes actively discourage attentive viewing. Tania Modleski (1996) is one such critic who has examined the deep implication of the genre with(in) the context of its domestic consumption.

The formal properties of daytime television... accord closely with the rhythms of women's work in the home. Individual programmes like soap operas as well as the flow of programmes and commercials tend to make repetition, interruption and distraction pleasurable.... Since the housewife's 'leisure' time is not so strongly demarcated, her entertainment must often be consumed on the job.

(109)

In contrast to the labelling of soap opera as a feminine genre, television news is often considered to be the domain of the male viewer (Morley, 1992), but this distinction is not necessarily so clear cut in practice. Morley's argument that men are better placed to watch television wholeheartedly, while women are only able to watch “distractedly and guiltily” (1986: 147) appears a reasonable enough conclusion when contrasting the two genres of television. However, I would agree with Ang and Herme's observation that his argument is overly mechanical “in that he tends to collapse gender positionings and gender identifications together”(1991: 319). Furthermore, their suggestion that the gender patterns identified by Morley may not necessarily exist in all (London working class) families all the time strikes a chord with my own findings.⁸ Gender differences in patterns of news watching are not

⁸ Cathy provides one example of a female viewer of news who appears to counter Morley's rendering of the gendered nature of viewers relationships

with television (news). Not only does she listen to “National Radio” (a mostly news and information radio programme) each day at work, but she is also an avid, if not compulsive, news watcher:

Cathy: Straight after work I like sitting down and um, um
— it’s a habit I’ve done for years, so... (laughs)...
I’ve done it ever since I was um, about nine. I’ve
watched the news every night. [41-44]

Tori is another example of an atypical (according to Morley) female news viewer:

Tori: Why do I watch the news? ‘Cause it’s interesting,
current affairs, keeps me up with what’s happening
in the country and around the world, and um, I ah, I
guess I have a passion for it. Mum and dad always
brought the paper home, so. I always either read
the print media, buy the paper during the day, buy
two papers during the day, the *Herald* and the
Times...

John: *Yeah.*

Tori: ... and watch the news, and watch the late news
bulletins as well.

John: *Ok.*

Tori: I also watch BBC World...

John: *Yeah.*

Tori: ... and um, CNN news at night, but that’s a day old,
so. ‘Cause we don’t get Sky.

featured as a specific element in this research, but the viewers I spoke with did offer confirmation for the possibility that “there may be moments in which the [female] becomes a much more involved television viewer, whereas [the male] would lose interest in the set” (ibid.)⁹. The point I am trying to make here is that soaps and news can together be seen as examples of television that share fragmentation of viewer attention (Kaplan, 1992) as a characteristic of their reception. Admittedly the contextual (and textual) conditions which give rise to these similar fragmented viewing practices are specific to each genre. They are also inextricably bound up with issues of gender, although perhaps in ways less clear cut and obvious than Morley has suggested.

To conclude this section, I wish to draw upon a comment that one of the viewers made which neatly encapsulates the last argument in particular. *Shortland Street* is presently New Zealand’s one and only indigenous soap opera, screening each weekday evening at 7.00PM (with a break over the Christmas and New Year holiday periods). Set in and around a fictional accident and emergency clinic, the programme first screened in May 1992 and is arguably the most successful locally produced serial, a claim underscored not only by its longevity (something of a rarity in terms of locally produced television) but also by the fact that it has been sold with some success in both Australia and the UK. During her interview, Winona admitted

John: *Ok, so you watch it on —*

Tori: *Ah...*

John: *... Coast to Coast, is it, is that where they have it?*

Tori: *... it’s on channel three quite late.*

that she was a big fan of the programme, so much so that she often recorded episodes if she knew she was going to be unable to watch them as they were broadcast.

Unfortunately, this sometimes meant that she had a backlog of taped episodes to watch:

Winona: What I have done after having lots of episodes is to like fast forward bits, or get someone to give me a quick summary, y'know. "Oh this happened, and that happened," and so you're just up with the major story lines and so that's sort of like doing a catch up on the news. You don't need to know who said what to who, you just need to know the basic storyline. [182-187]

In using the fast forward function on the VCR, Winona is able to recreate the kind of fragmented experience that characterises the watching of soaps in general (although in this case there is a greatly compressed form of temporal (re)organisation at play). The key point in this excerpt however is where she explicitly relates this kind of viewing to the watching of news. Watching the news to "catch up" on things, an activity replete with discontinuous moments of attention to the screen, is analogous to watching (a recorded) episode of a soap opera. Winona can skip the bits that don't interest her (including any advertisement breaks) without losing sense of the ongoing narratives. Her final comment is particularly significant in its very ambiguity. Is she referring to *Shortland Street* or the news?

⁹ For examples of this kind of viewing behaviour, see Chapter Eight.

6.3.1.3.3 An Inclusive Approach

In order to fully explore the various ways in which viewers engage with television news, I sought a framework for the analysis of the viewer-news relationship that was broad enough in scope to include the wide variety of encounters that constitute watching the news. While it is obvious that the news is regarded as a provider of information, it is also so much more than that, as the viewers in this study indicate. To limit the analytical scope to just the one form of engagement — watching the news as a way of keeping informed — produces an equally limited understanding of what constitutes reception. In Dahlgren’s (1985) study of Danish news reception he deliberately adopted the position of what he called a “naive” viewer to compare how this reading of the news differed from his reading of it as a researcher. He noted that his

responses, reflections, associations and interpretations ranged across many themes and topics and emanated from reaches of the psyche not always linked to the process of becoming an informed citizen

(ibid: 237).

Traditional approaches to studying the reception of news in terms of its function as a provider of information to the citizen invariably result in what I would call an exclusive understanding of reception.¹⁰

¹⁰ Examples of such studies include: Hacker et al. (1991), Philo (1990), and Roscoe et al. (1995). To a large extent, ‘reception’ in these studies is limited to the immediate research context. In this way they tend to exclude those aspects of the viewer-news engagement that are not necessarily oriented around the provision of information (e.g., watching news as a form of relaxation, watching news for the simple fact that it happens to be on, etc.).

6.3.1.4 Modifications

As I alluded to above, appropriating an analytical framework that was originally designed to examine viewer responses to an American soap opera involved more than simply substituting one set of data for another. Differences in both the type of television programme and the research goals have necessitated a number of modifications to Liebes and Katz's original formulation.

6.3.1.4.1 Differences in Referential Readings

In relation to the type of television programme, the major difference centres around the types of referential reading which viewers employ. As they pointed out, referential readings can involve interpreting what is seen on screen in terms of the world as it is represented in the narrative, or, alternatively, as it relates to the viewers' own real life experiences. Despite the fact that the world of *Dallas* is obviously a fictional creation, viewers nevertheless interpret it as if it is real. Ang, in her research on Dutch fans of the programme, employed the term "emotional realism" (1985: 41) to account for the way in which viewers expressed a recognition of the real at a connotative level:

They empathised with characters and situations in what is basically a family tragedy. Existing theories of realist representation were, according to Ang, inadequate for the task of explaining the associative meanings produced by her watchers of *Dallas*. It was an emotional resonance which made the fiction real and pleasurable for them.

(Moore, 1993: 44)

Despite the structural and stylistic characteristics that the news and soap operas share as specific forms of televisual discourse (see above), there is a key difference in the kind of referential readings that viewers make. With a soap opera the references are made to events and situations **as if** they are real. With the news, such a distinction

generally disappears, as references are made to events and situations that **are** real.¹¹ That is, they were not created for the sole purpose of entertaining viewers (although some critics, such as Postman (1987, 1992) would argue that this is precisely what does occur). The distinction I am trying to draw here is between a relatively static but parallel set of worlds that exists between viewer and soap (Gripsrud, 1995), and another, altogether more fluid, dynamic and sometimes converging set of worlds that exists between viewer and news. The worlds of viewer and soap opera may often involve similar “structures” of “tragic feeling” (Ang, 1985: 46), and yet it would be foolish to suggest that at some point these two worlds would ever converge.¹² And while sometimes the news world is as unreal and melodramatic as that of *Dallas* — one need only think here of the news media frenzy over the death of Princess Diana — in the space of a few minutes it may suddenly become very real in the form of a news story about an event that the viewer himself or herself has participated in. Even though both soap operas and news are textual constructions, there is always the possibility of convergence, either directly or indirectly between the reality of the viewer and the reality of the news. The particular form of referential reading that I will be focusing on in the following analysis is of this kind, where the world of the news is deemed to have some kind of connection, direct or indirect, strong or weak, with the world of the viewer.

¹¹ There are, however, exceptions to the rule, as the analysis that follows illustrates.

¹² This is not to deny that such a convergence may well take place in the minds of particularly ardent fans.

6.3.1.4.2 Semantic Readings

The second area in which I have deviated from Liebes and Katz's original formulation involves a specific form of critical framing. As their research sought partly to discover what kinds of themes, messages or issues the viewers of *Dallas* felt the programme offered, one strand of their analysis focused on how such semantic interpretations were framed. While the viewers in the current study provided some forms of semantic framing, they were not included as a distinct element of the analysis. Since the focus of the interviews was on how viewers interpreted and understood their engagement with television news in general, and not on how individual news stories were interpreted (at which level themes and messages would be more evident), these semantic framings were not considered to be of significance to the overall research goal.

6.4 Reception as Space

The analytical framework, as developed thus far, consists of two distinct but related dimensions. The relational dimension of the news-viewer engagement has the news at its centre, with the viewer subject to the push-pull of centrifugal and centripetal vectors. To adopt for a moment an astronomical metaphor, viewers orbit this focal point in a constantly fluctuating manner, sometimes being drawn close to it, at other times being flung away from it. The interpretive dimension also involves a similar oscillatory dynamic, with viewers constantly shifting between referential and critical modes of interpretation. The two dimensions co-exist in a dialectical relationship, with the interpretive outcome having an impact on the orbital trajectory (a specific interpretation may work to push the viewer away from the news, or alternatively it may pull them closer), which in turn has an impact on which parts of the news will be subjected to interpretation. These two dimensions of television news reception are representative of the much wider way that television in general is doubly articulated within the domestic realm (Silverstone, 1994). Television is both an

object and a medium, and as a specific form of television, the news exhibits its own version of this duality. Viewers are alternately drawn to or driven from the news-as-object, and at the same time they are engaging with the news-as-medium as they interpret its content.

As previously discussed in section 6.2, reception as a lived phenomenon is different from reception as discursively reconstructed through the act of research. As experienced reception is much more a seamless process than a series of discrete news-viewer encounters, and it is through the inclusion of this third, temporal, dimension that reception can be considered as a space consisting of an infinite number of possible viewer positions in relation to the news. In claiming this, however, I am not going so far as to grant complete autonomy to the viewer in terms of where and how they position themselves in relation to the news. In the first instance, viewers are only free to interpret a limited range of constructed texts. In the second instance, the specific way that the news-as-object is articulated within the individual viewer's everyday life will further constrain the potential range of positions that can be taken up within this space. Within these constraints, however, reception can still be understood as an unbounded potential. In other words reception-as-space consists of partly-constrained internal dimensions only, rather than as a specific area within external boundaries. The advantage of reconsidering reception in this way is that it brings to life in an obvious manner the concept of the active viewer. As a consequence of the interplay between the interpretive, relational and temporal dimensions of the engagement, watching television news involves a constant re-positioning of oneself within this space from moment to moment.

6.4.1 A Refinement of Hall's Decoding Model of Reception

Constructing the viewer-news relationship as a space within which an infinite number of potential reading positions exist can be seen as a refinement of sorts of the influential three-tiered model of reception that Hall proposed some twenty five years

ago.¹³ As one of the leading figures of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Hall's analysis sought to offer an explanation of how ideology was seen to work in and through television (and in particular, news) texts. According to Hall, the codes used in the production of a message (such as a television news item) are not necessarily the codes by which that message, once it has been transmitted and received, is ultimately decoded. He proposed three possible locations from which a viewer may decode any given text, and these positions are determined by the individual's social position in relation to the dominant ideology. These positions are: the dominant, the negotiated and the oppositional (Hall, 1980). A dominant reading of the text involves the viewer agreeing with and accepting the dominant ideology as it is reproduced in news items. A negotiated position is one in which the viewer may agree in principle with the dominant ideology but would perhaps disagree with some aspects of it in order to accommodate it within his or her particular social position. Partial opposition such as this may derive from perceived differences between televisual constructions of reality and the viewer's own material and subjective social experience (Fiske, 1989a). Finally there is the oppositional reading where the viewer rejects without question the dominant ideology as it is presented in the text.

Later work in this area, particularly by David Morley (1980, 1986), expanded and refined Hall's original formulation of the communication process. Morley felt that Hall's triumvirate of dominant, negotiated and oppositional decodings was too restrictive, as it had focused solely on the extent to which viewers agreed or

¹³ While his chapter entitled "Encoding/Decoding" in the *Culture, Media and Language* (Hall et al.) reader published in 1980 is often cited as the source of this model, this was in fact an edited extract from an earlier paper. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" was first published by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1973.

disagreed with the ideological propositions of the text (Morley, 1981). It was unable to account for alternative dimensions of audience response, such as the relevancy of a particular text or genre (Moore, 1993). Morley also argued that Hall had placed too much emphasis on the role of class as a determinant of what type of reading would be produced, as he found a number of interesting similarities in readings that apparently crossed conventional class divisions.

There are a number of problems, however, with the *Nationwide* study, some of which Morley has himself alluded to (see Morley, 1981, 1992). Among these was the realisation that there was a certain artificiality to the study. Moore (1993) points out that even if all of the subjects had regularly watched the programme, the context in which the interpretations were produced was not at all typical. Hartley has expressed it even more succinctly: "Morley's audience is... produced by his project" (1992b: 107). This is a similar charge to the one that I have already laid against a number of other empirical studies concerning audience reception of television news. Having labelled Hall's work as too reliant on class, Morley himself was later to criticise his own work for precisely the same reason, accepting that "the *Nationwide* study overly compressed the interpretations of the audience around a class paradigm" (Stevenson, 1995: 80, see also Morley, 1981, 1992). In *Family Television*, Morley (1986) addressed a number of these concerns by shifting his attention to concentrate on the sociological setting of television watching, emphasising the way in which television is actually used in the domestic context.

Despite these criticisms, the *Nationwide* study has generally been regarded as something of a watershed in the development of empirical audience research (Ang, 1996, Jensen, 1991, Lorrimer, 1994, Richardson and Corner, 1986). The difficulty that I have with Morley's (earlier) work is that it tends to reproduce a relatively static notion of reception. Viewers may well occupy the sorts of positions that Morley has identified, but these positions are not necessarily occupied with any permanency. In this respect, Newcomb's (1991) suggestion that Hall's 'dominant,' 'negotiated,' and

‘oppositional’ readings should all be considered variations of a negotiated reading offers what I believe to be a more appropriate way of understanding reception. This is particularly appropriate when the object of analysis is an entire broadcast news bulletin rather than a single story (or current affairs type programme). As the analysis in part two indicates, the positions that viewers take up in relation to television news are never fixed.

6.5 Conclusion

Following the preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts, an initial position was reached whereby news watching was understood to be an inherently contradictory process. Viewers had revealed, through the discourses of reception, a variety contradictions and tensions in their engagements with television news. Given the uniquely contextual nature of the viewer-news engagement, however, questions remained as to the underlying conditions that gave rise to these oppositional tendencies. In short, what is it about watching the news that makes it such a contradictory experience? Through a combination of perseverance and imagination, an appropriate analytical framework was developed to address this question. Perseverance was a necessary requirement in the laborious and often fruitless search for a clear way through the maze of possible routes that had been opened up by the initial exploratory coding process. Through NUD*IST, I was able to thoroughly mine the collected discourses of reception for that elusive vein of understanding. As for imagination, in that respect it was a statement by Corner that provided the required motivation to think creatively about the material I was dealing with. In his review of the reception analysis approach, he states that work in this area has brought increased attention to bear on “the types of **imaginative** engagement which audiences have with media output” (1996: 298, emphasis added). If audiences engage with the media in imaginative ways — and there is strong evidence that they

do¹⁴— then I would suggest that it is precisely this quality of imagination that is required if researchers are to heed Corner’s call for a “re-invigoration” (1996: 302) of the reception tradition. This research project is in part an attempt to invest the reception studies tradition with some of that much-needed imagination.

In order to develop an analytical framework that could adequately account for the rich complexity of reception as experienced by the viewers I spoke with, the discourses of reception were re-analysed from two distinct dimensions. The first of these took as its starting point the contradictory positions that had emerged as a consequence of the initial analysis. These contradictions, however, had emerged from the discourses of reception, rather than from the actual lived process of reception itself. The distinction is an important one. As reconstructed through the specific context of this research reception consists of a series of discrete viewer-news encounters, and as the analysis revealed, viewers took up a variety of positions in relation to the news within these discrete encounters. But this represents an essentially static model of reception. To effect a transformation of this static model of reception to one that captured the dynamic nature of the actual lived process required a shift in the analytical gaze. By focusing instead on how viewers come to take up these (often contradictory) positions vis-à-vis the news the concept of vectors was developed. As a force with both magnitude and direction, a vector can be regarded as something that acts on the viewer with (un)certain strength in an (un)certain direction, and it was the outcome of these vectors that the discourses of reception had revealed. Analysing these outcomes in terms of the direction of the vectors that led to them resulted in the identification of two broad categories. Centripetal vectors operated on viewers by drawing them in to an engagement with

¹⁴ See, for example, Ang (1985), Bausinger (1984), Liebes and Katz (1990), Michaels (1994), Morley (1980, 1986), Nightingale (1996), and Radway (1984).

the news, while centrifugal vectors worked to push viewers away from that engagement.

The second analytical dimension was derived from an earlier reception study that examined how various groups of Israeli viewers interpreted the US soap opera *Dallas*. This study drew a distinction in terms of how viewers interpreted or read the programme. Some of their readings were characterised as referential, in that they referred to events in stories as if they related to the world depicted within the fictional narrative. Referential readings also included those instances when viewers spoke of their own lives by reference to the way that the characters in the fictional narrative behaved. Viewers also made critical readings, where they interpreted the programme in terms of its existence as a textual construction, quite separate from the reality that it depicted. The discourses of reception that I had gathered exhibited this same basic distinction. Viewers alternated between talking about the news in terms of the real-world events shown in the various reports, and talking about the news as a textual construction, a product of news media organisations with identifiable conventions, styles and modes of presentation.

These two forms of engagement with the news – as an object (the relational) and as a medium (the interpretive) – represent the twin dimensions around which the analytical framework is structured. Combining a thoroughly grounded approach with an established method of analysis has given rise to a framework that not only serves as a model for reception in general but is also flexible enough to account for the contextual specificities of news watching as experienced by individual viewers. This framework also supports a model of reception that refines earlier theories of reception where the emphasis has often been on how viewers from different social groupings produce different ‘readings’. This has tended to result in an overly static and rarefied view of reception, with the emphasis on inter-viewer differences in relation to a pre-defined text. By looking at how individuals discursively reconstruct their everyday engagement with a particular genre of television, I hope I have

succeeded in moving beyond these limitations. The mutability of reception is brought to the fore through the focus on intra-viewer differences and conflicts. Viewers shift their position in relation to the text moment-by-moment as a consequence of the dialectical relationship between the interpretive and relational dimensions of reception. Widening the analytical focus to consider the viewer's engagement with a particular type of television, in this instance television news, gives rise to a much more inclusive view of reception than that provided by an encounter with a single episode or programme. Integral to this extended view is an acknowledgment of the processual nature of reception. It must be remembered that reception as a lived phenomenon has a temporal dimension that differs significantly from reception as reconstructed through the discourse of the research interview¹⁵. Explicit acknowledgment of this temporal dimension allows reception to be reconsidered as a potential space in which viewers constantly shift their position in relation to the news.

As the analysis that follows in Chapters Seven through Ten demonstrates, application of the analytical framework outlined above to the discourses of reception reveals just how complex the everyday activity of watching television news is. And in the process of unpacking the space of that very taken-for-granted act, a number of important questions concerning the wider significance of news watching as a social practice are addressed.

¹⁵ Whereas reception-as-lived is a continuous process, reception-as-reconstructed through research consists of discrete (and often quite disparate) moments of the viewer-news encounter.

PART II

ANALYSIS

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHY?

7.1 “Why do you watch the news?”

In all but one instance this general question was asked at the very beginning of each interview.¹ What was immediately noticeable was the striking similarity of the responses:

Sian: To find out what’s going on in the country. [2]

Matt: Umm, for information about what’s going on in the world really, keep up.... [7-10]

Kane: Probably just to, it’s just a way of um — keeping up with just different things that are going on, y’know — y’know in the country first, y’know, here, and just general stuff around, y’know. [2-4]

Dean: Catch up on what’s been going on around the rest of the world, um, you pick up what’s going on around here.... [12-13]

Barry: Um I probably watch it just to sort of keep up with things a bit in general.... [3-4]

¹ See Chapter Three for a discussion of the interview methodology, specifically the order in which questions were asked.

Bevan: Oh, keep up to date, so I know what's happening. [3]

Chris: Catch up with on the news, see what's happening around the world, that kind of stuff. [6-7]

Tori: Why do I watch the news? 'Cause it's interesting, current affairs, keeps me up with what's happening in the country and around the world.... [3-4]

Cathy: 'Cause I want to know what's going around. I like knowing what's happening (small laugh). [10-11]

Winona: Well, 'cause I like to be reasonably informed, I guess. [3]

From such responses it would not be unreasonable to suggest that these viewers all appear to share the common assumption that television news is a source of information about the world within which they live. Taking this apparently unequivocal concept as its starting point, this chapter seeks to examine in detail some of the complex and shifting dynamics that are involved in the watching of television news. The analysis will be presented on a case by case basis, as a way of retaining (and therefore emphasising) the contextual uniqueness that characterises the reception process. As the analysis will reveal, despite this singular desire to “keep up” with things which operates in a centripetal fashion to pull viewers in to an engagement with the news, there are a number of different factors operating centrifugally, simultaneously pushing viewers away from the engagement.

7.2 News As Information

Throughout this dissertation I have referred to a number of studies concerned with the reception of television news and current affairs programmes (e.g., Dahlgren, 1985; Dickerson, 1996; Hagen, 1994; Höijer, 1990; Jensen, 1990; Philo, 1990; Roscoe et al., 1995; Ward, 1992). In spite of their differences, what these works all have in common is the way they situate television news (and current affairs more generally) within what is essentially a public knowledge framework. Most, if not all, of them consider news primarily (and in some cases exclusively) as a source of information. From the viewing experiences of the people I interviewed (and also from my own situated position as a reflexive viewer of news), it would appear, however, that news watching involves much more than just ‘processing’ (or ‘decoding’, or ‘interpreting’) the informational content of specific news stories. While news may indeed be thought of as information, understanding the reception of television news necessarily involves the consideration of wider contextual factors. In the spirit of Livingstone’s (1994) call for the reintegration of the public knowledge and private pleasure strands of reception analysis, this research draws on theoretical perspectives from both approaches. For the moment, however, I will return to the issue of news-as-information as my starting point for this analysis.

Given that the informational aspect appears to be a prime force in bringing viewers to the news, a logical next step would be to determine what it is that viewers “pick up”, are kept “up to date” with, and are “informed” about. While a content analysis of television news would be one way of providing an answer to this question, such a method is incommensurate with the overall approach of this study. Instead I have analysed the interview transcripts for any mention of the kinds of things that are typically shown on the news. Adopting this method enables me to retain the overall emphasis on how *viewers* themselves (as opposed to researchers) articulate what it is that they gain from the news. Another reason for following this approach was that as the interviews themselves were conducted over a period of several months, a full

content analysis of news bulletins for this period would be a massive undertaking, involving resources that were beyond my (modest) means. Alternatively, if the analysis was restricted in size, it would not necessarily bear any relationship to the news items which were mentioned in the interviews.

SPECIFIC	GENERIC
Anarchist Conference (MJ)	Accident (SD)
Anti-Abortion Protest (MJ)	Celebrity News (TD)
Balkan Conflict (SD, CF, KH, MJ, BR)	Dead Body (SD)
Break Away United MPs (BR)	Disaster (CT)
Cave Creek Viewing Platform Collapse (SD, CT)	Foreign Affairs (KH)
Civil War in Rwanda (SD)	Internet (MJ)
Film Censorship (MJ)	Jim Bolger In New Zealand (DJ)
Governing Under a Coalition (WK)	Kitten Up Tree (WK)
Fiscal Envelope Iwi(SD)	Maori Land Claims (KH)
Hugh Grant's Arrest in Los Angeles (CF)	Missing Person (SD)
Jim Bolger Visiting The United States (MG, MJ)	Murder (KH)
Moutoa Gardens Land Protest (SD, MG, KH, MJ, CT, TD)	Nuclear Testing (MG, KH, DJ, BP, BR)
Murder Trial of Carl Carter (TD)	Health Sector Restructuring (SD, WK)
News Coverage of South Africa (BP)	New Zealand's International Trade (KH)
Oklahoma Bombing (KH, MJ, WK, CT)	Road Accident (SD, KH, BP)
Police Manhunt (BP)	World Famine (WK)
Rainbow Warrior/Nuclear Testing (CF)	
Serial Rapist Trial (CF)	
Student Riots in Dunedin (CF)	
Traffic Congestion In Auckland (BP)	
Tramper Lost in River (SD)	
TV Cartoon Violence (MJ)	
Youths Taking Datura (KH)	

Table 7.1 News Stories as Mentioned by Viewers

This table shows the range of news stories as mentioned by the viewers (with the letters in parentheses indicating which viewer or viewers mentioned the story). The interviews were designed to question viewers about their relationship in general with television news, as opposed to specific news stories, and this resulted in a variety of contextual references being made. Sometimes the viewer would refer to an actual item that they had seen on a news programme prior to the interview taking place. These references ranged from the somewhat vague (“Oh, well, like those kids falling off that platform...” [Sian 37]) to the more or less definite (“they were talking away about the violence that was available on TV to young people during the cartoon section “ [Malcolm 357-358]). In the first case, I was able to categorise this reference as the Cave Creek Viewing Platform Collapse because, as a news watcher myself, I was already familiar with this story (and I had in fact seen a number of news reports about it). In the second case, I had not seen the item in question, but again my own experience of the news gave me the confidence to assume (not unreasonably so) that Malcolm had indeed seen a certain story about TV cartoon violence. Stories of this nature have been grouped together in the column labeled ‘specific’. At other times the viewers would speak of a certain type of news story without specifically referring to an actual item that had been broadcast (“unless they throw in a little thing about y’know a kitten being stuck up a tree and a fireman rescuing it...” [Winona 489-490], “And when there’s like disasters and people have died and stuff y’know they tend to stick the cameras in people’s faces...” [Chris 50-51]). Once again, my own experiences of television news watching meant that I was able to instinctively comprehend such references from a shared perspective. News stories that were identified in this manner are grouped together in the column labeled ‘generic’, since they refer to generic formulations of news stories. In this way then, the categories above represent a synthesis of the reception experiences of both the interviewees and myself.

As the table clearly shows, the stories mentioned range across the whole spectrum of news coverage from what is constructed by the news as vitally important (the

restructuring of New Zealand's health sector) to the relatively trivial (the archetypal 'kitten-up-a-tree' story); from major international stories (the Oklahoma bombing and the continuing Balkan conflict) to national ones (the Moutoa Gardens occupation and the Cave Creek viewing platform collapse); from 'celebrity' news (the Hugh Grant — Divine Brown incident) to political news (the formation of the new United Party). Thematically speaking, the stories are broadly representative of the kinds of stories that are regularly broadcast on television news crime (the Murder Trial and the Serial Rapist Trial); politics (Jim Bolger Visiting the United States, United MPs Breaking Away); tragedy (Cave Creek Viewing Platform Collapse, the Tramper Lost in River); "international" news (Civil War in Rwanda, Oklahoma Bombing; World Famine). Although it would be tempting, and no doubt fruitful, to subject this particular formulation of the viewers' (and my) discourses of reception to more detailed analysis, such an investigation lies outside the immediate scope of this thesis. What is being emphasised here is that from the viewer's point of view, these are the kinds of things that the news informs them about and keeps them up to date with, and as such the list of stories above provides a useful summation of the world of news as seen from the perspective of the viewer.

In terms of the different modes of interpretation that viewers employ when watching the news, the desire to know about and keep up with things that have been happening can, in its broadest sense, be regarded as an example of the referential. At one level, at least, television news is all about (i.e., it refers to) events that have happened locally, nationally and internationally. As with any form of communication though, and in particular with television, the referential is not the only mode of interpretation that can be mobilised. Viewers may also adopt a critical mode of interpretation, whereby television news is understood to be a (specific) construction of the 'reality' that is being referred to. If people watch the news in the expectation of being informed about the various events, happenings and occurrences of the day, then the reality is that this expectation is more often than not met with varying levels of dissatisfaction as the viewer encounters the inherent structural limitations of

broadcast news. It is precisely this tension between the referential and the critical — between what the news shows and how it shows it — that forms the basis of the analysis that follows. At the same time, the dynamic relationship between viewer and news will also be taken into consideration. The analysis that follows seeks to reveal the complex ways in which the different modes of interpretation (referential and critical) and the dynamics of engagement (centripetal and centrifugal) are inextricably bound together to create the tension-filled and contradictory space that is television news reception.

7.3 Case Studies in Oppositional Vectors

The following section of this chapter presents the first part of the analysis of the viewer-news relationship in the form of individual case studies. The various discourses of reception are analysed from the same basic starting point: Why do you watch the news?

7.3.1 Sian

Sian stated right from the outset that the reason she watches the news is to “find out” about the things that have been happening throughout the country [1-2]. Almost immediately, however, she provided a frank assessment of the news’ performance in this regard [10-12]. Throughout the conversation that followed, Sian indicated on a number of occasions why she felt that the news did not provide her with enough information. Adopting a critical mode of interpretation, she argued that the news often presents information out of context [49-53, 108-122], with little or no background information that would otherwise enable her gain a better understanding of the situation [108-122]. Also, she does not get “the full picture” [128-130] because the inherent limitations of news production (“...they’ve got time limits I suppose.” [128-130]) means that only a “small part” [324-235] of any event is ever shown. Sian is drawn to watch the news by the centripetal promise of being

informed. A critical mode of interpretation, however, suggests that this expectation is often not met.

John *Um, ok first question is why do you watch the news?*

Sian To find out what's going on in the country. [1-2]

John *Ok, um, do you think you get enough out of that news bulletin — to tell you what's going on?*

Sian No — no, not really (laughs). No, not at all. [10-12]

Sian Like that Wanganui land thing, like all you saw was the protesters being intimidating and, etc. on the news. They just take it out of context a lot of it, y'see, y'see what, a clip of twenty seconds, or whatever it is, and that's what you think, y'know, and it panics people. [49-53]

Sian They'll take, they'll give a clip of her talking for twenty seconds and, um, what she's saying probably wouldn't appeal to the, like the beneficiaries or something, but it's taken out of context again. Like it doesn't give the whole picture sometimes. They focus, seem to focus

in on one, one part of it, that a lot of people are going to be poopy about. Um, I don't know, the housing thing, y'know putting rents up, market, making it market — up to market rents and — y'know it, they didn't do any background was on like why they've gone ahead and done that, you don't know what those houses are c-costing the taxpayer, or, or things like that. It's just oh y'know, they're selling Housing Corp and this and this and this is going to happen and it's going to be terrible for everybody and, but there's no background, um.... They don't say because the houses are costing each taxpayer x amount, y'know. You only get a part of the story quite often, most times. [108-122]

Sian Which is um — they just don't give you the full picture and it's all, um — it's just not involved enough really, but mind you they've got time limits I suppose. They can only put so much across at a time. [128-130]

Sian ...there, with that sort of carry-on. But that was just a small part of that whole day that they filmed, and they put it in your head that.... [324-325]

The final excerpt below [392-394] provides a useful indication of the kind of contradictory experience that is characteristic of television news watching. The context of her comment was the news' ongoing coverage of the Maori occupation of Moutoa Gardens/Pakaitore Marae in Wanganui early in 1995. The story occupied a prominent place in most New Zealand news media during the time the interviews took place, a fact that is reflected in the relatively high number of mentions of this story (see table 7.1 above). Talking about the spokesman for the occupiers of the disputed land, Sian freely admits that all she knows about him is from what she has seen "on the media". Within the same major news story, Sian has moved from a critical position where the news is censured for its **lack** of information to now occupy a wholly referential position in which the news becomes her **only** source of information.

Sian And he's a, he's um — y'know he's um, I only
 know about him what I see on the media and
 he's a fanatical bloody idiot, y'know. He's
 unreasonable.... [392-394]

7.3.2 Matt

Like Sian (and, indeed, most of the other viewers), Matt's initial response to the question of why he watches the news emanates from a referential position by direct reference to its informational function [7-10]. What is less clear is how he manages to "keep up with the details" when the news presents only "the top part" without going "into any depth" [118-121]. This contradiction is further enhanced when he claims that despite providing only a "short description" and "not tell[ing]... everything they could" [154-156], the news does give him an "insight about what's going on" [135-137]. Apprehending the inner nature, or gaining a deep view of events that are shown on the news is perhaps rather difficult when the news is

(critically) interpreted as “shallow” and merely “glossing over things that are happening” [277-280].²

Matt Um, for information about what’s going on in
 the world really, keep up...

John *Ok.*

Matt ...keep up with the details. [7-10]

Matt ...they just present them the top part of it and
 they’re not going in depth in-into any depth.
 But I think that was also on TV1 which I find
 don’t go into um, stories quite as much as TV3
 does, which is the reason why I watch TV3.
 [118-121]

Matt Um, maybe not an adequate. I-I think it gives
 you an insight about what’s going on, and if
 you’re interested in that topic, um you can
 delve further if.... [135-137]

Matt ...they’re not, they’re not saying, I don’t think
 they tell you everything that they could. It’s

² Insight: internal sight, mental vision or perception, discernment;
 understanding the inner character or hidden nature of things; a glimpse or
 view beneath the surface (OED).

um — it's a very sort of um, short description of what's happening. [154-156]

Matt Not a h-not a huge change. I mean, of course it's got more techni-technological, um with all the different blue screens and silly things like that. Um — and I think that um it's in someways got a bit more shallow. It's just really glossing over things that are happening.... [277-280]

Another example of the contradiction that can arise between the critical and referential modes of interpretation occurs when Matt speaks of being “racked off” (i.e., annoyed) at how the story is put together [79-91]. An important point to note here is that he's not questioning the fact that it is put together, but rather that it is not done “properly”. Yet when commenting on how he will sometimes talk about what he is watching with other viewers, he says this is usually about **what** was shown (the referential) rather than **how** it was shown (the critical-syntactical) [174-175].

Matt Ah, it's not too bad. Um, I get a bit racked off with some of the reporters every now and again. They're either...

John *Ok, in what way?*

Matt They're either not very um — well spoken, um or just I don't know. I just get, some of the reports you get in from outside, um, like from the reporter, say um — down in Wellington

when the studio's in Auckland y'know, on site type thing, on location. Um, the way it's edited, or just the way they do things I think could be done better. Lack sort of, lack a bit of professionalism, and also in the way that, especially TV1 these days seems to be stuffing up a lot. A lot of people looking at the wrong cameras, or sound, or mikes not or, y'know "We'll go to this now," and the clip's not coming up sort of thing. [79-91]

Matt ...sort of, if you make any comments about it, it's about what they were saying not how it was presented. [174-175]

7.3.3 Kane

Compared to all the other viewers, Kane provides what is perhaps the most overtly referential interpretation of the news. The news not only provides him with an "awareness" [37] of the "different things that are going on" [2-4], it is also regarded quite literally as a "reference" [19-25], enabling him to "grasp what's going on" [520-521]. Countering this referentiality however are the critical observations that he makes of the news. It blows things "right out of proportion" [47-49], only seems to cover "high profile" things [124-129] and often lacks detail [610-611].

Additionally, the referential performance of the news is further undermined when Kane admits that sometimes he doesn't actually know if what he is seeing is the "real" story or not [437]. This contradiction between using the news as a form of reference, while at the same time acknowledging that it is only ever a partial

construction of the reality that it refers to, appeared in varying degrees throughout all of the interviews. Kane was one of a number who gave a discursive indication of how this tension may be negotiated. His comments about how the news “gives it straight”, as opposed to a newspaper which requires a more active form of involvement from the reader, and that the news on television is “an hour of different things” [607-611] can be seen as something of a trade-off. The syntactical limitations of news production that are responsible for the lack of depth and narrow range of coverage are, paradoxically, also responsible for a number of features that draw Kane to the news. Lack of detail and disproportionate coverage are compensated for by the immediateness of delivery and variety of content that television news provides.

Kane Probably just to, it’s just a way of um —
 keeping up with just different things that are
 going on, y’know — y’know in the country first,
 y’know, here, and just general stuff around,
 y’know. [2-4]

Kane Well, the news for me is just a, just a, um —
 advising, advisory thing, y’know. It’s not, I
 mean I don’t, the news I mean if, like the
 bombing that just happened in America, I don’t
 think that’s good, bad or anything but...

John It’s told you about it..

Kane It’s just reference, y’know.

John So you know it’s happened?

Kane Yeah, yeah, y’know, and.... [19-25]

Kane So it's just a — y'know, awareness thing I'd
say. [37]

Kane No, no, I think what I, th-the first sort of thing
you do is you grasp what's going on, or what
has happened, and then you, well that's what I
do, and.... [520-521]

Kane y'know television and radio and stuff, what you
hear, is y'know, right out of, y'know, in some
cases, things, different issues and things like
that, is right out of proportion. [47-49]

Kane Oh, sometimes, I mean —— yeah, I-m-th-
there again, y'know it's more, the bad things,
y'know, or well, not bad things, but, ah — the
more, um — what do you call it?, something
high profile stuff y'know, is discussed, not m-
y'know.

John The stuff that stands out?

Kane Yeah, yeah — yeah. [124-129]

Kane land one, um you don't really know what the
real issue is.... [437]

Kane Oh no, I re-well, that's, my main reason for watching is, is, I think the TV gives it straight-y'know — rather than having to sit down and read my newspaper, um, which I do anyway, I-I'll sit down, wh-when you watch it on TV it's like an hour of different things, I mean they don't go into to much detail, they give you the, um — overall thing of what's happened....
[607-611]

7.3.4 Dean

The first two excerpts below [12-13, 16-17] are again emphatically referential as they express Dean's desire to "catch up" with "what's been going on around the rest of the world". The global perspective that he emphasises (especially compared to Sian and Kane) is perhaps understandable given that Dean was originally born in England, arriving in New Zealand as an adult some thirty years ago. Once again, however, a critical interpretation [75-81] emphasises the shortcomings of the news. Compared to current affairs type documentaries, Dean feels that the news does not perform "particularly well" as it lacks any kind of analysis. Although not necessarily having actually occurred, the example he offers does illustrate the news' penchant for focusing on personalities as opposed to issues. For Dean, this represents what Atkinson has termed the 'depoliticisation' of television news in New Zealand, where "the drive to maximise rating points and advertising revenue" has led to the almost complete "removal of serious discourse about public affairs" (1992: 5).³ Dean in

³ Although Atkinson's research was based on a content analysis of One Network News, anecdotal evidence would suggest that an analysis of 3 National News would yield similar findings.

fact alludes to the syntactical limitations that the commercial imperatives impose upon the news when he says that in comparison to newspapers, television news organisations have less time available to “be in there, get it, and get out” [120-122].

Dean Catch up on what’s been going on around the rest of the world, um, you pick up what’s going on around here without too much trouble, listen to.... [12-13]

Dean Oh, I like to know, y’know what’s happening in, over in the States, how the Aussies are going, maybe what the Poms are up to. [16-17]

Dean I don’t think the news does it particularly well, um I tend to rely on programmes like Inside New Zealand, one or two others like that, where you have an analysis of what has been going on...

John *Yeah.*

Dean ...ah, rather than the news which gives you, um, oh Jim Bolger was in Te Kuiti today and he did so-and-so and so-and-so and he was heckled, y’know. Well what the hell does that tell you about anything? [75-81]

Dean ...ah political news. Um — probably the newspapers have more time to, y’know to pull things together, I mean it may come out a day later than the actual event, whereas the TV, they have to be in there, get it, and get out.
[120-122]

The following excerpts show Dean adopting a critical-pragmatic interpretation as he speculates on the nature of the relationship between viewer and news. He alludes to a certain amount of cynicism when he states that “we do not believe what comes across” [135-137] and yet a short time later [149-153] he proposes a viewer-news relationship which hints at a more complex dynamic. Arguing that viewers are “conditioned” to watch the news, there is a suggestion that while cynicism may indeed prevail, there is nevertheless a desire to actually believe what the news shows. We may not necessarily believe much of what we see, but that does not stop us from **wanting** to believe, from wanting to be told the ‘truth’. Finally Dean makes a comment that contrasts with the previous two. From a position of cynical mistrust and an almost Orwellian state of existence in which viewers are “conditioned... to watch the news”, he moves to one where “it’s enjoyed” [161-162]. Notice too how that at this point the referential once more moves into prominence as he and his wife “often discuss what’s been going on afterwards”.

Dean We do not believe what comes across, and I think we get presented with a picture that they want us to believe.... [135-137]

Dean Um, it’s a conditioned reflex to watch the news and we’re on a very lean schedule of reinforcement as far as ah, truth is concerned, but that, that lean schedule keeps us

responding, we keep on watching in the hope
that y'know we are going to be able to pick
something out that's goi-really going to be
ah.... [149-153]

Dean ...It's enjoyed and I think, y'know my wife and
I we often discuss what's been going on
afterwards.... [161-162]

7.3.5 Winona

Winona indicated early on in the interview that she seldom watched the news at 6.00pm, instead preferring *2Newsnight*, a late evening (10.30pm) news programme on Channel 2, the light entertainment vehicle of TVNZ's twin-channel line-up.⁴ Despite the fact that *2Newsnight* was markedly different in style and content than either of the mid-evening news bulletins (*One Network News* and *3 National News*), Winona's comments are equally illuminating in terms of her relationship with television news.⁵ She begins with a referential interpretation that alludes predictably enough to the informational aspect of news [3]. The addition of the "I guess" does however suggest a less than definite certainty, hinting that perhaps she is unsure if this in fact is her real reason for watching. The following two excerpts certainly give a strong indication as to why she does **not** watch it. Speaking firstly about radio

⁴ *2Newsnight* screened for less than two years, from March 7, 1994, to November 30, 1995.

⁵ From this point forward, the following abbreviations will be used when referring to the 6.00pm news bulletins: ONN for *One Network News* ; 3NN for *3 National News* .

news [10-13], Winona reveals that for her there is an unacceptable emotional cost in her (referential) quest to be “reasonably informed”. She reiterates this in her assessment of the 6.00pm “in-depth” news bulletins, saying they are “not the sort of thing [she would] regard as being terribly relaxing” [16-21], and later on saying that they can be “just too distressing at times” [558-562]. She also reveals another reason why she does not usually watch the 6.00pm news: it simply does not fit in with her daily routines [16-21].⁶ This combination of bad timing and emotional distress that drives Winona away from watching the news at 6.00pm does not keep her away from news altogether. As she says, *Newsnight* (sic) is “pretty lightweight”, and because in all likelihood it will not have a story “about the starving millions in Outer Mongolia”, it’s an “OK thing if you’re relaxed” [48-55]. Furthermore, Winona says that she likes one of the presenters on *2Newsnight*, Marcus Lush, referring to him as “really hard case”. Looking at her responses from a purely referential perspective reveals an underlying tension. She has stated that she likes to be informed about things, and yet the very nature of the information drives her away from engaging with the news. This tension is articulated by Winona herself when she says that “in theory if there’s something that really interested” her, she “could follow it up” [126-135]. She continues with an admission that such behaviour is indeed theoretical, as she tends not to do this in practice. Despite this sense of needing to be informed, she manages to avoid the emotional trauma that this may cause by limiting herself to a particular version of television news, reasonably confident that it will not be too distressing.

Moving to a more critical mode of interpretation, another tension becomes evident. Watching *2Newsnight* may be less distressing, but it can sometimes leave Winona feeling “a bit frustrated” as she realises that what she has seen is only a very small

⁶ See Chapter Eight for a more detailed discussion of the temporal factors that are involved in television news watching.

reconstruction of the actual event [60-62]. Commenting on the way that the news is structured, she says the newspaper gives her more choice, both in terms of what she reads and how she reads it [126-135]. In terms of the amount of information, she is unable to get “anything more in depth” from 2Newsnight because “it’s just not there”. With a newspaper she can choose which stories she will read (and which she will avoid) based on the headlines or “a quick skim”, whereas the linear structure of broadcast television means that she “can’t choose” (except to **not** watch at all).

Winona Well, ‘cause I like to be reasonably informed, I guess. [3]

Winona Oh, yes. I used to listen to Morning Report all the time. It was a horrible way to start the day in a way. I mean you sort of, there’s hardly ever any good news, y’know, and so you sort of start the day feeling really glum. [10-13]

Winona ‘Cause six o’clock’s a real scungy time. I mean sometimes I don’t get home until six, and I like, it’s not the sort of thing I’d regard as being terribly relaxing, I guess. Um, in-depth news like that, Newsnight’s pretty lightweight. Um, it’s, and it’s just not a very good time. Getting dinner ready, that sort of thing, y’know. Um, though I may well watch news if it was on um, y’know seven.... [16-21]

Winona One of the reasons I choose y'know probably like not to watch in depth news at that time is it's just too distressing at times. It's y'know depending on y'know what it is, it's just y'know, if you're trying to relax, you just don't need it, y'know. [558-562]

Winona Well, I like Marcus, he's really hard case. In terms of a news programme, it's pretty slack, but it just gives you the main points so you don't feel you're like totally out of touch and, but it's not, it's not really very newsy, so it's an OK thing if you're relaxed and y'know it's not like you're going to suddenly start thinking about the starving millions in Outer Mongolia, 'cause th-y'know it's not, it's not really current events. It's more an entertainment sort of news package. [48-55]

Winona Yes, yeah, I guess so. Um — sometimes I sort of feel a bit frustrated by it, and you think "Oh, y'know there must have been more to the story than that".... [60-62]

Winona Well, I mean partly is to get a little bit of knowledge, to have inside, in theory if there's something that really interested me, I could follow it up. I say that in theory because I

don't tend to do that. Um — I guess — y'know
 in terms of the paper I'm a headline reader
 first and then a quick skim, or an in depth
 read. So that would probably be like if I
 watched more news I'd probably be a bit more
 like that, but you can't choose with the news.
 Um, but with Newsnight I guess you can't, you
 can't choose to get anything more in depth out
 of it, because it's just not there. [126-134]

7.3.6 Barry

Barry's declaration that the news is not his "favourite" programme on television, and that he is "not a big news watcher" [3-4] marks him out as a less than enthusiastic viewer (compared to Cathy and Tori, for example), yet he still couches his response in terms of the referentiality of news. He emphasises the informational aspect when he says "of the masses" that it does "inform them of something" [326-328], although of course that then begs the question of what exactly it does inform them about. The referential mode of interpretation continues in the next excerpt where he offers concrete evidence of the sorts of things that he is able to "keep up with". In marked contrast to his opening remarks, he now admits to a certain level of enjoyment of the news [53-64], although for some reason he still seeks to down play his involvement ("but still not greatly"). When pressed, he reveals a pragmatic awareness that the news will sometimes broadcast stories that "maybe affect [his] life more". Thus Barry is partly drawn to the news because of a perceived relevance of some of its content. While the subject matter may have led to a greater degree of involvement with the news, the critical interpretation that Barry offers does temper this centripetal vector to some degree. An awareness of the inherent limitations of the news, in particular a recognition that "there's got to be sort of another side to most things" [143-145] leads him to declare on more than one occasion [114-115, 143-145] that

he is “sceptical” of the news media. Returning to the question of relevance at a later point in the interview, I asked Barry whether or not he thought most of the news was relevant to him. His immediate response was an unequivocal “No” [428-434], which appears to be a direct contradiction of his earlier position. He then proceeded to qualify his answer by saying that while it may well be “interesting to know”, it is not exactly “life threatening” if he happens to miss it. An awareness that there **may** be something of direct relevance to him has drawn Barry closer to the news in the last few years, but this referential form of engagement is contradicted by his critical awareness of the inherently limited point of view that news provides and also by an acknowledgment that, despite his earlier comments, most of the time there is in fact little in the news that is of direct importance to him.

Barry Um, it’s not my favourite. Um I probably watch it just to sort of keep up with things a bit in general, but I’m not a big news watcher.... [3-4]

Barry I’d say generally of the masses, I mean it’s going to inform them about something otherwise they’re really going to know nothing about, so.... [326-328]

Barry I’ve sort of grown to, I guess enjoy the news more than I used to. Like a few years ago I really wouldn’t have cared at all, but I guess now I’m a bit more interested than I was, but still not greatly.

John *Why, why would that be?*

Barry Um — I don't know really. I guess, I guess I'm just thinking, y'know things maybe affect my life more and maybe I might want to know the mortgage rates in a few years time or something, y'know it's like, I guess it might be applying to more than it used to be, I don't know. [53-64]

Barry I am pretty, I'm pretty sceptical of media, to be honest. [114-115]

Barry Yeah, nah, you do, you do, but um — I mean I sort of have to think y'know there's got to be sort of another side to most things. Um, generally I am quite sceptical.... [143-145]

John Um, well I guess what I'm trying to ask is do you think that a lot of the news, is a lot of the stuff that's on the news actually relevant to you, in the sense that it's, it's crucial for you to know...

Barry No.

John ...or do you think that it's just kind of interesting?

Barry I guess it's interesting to know, but not really life threatening if you don't. [428-434]

7.3.7 Bevan

Following the pattern set by all of the viewers so far analysed, Bevan immediately adopts a referential perspective when asked why he watches the news [3]. Shortly thereafter, in the course of describing how he usually watched it, Bevan revealed that there were some parts of the news that he simply couldn't be bothered watching. He gave "politics or something like that" as one such example, elaborating that there is "too much coverage of the same items over and over" [66-70]. The news' referential capacity to keep Bevan up to date is then compromised by what he regards as repetitious coverage. The desire for 'the new' is contradicted by a steady diet of 'the same'. Like Kane, Bevan is also aware that the news only "picks up on... top issues" and "high priority stuff", with the result that it often "misses out on a lot of other" events that have happened [148-150]. Keeping up to date for Bevan therefore involves a tension between the novelty and interest factor of the new and its inevitable obsolescence in the face of repetitive coverage. The final excerpt [160-168] provides a clear illustration of this very tension. Initially his interest was piqued by the breaking story of the MPs who split from the National Party to form the United Party. Then, as the story was kept running "for a few days" he "lost interest in it quickly". He then goes on to suggest an additional reason for why he loses interest so quickly. In a similar fashion to Barry, Bevan admits that while the news may broadcast stories that are of "importance to New Zealand as a whole", like "stuff that's happening in politics", it is "not... personally" important for him.

Bevan Oh, keep up to date, so I know what's
 happening. [3]

John *Yeah. What sort of stuff do you sort of like not
 bother watching?*

Bevan Oh, if they're rambling about politics or something like that.

John Ok, why is that, like why is it of no real interest to you?

Bevan Probably because I've heard it all before (laughs) And get sick of it. Too much coverage of the same items over and over. [66-70]

Bevan I don't know, it's sort of like the news only picks up on sort of top issues, y'know, sort of high priority stuff and misses out on a lot of other.... [148-150]

Bevan I just, I don't know, when new bits come out such as like that, all those MPs broke away and formed the United Party, y'know it was interested there, the first night when you found out what they were doing and stuff, but y'know after that they're sort of going on about it for a few days, and sort of lose interest in it quickly. Sort of, they cover things for too long, I don't know whether they just try and, I guess it is of y'know re-relative importance to New Zealand as a whole, y'know stuff that's happening in politics, but — mmm, not for me personally. [160-168]

7.3.8 Chris

Chris provides something of a slightly different response from the previous viewers, although the referential function of news is still presented as a reason for watching [5-7]. What marks Chris out from the others is the implication that lies beneath his immediate response. The main reason he watches television news is because he “do[es]n’t read the newspaper a lot”. One way to interpret this remark is as evidence of an underlying imperative to be informed. It is keeping up to date with “what’s happening around the world” that is the key point here, and television news just happens to be **one** way that Chris achieves this. Once more though the referential force of the news is weakened by the inherent syntactical limitations of commercial broadcasting. In response to the question of whether or not he felt he got enough information from the news on television Chris said “No” because “they just cover it fairly quickly” in a “two minute slot which doesn’t say a hell of a lot” [25-29]. To make up for this, and in an apparent contradiction of his earlier statement, he said that he would “usually” go and “read the newspaper after... to... get more depth”. A short while later Chris continued his critical mode of interpretation by elaborating on the issue of depth (or lack thereof). Starting out with a blanket assessment on an absence of depth, Chris appears to then offer an exception to the rule in terms of the “major issues” [81-82]. But even these are “just generally breezed over”. While a paucity of information will lead Chris to seek out further information from alternative sources, he sometimes finds himself in the paradoxical situation of being driven away from television news by an excess of information. Commenting on the news’ propensity to focus heavily on human drama, where reporters “stick... cameras in [the] faces” of people who “are really upset” and who may have just “lost a family member” [49-53], Chris finds such instances at once “intrusive” and “quite cringeful”.

Chris Ah, mainly because I don’t read the newspaper
 a lot, that sort of thing. Catch up with on the

news, see what's happening around the world,
that kind of stuff. [5-7]

John *Ok, do you, do you think that you get enough
information out of it?*

Chris No, not usually. Usually I'll, I'll read the news
and I'll say go and read the newspaper after
that to get sort of more in depth, see what else
is going on, 'cause they generally just cover it
fairly quickly. Y'know, a two minute slot which
doesn't say a hell of a lot, just gives you an
idea of what's going on. [25-29]

Chris Ah, generally it doesn't cover it that in depth
really, it's only when major issues come up,
but you don't, just generally it's kind of
breezed over it. [81-82]

Chris Yeah, actually — they tend to be quite
intrusive sometimes into sort of people's
private lives and that. And when there's like
disasters and people have died and stuff
y'know they tend to stick the cameras in
people's faces who are really upset y'know,
and lost a family member and stuff like that.
It can get quite cringeful. [49-53]

7.3.9 Tori

Even though all the viewers thus far have shared a common referential attraction to the news as a way of keeping up to date with things, there are differences in the way this has been articulated. For Barry it's not his "favourite" form of television. Dean cheerfully acknowledges that he likes "knowing what's happening", and also admits that it's "enjoyed". Winona seeks to actively avoid news that is "too distressing", while still keeping "reasonably informed". Kane simply seeks a "reference". Tori is no exception when it comes to the question of the referential utility of news, but she asserts her uniqueness by claiming to have a "passion" for news. She cites the influence of her childhood when her parents "always brought the paper home" [3-6]. A critical interpretation soon reveals a by-now-familiar shortcoming of television news. The extremely limited amount of time that each news story has, "which is like a minute each segment, minute and half each segment" [27-33] does not provide Tori with what she feels is enough in the way of useful information. Because she doesn't "get the full story... a lot of the time", Tori is left with more questions than answers from some news reports. Lack of fulfillment is a common feeling as she is "still left wondering....". From not getting the full story courtesy of the temporal constraints that are an inherent feature of broadcast news, Tori moves on to suggest another impediment to the referential potential of news. Only this time it is a lack of fair representation that prevents the emergence of what she believes is the "true story", or the "real story" [63-65]. Tori's next utterance, however, represents nothing less than an exoneration of sorts. By immediately switching to a pragmatic interpretation of her relationship with the news, reasserting her attraction to it from an economic perspective, she is, discursively at least, letting the news 'off the hook' despite her accusation of unrepresentativeness. Another interesting tension can also be discerned between having a "passion" for watching the news and simply watching it because it is "free".

Tori Why do I watch the news? 'Cause it's interesting, current affairs, keeps me up with what's happening in the country and around the world, and um, I ah, I guess I have a passion for it. Mum and dad always brought the paper home, so. I always either read the print media, buy the paper.... [3-6]

Tori ...New Zealand news, which is like a minute each segment, minute and a half each segment. It's like yeah, we don't really a lot of the time get the full story, a lot of the time you watch a story on, a piece on the news and you think "Well, why did they revoke his li-his driver's license, or," you're still left wondering y'know...

John Yeah, ok.

Tori ...it's not fulfilling. [27-33]

Tori ...scare the shit out of you. But that's not the true story, I mean y'know, ask, go ask the Maori if you want the real story, yeah. It's ah, it's not very representational, news. But I watch it because it's free.... [63-65]

During the interview Tori indicated that she often switched between ONN and 3NN. When I asked what motivated her to switch from one to the other, the response she gave initially appeared to emanate from a critical interpretation. The use of the

interesting, and car prices are going up, and that's all great, but I'm not interested. I flick over because I want to see if that Carl Carter bloke um, got, is going to get a life sentence for murdering Mark Donovan. 'Cause that's interesting to me.... Like I'm not interested in Dow-Jones and all that 'cause there's no...

John *Yeah.*

Tori ...way in hell I'm going to be a rich person with shares, so y'know. I guess. [89-98]

7.3.10 Cathy

Cathy stressed the referential utility of the news as a way of satisfying her desire to know about things. Not only does she “want to know what’s going around”, she also emphasises that “being aware of” [3] and “knowing what’s happening [10-11] provides her with a certain amount of enjoyment (“I like... ”). From this position, Cathy shifts to a more critical appraisal of the news’ ability to fulfil this desire to know. Her response to the question of whether or not television news provides her with enough information is succinct and to the point, but with a little probing she does elaborate [66-78]. Accentuating the functional capacity of television as a medium in producing images, Cathy considers the news to be a “visual impression” of what she has previously heard on the radio. Such impressions are, however, only “skimming” the surface, a point which she emphasises later when she says that the news provides only a “very very very small view” and that it needs to “get into depth a lot more” [147]. The next excerpt [164-173] continues with this same theme of insufficient information. When discussing the coverage of politics on television news, Cathy expresses a dislike of the focus on personalities as opposed to issues

(similar to Chris, above). She cites the “constant...” portrayal of “petty squabbling” as an impediment to seeing “the bigger picture”.

Cathy Because I like being aware of what’s
 happening. [3-3]

Cathy ‘Cause I want to know what’s going around. I
 like knowing what’s happening (small laugh).
 [10-11]

*John Yeah. Um — do you, sort of think that, that
 the TV actually gives you, I mean does it
 personally give you enough information about
 what’s going on?*

Cathy No.

John Yeah, in a sense that do you think that TV
 gives you an adequate, or TV news gives you
 an adequate sort of understanding of what’s
 going on?

Cathy No, it’s just, it’s just skimming. It’s um, it
 gives you a visual impression of maybe what
 you’ve heard um, like it was great for example
 watching the Hugh Grant stuff ‘cause you could
 see him being really embarrassed and go,
 point your finger and laugh at him. Um, it was
 interesting seeing the snow in Wellington last

night, something I haven't actually seen
before. [66-78]

Cathy Ah, no I'd say that we're just getting a very
very very small view.... [129]

Cathy I think it's too light and it needs to get into
depth a lot more. [147]

Cathy I don't like the petty squabbling. 'You said
this, and I say that'. I can't be bothered with
that.

*John Do you think there's a lot of that though on,
on...*

Cathy On TV 3? Yes I do.

John ...on news in general?

Cathy Yes I do, constantly.... Like I like the bigger
picture than the um, oh 'He said I was a fairy
and he's a faggot,' sort of stuff. I can't be
bothered with that. [164-173]

When asked about the relevance of the information that she does get from the news, the referential mode of interpretation once again comes to the fore. Cathy's response is very similar to that of Barry, in that she provides examples of the sorts of things that the news can provide useful information on [285-296], and yet like Barry she is also aware that much of the news is not necessarily "crucial". Comparing these

statements with her earlier comments [66-78] about the kinds of things that the news shows reveals a tension between the aesthetic and the informational appeal of television news. The emphasis that she placed on the aesthetic appeal of the news was reflected in the two examples she mentioned the Hugh Grant—Divine Brown incident (“it was great... ‘cause you could see him being really embarrassed....”) and a report from Wellington on an unseasonable fall of snow (“it was interesting seeing the snow in Wellington... something I haven’t actually seen before”). For Cathy these stories are hardly “crucial” and in all probability they do not necessitate any kind of “forward planning”. Their particular appeal lies in their visual nature. Conversely it is this formal quality that ultimately gives rise to a lack of depth and narrow view, thus limiting the amount of information available to the viewer, information that Cathy clearly finds useful.

John *Do you feel that um — you actually need to know all the information that TV news presents to you? In the sense is it all, is it crucial to, to you?*

Cathy *No, it’s not crucial but it’s, it makes you um, a more balanced person I think because you know about more things. Um, i.e., um some things can be import-well, not crucial but um like you know there’s a problem in Kuwait and the oil is not coming through and people are starting to scream that barrels of oil are going up you know your petrol’s gonna rise, y’know, it’s just um, or um y’know that there’s a shortage of water in Auckland so therefore you know that electricity rates could easily rise therefore maybe it’s a good idea buying a gas*

heater instead y'know, things like — forward
 planning. [285-296]

The final series of excerpts illustrates a pragmatic awareness of Cathy's part of the inescapable tension that exists as a result of employing both referential and critical modes of interpretation when watching television news. When asked if she was consciously aware of the fact that the news is only ever a constructed (and partial) representation of reality, she replied emphatically that she was "absolutely... aware of that" [324]. A short while later she stated that she was "aware" that all her "sources of information" (and by this we must assume she is also referring to other mass media forms of information such as newspapers and radio) are "heavily doctored" [376-377]. As if to vindicate the enthusiasm with which she herself consumes such "doctored" information, and perhaps also as a way of negotiating the tension that is the space between the desire to know and the desire to deconstruct, she questions how one "could possibly get away from" such a situation. The sheer pervasiveness of television news is underlined when she refers to it as "the most accessible source" [422-425] of information. This accessibility is further enhanced by the speed with which information can be conveyed. Apart from "the Internet" (which, as a source of news raises many more issues beyond the scope of this analysis), Cathy feels that "there's just no other way you can get information quickly". This last comment especially carries with it the hint of an altogether different reason for watching the news. Despite Cathy's earlier comments, as well as those of a number of the other viewers, that the news only provides a "very small view" [129], is generally "not very representational" (Tori [63-65]), is sometimes "right out of proportion" (Kane [47-49]) and can even be "intrusive" and "cringeful" (Chris [49-53]), it nevertheless succeeds in drawing viewers to it every night in large numbers. Even though the substantive content of the information may not satisfy

viewers' expectations, it is the very process of **getting** that information, the act of **being** informed that counts.⁹

Cathy Oh absolutely, yep, I am aware of that. [324]

Cathy I'm aware that our sources of information are heavily doctored. I don't know how you could possibly get away from that. [376-377]

Cathy Yeah, yeah. It's because it's the most accessible source and apart from being hooked up with the Internet and um having the right connections with people who are also hooked up with the Internet, there's just no other way you can get information quickly. [422-425]

7.3.11 Malcolm

Finally we come to Malcolm, the only viewer whose response to the question of why he watches the news is not featured at the very beginning of this chapter. The singular uniformity of their initial response to this question is perhaps the one thing that all of these viewers have in common. A shared desire to know about things that have happened, to be kept up to date with events that have occurred locally,

⁹ Like a number of other ideas that have emerged throughout this chapter (see, for example, pages 10, 16, 19, and 20.), this is an important concept which requires further analysis and discussion. Such elaboration falls outside the analytical scope of the current chapter and so I will return to it at a later point (see Chapter Ten).

nationally and internationally certainly goes a long way towards explaining the similarity of their responses. I would suggest, however, that this similarity can also be attributed in part to the interview process itself. Coming as it did at the very start of the interview, the question “Why do you watch the news?” could perhaps have prompted these viewers to respond with what they felt was an appropriate answer rather than one which reflected the real (i.e., contradictory) nature of their relationship with television news. The interview with Malcolm, where the question was put to him after we had already discussed a number of issues, produced a very different response [266-273]. Even though I posed the question in the third person, his answer certainly does point to a number of alternative possibilities. Implicit in his questioning response — “Cause they think they have to?” — is an imperative that suggests that news watching is something that **should** be done. As such, his answer resonates with the final point raised in the discussion of Cathy’s relationship with news (see p. 157 above) and also with the sentiments expressed by Chris (see p. 147 above). Being informed is something that viewers feel they have to do, a necessary and required activity if you will, even if the information itself is of questionable value and the mechanism of delivery is inherently flawed. Almost immediately though, Malcolm proposes an alternative, and equally compelling, reason “Cause it’s on at six?” This points to the way that watching television, and by extension the news, is deeply implicated in the domestic routines of people’s daily lives. In this formulation, the viewer-news relationship has little, if anything, to do with the acquisition and possession of information. When asked directly why he watched it, Malcolm chose the second option as his reason before going on to add that he also watched it if he knew that there was going to be “something going on” that he wanted to “get a headline on”. This very issue of how the viewer-news relationship is in part determined by the integration of the medium into people’s everyday lives **and also** by the specific content that it displays, and the tensions that result, will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

John *Yeah, yeah. That's quite a — so in that respect then, why do you think people watch news?*

Malcolm 'Cause they think they have to? 'Cause it's on at six? (laughs) I don't know.

John Why do you watch it?

Malcolm Um, 'cause it's on at six. Um....

John What are doing at six o'clock?

Malcolm No, cau-I mean-I-if-I watch it if I know something's going on that I might want to get a headline on.... [266-273]

Prior to talking about the reasons for watching television news, Malcolm had revealed critical interpretations similar in nature to many of the other viewers. While discussing the on-going news coverage of the Oklahoma bombing, Malcolm spoke of how new media organisations made the most of “big event[s]” [73-78] such as this, referring to them as “their bread and butter”. While “six months” may be an exaggeration, there is no denying that when an event of such magnitude occurs (at least in the Western world), news media organisations will invariably “just go to town” in their coverage of it. He also alludes to the commercial imperative that drives broadcast television news when he says that he is aware that the news is a “big package”. Like some of the others (Kane, Bevan and Tori) he too is aware that there are a lot more things that “do... not get on” the news. Malcolm returns to this theme further on in the interview when he compares what can be found in newspapers to what is seen on television news [373-379]. From a purely quantitative point of view, “there seems to be a lot more in the newspaper than... on TV”. These extra stories also differ qualitatively, often being “little local things... probably not that important” and they may “take a while to break or take five days to report”.

Malcolm ...the news companies are, they live on that stuff. They are, if they can a big event, whatever it might be, that's their, their bread and butter for the next six months until something happens again, so they just go to town. Um — yeah, but, yeah, I'm sort of aware that the news is a big package, an', and that there's more news that's happening that does not get on there. [73-78]

Malcolm Yeah, probably a bit more in the newspaper actually 'cause they only seem to cover, there seems to be a lot more in the news paper than goes on TV. They don't, there's a lot of little stories that take, little things that are going on underneath, that take a while to break or take five days to report and you'll never see those on TV. Just little local things, and they're probably not that important but, yeah, the newspaper seems to devote quite a lot more coverage to them. [373-379]

7.4 Conclusion

There is no denying that television news is an important, or at least one of the most commonly accessed, sources of information about the various social, economic, and political events that occur throughout New Zealand and the rest of the world.

Official audience rating figures would certainly appear to support such a conclusion.

In 1995, a single *One Network News* bulletin was estimated to have been watched

by nearly 1.1 million viewers, ranking second only to the second New Zealand-Australia Bledisloe Cup rugby test match (AGB McNair, 1995).¹⁰ Such a conclusion is only partly correct though. Surveys of this kind reflect an institutional conception of both the audience and the activity of watching television (Ang, 1996). What these audience surveys fail to capture are the unique and particularised viewing practices of individual viewers, or, as Ang puts it, the “inherently tactical nature of television consumption” (1996: 64). About the only certainty that can be accorded these ‘people-meter’ derived findings is that at some point during the hour between 6.00 and 7.00pm a certain number of television sets were tuned into a particular channel. What actually took place in front of those television sets is an altogether different matter.

The analysis presented in this chapter began from a position which, although articulated by the viewers themselves, was in fact very close to both institutional (i.e., news media organisations and their associated agencies) and more traditional research conceptions of what news is: news provides viewers with information about the world that they are a part of. From such a singular starting point, however, it has become evident that there is a tension between the monoglossic uniformity of the immediate response to the question “Why do you watch the news?” and the heteroglossic responses that a detailed analysis of the discourse of reception reveals. Employing an analytical framework that emphasised the interplay of the referential

¹⁰ The actual reported figure was 1,086,884. Perhaps the most significant feature of this survey was the fact that out of the 10 top individual rating programmes, half were sporting events (three rugby test matches, one rugby league game and the final race of the America's Cup yachting regatta), two were comedy specials (*Mr. Bean* and a Billy T. James review) and one was a special feature on Princess Diana. The only other ‘informational’ programme was the tenth-placed *60 Minutes*.

and critical modes of interpretation highlighted the range of tensions. Some of these can be arranged thematically, with the same basic tension being expressed by different viewers. Contextual tensions are also discernible as each viewer articulates their own unique, and contradictory, experiences of reception. Including the idea of centripetal and centrifugal vectors — whereby viewers are respectively drawn into and pushed away from engaging with the news — has added a dynamic element to the analysis. Not only is it evocative of the processual nature of reception, but in combination with the modes of interpretation it also works to define reception as a space, and moreover as a space that is inherently contradictory.

The basic desire to be kept up to date that all but one of the viewers expressed represents the way that a referential interpretation of television news operates as a centripetal vector. There are of course a number of other reasons why people watch the news, as Malcolm suggested, but for the analysis presented here the focus is restricted to this particular desire “to know”. Arrayed against such a singular imperative is a variety of centrifugal vectors that counter this pull toward the news. In the main, these centrifugal vectors are experienced as a result of the mobilisation of a critical mode of interpretation, although there are exceptions to this (see, for example Chris’ comments on p. 148 above). In terms of a thematic arrangement, perhaps the most common tension arose from the fact that the news simply failed to provide enough information (see Sian, Winona, Chris, Tori, Cathy). A lack of depth (Matt, Cathy, and Dean), and unrepresentative coverage of events (Matt, Barry, Tori) constituted variations on this theme. The narrow scope of broadcast television news was cited by a number of viewers (Kane, Bevan, Tori, and Malcolm) as another shortcoming. Despite being drawn to the news by the possibility of seeing something that may impact directly upon them, some viewers (Barry, Bevan, Tori) ultimately admitted to the irrelevancy of most of the news. Other criticisms directed towards the news included presenting information out of context (Sian) and blowing things out of proportion (Kane).

Looking at each viewer individually reveals a variety of unique contextually rooted articulations of the basic underlying tension that exists between referential and critical interpretations of the news. Sian censures the news for consistently failing to provide enough information, and yet at one point she freely admits that all she knows about a high profile participant in a major news story has come from the news. Matt is critical of how some of the stories are constructed, and yet any discussion of news stories with fellow viewers invariably concerns **what** was shown, rather than **how** it was shown. One of the reasons that Kane is drawn to the news is for the immediateness of delivery and variety that it offers, and yet as a consequence of this he feels that there is no real depth to the news and only a narrow point of view is presented. Dean believes that viewers may not believe a lot of what they see, but they will continue to watch in the hope of seeing something that is believable, something of 'the truth'. Winona has a desire to be informed and up to date, and yet in order to avoid the emotional distress that results from watching what is shown on the (6.00pm) news she must watch a so-called news programme that fails to fulfill her informational requirements. Barry admits to watching the news because of an increasing awareness of the possibility that his life will be affected by the kinds of things the news reports on, and yet he eventually concludes that most of the news, while "interesting" is not actually that relevant to him. Bevan's desire for the new is often stymied by repetitious coverage of the same old things. Chris is driven to seek out more information from alternative sources, and yet he is also repulsed by too much information in the form of intrusive coverage of personal human tragedy. Tori admits to having a "passion" for the news, and yet she often finds it unfulfilling and unrepresentational. Cathy is drawn to the news by its strong formal qualities, and yet this is ultimately responsible for the lack of depth that she laments. Malcolm believes that people feel they should watch the news, despite feeling that the information is of questionable value and that the method of delivery is inherently flawed.

Some of these interpretations do drive viewers away from engaging with the news (see, for example, Winona, Bevan, and Chris). In that sense they can be thought of as centrifugal vectors, as they thrust viewers away from the central point of engagement that is the television screen. Others are somewhat less overt in the way that they counter the centripetal pull that is embodied in the desire to know (or, alternatively, in the news' implicit promise to show). Arguing for these to be understood as centrifugal vectors requires that they be understood as above all working to limit the actualisation of the (centripetal) desire to be informed that these viewers initially indicated was their main motive for watching television news.

CHAPTER EIGHT

How

8.1 Introduction

From starting the investigation into the nature of the news-viewer relationship by asking viewers why they watch the news, I now move on to examine in more detail the way that news watching is actualised in practice. In short, how is the news watched? This chapter consists of two main sections. Leaving aside for the time being the modes of interpretation that featured strongly in the last chapter, the first section instead focuses on the relational mode of engagement. It involves an analysis of the way that the activity of news watching is integrated (or not, as the case may be) into the domestic routines of viewers daily lives. The second section re-visits the different modes of interpretation by moving in to take a closer look at the actual viewer-text interaction. It involves an analysis of the interplay between the structure and content of news and how this impacts on the viewer-news relationship. As with the previous chapter, the idea of centripetal and centrifugal vectors operating in opposition to each other to create tensions and contradictions underpins the analysis in both sections. In contrast to the previous chapter where the analysis was presented case-by-case, in this chapter the analysis is organised thematically, with appropriate excerpts from the interviews being used to support the arguments that are put forward.¹

¹ Some of the excerpts used to illustrate the arguments in this chapter have already been discussed in the previous chapter (and some will appear in the chapters ahead). This provides a useful illustration of what Jensen has

8.2 “...it’s just a day-to-day thing...”: News Watching As a Domestic Activity

Television is perhaps the most quintessentially domestic of all the forms of mass media. As Silverstone puts it, television

...has become embedded in the complex cultures of our own domesticity. We can no more think of television as anything other than a necessary component of that domesticity than we can think of our domesticity without seeing both in the machine and the screen a reflection and an expression of that domestic life.

(1994: 24)

A growing concern with “interpreting [such] embedded acts of consumption” (Moore, 1993: 8) has been reflected in numerous studies over the last decade and a half.² While they all have their own particular research agenda, they all, to some degree or other, share a common concern with what could be called the “politics of the sitting room” (Ibid: 31). The title of Ang’s most recent work — *Living Room Wars* — is especially appropriate given that the overriding theme emerging from this growing body of literature is one of conflict. Disputes over what, how and when to watch intersect with divisions of both gender and generation within a framework of domestically organised power relations. In terms of the current section of this analysis, my interest is directed less toward these kinds of inter-viewer conflicts and more toward the tensions which can emerge as viewers attempt to combine the two

referred to as the “polysemy of reception” where any number of “relevances” can simultaneously “coexist in the reception of television news” (1990: 58).

² See, for example, Ang (1985, 1991, 1996), Bausinger (1984), Hobson (1982), Lull (1988, 1990), Morley (1986, 1992), Radway (1984), Silverstone (1994).

distinct modes of temporal organisation which structure, on the one hand, the world of television news and, on the other, their own private, domestic world.³

During the interviews I asked the viewers whether they regarded their watching of news as something of a habit or ritual. When analysing the transcripts, however, it became evident that I had used the two terms somewhat loosely and interchangeably. Although the two concepts may in fact mean quite different things, the way in which the viewers responded to my questions would appear to indicate that they were taken to mean the same thing.⁴ That is, I was interested in whether they saw their news watching as a regularly occurring daily routine, and if so, how it was integrated into all the other activities that make up everyday life. From the responses it is obvious that for some watching the news is very much a regular part of their day-to-day life.

Cathy: Um, it's also part of my relaxation thing.
 Straight after work I like sitting down and um,
 um — it's a habit I've done for years, so...
 (laughs)...I've done it ever since I was um,

³ This is not to say that I am unaware of the ways in which these inter-viewer relations impact upon, and indeed are constitutive of, the reception process. As a number of the excerpts will illustrate, these kinds of tensions can be discerned in some of the viewing experiences of the interviewees.

⁴ Habit: a settled disposition or tendency to act in a certain way, especially one acquired by frequent repetition of the same act until it becomes almost or quite involuntary (OED). Ritual: (from rite) used, occurring, etc., as a social convention or habit; a prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service (OED). The former implies a repetitious form of behaviour, while the latter implies that such behaviour carries specific meaning.

about nine. I've watched the news every night. [41-44]

Kane: Yeah, I mean, it's just a, it's just a day to day thing, I mean y'know, everyday, y'know — yeah, got to watch that, and I mean, it's just like if you want to watch a part... [590-592]

Bevan: Quite often I'll be doing something else at the same time, so yeah, looking at a book, or maybe cooking dinner or whatever y'know. But I'll have it, I'll usually typically turn it on, at six o'clock anyway. [55-58]

For other viewers, however, watching the news is an activity that takes place more sporadically.

John: Ok, um, you say you watch it up to about three times a week. Um, what's stopping you from watching it seven days a week?

Matt: Um, mainly varsity and stuff. Sometimes I don't finish up at varsity till five.... [11-15]

Chris: Yeah, yeah. If I'm home I'll watch it. [33]

Winona: 'Cause six o'clock's a real scungy time. I mean, sometimes I don't get home until six.... Um, it's, and it's just not a very good time.

Getting dinner ready, that sort of thing,
y'know.... [16-20]

In the examples above, Matt indicates that watching the news has to compete, sometimes unsuccessfully, with other activities (in this case his university studies). Although less specific than Matt, the implication of Chris' response is that he too is kept away from watching the news by activities outside of the domestic sphere. Winona also indicates that she is sometimes unable to get home in time to watch the news. Unlike the other two, however, she implicates the domestic realm in her explanation of why she does not watch the news on a regular basis. Preparation of the evening meal is given as an example of the kinds of daily household tasks which can prevent her from watching. These broad categories — the regular and the sporadic — are indicative of the frequency with which viewers engage with television news. Closer inspection of the discourse of reception reveals subtle distinctions in the way in which the engagement is actually managed. These modes of integration, as I shall refer to them, transect both of these categories.

A number of viewers indicated that watching the news can be a form of relaxation following their arrival home after a day's work. The fact that they have finished work for the day around 5.00pm means that they are able to make a cup of tea, possibly have a bite to eat and simply 'veg out' in front of the news at 6.00pm:

Malcolm: ...if I'm home by six I'll probably, yeah, turn it
on. Al-also 'cause it's a chance to ah, um, sit
down — and um read the paper at the same
time, or, yeah, have a cup of tea. [275-277]

John: ...what are you doing when the news is on?

Cathy: Um...usually having a cup of tea, or stuffing my face with food. Um — no I'm not sitting there like rigidly looking at it.... [103-106]

Cathy: Um, I guess um, I'm sort of just sitting there and I'm sort of still in veg mode, going "Blah". [228-229]

Cathy: I'm just collapsed with a mug of tea in my hand, and basically all my energies are focused on watching the box, and the rest of me is just relaxing, going "blah". I find it, I really just enjoy sitting down. [238-242]

Notice here that even though Malcolm indicates that sometimes he will not be home in time to watch the news, his mode of integration is very similar to that of Cathy who is, by her own account, a very regular news watcher.

Several other viewers, none of whom were regularly consistent in their viewing patterns, also indicated how their engagement with the news was generally managed with a minimum amount of effort. In the case of Sian, her comment that she is "sitting out, veging out looking at the TV" suggests an obvious similarity to Cathy in her mode of integration. Having previously indicated (see above) that he was often unable to watch the news due to other commitments, Matt nevertheless reveals that when he does watch the news he too is often "doing very little, just relaxing".

Sian: I mean quite often when I watch the news I'm just sitting out, veging out looking at the TV. [94-95]

John: Yeah, ok. Um, when you do watch the news what are you normally doing when you watch it?

Matt: Um, if dinner's ready I'll be eating dinner, but apart from that doing very little, just relaxing.
[22-26]

The extended excerpts from the interview with Barry which follow below are similarly indicative of this kind of casual engagement. It also provides a revealing glimpse into how watching the news on television is often deeply integrated within the domestic milieu of the household. It is precisely this inescapably domestic context that results in watching the news being taken for granted as just another routine, everyday activity. The news, it seems, is more often than not watched by default. A clue to this form of engagement appeared early in the interview when Barry explained that he was still living at home with his parents, and that his father watches the news every night [12-13]. Whatever else he might have been doing then, the news was always going to be “just on really” [169-172]. Although he said that watching the news was “probably not” [21-29] something that he did out of habit, neither did he admit to making a conscious decision to watch it. Instead he finds himself “not doing anything else at the time” as “it’s just sort of around” his “tea hour”. The news then happens to coincide with the preparation and sometimes even the consumption of the evening meal. Even though he was speaking of his father’s watching practices, the third and fourth excerpts emphasise the way in which, for some members of this household at least, the news forms more of a backdrop to the surrounding activities rather than taking up centre stage (cf. Cathy). Barry says that he will “wander off and do anything” because the news is “just on”, and besides his father is “going a bit deaf” which means that the volume is turned up “so it’s pretty hard to miss” [169-172]. This ability to be physically absent from in front of the screen while still maintaining the engagement at an aural level is further

reinforced by his description of how his father will “rush back in there” from the kitchen to watch something that he has heard.

Barry: Living at home, still. Yeah, that’s the one,
y’know my dad watches the news every night,
so yeah. [12-13]

John: *Ok, would you say that perhaps that, that
watching the news is something you tend to do
out of habit?*

Barry: No, probably not for me, no.

John: *So if you watch it, it’s more like a conscious
decision that you’ll go and watch it, or, or...?*

Barry: Um, basically, I’m just not doing anything else
at the time, and it’s sort of just around tea
hour and I’m sort of, getting ready to have my
tea and I’ll watch the news, or watch the news
while we’re eating our tea.... [21-29]

Barry: I don’t really, I don’t really sit there and only
leave the TV when the ad breaks come on. I’ll
wander off and do anything, it’s just on really,
and Dad’s going a bit deaf and he cranks the
volume up so it’s pretty hard to miss. (laughs)
[169-172]

Barry: Yeah, yeah, no I agree with that, yeah. We actually have our tea probably about towards the end of the news... but it sort of is going on while the rest of it's y'know, and Dad might, he doesn't always sit in front of the news the whole time, but it's up loud enough that if he's in the kitchen he can hear it and he'll rush back in there if, y'know. [551-557]

Barry: Yeah, I mean, I don't know. I don't know why people of that generation seem to just have to watch the news. It's like, Dad, Dad'll turn the TV on twenty minutes before the news starts, and go "Oh, leave it on channel One, the news is going to start soon," and I'm sort of like thinking it's not going to start for twenty minutes. It's like, such a big deal. [449-454]

In the final excerpt (above), Barry's ironic reference — "It's like, such a big deal" [449-454] — to his father's habit of turning the television on "twenty minutes before the news starts" further emphasises his own relaxed attitude in relation to watching it. Taken together, the descriptions of the domestic television viewing arrangements that Barry has provided mirror, to a certain extent, some of Morley's findings from the Family Television research project. It is clear from Barry's description that the news is indeed the domain of the male members of the household (Morley, 1992). Certainly his father's behaviour in relation to the news is representative of "masculine power... as the ultimate determinate... over viewing choices" (Morley, 1992: 147). As I have argued previously however, this distinction is not always so

clear cut in practice.⁵ Evidence of the inexorably contextual (Ang, 1991) nature of gender relations in regard to television news viewing can be found in these very same descriptions. The way that Barry's father "doesn't always sit in front of the news the whole time" [551-557] as there are moments when he may be "in the kitchen" paints a somewhat different picture than Morley's (1992) generalised claim that men prefer to watch television attentively, and without interruption. In this regard, Cathy's description of her viewing practices, where she says "basically all my energies are focused on watching the box" [238-242] represents yet another inversion of Morley's gendered patterns of engagement.

In contrast to the somewhat relaxed and casual encounters that Malcolm, Cathy, Matt, Sian and Barry have alluded to, other viewers appeared to engage with the news in a more controlled and purposeful manner. For Kane, there is a clear sense of demarcation between the activities he was involved in prior to the news starting at 6.00pm and actually watching it. Not only does he "make... sure" that he is "inside by six to watch the news", but, weather depending, he will immediately head "away again" once it has finished. Even though he is a regular news watcher, his method of watching is very different from Cathy, for example. While she makes the most of this time after work to relax, Kane is busy with other activities that he must interrupt in order to watch the news. Thus even though the news is a regular part of his day, it nevertheless has to compete (successfully) with other activities for his time.

Kane: Yeah, I-well, six o'clock, I finish at half past four, so I'm home before, y'know an hour or two before, and there's always something going on before I go-I mean, no, I make —

⁵ See Chapter Six, Section 6.3.1.3.2

sure that I'm there by six, y'know, or inside by
six to watch the news, yeah.... [158-161]

Kane: ...and then if it's shitty, like in the winter time,
then I'll stay there for the rest, y'know, rest of
the evening. But other than that y'know, it's
just watch the news and away again. [173-
175]

Winona presents a further variation on this theme of competition. Although she refers to other routine activities, such as meal preparation (see [16-20] above), which usually prevent her from watching the news, she does admit that there are occasions when the news can take precedence. On these occasions, when she knows that there is something that she wants to watch, she will "make an effort" [21-30]. The next three excerpts provide an interesting counterpoint to the way in which Cathy and Malcolm relate to the news. For these two viewers, watching the news is associated with relaxation. A lack of what she regards as "leisure time" has led Winona to resist "the habit" of "mindlessly... turning the news on at six" [624-629].

Furthermore, and in direct contrast to their position, she had earlier stated that watching the news was "not the sort of thing" she would "regard as being terribly relaxing" [16-18]. Winona's fitful engagement with the news can be interpreted as the outcome of two specific tensions. On the one hand the fixed schedule of news clashes with the temporal arrangement of her domestic routines. This means that while she does not usually watch the news, there are odd times when a desire to know will take precedence over such routines. On the other hand, she says that she makes a deliberate choice not to watch because this very same desire to know can sometimes result in being faced with images that are "just too distressing at times" [558-560].

John: Yeah, what about if there's something really really important, or really really...

Winona: Oh, that's why um...

John: ...big that sort of maybe concerns you, that you might want to...?

Winona: ...yeah, like that's why I would, like sometimes make an effort, yeah.

John: But only if it really is something that you're looking for?

Winona: Yes, I wou-I don't turn the telly on in an ad hoc sort of basis. [21-30]

Winona: Y-yeah, you guard your time a bit more, y'know. If I actually had a lot more leisure time I probably would watch more news and I probably would be in the habit of turning the news on at six, maybe. But, I don't have that much leisure time, and so I don't just mindlessly go and, and turn on the telly, and start getting involved with it, 'cause you do, y'know. [624-629]

Winona: I mean... it's not the sort of thing I'd regard as being terribly relaxing.... [16-18]

Winona: One of the reasons I choose y'know probably like not to watch in depth news at that time is it's just too distressing at times. [558-560]

Although she provides little in the way of contextual information about how watching the news fits in with the rest of her daily activities (cf. Kane), Tori's engagement with the news can be characterised as deliberate and intentional. Taking her statement below in conjunction with her earlier comments where she spoke of having "a passion" for the news, the impression is of a very purposeful news watcher. The news is not simply another element in her domestic ambience, something to be glanced at half-heartedly because it just happens to be on (cf. Barry). Tori is focussing her attention directly on the news, actively in control of what she sees. Tori's behaviour, in particular her use of the remote control, and also the context of her viewing (a mixed-sex flat shared with two others) once again lends support to Ang's (1991) criticism of Morley's over-generalised conclusions regarding the nature of gender relations in regard to television viewing.⁶

⁶ Of course it needs to be understood that whereas Morley was interested in the gender relations of the **family** as a sociological entity, the current analysis does not share this concern. If anything, the descriptions given by viewers in this study only serve to underscore the way in which the gender relations that Morley defines are specific to the kind of nuclear families that comprised his sample. As Ang and Hermes (1991) have argued, there has been a tendency towards gender essentialism in which the differences between gender definitions, gender positions and gender identifications have become suppressed. Citing De Lauretis (1987), they argue that "even though... the social subject is 'constituted in gender', in everyday life gender is not always relevant to what one experiences, how one feels, chooses to act or not to act" (320). In watching television news in the way that they do, both

Tori: Ok, at six o'clock I'm usually the first one home out of three, three flatmates, I'm usually the first one home so I'll be watching it, um I'll have the control in my hand, I'll be flicking...(laughs) [82-83]

8.3 News-Time Versus Real-Time

For most people television is tightly woven into the fabric of their everyday, domestic lives and it is precisely this facet of its character, its 'domestication', that can prove problematic. In the case of television news, this is particularly evident when "the 'mass' character of its production and distribution is combined with the 'domestic' mode of reception" (Corner, 1995: 15). This necessarily involves a tension between two distinct forms of temporal organisation. On the one hand there is the permanently fixed schedule of the two main news bulletins (ONN and 3NN), broadcast each evening at precisely 6.00pm. On the other hand, individual viewers have their own unique patterns of activity that constitute their everyday lives. These patterns can range from the relatively fixed and stable to the completely unpredictable. Some viewers have stated that watching the news is a habitual activity, and as a specific activity it is variously integrated into their daily routines, sometimes smoothly and sometimes abruptly. For others, watching news is not necessarily a regular habit but, for these people, too, there is a similar range in terms of the way that their (irregular) encounters with the news are integrated into their other everyday activities. Viewers can also experience situations of competition rather than integration, where watching the news often has to give way to these other activities (or vice versa). Moores (1993) has suggested that the systematic

Tori and Cathy have managed, for a "rare moment... to escape the prison house of gender" (321).

scheduling of broadcast media has its origins in the 1930s during the heyday of radio. At this time, partly as a result of new techniques of audience research, there was a move towards more predictable programme scheduling which “‘chimed in’ with everyday domestic rituals” (85). Modern day scheduling practices, directed as they are toward the aim of building and holding a large audience share for the benefit of advertisers (Fiske, 1987), are still clearly based on this principle. Despite attempts by broadcasters to achieve concordance between the temporal rhythms of everyday life and the structure of the television schedule, and despite their apparent success in doing so at a macro-level, as the high ratings figures of the news would seem to suggest, an analysis of the “mezzo-level” of reception (Lorimer, 1994: 162), as presented above, indicates that the often chaotic patterns of everyday life sometimes refuse to be subdued by the regularity of television in general and the news in particular. What is equally clear is the fact that occasionally this situation is reversed, and everyday life is instead forced to synchronise with the television schedule. Thus it can be argued that news watching represents a tension between two forms of temporality, with the viewer in a continuous state of flux between the two.

8.4 Structure Versus Content

The preceding analysis dealt with the different ways that viewers manage the activity of watching news in conjunction with the other forms of activity that together constitute the routines of everyday life. This mezzo-level of engagement, where watching the news is located within a (generally) domestic context, is not the only available way to consider the ‘how’ of news watching. A micro-level analysis, where attention is brought to bear on the ways that viewers engage with the various textual elements that together constitute the news reveals further dimensions of the inherently contradictory experience that is reception. In this section the critical and referential modes of interpretation are once more brought back into play. Virtually

all of the viewers talked of making deliberate and conscious use of the very structure of the news bulletin itself to structure their own viewing patterns.⁷ They also indicated another way in which their viewing patterns were structured. The content of individual news stories plays just as significant a role in determining what parts of the news bulletin viewers will attend to. In this situation, the differentiation between modes of interpretation parallels that of the analysis presented in the previous chapter. Using the structure of the news bulletin obviously involves an interpretation from a critical-syntactic perspective, while viewing that is based on content involves making a referential interpretation (whereby an appraisal of the content is made based on what it actually refers to). Overlying both of these interpretations there is also a critical-pragmatic awareness at work as the viewers discuss the ways in which the critical-syntactic and referential readings combine to structure their involvement with the news.

8.4.1 Platforms of Departure and Arrival

In talking of the 'structure' of the news bulletin I am not suggesting that there is a single, definitive structure that the viewers made use of when deciding what and what not to watch. News bulletins are composed of distinctive audio-visual units, such as the opening and closing sequences, individual news reports (which are themselves further subdivided into discrete units) and studio-based sequences. There are also various thematic segments, such as sports, financial news, and the weather. While these are often clearly demarcated within the bulletin, other types of stories, such as international news, may not be as explicitly identified, but they are nevertheless often grouped together. In the space of one hour the viewer can be

⁷ The one exception was Dean, although the absence of any discourse relating to this phenomenon from the interview with him does not necessarily imply that he differed from the other viewers in this respect.

confronted by up to 40 distinct elements, not counting the advertisement breaks, of which there may be up to 5 in a typical one-hour news bulletin.⁸ Both ONN and 3NN, although organising these various components differently from each other, usually follow a set order. Exceptions to this rule typically occur in the form of extended coverage of certain events (thereby bestowing upon them the status of ‘extraordinary’) or live reports from events that are in progress as the news is being broadcast. However one defines the structure of a news bulletin (for it can be defined in any number of ways), to think of it as being permanently fixed is an erroneous assumption. A far more useful conception of the news bulletin structure can be arrived at by comparing news watching with a train journey where it’s not so much the destination as the getting there that matters. Having boarded the train, passengers may disembark at any of the numerous stops along the way, safe in the knowledge that they can always board another train that comes along. The list of possible stops along the way is just that, a list without a necessarily predetermined ‘structure’. The passenger defines the nature of his or her own ‘structure’ from this available list by choosing when to get on or get off. In a similar fashion, the junctures between each distinctive element in the news broadcast can be thought of as ‘platforms’, from which viewers can literally arrive at, or depart from, a position of engagement with the news. As the comments below show, these viewers have all devised their own distinctive structure by which they time their arrivals and departures based on a schedule that consists of the various discrete elements of the bulletin.

Cathy: Well, what I prefer about it is I can sit down
and lis-watch the news for basically three
quarters of an hour and when it hits sports I

⁸ Based on an analysis of the content of the 6.00pm 3 *National News* bulletin during the five day period of Monday 24 April to Friday 28 April 1995.

just turn over and watch *The Simpsons*. So
(laughing) it's just the good, the way it works
for me. [23-26]

Malcolm Yeah, yeah, um you sit down and watch the
news. I actually tend to — drift away from it
now after the headlines, if um, if something's
not, if it doesn't seem to be particularly
interesting coming up I'll drift away and come
back for the sports news. [290-293]

Winona: They obviously expected people to do what I
tend to use Newsnight for, to just come in and
watch a little wee segment and, y'know, or
maybe if they're running late they just come in
and want to hear the headlines at the end.
Um... [411-414]

Barry Um, yeah, I'd say so yeah. I don't really, I
don't really sit there and only leave the TV
when the ad breaks come on. [169-170]

Barry: Well, I mean headlines, obviously the main
thing you're going to watch, um, I'll probably
catch up on the sports, um then any sort of
real secondary stories that I don't care that
much about, and the weather I don't care
about either. Um, I'm not really, Paul Holmes

I used to watch but um, as long as *Shortland Street's* on.... [389-393]

Bevan Oh typical, I'll definitely watch the first section y'know, with all the main, main parts. Second part, yeah maybe. What is it then, they go into that Bill Ralston bit and probably depends on what he's talking about whether I bother or not, and then sport definitely, and the weather, not fussed. If I'm there I'll watch it, or depending if it's been really lousy.... [221-226]

What these excerpts illustrate is that despite the presence of an apparently 'natural' structure, in the form of labels which specifically identify individual segments and regularly occurring advertisement breaks, viewers will often create their own personal structure by using a combination of these designated platforms ("sports", "headlines", "ad breaks", "that Bill Ralston bit", "the weather") and their own rather nebulous formulations ("three quarters of an hour", "a little wee segment", "secondary stories", "second part"). What is also apparent from these descriptions is that this structural form of watching is also, in most cases, synonymous with a routinised way of watching. The fact that the sports section of 3NN **always** "hits [the] sports" after roughly "three quarters of an hour" [23-26] (in actuality it is more like 40 minutes⁹) means that Cathy's engagement with the news, at least from this structural perspective, will invariably follow the same pattern day after day. Malcolm's description points to a different but no less routine form of engagement,

⁹ See above.

watching “the headlines” and then leaving at some stage before coming “back for the sports news” [290-293]. Similarly, Bevan speaks of “definitely” [221-226] watching the “first section” and “then [the] sport” segment. Winona is perhaps the only odd one out here, which is hardly surprising given the fact that, compared to the others, she is an irregular watcher of the news. Nevertheless, her comments do reveal the way that structure can play a part in even the most sporadic of engagements with the news. Familiarity with the temporal arrangement of the various elements within a news bulletin means that viewers who may have missed the start of the news know they can still catch “the headlines at the end”.

8.4.2 “...if they are talking about something I can see myself needing to know about, I’ll prick my ears up a bit more....”

Using the bulletin structure is not the only way for viewers to organise their encounter with the news. As some of the remarks above hinted at, routine ways of watching that are organised around the various elements of the news can sometimes be contradicted by a far more arbitrary form of watching. Malcolm spoke of leaving after the headlines, unless there was something “particularly interesting coming up” [290-293]. Bevan’s decision on whether or not to watch the “Bill Ralston bit” (an editorial segment of 3NN) “depends on what he’s talking about” [221-226]. This unpredictability is, of course, determined by the actual **content** of the news, as opposed to its temporal organisation.

For Barry or Cathy, the specific content of the news — be it something that he feels he “need[s] to know about” [231-233] or something that simply “interests” her [106-108] — exerts a centripetal ‘pull’ by drawing their attention more fully to the screen. These excerpts are also illustrative, at a very concrete level, of how the double articulation of television within the domestic environment (Silverstone, 1994) manifests itself in the process of reception. For Barry the level of attentiveness that

he brings to bear on the news “depends on the issue”. If he perceives the (public, shared) content of a news item to be of relevance to his own (private, domestic) life, then he will “prick... [his]... ears up a bit more” [231-233]. In this mediation of the public and private spheres, Barry’s engagement is with the news-as-medium. As an object, however, the television is incorporated into the domestic space of the household for both aesthetic and functional reasons. It is this functional capacity of the television-as-object that Cathy refers to. The simple fact that she can **hear** what is on the news means that she is free to “walk away” without fear of missing out on something that may be of interest to her [106-108]. A simple touch of a button on the remote control (which in itself further extends the functionality of the television-as-object) increases the volume, allowing her to “pay attention” from a distance. Malcolm also revealed how his otherwise intermittent engagement with the news (see p. 183 above) could sometimes be prolonged by the presence of “something... interesting” in the “teaser section” [294-299]. Not only is this an example of an overtly critical interpretation (referring to the specific segment of the news by its technical name), but it also points to the way that viewers use both structure and content simultaneously in organising their engagement with the news. While Bevan simply refers to “a new thing that’s coming up” [187-188] as enough of an incentive to keep watching (or more precisely, and in common with Barry and Cathy, **listening**), Winona provides a more detailed response. She indicates two particular subjects that would cause her to turn the news on in the first place (remembering, of course, that she does not habitually watch the 6.00pm news). Like Barry, her comments have come from a strongly referential interpretation as she makes a direct connection between herself and the events being depicted on the news: “something... about the universities” (she works within the tertiary education sector); or something that involved the “Nelson area” (her “home town”) [31-36].

Barry Um, it’s just, it’s just not that important to me,
 I guess. I mean it depends on the issue. Um,
 like if they are talking about something I can

see myself needing to know about, I'll prick my ears up a bit more.... [231-233]

Cathy: Um, I do sort of walk away and come back. But when something interests me I'll turn it up and pay attention. [106-108]

John: *So you might watch like the first quarter hour and then come back for the last quarter hour?*

Malcolm Yeah, if, unless something turns up that looks interesting...

John: *Yeah.*

Malcolm ...in the, in the teaser section, then yeah, I'll go off and do something else.... [294-299]

Bevan Ok, yeah well when it's a new thing that's coming up, y'know typically I'll, yeah I'll be on to it and listen, yeah so.... [187-188]

John: *What, what sort of things would it be that you'd, that would make you definitely try and catch the six o'clock news?*

Winona Something like, maybe of a particular interest, like something maybe about the universities, maybe something of a regional nature like if

there was like flooding in Nelson area, y'know
my home town sort of thing. [31-36]

Tori: I'll have the control in my hand, I'll be
flicking... (laughs)

John: *Yeah.*

Tori: ...from Three to One because um, the story
might be boring and they might have
something better on the other side. [82-86]

Unlike Cathy, whose description suggests an engagement characterised by varying levels of attentiveness, Tori appears to be more single-minded in relation to the news. Instead of being drawn back into the engagement from some sort of external activity, she appears to be focused solely on the task at hand: watching the news (see p. 177 above). And unlike Barry, whose decision to pay closer attention is motivated by the referential relevancy of a particular news item, Tori is driven by a somewhat less specific motive, constantly “flicking” between news bulletins in search of “something better” [82-86]. Despite these differences there is a common factor between all three of these viewers’ descriptions. The double articulation of television is again evident in Tori’s comments. Not only is she engaging with it as an object with specific technological properties (the ubiquitous remote control), but she is also engaging with the medium as she searches for that (elusive) “something better”. It is also this search that marks Tori’s comments out from the rest of those above for another reason. All of the others refer to content that either re-establishes (Barry, Cathy), retains (Malcolm, Bevan), or instigates (Winona) the viewer’s engagement with the news. In each case the alternative is, literally, **not** watching (engaging). Tori’s situation is somewhat different. She is already engaged in the process of watching the news, and while she has been lured from “three to one” by

the possibility of “something better”, so it can also be argued that it was her very real and concrete (as opposed to possible) encounter with a “boring story” that pushed her from one channel to the other. The point I am making here is that just as the content of the news can act centripetally to pull the viewer into an engagement, so it can also act centrifugally by pushing the viewer away from the engagement. As Tori has suggested, this push could simply be from one news bulletin to another.

Alternatively, and as the excerpts below suggest, the content of television news can send viewers out of its orbit in a variety of ways, sometimes concretely and sometimes symbolically.

Sian, Winona, and Chris are all generally negative in their assessment of the way that news covers events that involve personal, human tragedy. Their comments also illustrate how the critical and referential modes of interpretation are tightly interwoven. Sian speaks of a hypothetical situation involving her “brother”, implicating of course the news’ referentiality. But she then immediately talks of the news having “a shot of him... even if it’s from a distance” [177-182] which is indicative of an interpretation of the news as a particular construction of that reality. And it is these particular constructions of reality that she does not “appreciate”, itself an example of a critical-pragmatic interpretation as she comprehends how such images impact upon her relationship with the news. Winona simply tries to avoid even being confronted at all by “distressing” images by “choos[ing]... not to watch in depth news” [558-565]. Again the interplay of the two modes of interpretation are clearly evident. She feels the news tends to “increasingly rely” (critical) on “the human... anguish” (referential), “showing the photo” (critical) of the “distressed mother” (referential). Chris opts for an actual piece of news that he had seen to express his dislike of how such events are sometimes covered. He finds it “quite cringeful” (critical-pragmatic) when they “stick the cameras in people’s faces” [49-53] (critical-syntactic). His comment about “feel[ing] sorry for the people” [59-64] reveals a strong referential interpretation as he empathises with the victims not only

for what they have suffered but also for the way that they are being subjected to such “ridiculous” and “intrusive” behaviour on the part of the news media.

Sian: I mean if it's my brother, say if he was killed in an accident or, um, I don't know, lost at sea or something and they find his body and it actually has a shot of him getting pulled out of the water and, y'know, even if it's from a distance, I probably wouldn't appreciate it. I don't think it's needed, I don't think you need to see actually see things like that. [177-182]

Winona: One of the reasons I choose y'know probably like not to watch in depth news at that time is it's just too distressing at times. It's y'know depending on y'know what it is, it's just y'know, if you're trying to relax, you just don't need it, y'know. Um, and they always have, they seem to rely on, to increasingly rely on the human sort of anguish, y'know. The showing the photo of y'know the distressed mother y'know, with the missing child or something.... [558-565]

Chris: Yeah, actually — they tend to be quite intrusive sometimes into sort of people's private lives and that. And when there's like disasters and people have died and stuff y'know they tend to stick the cameras in

people's faces who are really upset y'know,
and lost a family member and stuff like that.
It can get quite cringeful. [49-53]

Chris: That one they did alright actually, that one
wasn't too bad, but ah, can't quite remember
which one it was, it was real bad. They got
some, they got some stuff out of the Oklahoma
bombing which was quite bad. Like people at
the scene, y'know crying and stuff, y'know
friends been blown up. Sort of trying to ask
them "How do you feel," it was kind of
ridiculous. You got to feel sorry for the people.
[59-64]

Cathy and Kane talk about similar kinds of news, but they reveal a different type of response. For Cathy, the emotion that characterised the responses of Sian, Winona and Chris is held at bay. In a revealing piece of critical-pragmatic (and reflexive) interpretation she talks of being "de-sensitised" [118-122] by what she has seen. She is aware that perhaps she should feel the way that Winona does, yet she does not. For Winona, the possibility of seeing images of this kind prevents her from even engaging in the first place. For Cathy the actual presence of such images, in the form of "just another Bosnia report", serves to merely push her away for a moment. The question of an emotional reaction to this sort of news does not even figure in Kane's response. If anything it is the sheer repetitiousness of news coverage of things "like... the war in Bosnia" which can induce in him a less than attentive engagement with the news. In the case of Bevan, two previously analysed excerpts (see Chapter Seven) provide another example of how repetitious coverage can literally push viewers away from an engagement. Rather than the distant battlefields

of the Balkan states it is something a little closer to home, but no less devoid of conflict — “politics or something like that” [66-69] — that cause Bevan to “lose interest in it quickly” [164-165]. Matt is another who is inclined to break off his engagement with the news when the subject is politics. As an example he refers to news reports featuring the then Minister of Health, Jenny Shipley. He reveals a deliberate antipathy (or should that be apathy?) towards Mrs Shipley’s pronouncements, “almost sort of switch[ing] off” [193-198] when she, or someone like her, is on the news. Compared to some viewers (Winona and Cathy, for example) this “switch[ing] off” represents a somewhat passive form reaction to specific content. Rather than having a strongly negative impact which can literally push him away from the engagement, this type of news lacks the necessary impact that is required to adequately hold Matt’s attention in the first place. In a similar fashion, Barry reveals how certain news content fails to reach what can be termed his threshold of engagement. The series of stories on “highway congestion in Auckland” [405-408] appeared to have such little impact on him that he is not even sure if he watched them or not. He “think[s]” he “sort of heard” the previews for them, but then he “went off and did something else”.

Cathy: ...um sometimes if it’s just another Bosnia report which is the same thing, it’s just getting worse and worse and worse I can walk away from it, which is really horrible because it means I’m desensitised to what’s happening. Ah, which is something else again. [118-122]

Kane: Yeah, I mean it’s just like, um, th-the war in Bosnia. I mean, I mean how many times do you need to see that on TV to sort of know what’s going on.... [488-489]

John: Yeah. What sort of stuff do you sort of like not bother watching?

Bevan Oh, if they're rambling about politics or something like that.

John: Ok, why is that, like why is it of no real interest to you?

Bevan Probably because I've heard it all before (laughs) And get sick of it. [66-69]

Bevan they're sort of going on about it for a few days, and sort of lose interest in it quickly. Sort of, they cover things for too long, I don't [164-165]

Matt: I-I just don't really, I almost sort of switch off when it comes to politics tha-when it, when they have someone like Jenny Shipley on the TV, I don't listen to what she's saying, I just think, y'know-'cause from past experiences with say Jenny, she just doesn't answer any questions so I have no interest in watching her, watching what she says.... [193-198]

Barry Yeah, I mean I'm only really interested in the main stuff, I guess. I mean I s-I mean like I know they sort of started running some of sort

of secondary bits in that second half an hour about highway congestion in Auckland or something like that, but I mean I, like I don't think I watched it eh. I think I sort of heard them building up to it in the ads, and then, I don't know, I went off and did something else. I don't think I ever really watched any of those stories. [405-408]

Television news content can exert, through the presentation of certain images which are interpreted referentially, centrifugal forces on viewers which can push them away from engaging with the news. In addition, the way in which this referentiality is constructed will sometimes compound the viewer's desire to refrain from watching the news. For other viewers, the impetus to disengage from watching the news can result from seeing too much of the same thing. Or, as some viewers have indicated, the content may lack the required interest factor which is necessary to maintain the engagement. Tensions can thus be identified between viewing patterns that are arranged according to two distinct frameworks. On the one hand there are the various segments of the news (advertisement breaks included) which follow an established sequential order. The routine arrangement of these segments enables viewers to disengage and re-engage with the news at regularly occurring points throughout the broadcast. On the other hand viewers are also drawn to the news, or driven from it, by what they find in the actual content of these various segments. (Dis)engagements of this kind tend to be much more irregular in their occurrence because in most cases the content of a specific news item is not necessarily determined by its position within the bulletin.¹⁰

¹⁰ While it could be argued that news stories are sometimes arranged into groups based on 'content', such as international news stories, sports news,

8.4.3 “...you do get caught up in some things and sit there and just...”

Previously I spoke of structure in relation to the various segments of the news bulletin and how they were arranged in such a fashion that allowed viewers to construct their own ‘personalised’ bulletin. Cathy, who watched the news up until the sports section and then switched over to *The Simpsons* on TV2, was one viewer who did this. Another was Malcolm who would watch the headlines and then generally “drift away”, returning for the sports news segment. Yet there is another form of structure that runs through the news. As a latent form of structure, narrative is perhaps less immediately obvious than the kind of structure that has been discussed so far, but it is no less influential in determining how the news is watched. In this section I wish to explore the impact that narrative structure can have on viewers from two distinct perspectives. Firstly, and this follows directly from the previous section, there is the way that narrative can act to counter the centrifugal impact of content that may serve to drive viewers from an engagement with the news. Secondly, the comments of two viewers in particular reveal the way that the narrative constructions of the news have become naturalised to the point that their operation as structuring devices goes unnoticed most of the time. Before proceeding any further it should be noted that my intention in this section is not to produce any sort of overall analysis of the narrative structure of news. What I am focusing on is how viewers describe their news watching experiences in relation to certain narrative characteristics of the news and whether or not this gives rise to any particular tensions or contradictions. Furthermore, by returning once again to talk about

financial news etc., the point I am making is that even within these recognisable groupings there is no guarantee that the viewer will not be confronted with content which provokes the kinds of reactions outlined above.

structure, I am underlining the continuous interplay between referential and critical modes of interpretation that characterises the viewer-news engagement.

In Chapter Six I made reference to Justin Lewis' argument that television news has by and large abandoned the idea of a conventional narrative structure altogether. As a way of indicating how narrative structure can be expressed in terms of a centrifugal vector which works against maintaining the viewer in an engagement with the news I will briefly outline his argument. In particular, Lewis claims that television news narratives routinely subvert the hermeneutic code (1985). Barthes defines the hermeneutic code as

all those units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events that can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution.

(1975: 17)

In more simple terms, the hermeneutic code can be understood as working to draw the viewer into the narrative by establishing a sense of enigma, and it is one of the most prevalent forms of narrative in television. Long running serials and soap operas in particular are good examples of television genres in which the hermeneutic code can be found. By refusing to allow the characters and events to ever reach a state of equilibrium, the viewer is kept in a constant state of suspense. What's going to happen next? This is obviously the source of much of these programmes' power in attracting and retaining large numbers of viewers. As Lewis puts it, "if the 'main points' of Coronation Street... were given at the beginning of the programme, only the most enthusiastic viewers would be inclined to continue watching" (1985: 216). He goes on to suggest that television news, on the other hand, has almost completely done away with the hermeneutic code. Firstly, news items are oriented around a focal point, or series of focal points, which are almost never presented in terms of resolution, development or enigma. The result is often confusing with an enigma

presented first, followed by the cause of that effect. As Lewis points out, a news story needs to be presented **as** a story:

This means using a developmental narrative structure, where pieces of information, A, B, C, are presented sequentially and where B relates to A, C relates to B and so on. Sequences can develop chronologically (for example, 'this happened, then this happened, then this happened', etc.) or logically (cause of an event or problem, the event or problem, the implication of the event or problem). What is essential, however, is that they do actually develop. The focal point of a story should be presented in terms of such a sequence, it should be a part of the story. If this is not done... the context or implications of a news event simply vanish into the air-waves.

(ibid.)

Subversion of the hermeneutic code is also achieved by the standard practice of news stories being introduced by the studio news reader. If a news item does actually follow a developmental narrative, the introduction generally nullifies any enigmatic potential as it will usually consist of the focal point(s). Viewers are told in advance what the outcome of the next story is going to be, and thus furnished, the explanation of what led to such an outcome loses much of its importance. By structuring narratives in terms of enigmas and resolutions the viewer is constantly drawn from one sequence of events to the next, allowing him/her to make the required cause and effect relationship. This not only gives the resolution, usually the focal point of the story, much greater impact, but also allows for better understanding, since events will be seen to be linked in a specific manner rather than merely appearing as free-floating bits of information. This type of developmental narrative structure is an obvious feature of television fiction, so it is something of a paradox that the news, which shares many features of fictional television narratives¹¹ should choose to ignore this important method of communicating information. One possible

¹¹ See Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.3.2.

explanation is that “despite the differences between press and broadcast news, the structures of broadcast news still largely reflect its historical roots in printed journalism” (Bell, 1991: 175). In the print media, news stories are generally written in a format that headlines information and structures it in sequences of decreasing importance, which allows for stories to be edited from the bottom up. Unfortunately, often omitted are those least ‘newsworthy’ elements which provide the crucial bits of information which are necessary for a more complete understanding of the event that is being reported. The problem is further compounded by the different forms of engagement with the text that print and television permit. When reading a newspaper there are no temporal constraints. Written news reports can be skimmed through, pondered over, or even re-read in order to clarify certain points. Winona was one viewer who made exactly this point:

Winona: Um — I guess — y’know in terms of the paper I’m a headline reader first and then a quick skim, or an in depth read. So that would probably be like if I watched more news I’d probably be a bit more like that, but you can’t choose with the news. [129-132]

Lewis’ analysis, based as it was on various news stories within a single news bulletin, represents only one interpretation of how narrative can be understood in relation to the news. I would argue that an understanding of how narrative works in the viewer-news relationship needs to consider more than just the way that individual news stories are constructed. As I indicated at the start of this section, there are two other ways in which narrative can impact upon the viewer’s engagement with television news. In both cases these formulations of narrative structure suggest a contradictory form of engagement than that suggested by Lewis. Whereas his analysis paints a picture of narrative as a centrifugal vector, effectively diminishing the viewer-news bond through the subversion of traditional structuring devices, these

alternative conceptions of narrative present it as a centripetal vector, drawing the viewer into an engagement with the news.

In direct contrast to the presence of content that acts centrifugally, driving viewers from engaging with the news, there are a number of narrative devices that work to counter this. Pulling the analytical focus back from the level of the individual story to take in a wider, more generic interpretation of news allows us to see just how such devices operate. The news as a genre of information is predicated on the concept of 'the new', on providing viewers with previously unknown information. Viewers made it clear, at least from their initial responses to the question of why they watch the news, that they do respond to this promise of 'the new'. The implication behind these declarations of "keeping up" or "catching up" is that there will always be a never ending stream of events and occurrences about which the viewer feels compelled to be made aware of and kept up to date with. As Cathy says:

Cathy: ...It's just surprising how much, how things
can change in a week. [64-65]

The news may not do a particularly good job of actually keeping viewers up to date with all of these events, as the comments of the viewers in Chapter Seven can attest to, but it nevertheless does provide them with an opportunity to sample some of these 'things' that are continually happening. Irrespective of the news' perceived (in)effectiveness as a provider of information, there can be no denying that on any given night viewers will be faced with a wide variety of sounds and images.

Kane: ...wh-when you watch it on TV it's like an hour
of different things.... [609-610]

Bevan: Yeah, well sort of you don't know what's
coming, y'know in quite a lot of items,
especially sort of one-off type items. [88-89]

Furthermore, as Bevan indicates above, there is an ever-present sense of the unknown as this nightly parade of “different things” flows by. While it may be possible to second guess the content of certain news stories based on the studio news readers’ introductions (see Lewis’ comments above), the simple fact of the matter is that the majority of the news is just that: new. Most television in general is predictable, routine and even formulaic, and the news is certainly no exception, although it is perhaps the one genre of television that is not broadcast again and again in the form of reruns.¹² For Bevan, at least, there is a certain enigmatic aspect to his encounter with the news. Despite his previous admission that he often finds much of the news “boring”, he nevertheless keeps watching because within the inherent unpredictability of the news there is always the possibility that something interesting will come along.

A case in point is the teaser segment. Driven by the commercial necessity of maintaining high ratings figures, broadcasters must work to keep the viewer’s attention firmly locked on their bulletin, and brief previews of upcoming stories is one way of achieving this. At one level this does indeed represent a variation on the subversion of the hermeneutic code. The enigma of “what’s coming” that Bevan referred to is partially resolved, but in a way that is designed to pique the viewers’ interest rather than diminish it. The promise is one of: “Look, if you stay watching us, we’ll show you (the rest of) this...”. In this way the resolution of one enigma (what’s coming up next on the news?) can simultaneously create another (what has actually happened to the person or place that was just shown on the teaser?). Of course there is no guarantee that the teaser will have the desired effect. While one viewer may react ‘appropriately’ (“I want to see the rest of that”) another may just as

¹² Perhaps not in its original format (regular news bulletins) but the growing trend of so-called ‘reality-based’ television is certainly helping to keep footage originally screened on news programmes in circulation.

equally react ‘inappropriately’ (“I **don’t** want to see the rest of that”). For a viewer like Cathy a quick preview of the latest developments in Bosnia may prompt her to “just walk away”, while for someone like Winona it may even result in the deliberate switching off of the news. Malcolm provides an interesting example of how these teasers can work in both directions, simultaneously pushing the viewer away and pulling them in. He says that one of the reasons he prefers to watch 3NN is because

Malcolm: ...they [3NN] don’t spend half the time
pleading with you to come back after the ad
break — I think? — maybe they do? [198-199]

His uncertainty over whether or not 3NN employs this strategy as much as ONN is perhaps indicative of the way that the teasers have become naturalised as simply a ‘normal’ part of the news.¹³ Despite his apparent displeasure at the use of this strategy, he later acknowledges that it can often be a successful one:

*John: So you might watch like the first quarter hour
and then come back for the last quarter hour?*

Malcolm: Yeah, if, unless something turns up that looks
interesting...

¹³ Analysis (see note 5 above) reveals that both bulletins typically include three such ‘teaser’ segments. In the case of ONN they appear immediately prior to the first, second and third advertisement breaks. On 3NN their arrangement is only slightly different, appearing immediately prior to the first, second and fourth advertisement breaks. A variation of the ‘teaser’ is the opening headline sequence in which (typically) three or four of the major stories are briefly previewed. While ONN began all five bulletins with such a preview, 3NN only used the same device twice during the period of analysis.

John: *Yeah.*

Malcolm: ...in the, in the teaser section, then yeah....

[294-298]

Barry passed a comment on the compelling force of narrative structure that appears to directly challenge Lewis' claim that the hermeneutic code is only made noticeable in news stories by its absence. Despite a critical mode of interpretation that alerts him to the inherent imbalances in most news stories, he nevertheless admits to sometimes just "get[ting] caught up in some things" [143-146]. What is also worth noting about his admission is that it points to a subtle difference in terms of the referential mode of interpretation. In virtually all the other instances of referential interpretation that are discussed throughout this research, references are made to the actual events that have taken place (or the people involved). The example here is much closer to the kind of referential readings that are associated with fictional television. Although not stated as such, there is an underlying acknowledgment that what he is actually getting "caught up in" is the **story** of the event, rather than in the event itself.

Barry: I mean I sort of have to think y'know there's
 got to be sort of another side to most things.
 Um, generally I am quite sceptical, but you,
 you do get caught up in some things and sit
 there and just.... [143-146]

The second formulation of narrative structure that I wish to discuss concerns the way that narrative constructions are such an integral part of the news that they have become naturalised. Malcolm has already pointed to this (see p. 199 above), but it is Winona and Cathy who provide the most distinctive articulation of this phenomenon. Having already indicated that she preferred to watch *2Newsnight* rather than either

6.00pm news bulletins, as a way of avoiding seeing distressing images, Winona was nevertheless very aware of its shortcomings as a news programme:

Winona: Um, but with Newsnight I guess you can't, you can't choose to get anything more in depth out of it, because it's just not there. [132-134]

She then immediately switched to a pragmatic mode of interpretation as she pondered why it was that she felt it necessary, from a "lifestyle" point of view, to actually want to "get anything... more out of it". Before she even managed to finish this sentence, however, she suddenly launched into a description of how an enforced absence from the news produces "bizarre" and "weird" feelings upon returning.

Winona: ...I don't know why, lifestyle wise, why I would feel the need to, it's — it's funny, it's like y'know if you go away camping or somewhere like you're really like out in the bush, out of touch. Sometimes when you come back you feel, it feels a bit bizarre. There's all this stuff happening, like the President of the States could have been shot, Bolger could have been shot y'know, and there's been all these things happening, and you don't know about them, and you feel weird. I'm not quite sure why, but you feel.... [134-142]

Although I had not broached this issue myself through the interview questions, Winona's description resonated with me as I, too, recalled similar experiences from

my past.¹⁴ Accordingly, I added a question to the interview schedule on this very subject. Of the three remaining interviews in which I had the chance to raise the issue, only Cathy indicated that she had also experienced a similar situation:

John: Have you been in situations where you've had to basically, where you've been away from TV and, and in a sense radio?

Cathy: Yeah.

John: How do you sort of feel then, y'know...?

Cathy: Actually I feel unconnected, which is quite funny.

John: Do you feel unconnected at the time, or...?

Cathy: Well, I'm just thinking about the times when I, when I was a kid and I went off to camp for a week and there was no radios and no TVs or anything like that and um, I got back and all this stuff had happened and we knew nothing about it, and it was quite bizarre.

¹⁴ During the eight-week Springbok tour of 1981, I was travelling in Canada with my parents. After arriving back in New Zealand I can still recall the profound sense of disbelief that both my parents and I felt when seeing for the very first time television news footage of anti-tour protestors clashing with police.

John: Right. So, in a sense then, the sort of unconnected, or disconnected sense probably doesn't manifest itself until, until you get back.

Cathy: Until...yeah, and then you....

John: Your life carries on normally without it...

Cathy: Oh yeah, definitely, absolutely, yeah. (laughs)

John: You're not sitting there going "Oh...."

Cathy: "Oh my God, I need to watch the TV." No. It's just surprising how much, how things can change in a week.[48-65]

In recounting the paradoxical situation of not necessarily missing the news when she is unable to watch it, yet feeling “unconnected” and, like Winona, “bizarre” when she returns to watch it, Cathy has revealed how the narrative structures of television news seem so natural that their presence is only made noticeable by their absence. As Cathy explains, the absence of news itself is not particularly problematic, even for someone who watches the news as regularly as she does. The fact that both Cathy and Winona used camping as a context for this kind of experience is of some significance here. Camping obviously involves a departure from the normal domestic routines and environments within which news watching is usually undertaken. In such a distinctly different context, where the normal daily routines no longer apply, the absence of news is hardly, if at all, felt. Winona, in a later comment, made reference to another factor that may have also contributed to the way in which the absence of news passed by unnoticed. She questioned why it is that people feel the need to keep up with the news on a regular basis when it “it doesn't affect the way you go about your life...” [168-171]. The conversation with Cathy

produced a similar conclusion, as she agreed with my assessment that “life carries on normally” without the presence of news.

Returning to the regular routines of the domestic fold is an altogether different matter though. The fact that news reports are essentially stories constructed along specific narrative lines, some of which in turn form cumulative narrative trajectories over several days, possibly even weeks, is really only made clear to them when they find themselves back in the familiar routines of normal, everyday life. As part of this return to the everyday, they are suddenly reimmersed into the endlessly flowing stream of narratives that constitute the news. A brief period of narrative lag ensues as viewers have to quite literally catch up with the current of events that has been flowing by during their absence. Cathy’s “unconnected” feeling, and Winona’s “weird[ness]” represent their own particular articulations of this narrative lag.

8.5 Conclusion

The general analytical thrust of this chapter has been directed toward understanding how viewers engage and disengage with television news. In the first section the focus was on the mezzo-level of dis/engagement, with viewers indicating how the activity of news watching was variously integrated (or not) into their everyday routines. Within the domestic realm, news watching ranges from a predictably regular activity to a more or less sporadic and infrequent encounter. In addition to the variations in frequency, viewers also displayed differences in modes of integration. For some viewers watching the news is seamlessly incorporated into the other routine activities of everyday life with little or no disruption. For others the integration is more discontinuous, as they are required to stop whatever they are otherwise involved in to watch the news. As a specific activity within the realm of the domestic, watching the news represents a tension between two forms of temporal organisation. On the one hand there is the predictable regularity of the broadcast schedule, and on the other there is the always-contingent nature of people’s day-to-

day routines. This mezzo-level of analysis also pointed to the ways in which gender differences in relation to the reception of news are inherently contextual. The second section returned to focus on the interpretive axis of reception by taking a much closer look at how viewers engaged with the news as a textual construction. Viewers indicated how they used the various segments of the news to structure their viewing patterns. Like platforms at a train station, the different parts of the bulletin serve as points of departure and arrival for the engagement with the news. The regularity of the news' format also lends itself to routinised ways of watching. In contrast to this explicitly critical mode of interpretation, a referential mode gives rise to a far more arbitrary form of viewer-news engagement. Depending on the actual content of the various reports, viewers can either be drawn into an engagement with the news or driven away from it. Structure and content combine to produce a tension similar to that outlined in section one. The regular and predictable rhythms of the news' structure clash with the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of its content. The final part of section two returned to look at structure in the form of narrative. Despite Lewis' (1985) claim that television news has eschewed narrative as an organising principle, there are still a number of ways in which narrative exerts a centripetal pull on viewers. The ubiquitous teaser segments within news bulletins are a case in point. Viewers are offered a quick preview of upcoming stories in the hope that their interest will be sufficiently piqued to continue watching. The second way in which narrative works is far less obvious. Following the comments of two viewers in particular, it became apparent that as a structuring device narrative has become naturalised to the point of invisibility. Its presence was only noted after an enforced absence from the news, with the two viewers in question experiencing a form of 'narrative lag' as they attempted to catch up with the ongoing flow of events.

CHAPTER NINE

WHAT

9.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have explored the news-viewer relationship from two distinct perspectives. Chapter Seven began with the relatively uniform response by viewers that they watched the news to keep up with things. An analysis of the discourses of reception then revealed the presence of a number of tensions and contradictions which problematised this particular conception. A critical mode of interpretation produced an awareness in viewers of the structural limitations of broadcast television news, and this often worked to counter the referential pull of the news that is embodied in the wish to keep up. In Chapter Eight attention was centred on the various ways in which viewers managed their engagement with the news. From this perspective tensions and contradictions are also evident as viewers negotiate a path between the strictly ordered temporality of news and the relative irregularity of their own everyday domestic lives. Adding further complication to the equation is the fact that at any point during the news bulletin the viewer may be confronted by images that either attract or repel. In keeping with the arbitrary division of the news watching experience into discrete sections, this chapter is therefore broadly concerned with the “what” of that experience. The analysis in Chapter Seven was based on the shared assumption (of viewers, of news media organisations themselves, and also of certain research perspectives¹) that watching

¹ Looking back to when I conducted the interviews, I would have to include myself within such a perspective. In asking what at first appears to be such a simple and straightforward question I was perhaps guilty of assuming that

the news was all about information and being informed. As discourses of reception, the interviews may have began from this singular and uniform starting point, but as the following analysis will show, the viewers ultimately reveal complex and often contradictory understandings of what ‘news’ is and what it is used for.

9.2 Revisiting the Critical-Referential Distinction

Underpinning the analysis of the previous chapters has been the idea of the viewer adopting referential and critical modes of interpretation in relation to the news. The analysis in this chapter is no different in that respect, but there is an additional way in which these concepts are implicated within the analysis. In talking about what the news is (as opposed to why they watch it and how it is watched) viewers are typically adopting a critical mode of interpretation. Discussing such things as the production values of the news, how it is structured, presented, and promoted is reflective of an awareness of the news as a textual construction. Without belabouring the point, I want to emphasise again that **talking about** television news in these terms is indicative of a critical **interpretation** by the viewer. The distinction I wish to make is between the act of interpreting the news from this critical or aesthetic (Corner, 1995) perspective and the news itself as a form of communication which possesses its own aesthetic. If the aesthetic element of a communication is concerned with the form that it takes, and the referential with what it is that is being communicated, the question then is what precisely is the referential element of television news. Of course the answer that comes to mind immediately is simply the various “things in the world” (ibid: 6) that are shown on the news every night. However this definition requires some work before it can usefully be

the answer would be equally simple and direct. Initially it appeared as if that was the case, but as the interviews proceeded, and as the subsequent analysis showed, it soon became clear that there is no one single answer to such a question.

incorporated into the current analysis. Because the focus of this research is not on how viewers make sense of individual news stories, but is instead centred on the viewer-news engagement in general, there is little to be gained from concentrating on the various ‘real world’ things that viewers did mention (see Table 7.1). Returning to the very first answers that viewers gave to the question of why they watched the news provides what I believe is a more appropriate definition of what the news, as an aesthetic construction, refers to. Responses ranged from what can be termed the vague (“things... in general” and “general stuff”) to the only slightly less vague (“what’s happening” and “what’s... going on”). Geographically speaking, their responses were no less revealing, with those that did include a reference to locality being split between either “the world” or “the country” (although two viewers did mention both). At this point we once again return to the viewer. As well as making critical interpretations of the various aesthetic elements of the news, they also make critical interpretations of the news’ referential capabilities. In other words, they also made critical interpretations of how well the news, as a particular form of communication, performs in referring to “what’s... going on” and “things... in general”. By way of an example, take the following comments from Winona and Dean:

Winona: ...they tend to have this bland kind of, y’know, they’re really highly groomed aren’t they, and they’re like, y’know — bring back Philip Sherry, that’s what I say. He’s probably dead now (laughs). Um, yeah, yeah it’s a very slick package really isn’t it? [492-495]

Dean: Th-that’s interesting ‘cause I thin-I think they deal more with the trivia as far as New Zealand news, y’know, cat stuck up a tree and tha-this

sort of thing, or um. Oh, I mean they deal
with things that are going on in Parliament,
but not in any depth. [67-70]

In the first example Winona adopts a critical mode of interpretation as she talks of the news in terms of the way it appears, calling it “bland”, “highly groomed” and a “very slick package”. She is, in effect, commenting on the physically visible attributes of the news, on the aesthetics of the news. Dean’s comments, while also emerging from a critical mode of interpretation, are more concerned with the nature of the news’ ‘references’ to the real world events that it reports on. As he says, they (the news) do cover the “things that are going on in Parliament”, but the way in which they are covered — “not in any depth” — ultimately compromises the efficacy of the information presented. These two examples were deliberately chosen for the purpose of emphasising the different kinds of critical interpretations that viewers make of the news. However, as Corner suggests

The interrelationships, in any piece of television, between referential and poetic/aesthetic elements, often become extremely difficult to determine, not only because of their complexity but also because they **shift**.

(1995: 6-7, emphasis in original)

One is immediately reminded here of McLuhan’s oft-quoted aphorism that “the medium is the message”. Television news is first and foremost television. While this is perhaps stating the obvious, it is nevertheless a significant factor which is too often taken for granted. Furthermore, in the context of New Zealand (as with most countries), the medium of broadcast television news is very much a commercial enterprise. It is with this in mind that we can begin to grasp the full implications not only of the “interrelationships” between the referential and the poetic/aesthetic that Corner speaks of, but also of the difficulty in determining the nature of these interrelationships. When the medium itself, through the specific way it forms and carries content, constrains the presentation of meaning (Lorimer, 1994), determining

the exact nature of the relationship between the aesthetic and the referential does indeed become “extremely difficult”. As the analysis presented below will show, the discourse of reception is littered with numerous interpretations of the news which point to this very fact.² In adopting a critical perspective that focuses on the aesthetic elements of news as communicative form, viewers are also implicitly commenting on the news’ presentation of meaning, on the specific kinds of referentiality that it produces.

9.3 “It’s fast, it’s punchy, it’s bright...”

It is perhaps appropriate to focus on Cathy at the start of this section, because, as a trained graphic designer, she is eminently qualified to comment on issues of style and presentation. In fact Cathy’s discourse of reception was characterised by a number of detailed comments concerning the aesthetic style of television news. In doing so she revealed a relationship with the news that strongly emphasised the visual register of engagement:

Cathy: ...I actually um, find out every, all the bit of news on the actual radio and then I just see it later on on the news. [35-36]

² A note on organisation. For some sections of this chapter I revert back to discussing the experiences of individual viewers. Unlike Chapter Seven where each of the eleven viewers were featured, the analysis here concentrates on several of the viewers who spoke extensively of the news as an aesthetic form of communication. Where appropriate, excerpts from other viewers have been included which support the arguments being developed.

Cathy: No, it's just, it's just skimming. It's um, it gives you a visual impression of maybe what you've heard um, like it was great for example watching the Hugh Grant stuff 'cause you could see him being really embarrassed and go, point your finger and laugh at him. Um, it was interesting seeing the snow in Wellington last night, something I haven't actually seen before. Um, it's just snippets, um basically for the radio I think you get it more in depth but for TV you're just grazing.... [73-80]

Cathy: I think it's too light and it needs to get into depth a lot more. [147]

Cathy: Um, it's in the visual sense, um the approach has changed from a BBC approach to a um, an American um news form-magazine format type news programme. So it's gone the spectrum, the New Zealand presenters with their false British accents to um people who, oh Australian presenters with their false kiwi accents (laughs). Um, basically yeah, the shift has changed. It's fast, it's punchy it's bright. Um - it's um -- a little PC I think, which is good, I don't mind that, but some people might. [251-258]

Cathy: Um, it's basically.... Um, because I think that it's easier, they've got a quick story and I also think it's very much a magazine type news programme and they're in for the quick headlines and controversy and they're not into getting into depth with something that may be important for the country but maybe not a huge flash screaming neon sign story, as such. Um -- um so I prefer um - I guess a more, a less flashy - approach but ratings wise people's span of attention is very small, so. [177-184]

At the beginning of the interview Cathy revealed that while at work she listened to the morning news and current affairs show on Radio New Zealand's National Programme, broadcast between 9.00am and 12.00pm, Monday to Friday. As the first two excerpts [35-36, 73-78] indicate, Cathy combines both forms of news media in an attempt to find out about and keep up with things. The radio version of the news is her audio source as it were, and then when she gets home after work she can complement this with the "visual impression" provided by the televised version. This perception of the news on television as a strongly visual form of communication is echoed by her description of it as "fast... punchy... [and] bright" [251-258], and "magazine" like [251-258, 177-184]. Paradoxically it is these very aesthetic qualities that lead to the absence of what she regards as "in depth" stories, as the news instead goes for the "huge flash screaming neon sign" type of story [177-184]. The final sentence from this particular excerpt is especially significant. Most obviously it is an example of a critical-pragmatic interpretation. Cathy is reflexively aware of her own involvement with the news at this aesthetic level and yet despite this acute awareness of the attractiveness of the visuals, she claims to prefer a "less flashy" approach. Taking her other assessments of the news into account, where she talks of the news' lack of depth [73-80, 147, 177-184], her stated preference for a

“less flashy” approach suggests the presence of (and also an awareness of) a tension between the aesthetic and the functional. Her closing comment — “but ratings wise people’s span of attention is very small” — encapsulates the dilemma perfectly. The commercial imperatives of broadcast television news are such that any function, as in providing adequate and relevant amounts of information, will invariably be constrained by the necessity of achieving an aesthetic form that will attract and hold viewers’ attention³.

This theme permeated a number of Cathy’s comments, and her earlier assessment of the news as “too light” [147] provides us with an ideal opportunity to explore further the dimensions of this tension between the referential and the aesthetic. The word light itself has a considerable variety of meanings, any number of which could be applied to her description of the news. One possible interpretation which can be made is that the news is literally so dazzling to the viewer that any detail that lies behind the immediately visible surface (i.e., any depth) is impossible to perceive. Based on a definition of light as “bright, **shinning**, luminous” (OED), such an

³ Of course such an argument is based upon a position that regards the provision of adequate and relevant information as a function of news. From the viewer’s point of view, this is indeed one of the perceived functions of the news, as their initial reasons for why they watch the news will attest to. There is, however, another way in which the ‘function’ of the news can be considered. By mentioning “ratings”, Cathy has drawn attention to another ‘function’ of television news (and of all television in general). That function is to provide advertisers with an audience. Maximising the audience for the commercials which are part of (and pay for) the news ‘hour’ is an equally valid function of the news, at least from the producer’s perspective. In this way, then, the distinction between form and function in television news shifts with the relative position that one adopts to the medium.

interpretation is congruent with the “bright” and “flash screaming neon sign” metaphors that she employed elsewhere. Another definition of light is “of little weight, not ponderous” (OED). As a metaphorical description of the news, this definition provides a veritable plethora of possible interpretations, all of which are apt:⁴

- **bearing a small or comparatively small load** — as in the news only ever carries a “small load” of the various events and occurrences that take place in any one day.
- **deficient in weight; below the standard or legal weight** — similar to the above, but perhaps emphasising a more consumerist notion whereby the viewer as consumer is being short changed.
- **of small importance or consequence; slight, trivial** — this speaks for itself.
- **characterised by levity; frivolous** — as does this.
- **requiring little mental effort; amusing, entertaining** — a charge that has been laid at television news on numerous occasions. Cathy’s description of the news as “magazine”-like, as well as a number of other viewers’ descriptions (see in particular Malcolm below) attest to the way in which entertaining viewers appears to be as important, if not more so, than informing them.
- **having little momentum or force; gentle, not violent** — flowing on from the previous three definitions, whereby the news produces little noticeable impact on the viewer (soft- as opposed to “hard-hitting” news).

⁴ All definitions are from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

- **easy to bear or endure** — as something which requires little in the way of viewer sacrifice, be it in terms of time, effort, emotion, etc.
- **requiring little exertion** — see above.
- **(of sleep or a sleeper) not oppressive to the bodily sense; easily shaken off** — where the definition is directed more to the experience of watching, such that it takes little effort to break or disturb the viewer-news relationship.
- **easy of digestion** — in which the word light can perhaps be bastardised to read ‘lite’. As an invention of the advertising and marketing industry, lite is perhaps the most appropriate way to define television news. Lite is used to refer to something which has had all the (usually) ‘bad’ parts removed. Lite beer, for example, looks and tastes like ‘real’ beer, but it has had most of the alcohol content removed. In this way it is possible to consume equal quantities of the stuff without suffering any of the effects of full strength beer. Without wanting to subscribe completely to any sort of “effects tradition”, I would like to suggest however, that “lite news” can be consumed in a similar fashion, safe in the knowledge that the diluted nature of it will reduce any possible ill-effects. Of course, as Winona’s aversion to news in general has shown, what is one person’s lite beer may be another’s full strength.

Of course it needs to be pointed out that these are my interpretations of Cathy’s statement, but whatever she may have meant by this term, the implication of a tension between the aesthetic and referential aspects of television news is clear. Yes, the news is entertaining, requires little effort and is easily endured, and has little impact. That perhaps explains why Cathy associates it so strongly with the idea of relaxing after a day’s work, where watching the news is a chance to sit down with a cup of tea and simply “veg out” [41-44, 228-229, 238-242]. But what of her desire to be informed, to be kept up to date? It would appear that the aesthetic form of broadcast television news severely limits and constrains this aspect of its

functionality. The way in which the form of a communication can determine how that communication functions is rendered concrete by two of Cathy's statements in particular. When asked if she felt that television news gave her an adequate understanding of what was going on in the world around her, she responded by saying "No, it's just... skimming" and that in comparison with listening to the radio, watching the news can be characterised as "grazing" [73-80]. As with "light", there are a number of possible interpretations that can be made of the expression "skimming". Is it that the news provides only a thin layer of coverage, leaving the majority of an event or occurrence unreported? And if so, is it the 'cream' or the 'scum' that is being lifted off and presented to the viewer? Either way, what is clear is that there is a lot more that is left unreported, a fact that is not lost on viewers as their comments in Chapter Seven illustrated. As for "grazing", this is an expression that is often associated with television watching. To graze is to feed by eating small amounts continuously rather than one large meal, and to that end it could be argued that by "skimming", the news provides viewers with numerous hors d'oeuvres in lieu of a smaller number of more substantial dishes. And here a second, more pejorative interpretation of grazing comes into play. In the context of television, "grazing" usually refers to the practice of quickly and continuously switching channels without attending to any one programme in particular. In this sense, "grazing", both as a form of eating and as a form of news watching carries with it connotations of mindless consumption. As a consequence of constructing reports that just skim the surface of things, the viewer is presented with news stories that can be consumed with little or no reflection. Very little in the way of serious mastication is required, a quick bite or two and the attractive morsel is suddenly gone, only to be replaced by another, equally attractive but ultimately just as unsatisfying.

9.4 Strategies of Containment Versus Tactics of Resistance

The other viewers may not have commented so extensively as Cathy on the aesthetic qualities of television news, but some of them did manage to indicate how the form of the news impacted upon its function as a provider of information. In discussing how the news had changed over the years, Matt, for example, felt that apart from getting “more technological” in its form of presentation (“with all the different blue screens and silly things like that”), there hadn’t been a “huge change” [277-280]. However, he then went on to say how he felt the news had changed. Echoing Cathy’s opinion that the news lacked depth, Matt felt that it had become “a bit more shallow” as a result of these technological advancements. What is particularly striking about Matt’s assessment is the way that he discursively ties these two developments together through the use of the metaphor “glossing”. Tori was another who used a similar expression in the same context (of discussing how the news had changed over the years). In a direct reference to the physical appearance of the news, she noted that the “only visible difference” was that it had become “glossier and faster paced” [108-109]. The significance of using this expression in relation to the news lies, as it did with Cathy’s use of the phrase “light”, in the variety of ways that it can be interpreted.

Matt: Not a h-not a huge change. I mean, of course it’s got more techni-technological, um with all the different blue screens and silly things like that. Um — and I think that um it’s in some ways got a bit more shallow. It’s just really glossing over things that are happening....
[277-280]

Tori: Um, I guess it's got-the only visible difference
is that it's gotten glossier and faster paced,
being the nineties. [108-109]

Firstly, it can be argued that television news in “the nineties” does indeed possess a surface lustre or brightness in that it has been designed to be as visually appealing as possible. Atkinson, for example, has reported that as part of the move into a deregulated broadcast environment, TVNZ hired a team of American ‘news consultants’ between 1988 and 1990 to help revamp ONN prior to the arrival of TV3. In an attempt to make the news “more emotionally accessible to its audience, more user-friendly and thus more watchable” (1993: 13) the consultants proposed extensive and wide-ranging changes.

Numerous minor adjustments in set design, lighting, music, camera work, item placement and on-screen graphics were made to improve production values and to cue desirable emotional responses in the audience. Formality was rejected as supercilious, patronising or boring. Less transparent nuances of presentational intonation and gesture were tried to convey an impression of warmth, intimacy, and informality. The on screen presenters were portrayed as a family, with “spontaneous” banter being scripted to “tag” sports and weather presenters and thus draw them naturally into the action. Similarly, “back announcers” — scripted comments for Judy and Richard to make at the end of video reports — were introduced as a means of making the anchors look competent and authoritative... warmth and authority [was] to be conveyed by... carefully scripted comments, practised intonation and gesture, careful grooming, set and lighting adjustments and the like.

(ibid.: 12)

An alternative way to understand gloss is as something which is applied to provide a deceptively attractive outer appearance. Considering the kind of changes Atkinson reports, this is an equally appropriate definition. Courtesy of the Americans, ONN had a glossy new sheen applied to it that had been designed specifically to make it more attractive and appealing to viewers. But the overall result, it could be argued,

is ultimately one of deception as beneath the immediately appealing surface viewers find little in the way of useful or relevant information. Gloss is also an appropriate metaphor for describing how the news actually reports on events. As brief explanations of what are usually complex phenomena, news reports all too often provide viewers with little more than a 'gloss' of what really took place.

Chris was another viewer who commented on the lack of depth in the news. In the first instance he attributed this to the temporal constraints of the news bulletin structure, whereby each report is given a "two minute slot" within which it is required to provide the viewer with the necessary information. As he says, however, such a limited time frame means the report "doesn't say a hell of a lot". As a result he is driven to seek out "what else is going on" from alternative sources because the news on television "just gives you an idea of what's going on" [26-29]. In the second instance the metaphor that Chris adopts expands on the notion of a limited time frame by implying that as a direct result of such temporal constraints the majority of things that the news reports on are "breezed over" [81-82]. In contrast to more visually oriented observations of Cathy, Matt and Tori, Chris focuses on the dimension of time in his criticism of the news' lack of depth.

Chris: Usually I'll, I'll read the news and I'll say go and read the newspaper after that to get sort of more in depth, see what else is going on, 'cause they generally just cover it fairly quickly. Y'know, a two minute slot which doesn't say a hell of a lot, just gives you an idea of what's going on. [26-29]

Chris: Ah, generally it doesn't cover it that in depth really, it's only when major issues come up,

but you don't, just generally it's kind of
breezed over it. [81-82]

Underlying all of these responses, however, is a common understanding of the commercial imperative that drives television news in the 1990s. Once again, the advice provided to TVNZ by the American team of news consultants is significant in this regard. The importance of maintaining an upbeat pace is clearly emphasised. According to Fred Shook, the principal consultant, the reporter has a “contract” with the audience that lasts for between 15 and 20 seconds. This contract must be renewed every 15 or 20 seconds, or else the reporter runs the risk of “losing the audience” (Shook, 1988, in Atkinson, 1992: 14). In order to ensure this renewal, Shook emphasised the need for crisp, tight editing which would give the story a fast pace and not bore the viewer. Of course as Atkinson rightly points out, the “relentless tenor” of all this advice is directed towards

making the news bulletin popular, how to keep its audience away from the competition, how to make them identify with the events themselves and with the team of magicians who conjure them up, and how to make them feel they'll miss something terribly important if they switch channels or leave the room.

(1992:14)

The aesthetics of the news therefore appear to be shaped primarily by the overriding necessity of firstly capturing and then maintaining an audience. The producers of television news seem to feel that the best way of doing this is by making the news “fast... punchy... [and] bright”. The problem with this strategy is that it is based on an inherently contradictory understanding of what constitutes the audience. On the one hand the news media institutions seek to maximise viewer numbers so they can ultimately sell a large, undifferentiated homogenous audience to advertisers. These “technologized strategies” (Ang, 1996: 64) construct a single audience that is represented in strictly numerical terms as a percentage of the total possible viewing population. In doing so they effectively deny the existence of individual viewers and

the infinite range of “fleeting and dispersed tactics” by which the products of news media organisations are appropriated and transformed (*ibid.*).⁵ And yet on the other hand, it is precisely these contextually rooted “tactics” that the advice of Shook and his fellow consultants was designed to contain. In what is a sublimely paradoxical situation, it would appear that accepting the inevitably tactical nature of television consumption is a necessary prerequisite in the development of strategies which attempt to contain this very behaviour. In addition to those already discussed, a number of other viewers revealed how such strategies of containment are only ever partially successful:

Winona: ...they tend to have this bland kind of, y’know, they’re really highly groomed aren’t they, and they’re like, y’know — bring back Philip Sherry, that’s what I say. He’s probably dead now (laughs) Um, yeah, yeah it’s a very slick package really isn’t it? [492-495]

⁵ While it could be claimed that the market research industry devotes significant resources to identifying specific sub-groupings of audience members, based on measurable differences in patterns of consumption, the overall result is still the same. Audience groupings, no matter how specific, are ultimately constructed on the basis of similarity rather than difference, and so these constructions, as “regime[s] of truth” (Foucault, 1980, cited in Ang, 1996: 64), will always “stop short of acknowledging fully the permanent subversion inherent in the minuscule but intractable ways in which people resist being reduced to the imposed and presumed images of the ‘ideal consumer’” (*ibid.*).

Dean: ...I thin-I think they deal more with the trivia as far as New Zealand news, y'know, cat stuck up a tree and tha-this sort of thing, or um. Oh, I mean they deal with things that are going on in Parliament, but not in any depth. [67-70]

Malcolm: it seems to be just kind of, either sensationalised or trivialised, I'm not quite sure which.

John: So that's how you'd characterise...

Malcolm: Yep.

John: ...TV news's coverage of politics. Sensationalism or trivialisation.

Malcolm: Yeah, or, um — just reporting what they've been given. Like Bolger turns up and, Bolger turns up in America, and they all show all the pictures of the handshake and the waving and stuff like that, wh-which is nothing. [400-408]

Bevan I wasn't impressed when TV One went back to having a whole hour.

John: Yeah, why was that?

Bevan: It was a pain in the butt, y'know, I preferred with, in half an hour. I thought y'know you get

what you, y'know enough in that time. I reckon they're just padding it, filling it back up to an hour. [261-265]

9.5 “I guess we’re all swayed by that, a good bit of marketing.”

In the case of Dean, exploration of the aesthetic-referential confluence reveals a similar tension to the one discussed above. However, in keeping with the inherently contextual nature of reception, Dean’s experiences suggest that an altogether more intriguing conclusion can be postulated.

John: Ok, ok. Um, why, why do you prefer to watch TV3’s news than TV1’s?

Dean: Um — it started out as just seeing, y'know seeing what they'd done differently, and, um — I don't think they cover quite as much ground, but I think they do it a lot more thoroughly...

John: Ok, um...

Dean: Yeah, it's a better coverage, over a smaller number of items.

John: Um — do you think that, have you bas-have you gone back to loo-sort of check out TVNZ now they've gone to a one hour news bulletin?

Dean: Yep.

John: And still not...?

Dean: Oh, nah, not, not convinced. I think it may-
maybe it's got a lot to do with the presentation
as well...

John: *Right, ok.*

Dean: ...y'know, it's a — I think the TV3 is a bit
more of a professional presentation, and I
guess we're all swayed by that, a good bit of
marketing.

John: *Yeah. So y-you kind of feel that how it's
delivered is, is — kind of important to you, not
just what they're saying.*

Dean: Yeah — yeah, it's got to, it's got to appeal to
you.... [18-35]

This lengthy excerpt shows how the aesthetic aspect of news can act as a determining factor in which particular news broadcast will be watched. Having previously stated that he preferred to watch 3NN, I asked Dean to elaborate on this choice. His comment about “seeing what they’d done differently” is a reference to the fact that prior to November 1989, the then state owned broadcaster, Television New Zealand, was the only provider of television news, its flagship being the 6.00pm *Network News* bulletin. Following the arrival of the Canadian-owned TV3 network, New Zealand viewers have had a choice of two free-to-air news services. Although 3NN has never been able to match ONN in terms of audience ratings, it has over the past decade managed to attract increasing numbers of viewers. Some of these would no doubt have been drawn to it for the same reason as Dean, curious to see if it was any different from the TVNZ version. This in itself is a revealing insight into how viewers themselves make the distinction between the referential and the aesthetic. The very fact that there is a perceived difference between the two news

programmes is ultimately based upon the assumption that while news is news, the way it is presented can vary. In other words, the concept of the news as intrinsically referential is itself unquestioned, and yet it is suggested that the aesthetic form of this referentiality is open to manipulation. As Dean says of 3NN, they “don’t... cover quite as much ground, but... they do it a lot more thoroughly”. He feels that the referentiality of 3NN is “better” than that of its rival because they cover a “smaller number of items”. Although this is simply one viewer’s opinion (and an unsubstantiated one at that⁶), the significance of such an assessment lies in the way that the presentation and structure of the news is partly constitutive of its overall credibility in the eyes of the viewer, as the second part of the excerpt clearly illustrates. In February 1995 TVNZ changed the format of ONN by doubling its length to a full commercial hour-long bulletin (as 3NN had been from its inception). I asked Dean if he had gone back to check out ONN following this change. He said that even though he had, he was “not convinced”, adding that his continued preference for the TV3 offering has “got a lot to do with the presentation”. In a rather extraordinary example of critical-pragmatic interpretation, Dean acknowledges the impact of the commercial imperative that drives broadcast television news while simultaneously implicating himself as an active and willing participant in this

⁶ Analysis of both *One Network News* and *3 National News* for the five day period of Monday 24 April to Friday 28 April 1995 shows very little actual difference. The number of news stories on *One Network News* ranged from 20 to 25, with between 6 and 7 sports stories. On *3 National News* there were between 19 and 25 news stories and between 6 and 10 sports stories. Averaged out over the five days, the total number of reports were virtually identical, with ONN having 29.66 and 3NN having 29.75. Thus while Dean’s claim that *3 National News* runs fewer items than *One Network News* can be challenged, the question of which bulletin provides “better” coverage is still a moot point.

process. His pronouncement that “we’re all swayed by... a good bit of marketing” is in effect an admission that people can quite literally be sold a representation of ‘reality’ so long as it meets certain aesthetic conditions. As he goes on to say, “it’s got to appeal to you”. For Dean, one of the conditions that he requires of the news in order for it be appealing is that of “professional presentation”. Leaving aside for the moment the problematic question of what precisely constitutes professionalism in the realm of television news, what can be interpreted from such a position is that the appearance of “professionalism” as Dean understands it is a necessary part of his news watching experience. In other words, the news has to **look** like it is news, even if it doesn’t actually do a very good job of **being** news. As the excerpts below attest to, this is often the case.

Dean: I don’t think the news does it particularly well, um tend to rely on programmes like *Inside New Zealand*, one or two others like that, where you have an analysis of what has been going on...

John: *Yeah.*

Dean: ...ah, rather than the news which gives you, um, oh Jim Bolger was in Te Kuiti today and he did so-and-so and so-and-so and he was heckled, y’know. Well what the hell does that tell you about anything?

John: *So how would you — characterise — or how would you describe... TV news’ style of reporting politics?*

Dean: — Probably superficial — b-maybe
because, um, of course that will be denied....
[75-87]

Dean: I think it's just, y'know, an entertainment
value as much as anything, and that's probably
how, probably how I see political reporting on
TV, as entertainment value rather than, ah,
that's why it's put on. Not necessarily to
inform. [104-108]

Dean: That's right, and so the reporting, as I said
before, has become superficial.... [196]

Dean: It's the extremes that we see...

*John: Or see them kissing babies and shaking hands,
or see them...*

Dean: Yeah...

*John: ...digging themselves out from under a pile of
dirt.*

Dean: ...making bloody idiots of themselves, yeah.
You don't see anything about what is really
happening.... [402-407]

In discussing how the news covers events from the political arena in particular, Dean feels that the news does not “do it particularly well” [75-87] and that the style of reporting is “superficial” [75-87, 196]. As a way of illustrating this he presents what

is a hypothetical, but nevertheless plausible, example of how the news tends to focus more on personalities than issues [75-87]. Such superficiality has robbed the news of much of its (potential) informational value (“what the hell does that tell you about anything?”) to the point where it is regarded as “entertainment... as much as anything” [104-108]. Interestingly enough, the same commercial imperative that is responsible for the “professional” appearance of the news that draws Dean to it in the first place is also held responsible for this tendency. “Entertainment value” rather than information is “why it’s put on”. As for the kinds of political events that are reported, Dean declares (and as a fellow viewer, I am in agreement with him on this point) that “it’s the extremes we see” [402-407]. Both of our comments indicate an acute awareness of the news media’s propensity for selecting and presenting items based on criteria that appear to be derived from the world of entertainment rather than from journalism (Bogart, 1980). At an earlier point in the interview Dean made a comment that hinted at how this superficial style of news reporting could possibly impact upon the nature of the viewer-news engagement:

Dean: Maybe it’s being presented in this way so that
 we don’t think too much about what is actually
 going on. [244-245]

Kane was another viewer who made a similar comment:

Kane: ...they take the issues, the real issues that
 should be addressed, they take the, um, thing
 of it eh, y’know. Take the people, the New
 Zealand people’s attention away from it and....
 [413-415]

At first glance it would appear that what these viewers are suggesting is in effect a variant of a Marxist interpretation of capitalist ideology, whereby ‘they’ (as in news media organisations) are deliberately setting out to construct news that is superficial

in order to prevent viewers from understanding “what is actually going on”. A much more useful (and in my opinion more likely) scenario can be envisaged if Dean’s comment is literally turned around. Maybe “we don’t think too much about what is actually going on” **because** of the way “it’s being presented”. Instead of attributing some form of ulterior motive to this superficiality, such as deliberately distracting the viewing public from “what is actually going on”, I would argue that such distraction is a direct, though perhaps unintended, result of the overriding commercial imperative that seeks above all else to maximise viewer numbers. Whether or not the viewers themselves consider this to be a deliberate tactic on behalf of the news media or simply an inevitable consequence of the commercial nature of news (or, indeed, even if there is a difference), what is apparent is the acknowledgment that whatever the news shows, it is not necessarily what is “really happening” [402-407]. The particular form of the aesthetic-referential tension that Dean articulates through his discourse of reception centres, on the one hand, on the importance that he places in the professional look of the news, and, on the other, on an acknowledgment that despite this appearance of professionalism the news provides only superficial coverage of events.

9.6 “I figure as long as they still, I dunno — asking good questions or something, then it’s not too bad — yeah.”

Malcolm is another viewer who speaks of professionalism in relation to his choice of news bulletin. Like Dean, he also expresses a preference for 3NN over ONN. But this decision is based on an altogether contradictory application of the concept of professional presentation. According to Malcolm, it is ONN that is “scripted and tight and... super professional” [189-193].

John: So why do you prefer TV3?

Malcolm: It's just a little more — um, it doesn't seem to be quite so scripted and tight and, and super professional, y'know they, um, I dunno they don't seem to be quite as on a leash as, ah, as, is it what, Richard and Judy? Yeah.
[189-193]

Depending on the context of its interpretation then, the aesthetic of professionalism can operate as a centripetal vector, drawing the viewer in to an engagement with the news by creating the appearance (at least) of being informative (as is the case with Dean), or it may act centrifugally and push the viewer away by directing their attention to the very way in which the news has been carefully constructed to achieve a certain 'look' (as is the case with Malcolm).

Apart from the news bulletins themselves, there is another way in which both TNZ and TV3 use the notion of "professionalism" to convince viewers that their news product is better than each others. Prior to the arrival of TV3 in November 1989, if people wanted to see the news on television they had no choice but to watch the *Network News* on channel One. In such a monopolistic environment there was no need to promote the news simply because there was no other alternative. The deregulation of New Zealand's broadcast system that was finalised in 1989, and which eventually led to the introduction of a rival news service, changed things dramatically. Now viewers had the opportunity of choosing between two news bulletins. With competition came an increased commercial impetus as TVNZ was suddenly faced with a diminishing share of the viewing audience, while TV3 sought to build up its share of the potential viewing audience. As part of this developing competitive broadcast environment a new addition emerged in the ranks of products and services that were being (increasingly) advertised in all three major media sectors (newspaper, radio and television). These were advertisements for the news itself where in effect viewers were being sold the promise of getting the 'real' story

from a team of ‘professionals’.⁷ Although not strictly part of ‘the news’ as such, these advertisements are a constituent part of the news’ overall discourse. I asked Malcolm what he thought of these advertisements:

John: —— *Yeah. What about um — TV, TV news’s sort of habit now of, of really pumping its own...*

Malcolm: Uh!

John: ...*story, the adverts they have for it. I mean...*

Malcolm: Yeah.

John: ...*what do you, what do you think of those?*

Malcolm: I just ignore it. It’s — I hate it, but I just ignore it. Um — it’s just, sort of incidental really — yeah — I try and ignore it (laughs)
Building up the news reader to be a big star.

John: *Yeah.*

Malcolm: Yeah, I figure as long as they still , I dunno — asking good questions or something, then it’s not too bad — yeah. [171-182]

⁷ This form of advertising peaks with a frenzy of self-promotion at the end of May every year in the wake of the Qantas Media Awards. On the day following these awards in 1997, for example, both TVNZ and TV3 took out double page spreads in *The New Zealand Herald* to announce which awards their news and current affairs programmes and reporters had won.

His opinion of this strategy is hardly surprising in light of his rejection of the “super professional” aesthetic of ONN. He “hates it” but at the same time he tries his best to “just ignore it”. This type of advertising does nothing to convince him that one news programme is better than the other. He interprets it as nothing more than an attempt to “build... up the news reader to be a big star”. The dismissive way in which Malcolm refers to this is indicative of his refusal to buy into the underlying message of these advertisements, which centres around the concept of trust. It seems as if the idea is ‘trust the presenter, trust the news’.⁸ Yet despite his aversion to, and his attempts to disregard this form of persuasion, it would appear that Malcolm is nevertheless prepared to accept it as a necessary part of his news watching experience. Considering what has preceded it, his final statement can be interpreted almost as a form of forgiveness. As long as the news continues to “ask... good questions or something”, then Malcolm is prepared to accept this part of the news’ discourse as “not too bad”. One possible conclusion which can be drawn from this is that the aesthetic form of the news is perhaps less significant for Malcolm than it is for a viewer like Dean. The marketing and advertising campaigns which are designed to persuade him of the virtues of the two news bulletins count for little in

⁸ In his article “Inside The Richard and Judy Show” Campbell (1992) quotes the then head of TVNZ news and current affairs Paul Norris, who says of the ONN anchors: “They [the audience] want presenters who are warm and with whom they feel comfortable. These people, after all, inhabit their living rooms each night” (17). In an even more effusive style Rod Pederson, TV3’s editor-in-chief, sang the praises of Three National News’ anchorman, John Hawkesby:

It sounds like the biggest wank of all time but in television we all talk about a thing called the X Factor. Anyone can read a couple of lines down the barrel and not fluff up, but whether they can communicate through a screen is another story. It is an X Factor — it’s what you do with your eyes, whether the twinkle is there or not. Hawkesby’s got it...

Malcolm's final decision as to which one he will watch. His disparagement of ONN as "super professional" indicates that, if anything, these campaigns have a negative effect on him. Malcolm's choice of news bulletin, therefore, may have more to do with rejecting the aesthetic trappings of ONN rather than with any intrinsic quality — referential or aesthetic — that the alternative, 3NN, may possess. Unlike Dean who feels that the specific form of the referential must be appealing, Malcolm is more concerned that the news simply keeps "asking good questions", irrespective of how such questions actually "look".

9.7 Conclusion

This chapter has concentrated on how viewers interpret the news from an aesthetic perspective. The analysis presented in the previous two chapters was derived from the responses to a number of more or less direct questions (Why do you watch the news? How do you typically watch it?). For this chapter there was no such direct question (What is the news?). Instead, the analysis has been developed from the careful scrutiny of how viewers spoke of the news throughout the interviews as they responded to the entire range of questions asked of them. As discourses of reception, the interviews are as equally constitutive of what is being 'received' as they are of that actual process. Prior to examining some of these discursive constructions of what television news is, the critical-referential distinction was revisited. The purpose of this was to clarify the difference between the interpretations of viewers, which can be of either kind, and the news itself as a form of communication that possesses both aesthetic and referential elements. The specific nature of television as a form of communication, however, produces complex and shifting interrelationships between these elements. In other words, the referentiality of television is irrevocably tied to its aesthetic form. In commenting on the aesthetic form of television news (i.e., employing a critical mode of interpretation), viewers are also implicitly commenting on the specific kinds of referentiality that the news produces.

The first analytical section provides a vivid indication of this. As a graphic designer, Cathy is well versed in aspects of form and style. Her numerous comments showed how the commercial necessity of attracting as many viewers as possible has produced a specific aesthetic form that tends to adversely affect the news' referential capacity. Designed to be as appealing as possible from a visual point of view, the downside of this is a perceived failure to provide the viewer with enough in the way of information about what is happening in the world. A number of other viewers provided their own contextual variations of this particular tension. In the next section this tension is recast in terms of a constant struggle between the strategies of containment and the tactics of resistance. Drawing on Atkinson's (1993) review of TVNZ's revamp of *One Network News* in 1989, it illustrates how the strategies proposed by American consultants were designed to contain the unruliness of 'real' viewers, in the process transforming them into a fictionalised 'ideal' viewer. The paradox here is that in developing these strategies of containment, television producers are acknowledging the inherently tactical nature of reception, and in doing so they are also acknowledging that their strategies will only ever be partially successful. The following two sections illustrate this by exploring how a specific incarnation of the aesthetic form — that of 'professionalism' — is interpreted by two viewers in quite different ways. Dean indicated that one of the reasons why he preferred 3NN was its professionalism. Counteracting this, however, was that fact that in referential terms the news in general failed to live up to appearances. In a similar fashion to Cathy he cited a lack of depth and "superficial" reporting, of political news in particular, as evidence. Malcolm, on the other hand, showed a distinct aversion for news that he felt was too professional looking. Ironically enough his preference was also for 3NN, as he accused ONN of being too professional. Included in his list of pet hates, however, was the trend of self-promotion that both news programmes undertook in pursuit of maximising their respective audience shares.

The experiences of Cathy and Dean in particular suggest that watching television news is perhaps more about form than it is about function. They indicated how the appearance of news, while in itself acting to attract viewers, was at the same time responsible for limiting its overall effectiveness in adequately conveying enough information. In particular I wish to draw on the comments made by Dean about being “swayed by” the “professional presentation” and how the form of delivery has “got to appeal”. The importance that Dean attaches to the look of the news is all the more significant given his subsequent criticisms of its actual performance. What is the point, after all, of watching the news when it lacks depth and merely provides superficial coverage? Perhaps the answer lies in watching a bulletin that at least fits his expectations of what a news programme **should look like**. It might only give the impression of being informative, but by watching something that looks and sounds like the news Dean is also giving the impression of keeping up to date with things. In other words, what I am arguing for is not just an aesthetic understanding of news as a form of communication but also for an aesthetic understanding of news watching as an activity. And like the aesthetic form of the news, it’s all about appearances. Using Winona as a prime example, but also drawing on comments made by a number of other viewers, the analysis in the next chapter reveals how “watching the news” can, like the news itself, take on a particular form that while certainly giving the impression of “catching up” or “keeping up” with things, does not necessarily result in this actually happening in the manner that most viewers suggested. Building on this initial interpretation of the news watching experience, the chapter then proceeds to examine why the **idea** of watching the news (as opposed to the actual lived reality of that experience) is significant.

CHAPTER TEN

FROM SIMULATION TO SHOULD

A RETURN TO “WHY?”

10.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will develop the analytical trajectory that was outlined in the concluding paragraphs of the previous chapter. Starting with the idea that news watching as an activity can be interpreted from an aesthetic point of view, I will argue that for some viewers it is the appearance of news watching that assumes the most significance, rather than the content of what is actually watched. Following on from this, the question is then posed: What is the significance of maintaining this appearance of watching the news? Essentially this represents a return to the question posed at the very start of this analysis: why watch the news? Expanding the reception context through a consideration of the wider social relationships within which news watching is implicated provides one possible answer to this question. In this context, watching the news can be interpreted as an activity that for some viewers is perceived to be something that ‘should’ be done. In other words, there is an imperative to watch the news, and this compulsion originates from beyond the obvious one of simply wanting to find out and keep up with events and occurrences. Contrasting the centripetal vector of this compulsion is an array of less obvious contextual forces that work to push the viewer away from engaging with the news. Two particular articulations of these forces are examined. The first focuses once more on the issue of news as a source of information, while the second posits a view that in contrast to a sense of community that can be experienced as a result of watching news, viewers may also experience a sense of exclusion.

10.2 “I like to be sort of in touch on a surface sort of way....”

In the previous chapter I illustrated how, for one viewer at least (i.e., Dean), the news had to look like it was ‘the news’. I also suggested how it was possible to take this overtly aesthetic interpretation of the news and apply it to the actual activity of news watching. In *Winona* we have a very good example of a viewer whose engagement with the news can be clearly interpreted from such a point of view.

Winona In terms of a news programme, it’s pretty
 slack, but it just gives you the main points so
 you don’t feel you’re like totally out of touch....
 [48-50]

In this first excerpt, Winona is talking about her preferred form of television news, *2Newsnight*.¹ The key phrase here is: “...you don’t **feel** you’re like totally out of touch...” (emphasis added). In other words, it’s all about creating the right impression. Despite writing the programme off as ‘news’, both in terms of the quality (“it’s pretty slack”) and quantity (“just... the main points”) of information that it provides, she nevertheless manages to retain the notion of watching from an informational perspective, although this is achieved in a very tenuous manner. Unlike some of the other viewers who make a purposeful and deliberate effort to remain **in** touch with things, Winona operates in an inverse manner by casually, but nonetheless deliberately avoiding being **out** of touch. Given her aversion to what she regards as “distressing” [560] news, this is hardly surprising. As the following excerpts illustrate, a recurring theme throughout Winona’s discourse of reception

¹ See Chapter Seven where her reasons for preferring this news bulletin are detailed.

was this idea of ‘appearing’ to watch what ‘looked’ like the news, and, by implication, ‘appearing’ to be informed.

Winona: Yeah, I presume it’s aimed at quite a young audience, I guess. Um, but yeah, I like to think that I’ve actually seen, y’know, something of the news.... [92-94]

Winona: It doesn’t happen very often because I like to be sort of in touch on a surface sort of way, but yeah. [168-169]

Winona: What I have done after having lots of episodes is to like fast forward bits, or get someone to give me a quick summary, y’know. “Oh this happened, and that happened,” and so you’re just up with the major story lines and so that’s sort of like doing a catch up on the news. You don’t need to know who said what to who, you just need to know the basic storyline. [182-187]

Winona: Mmm, but it probably doesn’t matter as long as people think they’re being informed though, does it?

John: *What do you...?*

Winona: That's why it's a ritual, I guess yeah. Oh I see, yeah, yeah so, of course it doesn't actually matter, as long as you th-make people think they're getting a quality news bulletin, yeah, nothing, nothing else is important. [576-582]

Once again, as her comment that she “like[s] to think” that she has “actually seen... something of the news” [92-94] indicates, it is the action of watching that counts. Watching something — indeed anything — on the news is preferable to not watching at all. In such a scenario, therefore, the content of what is being watched is rendered subservient to the process of watching. Form, in other words, has superseded function. This is confirmed by Winona's own rather epiphanous moment, where she comes to the realisation that “it doesn't actually matter” what people watch, as long as they “think they're getting a quality news bulletin” [576-582]. Dean's preference for a “professional” looking news bulletin would appear to be a case in point (see Chapter Nine, section 9.5). In the same way that the news' credibility is directly related to how it looks, for Winona the process of watching news is all about surface impressions too. Her peripheral position in relation to the events that are covered by the news is further reinforced when she states that she likes “to be in touch on a surface sort of way...” [168-169]. While some would argue that even watching the news on a daily basis provides only a surface impression of things, given the nature of Winona's relationship with television news the impression here is of an extremely brief and fleeting (and highly selective) encounter with the events and occurrences that constitute the news. As she says in relation to her favourite television programme, *Shortland Street*, you “don't need to know who said what to who, you just need to know the basic storyline” [182-187]. Her tactic of taping episodes of the soap opera to then “fast forward” is “sort of like doing a catch up with the news”. In other words, by occasionally dipping into the ongoing narrative flow of news, Winona feels like she is keeping up to date with things (and

not being out of touch), despite the fact that this very limited form of engagement provides little in the way of useful information.

Before moving on to explore the larger question of why this impression of being in touch with and being informed about the events of the news is so important, there is one final point concerning Winona that needs to be discussed. In an instance of self-reflexivity, Winona revealed that she is perhaps aware of the very marginal nature of her relationship with television news:

Winona: Well, I mean partly is to get a little bit of knowledge, to have inside, in theory if there's something that really interested me, I could follow it up. I say that in theory because I don't tend to do that. [124-128]

I was drawn to this particular articulation following Devault's reflections on a similar expression from one of her housewife interviewees:

She went on to talk about other things, but I was haunted by a fragment of this excerpt: 'What I would like — maybe I will but probably not —' which struck me immediately with its off-hand poignancy. The question, for me was why would anyone say such a thing, what context produces this remark. Later I began to see how this woman was doing her work as we talked; she was, momentarily, musing and strategising about the kind of meal she wished to produce for her family.

(1990: 104)

In a very similar way we can see how Winona was also 'strategising' about the kind of news viewing that she would perhaps like to do, but in practice never actually does. What this also points to is an awareness on the part of Winona of how the news is perhaps expected to be watched. In other words, there is an awareness here of an essentially idealised form of news watching.

Chris was another viewer who expressed a marginal position in relation to the news. When asked if anyone in his family took precedence in terms of choosing which news bulletin would be watched, his response was one of ambivalence:

Chris: Ah, just whoever. I mean it doesn't matter as long as you're kind of watching the news. [40-43]

Unlike Dean or Malcolm, Chris expresses no real preference for either channel. But what is of significance here is the way that he has chosen to express this lack of preference. In saying "it doesn't matter" he could be referring to the fact that, as he expressed it earlier, both news bulletins are essentially "just the same" [3]. This is certainly a valid point, and it is one that I have made elsewhere,² but in the context of this utterance, there is another meaning that can be derived. It doesn't matter which channel is watched because the important thing, as with Winona, is the act of watching itself. Furthermore, that act of watching does not necessarily have to conform to an unspoken, but nevertheless implied, norm. In positioning himself such that he is "kind of watching the news", Chris has allowed himself a considerable amount of latitude in terms of the level of attention that can be brought to bear on the news. "Kind of" suggests an approximation — perhaps even a simulation — of that same (although undefined) idealised mode of watching that lurked behind Winona's descriptions of her way of watching.

The underlying sentiment of Chris' statement, and also those of Winona, appears to be one that grants particular significance to establishing and maintaining at the least an impression or appearance of news watching. In other words, it is the act(ivity) of watching the news that matters the most, irrespective of the success or failure of that act(ivity) in terms of what the viewers themselves have indicated is a major reason

² See note 6, Chapter Nine.

for engaging in that act(ivity) in the first place. The bracketing-off of the word act(ivity) in this context serves to emphasise the idea that it is the impression of watching news, and, by implication, the impression of being informed, that is of significance. The analysis in Chapter Seven has clearly shown, however, that the reality of news watching is such that it does not necessarily follow that viewers are in fact informed. The question that needs to be answered now then is what lies behind this signficatory pr(act)ice of news watching? Or, to respond to Chris' statement, **why** doesn't it matter?

10.3 “Cause they think they have to?”

As I stated in the introduction, we have now returned once more to the question that began both the interviews and the analysis: why watch the news? In order to re-examine this question it is necessary to analyse the experiences of watching television news within a much broader context of reception than one which simply understands news as providing (or failing to, as the case may be) information. This expansion of the reception context is achieved by including it as an integral part of the overall web of social relations that constitute the everyday lives of viewers. Following on from the uniform (and inherently contradictory) assertion that viewers primarily watch the news because it provides them with information about certain events this section proceeds by asking the question why? Why do viewers feel that they need to know about these things? Why is being ‘informed’ and being ‘kept up to date’ so important that people will regularly watch the news night after night even though for many of them the encounter often fails to satisfy in this respect?

These questions began to emerge after it became clear that for some viewers at least, watching the news was discussed more as a chore than a choice. As Matt put it:

Matt Oh, there's only, there's only really two of us in
 the flat that sort of make any effort to watch
 the news, so.... [31-33]

To “make an effort” implies more of a ‘should’ than a ‘want’ and suggests an imperative beyond that of immediate personal satisfaction. Along similar lines was Barry’s response:

Barry Um, it’s not my favourite. Um I probably
 watch it just to sort of keep up with things in
 general, but I’m not a big news watcher.... [3-
 4]

In contrast to these somewhat less than enthusiastic approaches to the news, Kane hinted at a somewhat more positive relationship:

Kane I mean y’know, everyday, y’know — yeah, got
 to watch that.... [591]

Even though he cheerfully admits that he watches the news every night, there is still an underlying implication here of ‘having’ to do so. This is echoed more strongly by Malcolm’s ironic reply to my question about why people watch the news:

*John: Yeah, yeah. That’s quite a — so in that respect
 then, why do you think people watch news?*

Malcolm: ‘Cause they think they have to? [266-268]

A perfectly reasonable response to this issue of why it is that people feel that they **have** to watch the news can be formulated if the question is posed within a “public knowledge” framework, as indeed a number of researchers have done. Jensen (1988), for instance, suggests that studies which are concerned with the representational accuracy of the news are based on the implicit premise that

news is presumably an important resource for political awareness and action by the viewer-citizen.... At least in principle, information in the news media may become a resource not just for keeping up generally with politics and society, but also for active political participation in a particular matter or context.

(276)

As I have stated previously (see Chapter Six) my analysis is based upon a more encompassing approach which seeks to collapse the essentially artificial division between public and popular perspectives of reception. By considering the social ramifications of how news is watched it is possible to arrive at an alternative answer to the question of why it is that people feel they ‘must’ watch the news. Talking about what was on the news with family members, friends and fellow workers is a common enough practice, and it is one which can lead us to an altogether wider, more inclusive understanding of what drives people to watch the news. By more inclusive I am referring to a conception which seeks to go beyond the overly **exclusive** focus on the purely informative function of the news that the viewers’ initial responses would seem to indicate, and which informs much research on the news (see Chapter Seven).

*John: Do you talk about what’s been on the news
with your, like people at work, the next day?*

Cathy: Yep, yes I do. [213-215]

*John: Ok, do you, um — like, down there when you
work with the others, do you, do you guys talk
much about sort of what’s been on TV the
night before, or, ah...*

*Kane: Oh, sometimes, I mean —— yeah, I-m-th-
there again, y’know it’s more, the bad things,
y’know, or well, not bad things, but, ah — the
more, um — what do you call it?, something
high profile stuff y’know, is discussed.... [121-
127]*

Malcolm: Oh, I think it's huge, yeah. Um — when ,
when you're talking with someone about some
sort of current events or something, it's never
"Did you read in the paper last night?", it's
always "Did you see on the news?", y'know, it's
always, I think it's probably one of the bigger
sources. [259-263]

Chris: Oh yeah, it's probably the biggest one. It
influences people the most. Y'know what
people talk about is what's on the news. [100-
101]

This indication of a discursive continuation of the reception process clearly illustrates how 'watching the news' should not be considered solely in terms of the time spent in front of the television. Various threads from that particular engagement are continually being woven into the wider fabric of social relations that viewers engage in on a daily basis.

Simply because people will often talk with friends and fellow workers about the news is hardly a prime motivational factor for feeling that one 'should' watch the news though. Considering the shortcomings that viewers expressed in terms of the lack of adequate and relevant information that were outlined in Chapter Seven, the notion that the news may provide viewers with a resource for active political

participation must also be questioned.³ By stepping outside of the 'public knowledge' framework and its implicit assumptions of how, and for what purposes, the viewer-as-citizen engages with the news it becomes possible to arrive at a rather more 'social', indeed more 'popular' understanding of the centripetal vector implied by this feeling that one 'should' watch the news.

John: I just sort of wonder why, what it is that drives people to actually feel they have to know...?

Winona: Well, you feel, I think you feel a bit of a dummy. People use it, it's like the weather, people talk about items, y'know, news items all the time, things, y'know, things that have happened. "Oh, did you hear about such and such, did you see that," and sort of. Yeah, so I'd think you'd probably end up feeling um — maybe a bit inadequate, y'know if you haven't got the foggiest idea, they sort of think "Oh..." y'know? [102-110]

³ Jensen has also questioned this idea, although from a slightly different perspective. Operating from within what is still an essentially 'public-knowledge' framework, he argues that "oppositional decodings are not in themselves a manifestation of political power in any specific or relevant sense. The wider ramifications of opposition at the textual level depend on the social and political uses to which the opposition may be put in contexts beyond the relative privacy of media reception" (1990: 58)

Barry: ...and then I'd go to the gym, and I wouldn't catch the news often y'know, like maybe a couple of nights a week. I sort of started to feel like I didn't really know what was going on in the world. Like, I felt a bit ignorant y'know. Like people would be talking about this and that and I'd be going "Oh, I didn't know anything about it", y'know. Yeah, I guess it's good to, y'know you can make conversation with people about things that are going on, and, um it's just good to be informed I guess.

[101-108]

Both of these responses would suggest that the news possesses a certain social value. News, or more accurately awareness of the news, operates as a form of 'social currency'. The news is generally watched in the private and essentially isolated context of viewers' homes (Corner, 1995), but talking about what was watched is generally done so collectively, as the excerpts above indicate. It is true that Winona and Barry do refer to the informational aspect of the news, in that the knowledge they have acquired as a result of watching it ensures that they do not feel "inadequate" or "ignorant". My argument though is not so much based on the intrinsic quality of that information per se but rather that its significance lies in the way that it enables them to participate, to feel that they are able to take something from their encounter with the news and then make a meaningful contribution to any ensuing discussions. This ability to actively participate in the circulation of meanings that such discussions allow for perhaps goes some way towards explaining why the news can still attract such large numbers of viewers despite research which seriously questions the 'quality' of the information that it provides. Atkinson (1992, 1993), for example, has been severely critical of the effects that the 1989 change from a state-controlled, public service-oriented system to a fully-commercial,

market-driven broadcasting system has had on television news in New Zealand. He argues that *One Network News* has become both “morselised” and “depoliticised”.

Morselisation is the reduction of everything to a short component of itself stemming from commercial pressure to divide up the television schedule into saleable segments. Depoliticisation is the removal of serious discourse about public affairs stemming from the drive to maximise rating points and advertising revenue.

(1992: 5)

This “dumbing down” (Gitlin, 1996) is not restricted to *One Network News* alone, as one observer of TV3’s newsroom practices discovered. Chronicling a typical day’s work involved in compiling the *3 National News* bulletin, he made the following observation:

10.30am.... A piece about British trade sanctions with South Africa is rejected because the film is ‘too boring’. The same goes for trouble in Northern Ireland and demonstrations in South Africa. The Grammy awards may not be much of a news story, but there are lots of pictures, so is the eruption of the Kilauea volcano in Hawaii.

(Allen, 1990: 63)

While the issue of what constitutes ‘quality’ television is debatable (e.g., Mulgan, 1990; Schröder, 1992) the point that needs to be stressed here is the way that being able to talk about the news with others can assume more significance than the intrinsic quality of the information itself. Returning for a moment to the discussion in the first section of this chapter, I would also argue that the appearance of being informed that the act of news watching produces is directly related to this point. As Winona suggests, feelings of inadequacy may be experienced as a result of not having “the foggiest idea” about what was on the news. There is a great deal of difference, however, between being aware of something and being thoroughly familiar with it. In other words, even the very tenuous nature of Winona’s relationship with the news is enough to allow her to contribute to the discussion, thus

ensuring that she does not feel “inadequate”. In short, watching the news — and even the appearance of watching the news for that matter — enables viewers to experience a sense of belonging, and rather than being pulled toward the news solely for its informational content, viewers are also impelled to watch because to not do so may result in feelings of exclusion, of somehow being ‘left out’.

10.4 Sifting Through the “bullshit crap that’s on every night....”

In terms of a centrifugally oppositional vector working to counter this feeling that the news is something that ‘should’ be watched, there is nothing so definite to suggest that viewers ‘should not’ watch it. As with the previous information-focused version of the engagement there is instead an array of less obvious contextual forces at play which work to produce tensions and contradictions within this particular form of the viewer-news engagement. The first of these that I will discuss once again centres on the informational side of the encounter. Given that I have just proposed an alternative way of understanding the forces which drive viewers to feel that they ‘should’ watch the news it may appear that I am about to contradict myself. Having advocated stepping outside of the ‘public knowledge’ framework to instead arrive at a wider, more inclusive, and hence more ‘popular’ conception of how viewers engage with television news, it needs to be made clear that I am not advocating the complete abandonment of the former in favour of the latter. What I am proposing is an approach which is much more holistic in its implicit assumption that the viewer-news relationship can best be understood as a plurality of engagements rather than a single, unitary relationship. Moreover, it is a plurality in which there are no clear boundaries. Thus, while I have suggested that the ‘social currency’ of news is an important factor in drawing viewers to the news, so the perceived irrelevance of much of the news introduces a tension into this encounter. Barry provides a good illustration of just this kind of tension:

Barry: ...but the news you sort of got to, I guess sift through the, the bullshit crap that's on every night to get to something that maybe is a real issue that you really should take notice of.
[617-620]

Having been drawn to the news partly in order to avoid feeling “ignorant”, he is then faced with the task of deciding which parts of the news deserve his attention and which parts do not. His metaphorical description of this process would appear to suggest that any potential nuggets of what he considers relevant information are invariably buried within much greater amounts of slurry. In such a situation the centripetal ‘pull’ on the viewer is matched, and often overcome, by a variety of competing centrifugal vectors ‘pushing’ the viewer away from the engagement, as the following examples show:

Cathy Um...usually having a cup of tea, or stuffing my face with food. Um — no I'm not sitting there like rigidly looking at it. Um, I do sort of walk away and come back. But when something interests me I'll turn it up and pay attention.
[105-108]

Matt I-I just don't really, I almost sort of switch off when it comes to politics tha-when it, when they have someone like Jenny Shipley on the TV, I don't listen to what she's saying, I just think, y'know-'cause from past experiences with say Jenny, she just doesn't answer any

questions so I have no interest in watching her, watching what she says.... [193-198]

Malcolm: Yeah, yeah, um you sit down and watch the news. I actually tend to — drift away from it now after the headlines, if um, if something's not, if it doesn't seem to be particularly interesting coming up I'll drift away and come back for the sports news. [290-293]

Barry Um, yeah, I'd say so yeah. I don't really, I don't really sit there and only leave the TV when the ad breaks come on. I'll wander off and do anything, it's just on really.... [169-171]

Bevan: Yeah, depends on y'know what they're talking about. Y'know some stuff on (unintelligible) bull, y'know I'll just ignore it if it's really boring. [64-65]

Sian (Laughs) It's amazing eh? This is all the news. How do you know that they sit there and switch off? Well you do, you do do it eh? I mean you do it yourself. [518-520]

10.5 “We have no relation to them, we’ll never meet them....”

A second form of centrifugal vector that can push viewers away from the news despite their feelings that they should watch it does so by contradicting the sense of ‘belonging’ that talking about the news can engender. As I have already discussed, the news works to create a sense of belonging in the way that it provides viewers with a form of ‘social currency’ which enables them to participate in the ‘discursive continuation’ of the reception process, usually in the form of conversations about what was seen on the news. But there are also ways in which television news can also provoke feelings of **not** belonging. The first example I will discuss focuses on one viewer’s observation that the news often makes mistakes:

Malcolm: ...And sometimes when they get huge glaring
factual errors completely wrong, y’know...

John: Like, can you give me some examples?

Malcolm: Um, whenever they, whenever they have any
news about the Internet, they usually get that
hideously wrong.... [28-32]

Malcolm: It depends, um, whether anything glaring
comes out of the, comes out of the
programme. So, so if something comes out
that suddenly goes “No, hang on, that’s not,
that’s not right”...

*John: Ok — would you say that, that those
occurrences relate to a whole wide spectrum of*

news, or, or would it be more common to occur with sort of specific kind of news stories?

Malcolm: They seem to be able to get it — yeah, get things wrong whenever they try and tackle a subject that's not — I dunno, whenever they try and tackle a subject that I actually know something about, they seem to be wrong. Anything to do with, say, motor racing, or, um , or um, computers, or something, they, they'll screw it up. [83-100]

At the time of the interview, Malcolm was employed as a computer programmer, specialising in Internet applications, and he is a keen motor sport fan. The knowledge that he brings to the viewing encounter, by way of his involvement in the areas of computer technology and motor sport, places him in a position from which he is able to mount a challenge to the authority of the news. Leaving aside for the moment the problematic issues of 'truth' and 'accuracy', the simple fact is that as far as Malcolm is concerned he is faced with televisual representations of two particular aspects of his world which simply do not correspond to his actual, lived experiences of those two aspects. In a later part of the interview where we were discussing the Internet and how he used it as a source of information, I asked Malcolm what he felt he got out of using this particular form of communication technology. His response was particularly revealing in terms of how he saw his relationship with television news:

Malcolm: Just more of a feeling that I'm part of it really, which I don't get from watching TV news (laughs).... [909-910]

One possible interpretation of this is that viewers may have a psychological need for the kind of social bonding that watching and talking about television news enables. In the case of Malcolm at least, the Internet would appear to provide an alternative source of fulfilment for this need.

In a slightly different context, Tori also experiences a world of the news that is perceived to be very different to her own:

John: Yeah, yeah. So in other words it has to have a relevance to you before you will kind of accept it as being...

Tori: Yeah. Like I'm not interested in Dow-Jones and all that 'cause there's no...

John: Yeah.

Tori: ...way in hell I'm going to be a rich person with shares, so y'know. I guess. [94-98]

Here the question is not so much one of accuracy as relevance. Tori has firmly positioned herself apart from the world that is being represented in the news' coverage of the financial markets. In an even more striking example of this kind of discursive positioning (Davies and Harré, 1990) she says:

Tori: That's an interesting point about the government being unreal. They come through every night on your television, which is a pure medium of fiction in the first place. We might as well be on another planet, really. (?) y'know, it's like...

John: Yeah, I mean the things, the things...

Tori: We have no relation to them, we'll never meet them.... [449-454]

For Tori it appears that the spheres of 'government' and 'business' as depicted on the news are literally a world apart from her own. This obvious contradiction between what the news promises⁴ and what it delivers for Tori is even more heightened when we consider the following comments she made about news stories dealing with 'celebrities':

Tori: And a lot of footage from overseas that's really quite amazing...

John: Yeah, yeah.

Tori: ...like Brad Pitt's opening of such and such, what he looks like now, and Naomi Campbell. Did you see it last night?

John: No, I didn't actually.

Tori: Oh, they had quite a few good stories on it about what famous people are doing and that's

⁴ At the time the interviews were being conducted TVNZ were screening a promotional advertisement for channel One immediately prior to the 6.00pm ONN bulletin each evening. This consisted of a series of images of both 'ordinary' New Zealanders as well as various television personalities from the channel's New Zealand-made programmes. Accompanying these images was a song featuring lyrics promoting the idea of unity:

Together we're feeling good like we should, here's where we belong
 Together we'll see New Zealand greet a brand new day
 One by one, old and young, everyone. Together we're one.

always really addictive and interesting. [144-
150]

This excerpt provides us with a stark illustration of how television blurs the distinction between what is 'real' and what is 'unreal'. On the one hand Tori sees politics and politicians as belonging to the realm of the unreal and of little or no relevance to her life. On the other hand, it appears that the essentially fictional universe of Hollywood and its associated galaxy of stars (whom she also has "no relation to" and will in all probability "never meet") holds greater interest, appeal, and even relevance for her. The paradox here is that it is precisely through the medium of television that the (real) world of politics has been transformed into some kind of strange fantasy representation, while the Hollywood stars, whose very existence (and significance) stems from the (reel) world of fantasy and fiction, have somehow come to represent reality. The politician (Winston Peters? Jim Bolger? Jenny Shipley?) as celebrity or the celebrity (Brad Pitt? Naomi Campbell? Hugh Grant?) as celebrity? A crude distinction perhaps, but one that is symptomatic of this simulated world of the media that we live in, where images represent the real and reality is lost within the images.

Here we have arrived, inevitably it would seem, at the "disturbing figure" (Docker, 1987) of Jean Baudrillard and his concept of the hyperreal:

In hyperreality it is no longer possible to distinguish the imaginary from the real, the sign from its referent, the true from the false.

(Kumar, 1995: 123-124)

As difficult and as inconsistent as he is,⁵ Baudrillard nevertheless provides a compelling, if overly pessimistic critique of mass communication:

⁵ See, for example, Stevenson (1995: 145) who refers to Baudrillard's "ironic and playful disposition" which, "coupled with an avant-gardist politics...

The deluge of images, spectacles, simulacra, according to Baudrillard, dissolves any outside, any referent, any reality, any meaning, and hence the social itself. Because of the media, the spectacles of the consumer society, and the information flood, the world is constituted only by simulations, a carnival of mirrors, and hence by hyperreality, images that proliferate and terrorise as they fascinate (it sounds like a snake pit).

(Docker, 1987)

Tori's comments seem to indicate a sense of ambivalence, caught somewhere between the outright gloom of Baudrillard and a more celebratory form of "semiotic democracy" that Fiske's work implies (McGuigan, 1992: 72). The sense of powerlessness embodied in her assertion that she will "never be a rich person with shares" certainly implies that the 'reality' of the news is nothing less than a floating, empty mirage with no firm anchorage in her day-to-day life. Yet against this what are we to make of her enthusiastic, even playful engagement with the equally hyperreal 'stars' of Hollywood? Perhaps the best way to comprehend this contradictory relationship with the news is to understand it as a concrete manifestation of the local meeting the global, where the "micro-politics of popular culture in consuming practices and reading pleasures" coexists in an uneasy and dialectical relationship with the "macro-politics and the machinations of the cultural industries" (ibid.).

10.6 Conclusion

This chapter began with a look at Winona, whose viewing experiences gave rise to the idea that news watching as an activity itself could be regarded from an aesthetic point of view. Through a very peripheral form of engagement, she avoids feeling out of touch, and in doing so she is able to maintain at the least an impression of news

makes his work difficult to summarise" as it "seeks to evade incorporation in texts" such as his (Stevenson's) own.

watching. ‘Appearing’ and ‘seeming’ to be informed were prominent motifs throughout her discourse. Echoing the form over function theme of the previous chapter, for Winona it is the impression of being up to date with things that matters. She is also aware to a certain extent of the disparity between how she actually watches the news and the expected, or idealised, way that news should be watched. Chris is another who indicated that it is the **act** of watching that is perhaps more significant than what is being watched. Given the limitations of the news as a source of information, the question then was what is the significance of creating and maintaining this impression? The second section of this chapter is an attempt to answer this question. Why do viewers feel the need to be informed? Why is keeping up to date so important when the means of doing so is so obviously flawed? A number of viewers hinted at an underlying imperative, suggesting that the news is something that **should** be watched. Malcolm’s ironic reply to the question of why people watch the news — “Cause they think they have to?” — is perhaps closest to the mark. From an exclusively informational perspective, this imperative to watch the news is contradicted in practice by the inability of the news to provide viewers with satisfactory levels of information (see Chapter Seven). By stepping outside this exclusive understanding of news reception, a more social, popular understanding of the centripetal vector that continually draws viewers to the news can be arrived at. Talking about the news is as much a part of people’s everyday activities as watching it is, and in order to participate in this ‘discursive continuation’ of the reception process, some knowledge of what was on the news is required. This is where the importance of the impression of news watching comes in to play. Through this act(ivity), it is still possible to participate in these discussions. Irrespective of what meanings are made (or if they are made at all), it is their functionality that matters. As Barry and Winona explicitly stated, the simple act of watching the news can help them to avoid feelings of inadequacy or ignorance. Of course it needs to be stressed here that talking about the news, and avoiding feeling ignorant or inadequate are not the sole reason why people watch the news, but they do act as an imperative which

keeps bringing people back to the encounter despite their frustrations with it.

Countering this centripetal vector there are a variety of centrifugal vectors, some of which have already been touched on in other chapters. Two that are focused on here are (once again) the informational shortcomings of the news and a sense of alienation that the news itself can engender in viewers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCLUSION

11.1 Introduction

As a conclusion this chapter necessarily consists of a review of all that has come before. But it must also be more than that. Conclusions, by their very nature, are all about endings. Here all the various threads are finally gathered together to be presented in a neat and tidy fashion as a coherent whole. Given the nature of the phenomenon under study here — the reception of a particular genre of television — a neat and tidy conclusion is not necessarily appropriate. Reception is a messy, contradictory, inconsistent, always-in-progress phenomenon. Despite our best attempts, it can never be neatly removed from the context within which it is experienced to be held aloft for examination as some kind of discrete entity.

The first section of this concluding chapter consists of a review of the analysis that has been presented in the preceding four chapters. It begins by reiterating the overtly reflexive stance that I have taken throughout the entire course of this research. From this perspective has come an understanding of news watching that is at odds with the relatively narrow definitions that characterise a number of recent reception studies. In addition to expanding the idea of reception beyond specific viewer-text encounters, this research has also sought to dissolve the distinction between the ‘public knowledge’ and ‘private pleasure’ streams of reception scholarship. As a consequence of this, an analytical framework was developed that took into consideration this broader view of reception. Structured around a set of interrelated

dimensions — the relational and the interpretive — the framework allowed reception to be recast as a potential space. Applying the framework to the discourses of reception that were produced during the early stages of the research project revealed how this potential space was actualised by viewers. A summary of the main themes of the four analytical chapters is then followed by a reminder that research is in effect a process of decontextualisation.

Recontextualisation is achieved in the second section by drawing together the various ideas and concepts explored in Chapters Seven through Ten into a more or less coherent understanding of reception as but one example of cultural consumption. In order to achieve that, reception is characterised as a form of guerrilla warfare where meaning (i.e., space) is fought over. Forces of constraint (the strategies of the producers) are met with forces of creativity (the tactics of the consumers), with ground being won and lost on both sides. In such a fragmented and diversified (and potentially contradictory) environment power has undergone a similar transformation, highlighting the importance of close and detailed analyses of the micro- and mezzo-levels of viewer-news engagement as a way of revealing its operation.

11.2 A Review

The approach to the study of reception that I have taken in this research project reflects a move away from (though not necessarily an abandonment of) the detailed specificity of the viewer-text interface at the level of the individual news story (or single-issue programme). I have sought to examine reception as a much more inclusive and fluid process than it has typically been by applying it to a much broader conception of the engagement that viewers have with news. In terms of my

own relationship with television news, I have recognised glimpses of it in work by the likes of Dickerson (1996), Hagen (1994), Höijer (1990), Jensen (1990), Roscoe et al., (1995) and Ward (1992). But these studies all share a relatively narrow focus in as much as they are concerned with the interpretation of specific texts (or specific elements of a textual nature). Reception, as I experienced it, certainly involved instances of ‘making sense’ of specific news stories, but it was by no means limited to this. My experiences have also resonated with certain aspects of studies that have sought to examine the contexts within which these micro-processes of reception occur, in particular the work of Morley (1986, 1992) and Silverstone (1994). Reception, therefore, was as much about how (in terms of the day-to-day context of viewing) the news was watched as it was about what was being watched. From my own perspective, as a viewer who recognised his simultaneous involvement in both the micro- and mezzo-relationships implied by these respective research traditions, it was essential to arrive at an understanding of reception that took account of this. In that sense, I have heeded Ang’s (1996) advice and sought to research the question from the point of view of the actual audience by reflexively considering my own experiences as an audience member.

11.2.1 Public Knowledge versus Private Pleasure

In addition to dissolving the distinction between specific viewer-text encounters and the engagement with television at a broader level, this research has also sought to abrogate another distinction within audience research. As part of mass media in general, television news does not exist in isolation from the plethora of mediated realities and fictions within which it is embedded. To that extent, there has arisen within audience research in general something of an artificial separation between factual television — in the form of news, current affairs and documentary

programmes — and fictional television. The differences between these ‘public knowledge’ and ‘private culture’ strands of research were briefly outlined in Chapter Two. From the point of view of the actual viewer (or reader) of these texts, such a distinction is somewhat artificial, implying as it does that issues of taste and pleasure do not play a part in the reception of factual media, and, conversely, that there is nothing of significant informational value in fictional media forms. The study of news has nearly always been undertaken within the ‘public knowledge’ realm, and this rarely provides us with insights into how viewers actually make sense of, understand, and negotiate the news text in their own terms. Once again, as a researcher who was (and still is) reflexively aware of my own experiences, I sought an approach that would go beyond this dichotomy to explore the full dimensions of the viewer-news relationship.

11.2.2 Developing an Analytical Framework

With this aim in mind, I adopted an analytical framework that was derived in part from the discourses of reception of the viewers themselves and in part from a previous study of reception. In terms of the former, there appeared to be a relational dimension to the viewers’ engagement with the news. That is, the viewers’ discourse served to position them at varying points in relation to the news. Sometimes the discourse indicated a general sense of being drawn towards the news, a ‘pull’ if you will, which not only brought viewers to the news but also kept them there once they were watching it. At other times, the discourse was characterised by an opposing dynamic. This worked to ‘push’ the viewer away from the news during the process of engagement or, alternatively, it worked to prevent the establishment of an engagement in the first place. Reception was therefore cast as a tension between the two forces. Viewers are caught in a state of flux between centripetal vectors that

draw them to the news and centrifugal vectors that work to push them away from the engagement. At times symbolically, and other times more concretely, this push-pull relationship that viewers have with television news underscores the dynamism of the reception process.

The second part of the analytical framework was derived from research into the reception of *Dallas*. In their study of how ethnically distinct groups of audiences interpreted the programme, Liebes and Katz (1989) differentiated between critical and referential interpretations. With some modifications, the same basic distinction was also evident in the interpretations that viewers made of television news. The discourses of reception showed that viewers alternated between interpreting the news on the basis of its reference to the world(s) which they inhabited and interpreting the news as a constructed phenomenon that consisted of identifiable conventions, styles and modes of presentation. Like the relational dimension, reception within this interpretive dimension is an oscillatory process, as viewers constantly shift between referential and critical modes of interpretation.

These two dimensions — the relational (i.e., centripetal-centrifugal) and the interpretive (i.e., critical-referential) — have been combined to serve as the analytical framework upon which the analysis presented in Chapters Seven through Ten has been built. Because reception is a process that occurs over time, however, a third, temporal dimension must also be considered as part of this analysis. In this way reception can now be reconfigured as a space within which there are an infinite number of possible viewer positions. As a consequence of the interplay between the interpretive and the relational modes of engagement, watching television news involves a constant re-positioning of oneself within this space from moment to

moment. As recovered (and reconstructed) through the intervention of research, the various positions that viewers adopt in the reception of television news have served to illustrate the inherent tension that comes from occupying this space.

11.2.3 Reception = Tension

Throughout the preceding chapters the discourses of reception have given rise to a variety of concretely experienced examples of the tensions that inhere in this space. In Chapter Seven reception was experienced as a tension between being drawn to the news for its informational (i.e., referential) potential, and being ‘pushed’ away as a result of the mobilisation of a critical mode of interpretation. In Chapter Eight tension was experienced as a consequence of combining the ‘mass’ character of television news’ production and distribution with the domestic (i.e., inherently contextual) mode of its reception (Corner, 1995). In addition, reception was also experienced as a tension between structure and content. Through a critical mode of interpretation, viewers were able to organise their engagement with the news according to the structural ‘platforms’ of the different segments. Contrasting this, though, was the often arbitrary nature of the content which, through a referential reading, could either draw the viewer in or push him/her away. In Chapter Nine a more complex variation of the critical-referential dimension of interpretation was invoked. Attention was now directed at the critical interpretations that viewers brought to bear on the aesthetic elements of news as a communicative form, and, by implication, on the news’ “presentation of meaning” (Lorimer, 1994: 202). In other words, the focus was now on the specific kinds of referentiality that this aesthetic form produced. Chapter Ten continued with the aesthetic notion, only this time it was applied to the act of reception itself. Given the clear inadequacies of the news in fulfilling the referential expectations of viewers (as discussed in Chapter Seven), the

significance of the act of watching itself was questioned. Expanding the context of reception by locating it within the overall web of social relations that constitute viewers' daily lives produced one possible solution: awareness of what is on the news functions as a form of social currency. Viewers are able to participate in discussions about the news, thereby avoiding feelings of inadequacy (Winona) or ignorance (Barry).¹ This integrative aspect of the news, however, can be countered by a number of factors. Apart from the already discussed informational shortcomings, a number of viewers experienced feelings of alienation, as the world of the news was perceived to be quite different from their own.

11.2.4 Analysis = Decontextualisation

Picking out certain parts of the discourses of reception to serve as concrete illustrations of the concepts, ideas and themes around which the analysis has been structured has effectively resulted in a decontextualisation of those very same discourses. The Gordian Knot has been unravelled and in doing so we have gained a deeper understanding of some aspects of the reception process. But in unravelling reception we have simultaneously created another tangle, as the summary presented above shows. Chapter Seven begins with a relatively straightforward, case-by-case exposition of the contradictions that inhere in the unequivocal claim by viewers that they watch the news to keep up with or catch up with events and occurrences locally,

¹ As was noted in the chapter concerned, awareness of something in the news does not necessarily imply, or require, knowledge of that particular situation. In other words, one can be aware of something that featured on the news, but one may not necessarily be in a position to offer a detailed summary of either the event in question or the news story about it.

nationally and internationally. From this singular starting point, however, things have become increasingly complex. In Chapter Nine the two modes of interpretation — critical and referential — that until now had been considered in terms of a binary opposition were situated in more complex ways in relation to both the news and each other. The observation by Corner, already noted at the start of Chapter Nine, is worth repeating:

The interrelationships, in any piece of television, between referential and poetic/aesthetic elements, often become extremely difficult to determine, not only because of their complexity but also because they **shift**.

(1995: 6-7, emphasis in original)

Having excavated the process of reception from the surrounding sediment of daily life within which it is firmly rooted, through the act of research (the interview), and having explored this process (the analytical procedure) to reveal the way in which opposing vectors work to position viewers within the space that is reception, it now remains to conclude the project by re-embedding that process within the dense tangle of “ongoing cultural practices and relationships” (Ang, 1989: 101) that constitute the everyday. Only through such a recontextualisation will it be possible to comprehend the wider implications of these vectors that operate within the potential space that is television news reception.

11.3 Recontextualisation

Relocating the practice of reception from the current (research) environment back into the ‘real’, everyday world of viewers necessarily raises questions of significance. What does it mean to say that viewers are subjected to centripetal and centrifugal vectors while watching television news? What does the mercurial nature of news watching, with viewers in a constant state of flux between being drawn to

the news and being repelled from it signify in terms of power, domination and ideology?

11.3.1 Questions of Power, Domination and Ideology

In his review of the ‘new revisionism’ of recent audience research, Curran is particularly critical of studies in which

the role of the media is reduced to a succession of reader-text encounters in the context of a society which is analytically disaggregated into a series of discrete instances... or in which power external to discourse is wholly evacuated.

(1990: 140)

In a similar fashion, Corner is critical of work in reception studies that celebrates the openness of the polysemic text without seriously acknowledging the “considerable degree of **determinacy** possessed by texts” (1991: 174, emphasis in original). The difficulty for reception analysts, especially when dealing with micro-level engagements, is how to adequately account for the work of the audience in producing their own specific meanings **as well as** the forces that shape and determine the textual landscape within which this activity takes place (Morley, 1995).

I would suggest developing an approach to reception that negotiates a path between these extremes of a reified viewer sovereignty, on the one hand, and a paranoid fantasy of global domination on the other (Morley, 1992). Michel de Certeau provides a useful way of understanding the nature of the relationship between the forces of creativity and constraint that characterise consumption (and within that the particular form of consumption that is watching television news). He refers to popular practices such as consumption as a form of interminable guerrilla war that is

fought on the oppressor's territory (Moore, 1993). In this never ending contest, the 'strategies' of the powerful are met with varying degrees of success and failure, by the 'tactics' of the weak. In this way

the 'creative' aspect of consumption is always operating by stealth, on momentarily 'stolen ground'. Thus creative uses (tactics) of communications technologies are to be seen as operating on the ground established by the dominant images of these technologies, as presented through the discourses (strategies) of powerful institutions of design, marketing and advertising.

(Morley, 1992: 217)

In relation to the watching of television news, the discourses of reception offered substantial evidence that viewers' engagements with the news are often of a creative nature. Equally clear, however, was the acknowledgment by viewers that these 'tactics' were at times negated by the inherent structural limitations of television news. Perhaps the most obvious example of this was the often-expressed complaint that the news failed to provide enough information (or only provided a very specific range of information). Thus no matter how much creativity is ascribed to the viewer, it can never be forgotten that this creativity can only ever be unleashed on a limited range of texts that are themselves the products of specific cultural practices (Schudson, 1989; Tuchman, 1978; Winter, 1994).

The analysis of the preceding chapters has thrown the spotlight on the interface between the 'tactics' of the viewer and the 'strategies' of the news. Although the view has been predominantly from the viewers' side of the lines, it has nevertheless illustrated the dynamic nature of the encounter. Here we can see the utility of understanding reception in spatial terms. There are no entrenched positions in this ongoing struggle for meaning. Ground (i.e., meaning) is continually being fought over, and both sides simultaneously gain and lose territory. Take for example Tori

who, armed with the remote control, constantly flicks between ONN and 3NN in search of something interesting. While she may succeed in subverting the efforts of the individual news bulletins to retain her attention, she is still nevertheless engaging with “the news”. Furthermore, does her playful engagement with news stories about celebrities and disdain of political and economic news represent a victory for the news, and if so, what exactly has been won? On the one hand it could be argued that because many viewers regard the news’ coverage of politics as sensational, trivial and shallow (Dean, Malcolm, Cathy), then in rejecting it Tori has lost little or nothing. On the other hand, this rejection of news about ‘serious’ issues could be viewed as a successful attempt by those in power to deflect attention from these very issues (a point raised by Kane, and one that I return to discuss below). The analysis in Chapter Eight provides us with a particularly cogent example of how viewing tactics intersect with broadcasting strategy. The news is broadcast each night at exactly the same time, with the various segments screening in the same order at about the same time. Contrasting with this are the inherently variable individual schedules of socially situated viewers. For some viewers watching the news is a daily activity, while for others the engagement is more sporadic. In addition there is also variation in the way that these engagements are integrated into the routines of everyday life. Cathy and Kane, for example, are both regular watchers of news, although they differ markedly in how this activity is actualised. For Cathy news watching is an integral part of her after-work relaxation time, while for Kane he usually has to stop whatever activity he is doing at the time in order to watch. Despite these differences in how the encounter with the news is integrated into their routines, both Cathy and Kane are indicative of how the strategy of news can succeed in capturing an audience. Other viewers, like Matt and Chris are more

sporadic in their engagements with the news. Both indicated that there are other activities which can often prevent them from watching the news (such as late lectures or going to the gym). In these instances the broadcasters' strategies are less successful because the fixed schedule of the news is unable to subdue the irregularity of these two viewers' daily lives.

Narrowing the focus to examine how viewers engage with the various textual elements of the news reveals a similar battle. News bulletins typically adhere to a routine and clearly demarcated structure, with (for example) headlines, international news, sports and weather segments interspersed with advertisement breaks. From a strategic perspective, such a regular structure is an inevitable outcome of the commercial imperatives that drive television news production. Viewers, however, have developed their own tactics for dealing with this predictability. In Chapter Eight (see Section 8.4.1) I referred to these different segments of the news bulletin as platforms of arrival and departure, whereby viewers choose to arrive at or depart from an engagement with the news. Malcolm, for example, said that he will usually leave after the headlines but come back for the sports news. Cathy, on the other hand, prefers to watch up to the sports news and then switch channels to watch *The Simpsons*. Determining 'winners' and 'losers' in this instance is problematic. Both viewers are actively deciding which parts of the news they wish to watch (and not watch), and while the 'sports' segment works to draw Malcolm back to the engagement (i.e. the news gains ground), it simultaneously pushes Cathy away from the engagement (i.e. the news loses ground). Added to this structurally-determined — and predictable — pattern of (dis)engagement is the unpredictability of specific news story content. Staying with Cathy and Malcolm for the moment, we can see how content works in an arbitrary fashion to either attract or repel viewers. While

Cathy's engagement with the news can perhaps be characterised as casual (see Section 8.2), there are times when something will interest her and she'll "turn it up and pay attention" [10-108]. However, there can also be content that will cause her to disengage from the news: "...um sometimes if it's just another Bosnia report...I can walk away from it..." [118-122]. In Malcolm's case he referred to the 'teaser' segments which run just prior to the advertisement breaks and which are one of the key strategies of the news designed to retain viewer interest. Malcolm said that he preferred 3NN over ONN because he felt they did not "spend half the time pleading with you to come back after the ad break..." [198-199]. But despite his aversion to this strategy, he later acknowledged that sometimes it was successful:

John: So you might watch like the first quarter hour and then come back for the last quarter hour?

Malcolm: Yeah, if, unless something turns up that looks interesting...

John: Yeah.

Malcolm: ...in the, in the teaser section, then yeah, I'll go off and do something else.... [294-299]

In talking of reception in such militaristic terms it should not necessarily be implied that viewers take no pleasure from this activity. On the contrary, and this is perhaps the most powerful and successful strategy of domination that individuals must face, reception feeds on (and in doing so, reproduces) the idea of pleasure. One of the underlying aims of this research project has been to push for a dissolution of the distinction between public knowledge and private pleasure within reception studies, which has typically placed television news firmly within the realm of the former. To suggest that watching television news does not involve an element of pleasure runs counter to the experiences of a number of viewers that I spoke with. As they

indicated, this pleasure can take a variety of forms: the news can be used as way of relaxing (Cathy, Malcolm, Barry); pleasure can be gained from an aesthetic appreciation of the news (Cathy); and for some there is pleasure to be gained from simply knowing about the things the news reports on (Kane).

Unlike a grand battle between two opposing forces of roughly equal size and strength, where the battle lines are plainly visible, the ‘guerrilla warfare’ nature of consumption makes it difficult to trace with any clarity the lines of power and domination that are in operation. Silverstone (1994) argues that this opacity is the result of two opposing tendencies within consumption: the simultaneous homogenisation and fragmentation of tastes and cultures. Homogenisation refers to the increasing internationalisation of industrial cultural production, which has resulted in a global culture that is

the product of American cultural and media imperialism and generating, both in form and content, a universal cultural framework from which there is very little escape.

(Silverstone, 1994: 108)

In the context of this study, Atkinson’s (1993) claim that *One Network News* was “Americanised” as a result of the changes wrought by the team of consultants hired by TVNZ represents a very concrete manifestation of such homogenisation (see Chapter Nine). Fragmentation and disintegration are representative of what Silverstone calls globalisation. From a postmodern perspective, globalisation

both recognises and releases the national, the ethnic and the individual. Incorporation into global culture (which may or may not be a bad thing) also creates a space for, and to some extent also legitimises, the assertion of difference.

(Silverstone, 1994: 108)

In Chapter Ten, the way in which Malcolm and Tori positioned themselves as outside the definitional world of television news would suggest that such assertions of difference take place in even the most ordinary and mundane of activities.

Reducing these two tendencies to their most basic form, they are, of course, ultimately representative of the twin forces of constraint and creativity. They also echo the relational dimension of reception. On the one hand there is the centripetal tendency of media imperialism which has seen the majority of the world's media organisations coming under the control of a very small number of trans-national corporations.² On the other hand, the fragmentation and disintegration of cultures and tastes is indicative of a centrifugal tendency.

What of ideology and power in this realm of simultaneous homogenisation and diversification? How do we account for their operation within a postmodern world in which it seems that “no one is dominating, nothing is being dominated and no ground exists for a principle of liberation from domination” (Poster, 1988: 6, cited in Ang, 1996: 170). Tetzlaff has argued that it is precisely in the fragmentation and diversification of postmodern society that ideological domination is achieved. Instead of a monolithic, centralised and ideologically unifying culture, he proposes that domination and control is actually achieved through a superficial, fragmentary culture. In this form social control is “based on disorientation to social relations”, through either confusion or detachment (1991: 14). Ang suggests that the absence of

² In 1983 for instance, approximately fifty national and multinational corporations controlled most of the world's business in daily newspapers, magazines, television, books and motion pictures. By 1992 that number had shrunk to twenty three (Bagdikian, 1992).

domination that Poster speaks of has come about because the once-irrefutable spread of a monolithic capitalist modernity (and the indiscriminate opposition to this spread) has been replaced by the “disturbing incoherence of a globalised capitalist postmodernity, and the mixture of resistance and complicity occurring within it” (1996: 171). In terms of television news, Dahlgren has adopted from Thompson (1984) the idea of dissimulation as a way of explaining how ideology works in such a consistently incoherent and contradictory context.

Dissimulation refers to the processes whereby attention and reflection on social relations of domination are deflected or blocked. Usually in regard to ideology, this would suggest some forms of concealment or distortion. However... it would seem that dissimulation can also function via a dissipation of those meanings which are relevant for a political understanding of one’s own situation in society. Thus the very openness of the text (and here I would add: regardless of whether or not it contains contradictions) becomes a key to its success in obfuscation. The audiovisual discourse of TV news occludes social reality precisely in making available an array of possible meanings, none of which on their own terms invite or help the viewer to locate him/herself as a political subject in an historical setting.

(Dahlgren, 1988: 299-300)

In *Tori* we have what I believe to be a particularly compelling example of this. Faced with news that treats politicians in the same way as movie stars (and vice-versa), it is little wonder that she feels (and expresses) a sense of alienation when confronted with news about political events in New Zealand while admitting that news about Hollywood celebrities holds more appeal for her. MPs breaking away to form new political parties, terrorist bombings in America, the trial of a serial rapist, civil war in Rwanda, Hugh Grant being arrested for engaging the services of a prostitute — news now has such an “array of meanings” that, as in the case of *Tori*, viewers have difficulty locating themselves as political subjects with any sense of

certainty. Even if there is no attempt to make 'meaningful' meaning, even if the only 'meaning' that is made is one of indifference or confusion, the disengaged audience is still an audience (Tetzlaff, 1991). Consumption of cultural products is still necessary in order to display indifference to the messages contained within them. The paradox here, of course, is that in thumbing their noses at the capitalist system through indifference people are still required to consume cultural products, thereby ensuring the continuation of the very structures of domination that they are 'resisting'.³

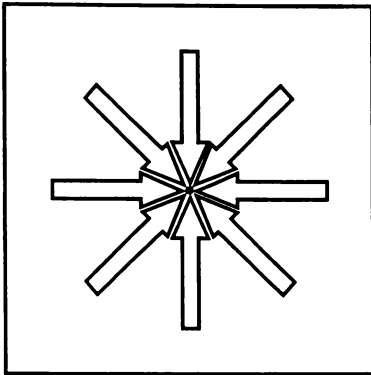
In this postmodern "realm of uncertainty" (Ang, 1996) where an increasingly globalised mass media system is producing ever more texts which are in turn being consumed by increasingly fragmented and dispersed audience groups, questions of ideology and power are as important as they have ever been. The difficulty now is in devising research strategies that are sensitive to the ways in which domination occurs within a media-saturated world. In celebrating difference and diversity within the postmodern we have not magically done away with ideology, power and influence, nor have we somehow managed to negate their effects as some would suggest. The new mediated landscape, celebrated by some as a "semiotic

³ Another form of 'non-response', and one that potentially subverts the consumption process, would be to refuse to participate in the first place. Not watching television would be one way of achieving this, although one must question the possibility of this ever occurring given the embeddedness of the medium into our everyday lives. Rejection of the entire capitalist way of life may be possible at an individual level, but it is hardly likely, in the foreseeable future at least, to be adopted by society at large.

democracy” (Fiske, 1987), is not devoid of patterns of domination and subordination. On the contrary, they are still very much alive and kicking, but the problem is now one of identifying their presence. In this diverse and fragmented environment ideology, power and influence have themselves become fragmented to the point of evanescence. To that end, this research project has, through a close analysis of discourses of reception, mapped out a number of specific skirmishes within which power, domination and ideology are certainly operating. In highlighting the inherent volatility of television news reception, I have pointed to a variety of ways in which the tactics of the viewer/consumer clash with the strategies of the news producers. These local skirmishes have resulted in victories and defeats for both sides, but qualifying those outcomes (i.e. what exactly was won/lost, and at what cost to whom) will require the application of new and innovative methods of research. What is clear, however, is that news media organisations are ultimately determining the shape of the landscape on which these battles (for meaning) are being fought. What is also clear from my research is that the micro- and mezzo-levels of media reception are now, more than ever, appropriate sites at which to examine how these diffused patterns of domination are experienced in the everyday practices of cultural consumption.

11.4 A Final Summary

The overriding impression that one is left with of the news watching experience is that it is very much a love-hate thing, a push-pull relationship. This is, of course, the result of those two core vectors that underpin the viewer-news relationship: the centripetal and the centrifugal. In concluding I wish to summarise how I see that essential tension operating across different facets of the viewer-news encounter.

**CENTRIPETAL**

Mass Audience/Institutional
(Ratings)

Homogenisation

Expectation

Public Knowledge

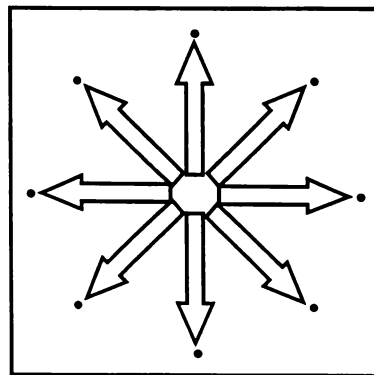
Known

Certainty

Limitation

Strategy

Constraint

**CENTRIFUGAL**

Individual Viewer (Actual
Experience)

Fragmentation

Reality

Private Pleasure

Unknown

Uncertainty

Possibility

Tactics

Creativity

Table 11.1 Centripetal versus Centrifugal.

In the opening paragraphs of this thesis I presented some figures which suggested that close to a million people watched television news every night in New Zealand. While the analysis Chapters Seven through Ten questions this in terms of what “watching the news” actually means for individual viewers, it cannot be denied that as a specific genre of television, the news is a centripetal phenomenon. From

Kaitaia in the north to Invercargill in the south, from Greymouth in the west to Gisborne in the east, every night at 6.00pm most television sets in the country are tuned into one of two news programmes. But what actually takes place in front of all those individual television sets? The eleven individual viewers in this study have provided us with an insight into that activity. In contrast to the institutional, homogenised and ultimately invisible audience that ratings surveys produce, this study has produced a fragmented audience of individuals that bring with them real, lived experiences of reception. Homogenisation is also very evident in television news as a specific cultural artefact. The two main broadcast news programmes — *One Network News* and *3 National News* — are for all intents and purposes identical. Apart from some minor stylistic differences, they both cover the same limited range of topics, and they both rely to a large extent on the same sources for international news. In operating with a mass conception of the audience, news producers are faced with the task of delivering a programme that will appeal to the broadest possible section of the viewing public (and in the process delivering the largest possible number of viewers to the advertisers who pay for the production). Contrasting this centripetal tendency, however, are the increasingly fragmented diversified viewers who may or may not consider the news relevant, worthwhile, interesting, or important. Like the viewers in this study, they may face many competing demands of their time, so that watching the news has to compete with the multitude of other activities, responsibilities and interests that make up life at the end of the twentieth century. Furthermore, with globalisation has come a heightened recognition of difference that allows viewers the opportunity to engage with news from a position that is explicitly at odds with the institutional conception of the audience.

Expectation of what the news will deliver is a primary centripetal force that motivates viewers to engage with the news. As Chapter Seven clearly demonstrated, viewers were almost unanimous in stating that they watched the news to keep up with things. The reality of what it actually delivers is another matter altogether. Arrayed against this singular imperative is a variety of centrifugal vectors that reveal how the news ultimately fails to deliver on this promise. There is not enough information presented, it lacks depth and it is unrepresentative. The news covers only a narrow spectrum of events, and these are often of little relevance to viewers. Other criticisms directed at the news included presenting information out of context and blowing things out of proportion. Linked to the notion that the news is required to provide viewers with important or necessary information is the fact that reception studies involving news more often than not operate from a position which privileges the public knowledge function of news. Again, this is representative of a centripetal vector at work. The idea of a 'public knowledge' is based on a similar premise to that of the mass television audience, with diversity and difference being subsumed under the mantle of one 'public'. As this study has shown, reception of television news also involves elements of pleasure. In contrast to the idea of a public knowledge, pleasure cannot be produced or experienced centrally (Fiske, 1987). Pleasure as a centrifugal phenomenon provides the necessary space in which a wide array of diverse pleasures can be experienced circumferentially. In the case of television news, that pleasure is experienced within the private, domestic realm of the individual.

In terms of what is known versus what is unknown, there are two specific ways in which the viewers in this study have articulated this tension. To a certain extent, viewers know what is going to be on the news, because the news relies on a

relatively stable and narrow range of topics. Also, the news follows a fixed pattern in terms of what types of stories are shown in what order, advertisement breaks, and other forms of segmentation (sports, weather etc.). This regularity works in a centripetal fashion by imposing order on the unruly events of the outside world. No matter what takes place on any given day, viewers can be assured that it will be presented in the same order as yesterday (the sports news **always** follows the financial market news, the weather **always** comes at the end of the bulletin). As Chapter Eight showed, the news' structure can also operate in a centrifugal fashion by providing viewers with opportunities to break off their engagement with the news. Contrasting this structural uniformity, however, the actual content of individual stories represents the unknown. The whole idea of news is based on the premise of 'the new', and while it may well cover a limited range of topics, it is typically about things that people have no prior (or only limited) knowledge of. The content of news stories can therefore be considered centrifugal in the way that it represents a potential for viewers to follow a variety of directions ("What's going to happen?" "Do I want to keep watching this?" "Do I want to switch channels to see what the other news programme is showing?"). The second articulation of the tension between the known and the unknown involves the mobilisation of the stocks of knowledge that individual viewers possess. For most viewers, most of the time the news is not questioned. The irony here is that recognition of this unquestioning acceptance that what the news presents is true and factual only comes when a viewer has the specialised knowledge to challenge a particular representation. The ramifications of this can be disconcerting. All of a sudden, what was previously taken for certain is now uncertain. If a viewer is able to challenge the accuracy or truthfulness of a news story based on their experiences or knowledge of the

particular situation, the question must then be what of all the other stories about which they do not possess the knowledge or experience to question? If the news can get it wrong in one story, then surely the possibility exists that they can get it wrong with all stories. As Malcolm put it: .

Malcolm: They seem to be able to get it — yeah, get things wrong whenever they try and tackle a subject that's not — I dunno, whenever they try and tackle a subject that I actually know something about, they seem to be wrong. Anything to do with, say, motor racing, or, um , or um, computers, or something, they, they'll screw it up. Which makes me wonder about things that I don't know so much about...

John: Right...

Malcolm: How much are they getting wrong? I can't be an expert on everything...

John: Ok, so...

Malcolm: ...how much are they screwing up?

From a slightly different perspective, this tension between the certain and the uncertain can be reinterpreted in such a way that the discomfort of not knowing is replaced by an altogether more positive experience for the viewer. Returning for a moment to a point made earlier (see Section 11.3.1), reception research needs to tread a path somewhere between the two extremes of a completely fixed text with a pre-determined meaning and the semiotic freedom of the sovereign viewer making whatever meaning s/he chooses to. The tension here is between limitation and possibility. As with any textual construction, news stories that are screened are the end result of a continuous process of limitation. At each point in the news production process decisions are made about what will fill the limited space

available in the evenings bulletin. Limitation is also a determining factor in the decisions that are made about how a particular story will be reported⁴. There is one thing that the news producers cannot limit, however, and that is the interpretations of the individual viewers when they watch the finished product. At the point of broadcast, this process of limitation is suddenly confronted by an array of possibilities, as viewers draw on a wide range of unique contextual resources to make sense of the news. Although it is more about the news as a whole as opposed to a specific story, the example of Dean and Malcolm and their divergent takes on the concept of a professional looking news programme is a clear example of this. For Dean the concept of a professional looking news bulletin is an important factor in determining which programme he prefers. For Malcolm, however, the same concept is the main reason for choosing to **not** watch a particular bulletin. The fact that they both end up watching the same news programme despite this apparently contradictory reasoning is further evidence of how little control the networks ultimately have over how viewers interpret what they watch. Of course it can also be argued that this is merely a case of Hobson's choice because of the limited range of alternatives open to Malcolm (i.e. he can choose to watch another news programme that is in actuality very similar to the one he rejects, or he can choose to not watch at all).

The contrasting interpretations of professionalism as articulated by Malcolm and Dean are also indicative of how the strategies of news producers and the tactics of

⁴ See Winter (1994) for a detailed study of this phenomenon within Television New Zealand's news department.

viewers confront each other with equivocal results. The strategy of the news producers is driven by the necessity of imposing control over the unruly audience. Ratings figures are one example of how this control is attempted. To subsume the experiences of individual viewers within a single aggregate figure is to deny the existence of those experiences. In table 11.1 above, the figure on the left is representative of this strategy. The point in the middle is the institutional audience and the forces of constraint work centripetally to limit the possibility of this 'ideal' audience fragmenting into real, live viewers each with their own unique interpretations. The figure on the right, meanwhile, is representative of how the creative tactics of resistance work centrifugally to counter the limitations of a homogeneous audience, with individual viewers making their own unique and multiple interpretations of the news. Combining these two together allows us to arrive at an understanding of reception that can be characterised as a space within which viewers are continuously subjected to a range of forces, some of which act centripetally and some of which act centrifugally.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT EXTRACT

The extracts below are from interviews with the following viewers: Winona, Tori and Dean.

A1.1 Explanatory Notes

The line numbers represent the individual text-units as defined within NUD*IST. These can be cross-referenced with the text-unit numbers in the NUD*IST extract in Appendix 2 and the analysis example in Appendix 3.

The following transcript conventions should be noted:

- Short pause (up to 2 seconds).
- Long pause (more than 2 seconds).
- Incomplete utterance (interrupted by other speaker).

A1.2 Interview Transcript Extract - Winona

- 1 JB: The first question I usually ask people is why do you watch the
2 news?
- 3 WK: Well, 'cause I like to be reasonably informed, I guess. Like, um I
4 don't get the Herald every day, and I don't like listening to news in
5 the morning, so I don't, y'know like I don't, I don't listen to the
6 news on the radio in the morning very often. I just don't like that
7 sort of thing happening in the morning (laughs).
- 8 JB: So you'd rather not start the day knowing, knowing the sort of the
9 bad things that have happened or...?
- 10 WK: Oh, yes. I used to listen to Morning Report all the time. It was a
11 horrible way to start the day in a way. I mean you sort of, there's

12 hardly ever any good news, y'know, and so you sort of start the day
13 feeling really glum.

14 JB: Ok, um — how is it that you end up watching 2 *Newsnight*, which
15 is quite late, um...?

16 WK: `Cause six o'clock's a real scungy time. I mean, sometimes I don't
17 get home until six, and I like, it's not the sort of thing I'd regard as
18 being terribly relaxing, I guess. Um, in-depth news like that,
19 *Newsnight's* pretty lightweight. Um, it's, and it's just not a very
20 good time. Getting dinner ready, that sort of thing, y'know. Um,
21 though I may well watch news if it was on um, y'know seven
22 thirty, or eight, y'know, possibly, yeah.

23 JB: Yeah, what about if there's something really really important, or
24 really really...

25 WK: Oh, that's why um...

26 JB: ...big that sort of maybe concerns you, that you might want to...?

27 WK: ...yeah, like that's why I would, like sometimes make an effort,
28 yeah.

29 JB: But only if it really is something that you're looking for?

30 WK: Yes, I wou-I don't turn the telly on in an ad hoc sort of basis.

31 JB: What, what sort of things would it be that you'd, that would make
32 you definitely try and catch the six o'clock news?

33 WK: Something like, maybe of a particular interest, like something
34 maybe about the universities, maybe something of a regional
35 nature like if there was like flooding in Nelson area, y'know my
36 home town sort of thing. Um, anything that was sort of like sort of
37 really big news, I guess. Um — because the thing with reading like
38 a morning paper, I hate the Waikato Times, I just think it's y'know,
39 it just doesn't really give you particularly good news, but the thing
40 with reading a morning paper is that y'know it doesn't actually
41 have so much in it about the news of the day, y'know. So if
42 something big has happened, y'know, like um, like say if it was the
43 day we won the America's cup, y'know, I'd probably want to see it,
44 so I'd turn the news on to y'know see it, `cause you'd be guaranteed

- 45 to see it six times, sort of thing.
- 46 JB: Yeah. Ok, what um, what do you th-what do you like about
47 Newsnight?
- 48 WK: Well, I like Marcus, he's really hard case. In terms of a news
49 programme, it's pretty slack, but it just gives you the main points so
50 you don't feel you're like totally out of touch and, but it's not, it's
51 not really very newsy, so it's an OK thing if you're relaxed and
52 y'know it's not like you're going to suddenly start thinking about
53 the starving millions in outer Mongolia, 'cause th-y'know it's not,
54 it's not really current events. It's more an entertainment sort of
55 news package.
- 56 JB: Yeah, but is it, is it kind of the fact that it does give you maybe three
57 or four kind of headline things, is that actually enough, does that
58 satisfy your kind of need to know? That at least you know that
59 something's going on?
- 60 WK: Yes, yeah, I guess so. Um — sometimes I sort of feel a bit
61 frustrated by it, and you think "Oh, y'know there must have been
62 more to the story than that", but — if you're not going to devote
63 that much time to it, it's handy to find that out, and I mean my
64 preference really for news is to read the paper, y'know, in way. But
65 Newsnight is good like that if it's day when I haven't read the
66 paper.
- 67 JB: So when would you read the paper?
- 68 WK: Um, after work, yeah. So while the news is on, probably, yeah.
- 69 JB: So, would you actually get, what do you get, the Herald, or...?
- 70 WK: Yeah. Mmm, yeah actually so that's funny when I say I don't really
71 want to watch news after work, yeah, but I would read the paper at that
72 time.
- 73 JB: Yeah, nah, I know what you mean about Newsnight, because I
74 usually sit, I mean most times I watch it I'm usually in bed just
75 about falling asleep, and it's really quite light weight, it's just,
76 and — you watch it and you're thinking "This isn't really news."
77 But you just keep watching it.

- 78 WK: Yeah, and Marcus does really dumb things too, y'know, there's
79 always the...
- 80 JB: Yeah, but it's a, it's, as you say it's more entertainment, than news.
- 81 WK: Mmm, yeah, it's it's, I wouldn't really regard it as being a news
82 programme. It's a misnomer, the Newsnight name I guess.
- 83 JB: It's um, it's more like a, a magazine programme with a few headlines
84 rather than...
- 85 WK: Yes, yeah, that's about it, mmm.
- 86 JB: Ok, um — no it's interesting that — so far of all the people I've
87 interviewed there's only two people who, who watch Newsnight
88 and, it's quite, I'm kind of curious to see because the other person is
89 um — a woman who's about your age, who's fairly similar in away.
90 I just sort of wonder what, I'd like t-I wonder what the audience,
91 their target audience thing is?
- 92 WK: Yeah, I presume it's aimed at quite a young audience, I guess. Um,
93 but yeah, I like to think that I've actually seen, y'know, something
94 of the news, but then sometimes it's really late. It varies in it's
95 time. Y'know, it can be as late as eleven, y'know, which is...
- 96 JB: I mean I wonder why that — one of the things I want to find out is
97 why is it that people feel they have to know about things that are
98 going on, when that's all they, in way you're simply told that
99 something's happened. You're not told anything about it, you're
100 told, in a way you're told "This has happened, this has happened,
101 and this has happened." But people have this urge to be told, but
102 that seems to be enough, and I just sort of wonder why, what it is
103 that drives people to actually feel they have to know...?
- 104 WK: Well, you feel, I think you feel a bit of a dummy. People use it, it's
105 like the weather, people talk about items, y'know, news items all
106 the time, things, y'know, things that have happened. "Oh, did you
107 hear about such and such, did you see that," and sort of. Yeah, so
108 I'd think you'd probably end up feeling um — maybe a bit
109 inadequate, y'know if you haven't got the foggiest idea, they sort of
110 think "Oh..." y'know?

111 JB: But at least, but at least you, with this you, I guess you kind, you can
112 put your two cents worth in and say at least you saw it, or you could
113 say something about it, even though...

114 WK: Yeah... "Oh, isn't it dreadful?"

115 JB: ...yeah. But I mean that's about as far you could go. But at least
116 you've, ok, that's yeah...

117 WK: Yeah, I'm sure that's why I do it. Um —

118 JB: I mean are you — does it not bother you personally that, that you
119 don't, I mean some people really go looking for lots of news and
120 really want to find out what's going on, and others don't give a shit.
121 Like Clayton doesn't watch the news at all, so I won't be
122 interviewing him again, just sort of stopped dead there. And, and I
123 mean, yeah, one of the things I'm looking at is what, what do
124 people kind of — why do people, some people go hunting for it,
125 others just take what they get. What's happening there?

126 WK: Well, I mean partly is to get a little bit of knowledge, to have inside,
127 in theory if there's something that really interested me, I could
128 follow it up. I say that in theory because I don't tend to do that.
129 Um — I guess — y'know in terms of the paper I'm a headline
130 reader first and then a quick skim, or an in depth read. So that
131 would probably be like if I watched more news I'd probably be a bit
132 more like that, but you can't choose with the news. Um, but with
133 Newsnight I guess you can't, you can't choose to get anything more
134 in depth out of it, because it's just not there. I don't know why,
135 lifestyle wise, why I would feel the need to, it's — it's funny, it's like
136 y'know if you go away camping or somewhere like you're really
137 like out in the bush, out of touch. Sometimes when you come back
138 you feel, it feels a bit bizarre. There's all this stuff happening, like
139 the President of the States could have been shot, Bolger could have
140 been shot y'know, and there's been all these things happening, and
141 you don't know about them, and you feel weird. I'm not quite sure
142 why, but you feel...

A1.3 Interview Transcript Extract - Tori

1 JB: Ok, um — so why, a sort of straight forward question, why do you, yeah
why do you watch the news?

3 TD: Why do I watch the news? 'Cause it's interesting, current affairs, keeps me
4 up with what's happening in the country and around the world, and um, I
5 ah, I guess I have a passion for it. Mum and dad always brought the
6 paper home, so. I always either read the print media, buy the paper during
7 the day, buy two papers during the day, the Herald and the Times...

8 JB: Yeah.

9 TD: ...and watch the news, and watch the late news bulletins as well.

10 JB: Ok.

11 TD: I also watch BBC World...

12 JB: Yeah.

13 TD: ...and um, CNN news at night, but that's a day old, so. 'Cause
14 we don't get Sky.

15 JB: Ok, so you watch it on —

16 TD: Ah...

17 JB: ...Coast to Coast, is it, is that where they have it?

18 TD: ...it's on channel three quite late.

19 JB: Oh yeah, ok. Um, do you, what do you sort of think of the news that we get
20 in New Zealand, either of international news or of local news?

21 TD: Well, I haven't compared it to BBC World. It's pretty um, it's pretty small,
22 what we get here. We don't really go in depth about ah, international
23 issues, um — Also-I watched BBC World for the first time in a long time
24 and I thought "Jesus, they're really onto it, eh." They had news from all
25 over Europe, they had news from England, they had news from the Pacific,
26 um, it was a one hour programme, really in depth, and then you see New
27 Zealand news, which is like a minute each segment, minute and a half each
28 segment. It's like yeah, we don't really a lot of the time get the full story, a
29 lot of the time you watch a story on, a piece on the news and you think

30 "Well, why did they revoke his li-his drivers license, or", you're still left
31 wondering y'know...

32 JB: Yeah, ok.

33 TD: ...it's not fulfilling.

34 JB: Um, so given that sense, again, why watch it if you are kind of left with all
35 these questions, if you're sort of thinking "Well it's not really telling me the
36 whole story." Like, I-are you watching it to, be told about something that's
37 happened...

38 TD: Mmm, yeah.

39 JB: ...rather than told what has, or, sorry you are rather told "This has
40 happened," but you're not told anymore? Is that the, is that the kind of,
41 um information you think you get of it? Just the fact that you know
42 something's happened, but then that's all you know, or, or in most cases
43 that's all you're left to know.

44 TD: Um — well, like I said, it doesn't give you the whole picture, so I, I
45 reimburse it by buying print media, and stuff like that as well.

46 JB: Yeah.

47 TD: I know that the news in New Zealand sucks, basically. It's just not very, ah
48 well put together, we don't have that good(?) journalists, and also it's very
49 um, one sided, a lot of it. I'm sure all news is one sided, but anyway.

50 JB: When you say one sided, I-I-what side, like what side is represented, or
51 what sides aren't represented?

52 TD: The states interests.

53 JB: Yeah.

54 TD: And it's also owned by, who, Rupert Murdoch is it, or Kerry Packer? It's
55 Kerry Packer, isn't it?

56 JB: Um, I know he's got a finger in, yeah in, in TV3 at least, um...

57 TD: So, with that knowledge you could put together why we get the news we do...

58 JB: Yeah.

59 TD: ...um, why we're made to be, why as white people we are made to be
60 frightened of the Maori, y'know the new face of Maori radicalism is this big
61 huge f-mother-fucker of a bloke with big full face moko, y'know...

62 JB: Yeah, yeah...

63 TD: ...scare the shit out of you. But that's not the true story, I mean y'know, ask,
64 go ask the Maori if you want the real story, yeah. It's ah, it's not very
65 representational, news. But I watch it because it's free...

66 JB: Yeah.

67 TD: ...I watch it because I'm home at six, and I watch it because everybody else
68 does.

69 JB: Would you agree with the statement that, that — watching the news, to a
70 large extent has become part of peop-a ritual in peoples lives? They come
71 home from work, they stop, they sit down, and they just stare at the screen
72 and get kind of fed...

73 TD: Definitely. I read a stat-a statistic once that said that most people watch the
74 television for news information rather than go out and buy the paper...

75 JB: Yeah...

76 TD: ...which is a bit sad.

77 JB: What are you doing when you watch the news? Do you, are you kind of like
78 — is it just you watching the news, or is there something else going on?
79 Are you having dinner, are you, whatever, y'know, I mean, describe to me
80 the sort of typical scene at six o'clock.

81 TD: Ok, at six o'clock I'm usually the first one home out of three, three
82 flatmates, I'm usually the first one home so I'll be watching it, um I'll have
83 the control in my hand, I'll be flicking...(laughs).

84 JB: Yeah.

85 TD: ...from three to one because um, the story might be boring and they might
86 have something better on the other side.

87 JB: Ok, so how are you, yeah, wha-what drives you to change channel between
88 the two?

89 TD: Just newsworthiness for me. If they're talking about the ah, Japanese yen,
90 that's al very interesting, and car prices are going up, and that's all great,
91 but I'm not interested. I flick over because I want to see if that Carl Carter
92 bloke um, got, is going to get a life sentence for murdering Mark Donovan.
93 `Cause that's interesting to me.

94 JB: Yeah, yeah. So in other words it has to have a relevance to you before you
95 will kind of accept it as being...

96 TD: Yeah. Like I'm not interested in Dow-Jones and al that `cause there's no...

97 JB: Yeah.

98 TD: ...way in hell I'm going to be a rich person with shares, so y'know. I guess.

99 JB: Ok, um — do you, are you, have you always watched the news? Like can
100 you remember as a kid watching the news?

101 TD: Yeah, mum and dad always watched the news, and we always watched it
102 together.

103 JB: Yeah, do you, do you think it's changed, since those days?

104 TD: I can't recall, um. What, you mean the format, or...?

105 JB: Well, yeah, I mean, what do you think is different about the news now then
106 say when, I don't know, even sort of five ten years ago? If you can recall
107 any differences, I mean some-it's often difficult to do so?

108 TD: Um, I guess it's got-the only visible difference is that it's gotten glossier and
109 faster paced, being the nineties. They have younger announcers, there's the
110 um, McNaught woman and ah...

111 JB: Ok, why, why do yo-do you have any ideas why that kind of change, I mean
112 obviously it's th-y'know there's the American influence and all that sort of
113 stuff, but, but like I see it in parallel with, like the rise of the trashy woman's

114 magazines and stuff like that. Now that was kind of...

115 TD: Not the rise of feminism?

116 JB: Um, no w-well in terms of, of like the news media's got kind of, the news
117 has got kind of more entertainment based, and, and as you say glossy and
118 all that, and then you look at magazines that are kind of aimed at a certain
119 group, like things like Woman's Day and New Idea and Women's Weekly
120 and that. Y'know, kind of five years ago they weren't really kind of — they
121 were out there but they weren't full of the crap they're full of now...

122 TD: Yeah, the sensationalist crap...

123 JB: ...they were full of different crap, but y'know, yeah and it's kind of, um I'm
124 interested to see what's causing that to happen that way, or what.
125 Is that what people want, or are they being fed that?

126 TD That's a really good point, yeah.

127 JB: Um, and I mean this is some of the things I'm trying to find out is, is what
128 is, what is it, are people getting what they want, or are people getting what
129 other people think they want, and does that then, simply sort of, does one
130 feed the other?

131 TD: Mmm, there's a place for it. I mean it's always interesting. Newsnight, they
132 call it Newsnight but it's not really...

133 JB: Yeah, what-what do you think of Newsnight, as a programme?

134 TD: Oh, it's um, it's addictive, but it's shit, yeah...

135 JB: That's very good.

136 TD: ...it's addictive shit.

137 JB: Yeah, I mean, I-I, same thing, I watch it as well, but it's yeah, it's basically a
138 load of crap, um, but it's kind of, you start wa-I star-I find I-I start watching it
139 and I find it very difficult to actually get up and turn it off, 'cause it's — it's,
140 Marcus Lush is a twit but he'll have stories that are kind of interesting, on a
141 very superficial level...

142 TD: Mmm, yeah.

143 JB: ...and they often are. Y'know, interviewing interesting people, ah...

144 TD: And a lot(?) of footage from overseas that's really quite amazing...

145 JB: Yeah, yeah.

146 TD: ...like Brad Pitt's opening of such and such, what he looks like now, and

147 Naomi Campbell. Did you see it last night?

148 JB: No, I didn't actually.

149 TD: Oh, they had quite a few good stories on it about what famous people are

150 doing and that's always really addictive and interesting.

A1.4 Interview Transcript Extract - Dean

1 JB: Ok, so obviously you watch television news. Um — is that the only TV you
2 watch?

3 DJ: Oh, can watch a bit of um, Casualty, and um, oh Pie in The Sky, I used to
4 watch...

5 JB: So you're a BBC man?

6 DJ: Yeah definitely, definitely yeah. I don't find American humour grabs me
7 very much.

8 JB: No? Ok.

9 DJ: Kids watch The Nanny and it drives me up the bloody wall (laughs).

10 JB: Fair enough, um — what do you see as the main reason why you watch the
11 news, like why do you watch it?

12 DJ: Catch up on what's been going on around the rest of the world, um, you
13 pick up what's going on around here without too much trouble, listen to
14 the radio in the morning, y'know, so...

15 JB: Yeah, ok.

16 DJ: Oh, I like to know, y'know what's happening in, over in the States, how the
17 Aussies are going, maybe what the Poms are up to.

18 JB: Ok, ok. Um, why, why do you prefer to watch TV3's news than TV1's?

19 DJ: Um — it started out as just seeing, y'know seeing what they'd done
20 differently, and, um — I don't think they cover quite as much ground, but I
21 think they do it a lot more thoroughly...

22 JB: Ok, um...

23 DJ: Yeah, it's a better coverage, over a smaller number of items.

24 JB: Um — do you think that, have you bas-have you gone back to loo-sort of
25 check out TVNZ now they've gone to a one hour news bulletin?

26 DJ: Yep.

27 JB: And still not...?

28 DJ: Oh, nah, not, not convinced. I think it may-maybe it's got a lot to do with
29 the presentation as well...

30 JB: Right, ok.

31 DJ: ...y'know, it's a — I think the TV3 is a bit more of a professional
32 presentation, and I guess we're all swayed by that, a good bit of marketing.

33 JB: Yeah. So y-you kind of feel that how it's delivered is, is — kind of
34 important to you, not just what they're saying.

35 DJ: Yeah — yeah, it's got to, it's got to appeal to you...

36 JB: Yeah, yeah. Um, what do you think of the overall standard of news in New
37 Zealand, of television news in particular in New Zealand.

38 DJ: — Tend-there is a tendency I think for it to dominated by the um, the
39 American networks...

40 JB: Yeah.

41 DJ: ...ah CNN, or is it CNA?, CNN, um but I guess then that's understandable
42 because they have, um they have a world wide coverage. I guess I still hark
43 back to the days when Reuters was the main um news agency, and um,
44 probably find it hard to come to terms with the Americanisation of our
45 news (laughs).

46 JB: Yeah, yeah, that's fair enough. Do you ever see or catch the BBC world
47 news that they sometimes have on, in the mornings, on TV, or...?

48 DJ: Ah, no, but I do ah, listen to the National Programme a lot and it gets
49 world, world service news there, and on Concert FM. And, ah, again that
50 gives you a totally different perspective...

51 JB: Yeah. Are they generally covering the same events, do you think?

52 DJ: To some extent, although they do tend to ah, to centre on stuff that affects
53 Britain...

54 JB: Yeah.

55 DJ: ...or, more the European.

56 JB: Yeah. Do you read the news paper at all?

57 DJ: Yeah, we have the Waikato Times and I get the, um, Herald, on a Saturday,
58 mainly for the jobs (laughs).

59 JB: (laughs)

60 DJ: Oh and we have th-we get the Sunday times too, 'cause there's often often
61 some bloody good reads in that...

62 JB: Yeah.

63 DJ: ...really good.

64 JB: Ok, um — do you feel that, that um — the news does a, a fair job of
65 reporting — what's going on in New Zealand? Or do you think they kind

66 of, perhaps have got it a bit wrong, or not? I mean...

67 DJ: Th-that's interesting 'cause I thin-I think they deal more with the trivia as
68 far as New Zealand news, y'know, cat stuck up a tree and tha-this sort of
69 thing, or um. Oh, I mean they deal with things that are going on in
70 Parliament, but not in any depth.

71 JB: Ok, 'cause that's, that's a point I was going to bring up later on, actually. But
72 seeing as you've brought it up now, um on that issue of, of news about
73 politics, um, yeah, what are your sort of, what are you feelings about how,
74 how television news covers politics in New Zealand?

75 DJ: I don't think the news does it particularly well, um tend to rely on
76 programmes like (?) New Zealand, one or two other's like that, where you
77 have an analysis of what has been going on...

78 JB: Yeah.

79 DJ: ...ah, rather than the news which gives you, um, oh Jim Bolger was in Te
80 Kuiti today and he did so-and-so and so-and-so and he was heckled, y'know.
81 Well what the hell does that tell you about anything?

82 JB: So how would you — characterise — or how would you describe, in a, in a,
83 if you had to give it a particular style, how would TV news' style of
84 reporting politics, like, um — Do you you think there is a particular style,
85 or, or slant to how they cover politics?

86 DJ: — Probably superficial — b-maybe because, um, of course that will be
87 denied, there is still some censorship there, and they are still subject to
88 political whim. Yeah, they say something that ah, the politicians don't like,
89 one way or another there'll be pressure brought to bear and, ah, I think they
90 have to tailor it to, the way they report the political news to the party that's
91 in power...

92 JB: Yeah, ok.

93 DJ: ...at the time. Ah, not as bad as it was when y'know Muldoon was around,
94 um...

95 JB: But would you, would you say that they tend to focus on um, do you think
96 they focus on particular aspects of the sort of, the political scene to the

97 exclusion of others?

98 DJ: Yeah, I mean bad news is good news isn't it? Ah, the gaff's, the faux pas,
99 um, the bad news, yeah.

100 JB: Ok, um...

101 DJ: Even to the extent that when there's good news, um they always have a
102 disclaimer from the other side.

103 JB: Yeah, ok.

104 DJ: And, I don't really think that's in the interests of good reporting. I think it's
105 just, y'know, ah entertainment value as much as anything, and that's
106 probably how, probably how I see political reporting on TV, as
107 entertainment value rather than, ah, that's why it's put on. Not necessarily
108 to inform.

109 JB: Ok, that's, getting back to what you say about how you watch the news to
110 catch up on what's going in the world...

111 DJ: Mmm.

112 JB: ...given then that, that, from what you said it primarily is entertainment
113 rather than information...

114 DJ: As far as local politics is concerned.

115 JB: ...yeah, but do, do you think that applies to the who-news as a whole, or are
116 you kind of, um...?

117 DJ: No, 'cause when I compare the, the TV and the radio news with what
118 comes out in the newspapers there's often a very close correlation there
119 between what's reported in the papers and the TV particularly on overseas,
120 ah political news. Um — probably the newspapers have more time to,
121 y'know to pull things together, I mean it may come out a day later than the
122 actual event, whereas the TV, they have to be in there, get it, and get out.

123 JB: Ok, um — how accurately do you think TV news in New Zealand is — kind
124 of showing — but is it, do you think it accurately represents what is
125 happening in New Zealand on a daily basis? Or is it kind of way out there
126 somewhere, but it's not in relation to what's going on, on a — One of the

127 examples I used with someone else was what do you think a visitor from
128 overseas, who doesn't know much about New Zealand would get, what
129 would they pick up about New Zealand if they were watching TV news?

130 DJ: Yeah, that's interesting. I-I'm probably horribly biased, but I think we're
131 given what we expect to be given. I don't necessarily think that we get the
132 true picture of what is going um, um. I mean, you look at rumours that fly
133 around all over the show, y'know "We will never sell Telecom, blah blah
134 blah," and I guarantee ninety percent of people now would turn around and
135 say "Oh yeah, you can bet your life it's going to happen." We do not believe
136 what comes across, and I think we get presented with a picture that they
137 want us to believe...

138 JB: Ok, um, given that...

139 DJ: ...in terms of the pol-the politics anyway.

140 JB: Ok, given that, why do you think then that people watch the news so
141 religiously because if they are kind of consciously aware that it's, that it's not
142 giving them the truth, in quotation marks, um, and yet people will
143 continue watching the news and — it seems to me a bit of an odd...

144 DJ: No, it's, it's not really that odd, ah...

145 JB: I mean are you saying there's a level of cynicism out there that, that people
146 are kind of watching the news and going "Yeah, right, don't try and pull the
147 wool over our eyes, we know better."

148 DJ: I think there is a level of cynicism there but I think it's also um — I'm a
149 cynierian (sic). Um, it's a conditioned reflex to watch the news and we're on a
150 very lean schedule of reinforcement as far as ah, truth is concerned, but
151 that, that lean schedule keeps us responding, we keep on watching in the
152 hope that y'know we are going to be able to pick something out that's goi-
153 really going to be ah...

APPENDIX TWO

NUD*IST EXTRACT

The following information is taken directly from NUD*IST and represents a report on the document WK1 (the transcript of the interview with Winona).

A2.1 Explanation of Report Parameters

The report parameters were set as follows:

Document: WK1
Text-Units: 1-142
Text to display: Document Text
Coding to display: Coding Stripes

Document

This is the name given to the interview transcript after it has been entered into NUD*IST. The naming convention that I adopted for this project was first-initial, second-initial, number. The initials refer to pseudonyms while the number indicates that it was the first interview (used in case more than one interview would be required).

Text-Units

The report can be limited to a specified number of text-units. In this case I have limited it to match those of the interview transcript in Appendix 1.

Text to display

Options available (any combination can be selected):

<i>Header</i>	Information previously entered, such as date, time, and place of the interview. This option was not selected for this report.
<i>Memo</i>	Text contained in the analytical memo attached to the document. As there was no such memo created for this document, the choice was not available.

Text The document text itself.

Coding to display

Options available (only one option can be selected):

- No Coding** If this is selected, the report will simply contain the text with no other information.
- Summary** Lists all the node addresses of the index tree with those text-units from the document that are coded at those nodes. Not selected for this report.
- Stripes** Displays coding stripes in the margin which indicates which node(s) each text unit has been coded at. The user can select up to 26 nodes for the coding stripes. For this report five nodes were selected. Coding stripes provide a quick visual indication of those parts of the text that are coded at multiple nodes.
- Cross Refs** For each text unit, all the node addresses of those nodes at which the text unit has been coded. Not selected for this report.

A2.2 Report Text

Q.S.R. NUD*IST Power version, revision 4.0.
Licensee: John Bosanworth.

PROJECT: THESIS 96, User John Bosanworth, 8:35 pm, 7 Jul, 1999.

+++++
Margin coding keys for selected nodes in document WK1:

A: (10 1) /Relational/Centripetal
B: (10 2) /Relational/Centrifugal
C: (11 1) /Interpretation/Referential
D: (11 2 1) /Interpretation/Critical/Syntactic
E: (11 2 2) /Interpretation/Critical/Pragmatic

+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: WK1

+++ Retrieval for this document: 142 units out of 727, = 20%

+++ Text units 1-142:

```

1      JB  The first question I usually ask people is why do you watch the
2      news?
3      KW  Well, 'cause I like to be reasonably informed, I guess. Like, um I  A
4      don't get the Herald every day, and I don't like listening to news in
5      the morning, so I don't, y'know like I don't, I don't listen to the
6      news on the radio in the morning very often. I just don't like that
7      sort of thing happening in the morning (laughs).
8      JB  So you'd rather not start the day knowing, knowing the sort of the
9      bad things that have happened or...?
10     KW  Oh, yes. I used to listen to Morning Report all the time. It was a  B . E
11     horrible way to start the day in a way. I mean you sort of, there's  B   E
12     hardly ever any good news, y'know, and so you sort of start the day  B   E
13     feeling really glum.  B   E
14     JB  Ok, um - how is it that you end up watching 2 Newsnight, which
15     is quite late, um..?
16     KW  'Cause six o'clock's a real scungy time. I mean, . sometimes I don't  B   E

```

17 get home until six, and I like, it's not the sort of thing I'd regard as B E
18 being terribly relaxing, I guess. Um, in-depth news like that, B E
19 Newsnight's pretty lightweight. Um, it's, and it's just not a very B D E
20 good time. Getting dinner ready, that sort of thing, y'know. Um, B E
21 though I may well watch news if it was on um, y'know seven B E
22 thirty, or eight, y'know, possibly, yeah. B E
23 JB Yeah, what about if there's something really really important, or A E
24 really really... A E
25 KW Oh, that's why um.. A E
26 JB ..big that sort of maybe concerns you, that you might want to...? A E
27 KW ..yeah, like that's why I would, like sometimes make an effort, A E
28 yeah. A E
29 JB But only if it really is something that you're looking for? A E
30 KW Yes, I wou-I don't turn the telly on in an ad hoc sort of basis. A E
31 JB What, what sort of things would it be that you'd, that would make A C
32 you definitely try and catch the six o'clock news? A C
33 KW Something like, maybe of a particular interest, like something A C
34 maybe about the universities, maybe something of a regional A C
35 nature like if there was like flooding in Nelson area, y'know my A C
36 home town sort of thing. Um, anything that was sort of like sort of A C
37 really big news, I guess. Um - because the thing with reading like
38 a morning paper, I hate the Waikato Times, I just think it's y'know,
39 it just doesn't really give you particularly good news, but the thing
40 with reading a morning paper is that y'know it doesn't actually
41 have so much in it about the news of the day, y'know. So if A E
42 something big has happened, y'know, like um, like say if it was the A D E
43 day we won the America's cup, y'know, I'd probably want to see it, A D E
44 so I'd turn the news on to y'know see it, 'cause you'd be guaranteed A D E
45 to see it six times, sort of thing. A D
46 JB Yeah. Ok, what um, what do you th-what do you like about
47 Newsnight?
48 KW Well, I like Marcus, he's really hard case. In terms of a news A B C E
49 programme, it's pretty slack, but it just gives you the main points so A B D E
50 you don't feel you're like totally out of touch and, but it's not, it's A B E
51 not really very newsy, so it's an OK thing if you're relaxed and A B E
52 y'know it's not like you're going to suddenly start thinking about A B E
53 the starving millions in outer Mongolia, 'cause th-y'know it's not, A B D E
54 it's not really current events. It's more an entertainment sort of A B D
55 news package. A B D
56 JB Yeah, but is it, is it kind of the fact that it does give you maybe
57 three or four kind of headline things, is that actually enough, does that
58 satisfy your kind of need to know? That at least you know that
59 something's going on?
60 KW Yes, yeah, I guess so. Um - sometimes I sort of feel a bit B E
61 frustrated by it, and you think "Oh, y'know there must have been B D E
62 more to the story than that" but -- if you're not going to devote A B D E
63 that much time to it, it's handy to find that out, and I mean my A E
64 preference really for news is to read the paper, y'know, in way. But
65 Newsnight is good like that if it's day when I haven't read the A E
66 paper. A E
67 JB So when would you read the paper?
68 KW Um, after work, yeah. So while the news is on, probably, yeah.
69 JB So, would you actually get, what do you get, the Herald, or...?
70 KW Yeah. Mmm, yeah actually so that's funny when I say I don't really
71 want to watch news after, yeah, but I would read the paper at that
72 time.
73 JB Yeah, nah, I know what you mean about Newsnight, because I
74 usually sit, I mean the most times I watch it I'm usually in bed just
75 about falling asleep, and it's really quite light weight, it's just,
76 and - you watch it and you're thinking "This isn't really news."
77 But you just keep watching it.
78 KW Yeah, and Marcus does really dumb things too, y'know, there's
79 always the..
80 JB Yeah, but it's a, it's, as you say it's more entertainment, than news.
81 KW Mmm, yeah, it's it's, I wouldn't really regard it as being a news
82 programme. It's a misnomer, the Newsnight name I guess.
83 JB It's um, it's more like a, a magazine programme with a few headlines
84 rather than..
85 KW Yes, yeah, that's about it, mmm.
86 JB Ok, um - no it's interesting that - so far of all the people I've
87 interviewed there's only two people who, who watch Newsnight
88 and, it's quite, I'm kind of curious to see because the other person is

89 um - a woman who's about your age, who's fairly similar in away.
90 I just sort of wonder what, I'd like t-I wonder what the audience,
91 the kind of audience things is?
92 KW Yeah, I presume it's aimed at quite a young audience, I guess. Um, A D E
93 but yeah, I like to think that I've actually seen, y'know, something A E
94 of the news, but then sometimes it's really late. It varies in it's A E
95 time. Y'know, it can be as late as eleven, y'know, which is..
96 JB I mean I wonder why that - one of the things I want to find out is
97 why is it that people feel they have to know about things that are
98 going on, when that's all they, in way you're simply told that
99 something's happened. You're not told anything about it, you're
100 told, in a way you're told "This has happened, this has happened,
101 and this has happened." But people have this urge to be told, but
102 that seems to be enough, and I just sort of wonder why, what it is A
103 that drives people to actually feel they have to know..? A
104 KW Well, you feel, I think you feel a bit of a dummy. People use it, A E
105 it's like the weather, people talk about items, y'know, news items all A E
106 the time, things, y'know, things that have happened. "Oh, did you A E
107 hear about such and such, did you see that," and sort of. Yeah, so A E
108 I'd think you'd probably end up feeling um - maybe a bit A E
109 inadequate, y'know if you haven't got the foggiest idea, they sort of A E
110 think "Oh.." y'know? A E
111 JB But at least, but at least you, with this you, I guess you kind, you
112 can put your two cents worth in and say at least you saw it, or you could A C
113 say something about it, even though.. A C
114 KW Yeah.. "Oh, isn't it dreadful?" A C
115 JB ..yeah. But I mean that's about as far you could go. But at least
116 you've, ok, that's yeah..
117 KW Yeah, I'm sure that's why I do it. Um - A E
118 JB I mean are you - does it not bother you personally that, that you
119 don't, I mean some people really go looking for lots of news and
120 really want to find out what's going on, and others don't give a shit.
121 Like Clayton doesn't watch the news at all, so I won't be
122 interviewing him again, just sort of stopped dead there. And, and I
123 mean, yeah, one of the things I'm looking at is what, what do
124 people kind of - why do people, some people go hunting for it,
125 others just take what they get. What's happening there?
126 KW Well, I mean partly is to get a little bit of knowledge, to have A E
127 inside, in theory if there's something that really interested me, I could A E
128 follow it up. I say that in theory because I don't tend to do that. A B E
129 Um - I guess - y'know in terms of the paper I'm a headline
130 reader first and then a quick skim, or an in depth read. So that
131 would probably be like if I watched more news I'd probably be a bit E
132 more like that, but you can't choose with the news. Um, but with E
133 Newsnight I guess you can't, you can't choose to get anything more B D
134 in depth out of it, because it's just not there. I don't know why, B D E
135 lifestyle wise, why I would feel the need to, it's - it's funny, it's B E
136 like y'know if you go away camping or somewhere like you're really
137 like out in the bush, out of touch. Sometimes when you come back
138 you feel, it feels a bit bizarre. There's all this stuff happening, like C
139 the President of the States could have been shot, Bolger could have C
140 been shot y'know, and there's been all these things happening, and C E
141 you don't know about them, and you feel weird. I'm not quite sure C E
142 why, but you feel..

APPENDIX THREE

SAMPLE WORKING ANALYSIS

The table on page 324 represents a consolidation of various NUD*IST reports on the interview transcript for Winona. Using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to bring the various analytical components together in this way provided a concise summary of the entire transcript. As mentioned in Chapter Five, NUD*IST allows the researcher to attach analytical memos to each node. These memos can contain extra contextual information, emerging thoughts, ideas and concepts. In this study, they were used to store the comments that appear in the table below (see the table elements marked *).

A3.1 Explanation of Table Elements

A3.1.1 Common

These table elements are common to all three interpretive sections of the table.

Text Units	The text units to which the analytical comments apply
±	The general direction of the vector. + represents centripetal, - represents centrifugal. Where both appear, it indicates that the vector can operate in either direction.



The grey-shaded areas correspond to the text-units contained in the interview extract that features in Appendices One and Two.

A3.1.2 Referential

In this section the focus is on the different ways in which viewers interpret the news from a referential perspective, and whether or not this draws them into or pushes them away from the engagement.

Object The particular aspect of the news (part of a story, the news reader, the news in general) that the viewer's discourse refers to.

Connection Is there a specific connection between the particular aspect of the news and the viewer's own life.

Notes Analytical comments.

A3.1.3 Critical-Syntactic

Critical-syntactic looks at how viewers interpret the news as a specific textual construction. Note that the analysis in this section of the table is divided into three distinct areas.

Treatment of Events How the viewer perceives the news as treating the various events that are reported.

Aspect of Construction The particular aspect of the news that is being referred to.

News as a Whole Reference to ‘the news’ rather than to a specific aspect of it.

A3.1.4 Critical-Pragmatic

Critical-pragmatic looks at how viewers interpret their own relationships with the news

Content/Structure Is the viewer talking about the content of the news or the way that it is structured?

General/Specific Is the reference to the news in general or to a specific aspect of it?

What Specifically The specific aspect that the viewer is talking about.

Impact on Rel’ship The impact that this general or specific feature has on the viewers relationship with the news.

A3.2 Table Showing Sample Working Analysis

See over.

REFERENTIAL				CRITICAL-SYNTACTIC			CRITICAL-PRAGMATIC								
Text Units	±	Object	Connec-tion	Notes	Text Units	±	Treatment of events	Aspect of Construction	News as a whole	Text Units	±	Content/Str ucture	General/S pecific	What Specifically	Impact on Ref'ship
										10-13	-	content	Gen		can adversely affect her sense of well-being
					19	-			lightweight (2Newsnight)	16-22	±	structure	Spe	time-schedule of news	determines if she will/not watch it
													Gen		can adversely affect her sense of well-being
										22-30	+	content	Spe	something important, big	determines if she will watch it
31-36	+	her 'home town', place of work etc.	YES	physically far, emotionally close	42-45	+	repetition of BIG news stories			41-45	+	content	Spe	Something big (America's Cup)	determines if she will watch it
48-48	+	liking' a presenter	YES	considering him NOT as a 'news person' but as a friend	49	-			'pretty slack'	48-51	+	content	Gen		can keep her 'in touch'
					53-55	+	does not cover real 'current events'		more entertaining	52-56	±	content	Spe	e.g. famine story	absence of this type of story from late news allows her to watch it
					61-62	-	narrow coverage		specific reference to 'stories'	61-62	-	content	Gen		lack of coverage prompts a reaction questioning what was not shown
					92-93	+			aimed=targetted=marketing	92-93	+	content	Gen		enables her to think she's seen something
112-114	+	The story itself	NO	Saying how 'dreadful' it is.											
										117-117	+	content	Gen		allows her to contribute to conversations about the news
										127-129	+	content	Spe	something that 'interested her'	determines if she will watch it
					133-135	-	lack of depth			133-135		content	Gen		reflexively questioning why she feels she needs to watch it
138-142		Events happening	NO							141-141		content	Gen	e.g. state leader shot	lack of = feeling 'weird'
170-171	-	Things the news covers	NO	NOT affecting her life.						168-171	-	content	Spe	e.g. state leader shot	lack of does not affect her
					401-402				specific mention of 'format'						
					404-405				changing from 30 min to 1 hr						
					410-410				repetition						
					413-414				talks of 'segments'	412-412		structure	Gen	of 2Newsnight	used for a specific reason
										443-444	+	structure	Gen		contributes to news watching becoming a ritual
										478-479	+	structure	Gen	c.f. newspaper	can 'get' the viewer visually and aurally
										487-488	±	structure	Spe	performance of news readers	can determine how a story is interpreted
										558-567	-	content	Spe	incl 'human anguish'	can adversely affect her sense of well-being
															determines what (and why) she does not watch
										576-582	-	content	Gen		has little to do with people believing that they are being informed
											+	structure	Gen		has everything to do with people believing that they are being informed
										706-711	-	content	Spe	Holmes on Aramoana	determines what (and why) she does not watch
											+	content	Spe	human disaster stories	determines why 'other' people watch

Table A3.1 Sample Working Analysis

APPENDIX 4

THE NEW ZEALAND TELEVISION ENVIRONMENT IN 1995

In 1995 the New Zealand television environment consisted of a mixture of public and private broadcasters. The major players in the market were the state-owned Television New Zealand with its twin-channel line-up of Television ONE and Channel 2, and the Canadian-owned CanWest consortium that broadcast TV3. All three major channels were commercial (i.e. they all screened advertisements), and were free-to-air with nation-wide coverage. In addition to the two main broadcasters, there were 5 regional and 1 subscription broadcaster operating in New Zealand in 1995. New Zealanders were required by law to pay an annual broadcasting fee of NZ\$110.00 through NZ On Air, a portion of which is then used to fund local television productions.

A4.1 Television New Zealand (TVNZ)

Operating since 1960 (firstly as the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, then from 1977 until 1980 as the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand), TVNZ was a fully commercial state-owned enterprise (SOE) broadcasting two nationwide free-to-air VHF networks: Television ONE and Channel 2. Television ONE catered for “viewers wanting a strong, information based service with quality entertainment, sports and drama” (Television Broadcasters’ Group, 1995: 20). Channel 2 provided viewers with a broad mixture of mainly light entertainment programmes including comedies, movies, talkshows, soap operas and music programmes. The target audience for Television ONE was 25-54 year olds, while Channel 2 was aimed at 18-44 year olds. Television One drew heavily on British-made programmes, while Channel 2 relied for the most part on American programmes and also a number of Australian productions.

A4.2 TV3

In 1995 TV3 was New Zealand's only privately owned and operated national television service. Canadian broadcaster Can West Global Communications held a 20% share of the company and managed the operations of TV3. The other major shareholder was Westpac Bank. TV3's programming mix was closer to that of Channel 2 than Television One, with a strong American content. Despite some early financial difficulties that resulted in receivers being called in, by 1995 TV3 had become firmly established in the television marketplace.

A4.3 Other Broadcasters

Of the remaining six broadcasters operating in 1995, five were regional based. The South Island was particularly well serviced with no fewer than four channels. Canterbury Television Limited (CTV) was the first regional television station established in New Zealand, broadcasting from 5.00pm until midnight, seven days a week since June 1991. CTV's programming mix consisted of local news and information as well as sports and imported drama, comedy and documentary programmes. CRY Television is also broadcast from Christchurch and its programming is music based, with 90% being formatted video clips (including a 30% New Zealand music content). The remaining 10% consisted of local live-to-air interviews and music-related events. The third South Island broadcaster was Mainland Television. Operating from Nelson and covering the top-half of the South Island, Mainland's programme content is 70% music, 20% local with the remainder a mixture of news and tourist information. The fourth South Island broadcaster was part of a nation-wide regional-based network — Horizon Pacific Television. A wholly owned subsidiary of Television New Zealand Limited, Horizon Pacific operated four city-based UHF television stations and was the biggest force in regional television with a reach of approximately 40% of New Zealand's population. The regions it covered were: the greater Auckland city area, the Waikato and Western Bay of Plenty (broadcasting from Hamilton), the greater Wellington city area, and Dunedin city. A typical prime-time schedule consisted of news and marketplace information between 6.00pm and 7.00pm followed by a locally anchored half-hour news show. Most nights this was followed by a 30-minute current affairs show with

a strong local content. At 8.00pm all four regions switched to a live satellite-delivered news bulletin from the BBC World Service. This was then followed by “quality documentaries, dramas, miniseries, movies...[or] other informational programming” (Ibid: 26). The North Island’s only another regional channel was Max The Music Channel (otherwise known as simply ‘The Max’). On air for 76 hours per week and limited to the greater Auckland city area, Max was committed to “playing the best variety of music in the world” (ibid.) and it also had a very strong New Zealand music content.

In 1995 New Zealand had one pay television network. SKY Network Television Ltd. began transmission on the ultra-high frequency in May 1990 and in five years had attained a subscriber base of 175,000 New Zealand homes. Originally comprising three channels — news (CNN), sport (ESPN) and movies (HBO)— SKY has subsequently added a documentary channel (Discovery) and a light-entertainment channel (Orange) to its stable. While viewers must pay to access these channels, there is one channel on the SKY network that is free-to-air. Trackside Channel brings free live-to-view racing (horses and dogs) to existing and potential race-goers.

At the time of writing (1999), there have been a number of changes to this environment. Regional-based television has almost completely disappeared, and in 1997 the number of free-to-air national channels was increased to four with the introduction of CanWest’s Channel 4. SKY Television has increased its number of channels to 7 and has recently introduced Satellite television, boosting the number of channels available to subscribers to over 50. The three main channels (ONE, 2, and 3) still dominate in terms of ratings, however, and there is little to suggest that this dominance will be challenged by future developments.

A4.4 Television News in New Zealand in 1995

In 1995 there were two main news programmes broadcast free-to-air every night. TVNZ’s *One Network News* screened on Television ONE for a commercial hour Monday to Friday, with the weekend bulletins running for a commercial half-hour. TV3’s *3 National News* followed the same schedule, and both bulletins began at 6.00pm. *One Network News* was anchored by a male/female team, with a separate sports anchor (varying week-to-week, male and female) and a regular weather

reporter (male). 3 *National News* had a single male anchor with a separate sports anchor (varying week-to-week, male) and a regular weather reporter (female). Both channels also screened a late-evening bulletin. Both Television ONE's *Primetime* and TV3's *Nightline* screened for a commercial half hour starting at 10.30pm, Monday to Friday. Channel 2 also had a late night news programme in the form of 2 *Newsnight* which screened at the same time.

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