

MEDIA CRITICISM AND SETTLING OPINION

26

Elliot Gaines

*Wright State University***Attracting Attention to Symbols of Symbols**

As a general rule, the media themselves are only messengers; the media provide a systematic context that is secondary to the messages that make sense to the audience on their own. The nature of the media affects the message because each medium transmits a distinct symbolic system of expression. As Sebeok said, "Each species produces and understands certain kinds of specific signs for which it has been programmed by its biology" (2001: 3). Each symbolic expression addresses signs to the audience through individually embodied biological receptors adapted to the codes of significance of the media. But much is taken-for-granted within cultural groups sharing elaborate systematic codes of communication.

By virtue of the media of mass communication, symbols of symbols are embedded in cultural codes reassembled and received with a potential sense of immediacy by individual members of mass audiences. The nature of narrative is symbolic in that stories are represented by systems of signs understood by members of a group who share knowledge of the codes that structure meanings. A newspaper article about the speech of a politician like the President of the US assumes the reader's knowledge of the language, context, and continuity of his political discourse. The same is true when video of the identical speech appears on TV or the Internet with the additional impact and emotion expressed by the sound, appearance, and verisimilitude of the immediate presence of the speaker. The technologies of the media make it possible to represent symbolic systems while overcoming the natural restrictions of time and space and making communication appear immediate and intimate when received.

The notion of *immediacy* refers to a sense of being present at an event even though the media only represent it after the fact and from far away from its original location. Thus the power of mass media is not just in their capacities to deliver ideas and information, but also in their ability to exploit the verisimilitude of representations that are received with a sense of intimacy and immediacy. In addition, the *third-person effect* hypothesis suggests that people generally believe that media affects others while they themselves are immune to being manipulated or persuaded unknowingly (Rojas, Shah, and Faber 1996:163). Audiences need to recognize that media affect every user because attention is drawn to intended meanings and inferences of consequences. Media are ubiquitous and enter personal space with a sense of immediacy that

gives contemporary mass communications and opinion leaders great power and access to people. Without critical thinking and media literacy, it is easy to assume a great deal about the media and the world of objects, ideas, and situations they represent.

The goal of media is to attract attention in order to successfully profit and sustain themselves. Secondly, media deliver information about issues and events, entertainment products that suggest social norms, attract attention to products, and influence the ethos of society. It's the audience, engaged in social discourse, which learns the codes and negotiates the veracity of representations intended to communicate a particular point-of-view.

The problems of media and “settling opinion”

The representational qualities of media phenomena are reasonable because they are logically developed from older, familiar signs that are continuous with established ideas. Media project a tacit *authority* to provide knowledge and expertise, but the credibility of media draws from its repetitive and persistent presence that simulates the continuity of signs necessary to logical reasoning. However, this is an illusion of veracity generated by the media that cannot substitute for verification. Part of the illusion is self-referential; media referring to (indexing) other media products or spokes-persons only demonstrates social discourse but does not provide evidence of any particular argument. In order to understand authentic verification, it is necessary to look at the methods of proposing opinions about the meanings of things.

Pierce described five general ways of “settling opinion” in order to achieve consensus about truth that include the methods of tenacity, authority, popular opinion, a priori, and the method of inquiry (CP 5.377-5.385; Liszka 1996: 99-104). Each of these methods are represented in the media, but only an “ongoing process of inquiry” can provide verification and consensus in the long run because “the possibility of truth rests on an appeal to the real, understood as something that cannot be changed by human convention [...]” (Liszka 1996: 102-03). The nature of actual existent phenomena are unaffected by opinions and interpretations drawn from various cultural perspectives. Scientific communities systematically test and peer-review the results of studies to verify the accuracy and validity of research methods and findings. General audiences lack the specialized knowledge of scientists and other expert communities that are necessary for understanding the details of rigorous science, scholarly research, and discipline-specific discourse of diverse specialties. Thus, media often provide lay descriptions of complex issues that enter into public debates.

Conventional fiction and non-fiction media employ Peirce’s various methods of “settling opinions,” and influence social discourse about facts, events, and speculations and their effects on beliefs and public policy (Peirce CP 5.377). The method of *tenacity* is an insistence that a belief is valid without considering evidence to the contrary (Liszka 1996: 100; CP 5.377). An argument based on *tenacity* will only prevail in isolation or if one has absolute

26. "Media Criticism and Settling Opinion" ❀ *Elliot Gaines*

power to influence. As media circulate ideas and information, *tenacity* should fail when contradictory opinions challenge unsubstantiated claims. Still, media audiences are so large that sheer *tenacity* persuades a great number of people who are inclined to accept a particular point-of-view regardless of opposing evidence. A Fox News Channel political commentator like Bill O'Reilly can insist on his own point-of-view and literally tell someone on his TV show who disagrees with him to shut-up. Any commentator or journalist can be mistaken about the facts or inferences of news events or political outcomes. But beyond simple courtesy in public discourse, O'Reilly uses *tenacity* as a communication strategy to dramatically demonstrate that he has the *authority* to silence an opposing opinion of anyone on his show.

The method of *authority* imposes beliefs on others because one has the brute power to do so (Liszka 1996: 100; CP 5.379). Generally used in order to sustain the control of those in power, imposing opinions on others works until evidence to the contrary is persuasive enough, and the power of *authority* can be resisted or overthrown. For example, consider the case of Hungarian obstetrician Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis who lived from 1818-65, and introduced antiseptic prophylaxis into medicine (Center for Disease Control 2008). Working in a maternity ward in Vienna he had observed that patients became ill and died after being examined by student physicians who had come directly from working in the morgue. Semmelweis experimented with antiseptic practices by simply insisting that students wash their hands before touching patients. His experiments resulted in reducing the death rate by 11% in 2 years (Centers for Disease Control). Still, physicians and hospital officials were insulted by his suggestion that they should wash their hands. Arguing that their methods were well established and correct, they ultimately had the *authority* to terminate Semmelweis and force him to leave Austria in 1850 (Centers for Disease Control 2008). After many years, the method of *inquiry* eventually overcame the *authority* of established medical practitioners of the times. Eventually the principles of antiseptic prophylaxis were accepted. Even though the general population may not understand the scientific reasons why these practices prevent the spread of disease, media helped to generate *popular opinion* that embraced basic hygienic behaviors like washing hands before engaging in medical procedures, eating, or handling food.

In contrast to a notion of *authority* based on brute force, the *authority* of the media is derived from its pervasiveness and capacity to promote complicity through identification with the dominant ideologies generally portrayed through the media. Exploiting the universal appeal of wealth and material comfort, media representations suggest that the general audience accept the values and beliefs of those with power. Audiences adopt values that are attractive and familiar, and eventually they can be developed to a level of acceptance that becomes *popular opinion*. However, *popular opinions* are still derived without verification. For example, opinions about the guilt or innocence of someone accused of a crime do not affect the truth, but can possibly influence the outcome of judicial decisions through the power of media.

While the media may not be unified in a conscious conspiracy to manufacture consent, cultural hegemony sustains the dominance of certain belief systems. Following the ideas of Walter Lippmann who served on President Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information, media propaganda has intentionally been employed to influence public opinion (Chomsky 2003: 5-6). Recognizing the advantages of gaining complicity rather than using coercion, powerful interests exploit the media in order to gain consensus for policies. Promoting themselves as messengers, the media attract attention to celebrity personalities, spokes-persons, and opinion-leaders that become familiar and attractive to the more diverse populations in the audience. To a great extent media spokes-persons are assumed *a priori* to be knowledgeable and to speak the truth in the public interest just because they have a presence in the media and subsequent access to audiences. Again, media personalities become familiar and self-referential creating an illusion of reason based on an internal logic of ideas that were not necessarily verified. Opinions based on fear and hatred affect emotions and rhetorically include some people in the audience and isolate others.

Commercial media promote lifestyles, consumerism, and dominant ideologies that appeals to the reasoning of the audience *a priori*, and maintains the values of existing power structures at the same time. The *a priori* method is comfortable because it seems reasonable, but it is also accepted without the rigor of testing its validity. According to Peirce (CP 5.382):

The most perfect example of it is to be found in the history of metaphysical philosophy. Systems of this sort have not usually rested upon any observed facts, at least not in any great degree. They have been chiefly adopted because their fundamental propositions seemed 'agreeable to reason'.

Considering that news events happen at remote locations, audiences can either accept or reject the reliability of journalists or opinion-leaders based on assumptions *a priori*. The *a priori* method appeals to what people already know or believe to be true and according to Peirce is very similar to the method of *authority*. "The very essence of it is to think as one is inclined to think. All metaphysicians will be sure to do that, however they may be inclined to judge each other to be perversely wrong" (CP 5.385). While commentators argue polemics and speculate on the inferences of policies and events, the news items and stories circulating among non-fiction media are remarkably consistent. Related topics with cultural significance appear in newspapers, magazines, on radio and TV, and the Internet creating cycles initiated by an event like the Olympics, a medical breakthrough, a government initiative, a high profile crime, a scandal, or a legal case. At some level beyond verification all news stories appeal to *a priori* assumptions that sustain what a particular demographic audience is inclined to think about the inferences of events conveyed by the media.

The *a priori* method appeals to a universal sense of reason that is com-

26. "Media Criticism and Settling Opinion" ❀ *Elliot Gaines*

fortable to an individual or group but does not necessarily accept the *authority* or *popular opinions* of others (CP 5.382; Liszka 1996:101). An example of the *a priori* method is a continuing debate that challenges the validity of science and scientific methods. Advancing familiar ideas and habits of reasoning, opinion-leaders use the media to argue that scientists do not all agree or that scientific opinions change and are therefore unreliable. Determined to maintain the dominance of a political ideology, religion, or economic model, the *a priori* method fails to prepare opinion-leaders to recognize scientific inquiry as a perpetual search for evidence of facts that need further verification in specifically situated contexts. Thus, a community of scientists recognizes their own fallibility as an asset. With an understanding that the method of *inquiry* is a continuing process of observing, openly questioning, and testing validity, scientists do not assume they are correct *a priori*, they reject beliefs based on *tenacity*, resist control by *authority* and are not influenced by *popular opinion* (Liszka 1996: 103).

In contrast to science, fiction media use artistic representations that resemble the real and creatively describe the qualities of actual experiences. Writers always re-present ideas derived from experience and observation within stories about characters and events. Fiction writers specialize in crafting descriptions simulating reality that amplify aspects of experience without a direct attempt to be accurate about actual events. Still the emotional and poetic qualities of fiction narrative evoke empathetic feelings through identification with the realistic qualities of the events and experiences of the characters in a story. In this way, fiction relies on the methods of *a priori* and *popular opinion* to sustain belief in the affective realism of a fiction narrative.

Similarly, in the guise of serving the public interest, non-fiction media persistently engage in political discussions that are staged to appear to be representative of the general population involved in democratic social discourse. Spokes-persons claim to have *authority* because they have the power of the media to amplify their opinions, and they can appear to speak for others in the general population. Opinion-leaders who insist with *tenacity* that their ideas and solutions are correct even if they have no evidence and there are signs to the contrary, appeal to *popular opinion* as if consensus was evidence. Such political discussions suggest that the actual conditions of the world can be negotiated and that *popular opinion* can somehow resolve conflicts about the nature of the truth and the material nature of the universe.

News media have traditionally regarded objectivity as the notion that reporters can describe real events without speculation or opinions. The ideal of journalism is based on observation and the principles of *inquiry*, but the *authority* of any given media is negotiated in the audience through *popular opinion*. While the ideals of objective journalism have been effectively debunked, traditional journalists maintain an ethos of accountability and independence while maintaining a clear distinction between verifiable facts and opinions that are based on speculations. People who own and control the media have the power to assert the method of *authority* and readily exploit the poten-

tial of propaganda to maintain particular beliefs and promote specific ideas. Fox News, for example, targets a particular demographic audience who want their *popular opinions* validated by the *authority* of the network.

Speaking of the appeal of *authority* Peirce stated, “For the mass of mankind, then, there is perhaps no better method than this. If it is their highest impulse to be intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain” (CP 5.380). While similar to Lippman’s elite determination to control public opinion, from his 19th century perspective Peirce could not have anticipated the powerful influence and extensive reach of 21st century media technologies. Still, authentic verification depends on observation and a community of inquiry that necessarily are “[...] subject to investigation, since they are fallible and subject to genuine doubt” (Liszka 1996:102).

Semiotics and Media Literacy

Media and technologies empower writers and producers to selectively focus attention on objects and ideas, and distribute them without the natural constraints of space and time. Media consumers need logical methods to engage in effectively understanding media. Those methods must specifically address the conditions of media production (such as quotas and deadlines) and the motivations of producers (such as profits or ideological agendas), and consider the contexts and identities that affect individual reception and interpretation. Semiotics provides the descriptive tools necessary to developing media literacy by addressing the processes that distinguish media communications.

The role of semiotics is to study the relationships between signs and the objects, ideas, events and meanings that they stand for, and to understand how signs produce other signs that determine meanings that translate into the actions of interpreters. Semiotics is descriptive, but does not resolve the issues communicated by the subject of its observations. Rather, semiotics can illuminate the processes that communicate and produce meanings, describe the limits of knowledge expressed through certain representational and interpretive processes, and facilitate critical discourse about the certainty of what can be known.

References

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION.

2008. “Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis” *Emerging Infectious Diseases: The Cover*. vol. 7 no. 2. March-April 2001. The Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.cdc.gov/NCIDOD/EID/vol7no2/cover.htm>.

CHOMSKY, Noam.

2004. *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Henry Holt and Company).

LISZKA, James.

26. "Media Criticism and Settling Opinion" ❀ Elliot Gaines

1996. *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

PEIRCE, Charles S.

i.1866–1913. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, in 8 vols., ed. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958); all eight vols. in electronic form ed. John Deely with an Introduction "Membra Ficta Disjecta — A Disordered Array of Severed Parts" (Charlottesville, VA: InteleX Corporation, 1994). Dating within the CP is based on the Burks Bibliography at the end of CP 8. The abbreviation followed by volume and paragraph numbers with a period between follows the standard CP reference form.

ROJAS, Hernando, Dhavan V. Shah, and Ronald J. Faber.

1996. "For The Good Of Others: Censorship and The Third-Person Effect." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. Vol 8. no. 2 pp 163-186. Oxford Journals. <http://ijpor.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/8/2/163>

SEBEOK, Thomas A.

2001. *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (2nd ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press).