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What we should look for in television news

Spectacle and excitement

Something that frustrates many viewers of television news bulletins is the emphasis on spectacle and excitement over and above explanation and understanding. How many times have we watched an item on the evening news and come away shocked and perturbed, but none the wiser about the events covered? Hard-boiled, unquestionably courageous, professional journalists – often motivated above everything else by high public principles – are sent hither and thither across a region of the globe to pick up and run with the latest story, quickly attempting to understand the basic gist of what's been going on in order to be able to put together a 2- or 3-minute package. Some of these journalists will, in fact, have been covering a region for years on end and will have an in-depth background knowledge of their subject matter. Others have a more rudimentary knowledge, but have alternative skills valued by their networks, fluency perhaps, or screen presence. Even in the former case, one has a sense that the exigencies of the television news format radically constrain and channel the quality of information journalists are able to convey. Social theory can do little to directly affect many of the institutional, commercial, logistical and other pressures that create these constraints. It can, however, shed a good deal of light on the quality of the news and current affairs diet we are ultimately provided with. It can offer intellectual resources to strengthen the powers of interpretation and assessment available to audiences and to journalists, who may or may not have the autonomy to make use of them in their professional lives.

For the news channels themselves, conveying knowledge often seems to be less important than getting journalists and the cameras to where the action

is, and, even more important, to have their journalists be seen to be where the action is. Sometimes it does matter where journalists are, when the authority we accord to what they tell us requires that we know they've witnessed something first hand, or that their presence *in situ* can in other ways assure us of the authority of their message. However, on many occasions it is by no means self-evident that their presence provides them with any special authority. At the extreme, we've all seen the rather forlorn, vaguely comic, pictures of a reporter, who is unable for one reason or another to be in the country he or she is talking about, speaking from just across the border in a neighbouring country, or from that second country's capital city. The message is that they aren't exactly where the action is, which is implied to matter in and of itself, but they're pretty close. The unspoken assumption is that to unlock the secrets of a news story, to really grasp the essence of what is going on, one has to be there or thereabouts. News authenticity consequently means having feet on the ground, a familiar face speaking to camera, preferably out of breath and dishevelled, with the story's ambient noises palpably present, whether these are the sounds of vehicles, the clamour of people scurrying, scuffling, marching, calling out their demands or their insults, or plaintively pleading for their plight to be recognized. There may also be the resonant rattle of gunfire, explosive reverberations from mortars, bombs and other killing devices, and, of course, the sights and the sounds of hardship, suffering and grief, often very hard to watch, all providing audiences back home with the vicarious sense-experience of being there. Sometimes, tragically, the journalists themselves become the victims.

Visually evocative background settings, also, are a deep-seated part of the news package. Settings are invoked in familiar tableaux: the desolate, boarded up shops and homes of an American mid-western automobile town; listless clusters of distracted men, at home in the middle of the day, set against billowing washing lines and the surrounding moorland of a Yorkshire mining village; the sight of saffron-robed monks on dusty tracks, standing out in sculpted relief against lush green tropical vegetation, as they demonstrate against the military junta in Burma; the intermittent lighting up of the sky in Baghdad, Belgrade or some other city, as it is attacked from the air; and the white and variously stained, sun-drenched, flat-roofed dwellings, palm trees, fences and checkpoints in Gaza or the West Bank. With the right treatment, such images can capture the imagination; they can potentially give a greater sense of what it feels like to suffer certain experiences, to be able to stand in the shoes of the people at the heart of a story.

But in reality, sounds, settings and suffering by themselves, and as palpable and intense as they are, are not enough to sustain anything more than a generic sense of fellow-feeling, coupled with a sense of having seen the same thing many times before. The fragmented, disembedded nature of what we

are shown, and the speed with which one story flows into another, leaves us feeling disorientated, dizzy. Or it does if we continue to pay attention and try to make sense of it. History comes across as cyclical and unchangeable – what goes around comes around – and this typically engenders fatalism, an overwhelming sense that it would be futile to try and change the course of this interminable wheel of inevitable and homologous events.

There are *two key, related reasons* for these feelings of vertigo and fatalism. The *first* is the absence of co-ordinates to provide viewers with a sense of orientation, so that they can understand how the events on camera are related to the conditions and processes that surround those events, that led up to them, that played major roles in causing them to happen. This is the absence of what I will refer to throughout the book as a suitable *contextual field*. By this I mean the provision of contextualizing markers that would somehow manage to offer an adequate-enough map of the primary institutional and individual actors, networks, forces, pressures, dynamics and histories that are relevant to the moments of action we witness on our screens. Many aspects of this contextual field will not be visible in the action, in the events on screen, but without them the events would not have happened. They are the necessary conditions of existence of the events on camera, but for the most part their existence is elsewhere. These are conditions such as the decisions of corporate managements to close car factories or coal mines that are deemed to be uneconomic. They are sequences of networked conditions such as those created by the Burmese military dictatorship in the trade deals it negotiated with influential foreign powers, creating the financial conditions for its own survival, which, in turn, allowed it to continue its abuse of human rights and to curtail the freedom of speech of political dissenters. It is only the final stages of this latter sequence – the protests against these abuses and curtailments – that we see on camera. These influences on the events captured by television news might be at the other end of the city or on the other side of the globe, and so they are absent spatially from the events we see, but their various effects are transmitted to where the action is, and to what the action is. They thus have a presence in the events that are shown to us, even though they are not visible.

A key question to ask of any news story is consequently: What is its *relevant* contextual field? That is, in thinking about the what, where, when, who and how of the events that are spoken about or are captured on camera, we need to understand that there is more to understanding each of these things than what we see before our eyes. In the course of the book I shall argue that audiences need to initially try and map what they can of this field on the basis of the raw material provided in the story itself. The journalists producing the stories will be more or less helpful in facilitating and guiding such a process. The mapping needs to have a geographical, spatial dimension, providing a basic orientation as to how current institutions, individuals and

forces – wielding variable powers – zone in from near and far to contribute their bit to the events in the field of vision. The mapping also needs a historical, temporal dimension, because the contextual field relevant to any event – the field relevant to the production of that event – will have its own history, and at its most palpable this history will have conveyed into the present such things as technology, infrastructure, hierarchies of power, distributions of wealth and so on. It will also have conveyed less tangible, but just as powerful, cultural elements such as memories, values, affiliations and grievances.

Precisely which parts of the contextual field will be relevant to a particular story will depend on that story's focus and claims, and we will return to this point through the book. The raw material that television news stories provide for mapping the contextual field will vary a good deal, both in terms of what a story actually covers and in terms of the degree of detail and precision with which it covers it. It is important for audiences to be highly attuned to this variability.

The *second* reason for the sense of dizziness and hopelessness news often conveys is that the absence of a contextual field is typically compounded by an additional absence. This is the lack of a genuine, empathetic engagement with the experience of the people that news accounts focus upon. Social theory calls this the 'hermeneutic' engagement.¹ Such engagement has the potential to add ballast to the spinning-top of news, to slow it down, to allow one to focus for more than a split second on those involved. It requires imaginative sympathy with the characters in focus, such that concerted effort is made to understand something of their cultural worldviews, including such things as what they most care about in life,² what their memories, sensibilities and mental scars are, what they wish for – or wished for – and how any of these affect the ways in which they experience the events in focus. If it's the case that news can't provide any of this, and shouldn't be expected to, then we should be cognizant of this. Its absence should be emblazoned in lights within the interpretative schemes we bring to our readings; we would need to fully and clearly recognize the relative poverty of such accounts when compared to the enriching accounts of interior lives captured in other genres, from in-depth oral histories to the great novels of world literature.

If it is the case that there is a relative dearth of empathy and imaginative sympathy in television news, then a further element that is key to the uprooted quality of news follows from this. For without focused engagement on the subjectivity of the social actors who appear in news stories, it is logically impossible to look at the ways in which that subjectivity is inhabited by the socio-structural context in which it lives, and which it constantly negotiates. It is not possible to situate these interior worlds in relation to such things as the objective social networks of roles, duties and obligations that impinge upon them. It would be difficult to over-emphasize this point, as it means

that we can't anchor the subjective viewpoints of actors in their own sense of the dynamic nexus of social forces, power relations, expectations, pressures, potential sanctions and rewards, risks and dangers that provides them with their context. Subjective viewpoints are indeed 'subjective' and part of subjectivity is a potential to look at things differently from the ways society expects, and to resist social injunctions to do things in a particular way. However, while actors are not entirely determined by social situation, their relationship to their social context is far from being completely arbitrary or wilful. Subjective points of view, and the socialization processes that help to produce them, are not formed in a vacuum, but in relation to a particular contextual field. What actors feel, do and say can only be understood once they are placed within this context.

We consequently need to know how the contextual field 'out-there' enters 'in-here', how it is internalized in the minds of the subjects of the news stories, how it gets under the skin of the people and institutions that appear on the television screen. We need to know how it articulates with their ideals, values and cultural orientations. To do this we need empathy complemented by a sense of how those we empathize with experience the social relations or structures of the contextual field in which they are positioned. This means that a cultural, 'hermeneutic' engagement needs to be complemented by an awareness of how the subjectivity of those actors is grounded in, anchored in, a set of socio-structural relations provided by the relevant contextual field. We could refer to this as a 'hermeneutic-structural' engagement.³

This should affect how we approach news stories. If we feel that stories should be designed to elicit empathy, then we need to make a distinction between a kind of disembodied, universal empathy for all human beings and a more grounded, fleshed-out attempt to understand what it feels like to be a particular person in a particular time and place. More context is required for viewers to gain an adequate level of understanding about how it feels to be the person in the lens of the camera at that place at that time, rather than how it feels to be any person caught up in a roughly equivalent generic set of circumstances. Insisting upon the significance of the specificity of events means that one can situate particular people, with their unique names and biographies, within the push and pull of the specific what, where and when of the forces and dynamics within the story at hand. The universal, disembodied kind of empathy doesn't really require us to know something about a person's everyday concerns, who they care about, what their worries are and what lies ahead of them in the coming weeks and months. The more grounded, embodied kind of empathy does require these things, and it is then a small step to want to understand more about the social structures and relations which have conspired to make that person's life one dominated by fear, insecurity, poverty, ill-health or loneliness. For a journalist, or a viewer, to understand

what everyday life feels like for this person, and also to have insights into whether things could conceivably be otherwise, and if so then how this might come about, then a good deal of background, situating context is required.

These points have direct implications for the feelings of fatalism and hopelessness induced by television news. For, as with situated actors, if engaged viewers are to be able to look for ways of improving a situation, are to be able to reflect upon whether resistance, protests, changes in consciousness or innovative policies are likely to make a positive difference, then they need to be able to objectively position actors within a mapping of the relevant contextual field. They also need to understand how these structural things look, subjectively, for the variously positioned people within this field. Part of this will involve understanding how things look from the perspective of those without power and part of this will mean understanding how they look for those with power. These are essential prerequisites for thinking responsibly about political strategy. So, the first reason for vertigo and fatalism is the lack of a *contextual field* in which to place a news story, and the second reason is the lack of a *hermeneutic-structural* engagement with the people that television news tells us about.

It would clearly be asking a lot of television news if we were to demand that it tries to fully address both of these issues. Only a moment's reflection is required to see that it is probably unfair and inappropriate to criticize television news for not being entirely satisfactory in its treatment of these matters. But should it do more than it does? At this point I want to leave the question hanging as a potentially fruitful quandary about just how much we should expect from television news, or from any other genre of news and current affairs for that matter. It is surely possible to expect too much. In part this is why I want to place much of the onus of my claims for social theory on the greater depth of awareness it could provide for audiences. In later chapters I will focus on the tools which social theory can provide to enable audiences to do more with what is given to them. For the moment, however, I will use the framework I've introduced as a backdrop against which to say more about what television news actually does provide and the various ways in which this is objectively limited.

Amusing ourselves to death

Nearly 30 years ago, Neil Postman, a professor of communication arts and sciences at New York University, composed an argument about the limitations of television as a source of education that helps to explain why the landscape of television news is as it is. Postman didn't confine his argument just to

television's news output, but he definitively included television news within his compass. He was concerned to focus on all kinds of nominally serious television. His argument can usefully be read as an explanation for television's preoccupation with spectacle and excitement, and its propensity to present an interminable litany of potentially interchangeable events. Equally, it illuminates why television channels would be likely to resist any suggestion that television news should provide more of the kinds of context, specificity and structural-hermeneutics essential to raise reporting to a higher level. The argument also sheds more light on the characteristics of television news we've already mentioned. It should be noted that Postman's argument is directed most evidently at commercial television, and that there will be some important differences, and perhaps more hope for optimism, when one looks at public service broadcasting.⁴ There will also, however, be significant similarities.

Writing in the US context, Postman's book, entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, focused on how the values of entertainment had increasingly encroached upon the world of news and current affairs.⁵ This, he argued, was a phenomenon closely linked to the significance accorded to ratings and advertising revenues. Given the importance of these revenues to news channels, it was clear that the media was increasingly reluctant to make demands on its audience lest they vote with their feet, switching to another channel or switching off. This had major implications for the capacity of television to promote quality news and current affairs programmes with a view to educating audiences. If keeping the audience away from other channels were to be the primary goal then this had a knock-on effect on the kind of programming that could be tolerated.

Postman took the implications of this seriously, and trenchantly criticized the idea of news as entertainment. He broadened the critique to cover television's more general advancement of a philosophy of education based on simply pleasing and entertaining the audience. Those in today's higher education world who embrace the results of student satisfaction surveys without the hint of qualification would well heed his reasoning. Even by the mid-1980s there had already been a rapid dissolution of education organized 'around the slow moving printed word, and the equally rapid emergence of a new education based on the speed-of-light electronic image'.⁶ Postman felt it was necessary to face up to the consequences of this, and particularly to what he called the three commandments that form the philosophy of education associated with television. Each of these commandments has a bearing on the ability of television to provide sufficient background context for a story to be understood, both in terms of information and in terms of how to conceptualize that information.

The first of these commandments was said to be, 'thou shalt have no prerequisites', meaning that the idea of building up of a body of knowledge

over time, constructing edifices of understanding brick by brick, could not be countenanced except at the most minimal of levels. This commandment fed into television's mission to 'exclude no viewer for any reason, at any time'. The second commandment was captured as 'thou shalt induce no perplexity', lest the intellectual demands made encourage the viewer to switch to another channel:

This means that there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied or, worst of all, endured. It is assumed that any information, story or idea can be made immediately accessible, since the contentment, not the growth, of the learner is paramount.⁷

The third commandment, which Postman believes is the most formidable, is 'thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt'. Taken together, these commandments, says Postman, mean that television teaching always takes the form of storytelling, conducted through dynamic images and supported by music, and it gives short shrift to serious, rigorous and sustained '[a]rguments, hypotheses, discussions, reasons, refutations or any of the traditional instruments of reasoned discourse'. The name we properly give, says Postman, to education without *prerequisites*, *perplexity* or *exposition*, is entertainment.⁸

Postman's arguments are made with the United States of 30 years ago in mind, but they are generalizing arguments. Whether it is always like this, and if it is, then whether it will always have to be like this, should be open questions. And it is equally worth asking if some countries or some media organizations have managed to confront these challenges more adequately than others and also if there has been any movement and change over time. In any event, Postman's observations have enough truth in them to be worthy of serious reflection.

Seeing beyond the immediate spectacle

The very idea of asking audiences to approach news stories with the notion of a contextual field in mind is a statement of the need for prerequisites – *conceptual prerequisites*. It is to insist on the idea of the contextual field as a conceptual prerequisite for understanding, one that provides the background categories with which audiences can interpret whatever exposition is made available. The contextual field is designed to direct audiences to look for the positional markers in a story required to situate events within an appropriate context.

In writing about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, academics Greg Philo and Mike Berry, associated with the Glasgow University Media Group, work implicitly with something akin to the idea of a contextual field. They criticize the failure of television news in the United Kingdom to provide the informational raw material that could populate a contextual field. What they say reinforces Postman’s points by illustrating the extent to which television news avoids the exposition, and the potential perplexity, that would be required to sufficiently place news events in a meaningful context. They argue, specifically, for the inclusion of more historical context. Surely, they say, viewers should be told that ‘when Israel was created in 1948, a large number of Palestinians were displaced from their homes and became refugees’, and that ‘many of these people then went to live on the West Bank of the Jordan, in East Jerusalem and in Gaza, all of which were subsequently occupied by Israel in the war of 1967. The Palestinians subsequently lived under Israeli military control which they bitterly contested. . .’.⁹ They later note the BBC’s failure to properly explain the ongoing nature of the military occupation imposed by Israel on the Palestinians, quoting radio references to ‘building’ in East Jerusalem, wondering ‘if BBC journalists will ever run out of euphemisms for describing this’.¹⁰ They poke fun at the idea that there isn’t enough time in a short bulletin to unpack what ‘building’ might mean:

This vague description conveys very little of what is at stake. Actually what the Israelis were doing was putting houses for their own people in a city which they had taken by force. It does not take long to say this.¹¹

Any mention of Israel and Palestine, of course, immediately raises the spectre of ideological perspective, of the side from which a story is being told, and what this means for standards of objectivity. Suffice to say that from whatever perspective a story is being told, the issues of context and specificity remain the same, and are always critical for questions of the status and adequacy of an account. The ability to assess the status and adequacy of any news account from any perspective is key to the argument of this book.

The kind of historical information that Philo and Berry suggest could easily be included in news stories is still really quite rudimentary. It is certainly much less than the sum total of information we would ideally like citizen viewers to possess as they carry out the work of forming their opinions. Television news would have to change quite radically in order to provide enough of the kind of positioning and specificity required for the formation of well-informed, politically educated citizens. The truth, for now, is that television news stories very often end up being virtually interchangeable, one with the other, with the sounds, the commentary and the images of a story from Syria appearing to be very much like one from Iraq or Egypt. This is precisely because the

stories are too free-floating; they lack a grounding in their context. They are presented without provision of that background knowledge that would allow us to understand the nature of their positioning, and to grasp enough of the detailed processes that have led to things ending up this way. We are told almost nothing about such things as the various *causes* of the news event, about why the news event has happened now rather than last week or last year, about the relative strength of the various forces involved, or of what kinds of solutions would be possible within this context and the odds for or against these happening. Instead of specific contexts and processes, clearly conveyed, we have the same journalists in different places, wearing roughly the same clothes, ducking and diving, exuding the same urgency and spirit, implying or openly stating their moral condemnation of one side or the other and displaying what comes across as genuine, unaffected concern for the plight of the suffering. It is often only the visual backdrops and the names of leaders or groupings that provide some cues to geographical context. Social critics have referred disparagingly to these tendencies of news bulletins as a preoccupation with 'hot live action' or the 'bang bang stuff', deriding the way in which the preference for the dramatic moment or spectacle – with one of that station's own journalists in its midst – crowds out any space for the provision of the context and the causal explanation required for real understanding.

Excessive expectations of television news

But this brings us back to the question of what we should expect from television news. Perhaps its job is simply – but vitally – to alert us when something newsworthy is happening. It tells us the bare bones. We certainly shouldn't expect it to deliver all the intellectual raw material necessary for effective citizenship. We need to balance a concern that we get the best out of television news with an acceptance that there will always be limits to what it can provide. Television news alone will be more or less adequate as a source depending upon the degree of depth a viewer requires on a particular subject. For getting a greater depth on a subject, we need to conceive of informed citizens reading across genres of news and current affairs, and supplementing this, where necessary, with recourse to the arts, humanities and natural sciences. Television news can be complemented by news, feature and opinion pieces in broadsheet newspapers or magazines; by documentary films; by long pieces in periodicals such as the *New York Review of Books* or the *London Review of Books*; by fiction or drama in its many forms; or by academic journal articles and books. The home pages of television channels

such as the BBC, Al Jazeera, or the ABC in Australia, or those of broadsheet newspapers across the globe, now provide an invaluable resource for 'reading across' stories and genres, filling in gaps by following trails of links to further stories from within and outside that organization. Video links are combined with the written word, and timelines and background summaries can be found on most topics. All of this can be supplemented, of course, by a constant flow of alerts, notifications and feeds, more or less tailored to an individual's preoccupations. There is still, of course, the issue of trust and the essential checking and double-checking of the veracity of facts and information, something that is quite rightly close to the heart and the integrity of traditional journalism.

These webs of information can provide more of the information we would ideally want citizens to possess. By themselves, however, they wouldn't provide the 'ways of seeing' necessary to make adequate sense of the information, or to develop an appropriate response to it. For this we would need to return to the question of how to marshal and make sense of all the information. This requires guidance from social theory – from the stocks of systematic reflections on social phenomena – as to how to conceptualize social entities and processes and how to link these concepts to the many fragments of empirical evidence that assail us.

I have begun to argue that the place to anchor this conceptualization is within a contextual field. We start by identifying the contextual field relevant to the story at hand and to the key arguments or concerns of the account.

If the story were about power, then in order to provide the relevant context, we would want an idea as to who was wielding the decisive influence and authority, what interests and values were informing the use of it and what kinds of interests and values were held by those suffering from it, or resisting it. Further, we would want to ask how much power these latter, weaker, groups had, and whether all of these groups had reasonable claims to legitimacy. Once we had made some inroads into these still very basic questions then – if we were interested in remedies, solutions – we could begin to surmise, and even begin to explore, whether it would be possible for some alliance of groups to put a stop to illegitimate uses of power. Alternatively, we might decide that fatalism is indeed the necessarily appropriate response. All this involves a form of mental mapping, and I will say more about this in the next chapter. For now, the important message is that the world of social theory is a world in which more demanding questions can be asked about the raw material of news and current affairs. It is a world in which it is important to draw attention to the lack of relevant context and specificity in a news story, and to try and work through which ways of thinking, and what kinds of background information are most relevant to the events that a news story is covering.

Media frames and audience skills

How a story is told can help or hinder the intuitive propensity of audiences to place events within a contextual field. A set of fascinating experiments bearing on this point were carried out in the 1980s and published in the early 1990s by Shanto Iyengar, then professor of Communication Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research noted that when poverty was covered in the news, which was rarely, it tended to be covered in what he called an *episodic frame*. This meant it only talked about a specific incident, cut off from its structural context and typically presented from a human-interest angle. In his experiments, three examples of news stories presented in episodic frames – which according to Iyengar amounted to 66 per cent of all news stories on poverty – were shown to audiences.¹² One was a report on the high cost of heating, which described a particularly harsh winter in the upper Midwest, focusing on two families who were unable to pay their heating bills. A second, entitled 'Homeless', focused on two black teenagers living on the streets of New York City and a white couple living in their car in San Diego. And a third story described the financial difficulties facing the family of an unemployed car worker in Ohio. The participants in the experiment were asked to watch these kinds of news stories, with Iyengar correctly hypothesizing that their episodic framing would influence the viewers to hold the poor people themselves responsible for their predicament. This was even more so in cases such as the story involving the black teenagers, because of deeply rooted cultural preconceptions – background categories – about race and welfare issues.¹³ This latter observation says a good deal about the importance of the predispositions that audiences bring with them to their interpretation of news texts, something which I will return to shortly.

These reactions, of blaming individuals, contrasted with responses to stories that used what Iyengar called a *thematic frame*, a frame that placed poverty in a broader context, documenting an increase in national poverty, marked reductions in the scope of federal social welfare programmes, and the implications for poverty of the management and regulation of the federal budget deficit. When this broader thematic frame was used, pointing towards socio-structural factors making a difference, responsibility for the plight of individuals tended to be attributed, instead, towards government and society: 'poverty was depicted in terms of collective or societal outcomes and trends'.¹⁴ I see this sketching out of a broader thematic frame as an important part of what it means to provide a more adequate contextual field for news stories, which means positioning them in relation to the wider socio-structural environment, rather than treating the stories as somehow free-floating, emerging out of thin air.

The forces and dynamics of the immediate socio-structural environment in which people experience poverty have an objective reality, and one that will involve all kinds of local features mixing in with more national and global dimensions. Because of this, it is important to both embrace and go beyond the broad, macro, contours of the kind of thematic frame identified by Iyengar. More can be said about this thematic frame, and its implications for macro-, meso- and micro-issues, and much of the rest of the book will be devoted to doing this through an elaboration of how we approach the contextual field. The meso-level issue is at the heart of my argument. It's necessary to zoom in to this middle ground, to identify all the most relevant contextual forces encroaching on, constraining and so on, the lives of the various subjects of the kinds of news stories drawn upon by Iyengar. The macro – national and global – forces will still be present in their effect, at this middle ground, but they will have local manifestations. Zooming in, attempting to map something of all of the most important contextual structures impinging on lived lives, is required if we are to try and grasp the nature of the objective forces these people are subject to. It is also important, however, to understand how these *objective* factors put their stamp on the people's *subjective* experience, on their inner realities. It will hopefully become clearer and clearer as the book proceeds, that this interplay between objective forces and subjective experience lies at the heart of what takes place in the events news stories cover, whether or not news stories pay attention to them. Dynamics, forces and subjective experiences differ from place to place, situation to situation, and if these fail to be understood by journalists, or if they grasp them but fail to convey them in their news bulletins, then the essential texture of those people's reality will be lost. News stories will end up simply presenting generic, empty stereotypes of conflict, the last story interchangeable with the next and the next interchangeable with the last.

Iyengar's findings reveal how the framing of news by those who produce it has effects on audiences that are 'unnoticed'. The experiments demonstrate that audience responses are profoundly affected by producers' decisions to frame stories in episodic or thematic ways, and they also show that viewers were unaware of these effects. This points to the profound ability of textual 'framings' to elicit certain responses from people. These effects will be particularly pronounced when the viewers in question are not primed to take some critical distance from the news stories they are exposed to. This is not a straightforward matter of general levels of education; Iyengar's audiences tended to be more educated, more affluent and more politically engaged than one would have found in a representative sample of the American electorate. Rather, it is a matter of drawing attention to the critical tools – the background preconceptions and categories intuitively drawn on in responding

to stories – that are brought to the interpretation of news stories, and to ask what can be done to cultivate and educate these.

These categories and preconceptions, which have been elucidated by the phenomenological tradition in social theory,¹⁵ have the same basic structure as the more general sets of background understandings we bring to our interpretations of plays, films and political dramas, and more broadly to all our interactions in everyday life. They determine how we intuitively think about things. Given the significance of news to democratic citizenship, and the significance of the quality of background capacities to the interpretation of news, it's clear that it should be an intrinsic part of education to heighten awareness of what they are, how they work and whether we think they are adequate to the task. Iyengar was able to point to background preconceptions among his sample, triggered particularly by episodic accounts, in which exposure to actors possessing certain combinations of race, gender, age and marital status (i.e. black adult single mothers) was automatically translated into assumptions of individual responsibility, without any sense of a need for an understanding of social forces and pressures. This lack of ability to think in categories of *social structure*, and of individuals being embedded within social structures, is of key importance. It points to something deficient in the quality, durability and resilience of the background understandings that Iyengar's viewers brought to their interpretation of sociopolitical issues.

The notion of social structure is difficult to pin down once and for all, making sure none of its characteristics have been left out of a definition or characterization. It can be usefully thought of as all those elements – such as the structured distribution of resources and the structured organization of social interactions, with all their hierarchies, rules, rewards, sanctions and expectations – that provide the context within which individual and institutional actors do whatever they do. Because of this, for my purposes, it can often be thought of as synonymous with the contextual field. Where someone is positioned within social structures, either at birth or at a later point, will have a profound effect on their subsequent life chances. The aspects of social structure most written about and discussed in both academic and non-academic literature are those related to political power, class and occupation, gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, disability, sexuality and access to housing and services, including education and health services. The social structural context presents actors with a variety of constraints, depending upon where they are situated within it, and it can also, of course, provide opportunities, empowerment and so on, the character and extent of which also depend upon one's situation. Notions such as status and stigma, and of differential levels of cultural capital¹⁶ (to do with levels of education; manners of speech, dress, gesture, comportment; aesthetic tastes; cultural knowledge; and so on), overlap with the categories just mentioned, and

are often derived from them in various ways. All are deeply embedded as structural categories that provide the possibilities available to individuals, and which imprint themselves on who they are.

Emphasizing social structure means moving away from accounts of the world that place all the emphasis on individual actors, blaming them entirely for everything that befalls them, or praising their efforts and talents, and these alone, when they succeed in some way. What individuals experience, how they act in the world, and with what degrees of success or frustration, will certainly depend to a degree on their own agency, but it will also depend to a huge extent on the socio-structural cards they have been dealt, and on the cards they continue to be dealt as they navigate their way through life. There are many things in their lives, and the context of their lives, that people can neither control nor influence.

Media frames and social-theoretical frames

As long as audiences are unaware of the mechanisms at work in news stories, and so are unable to protect themselves from their effects, power is well and truly lodged in media accounts and how they are framed. The idea of 'media frames' is used widely by academics in contemporary media and communications studies to indicate the perspectives and categories through which people read news stories, and through which they are constructed in the first place. Iyengar's experiments demonstrated the ability of frames to manipulate the sample audiences of that time, place and culture, albeit that much of this was probably unintentional on the part of journalists. We should be concerned by the vulnerability of audiences that such studies imply, and by the relatively low level of current affairs literacy that this entails. Iyengar's use of the idea of media frames is ultimately very broad brush, with the episodic frame representing a more individualistic, free-floating, presentation of events and the thematic frame broadly representing a more structural presentation. I want to develop and deepen a form of audience literacy that takes Iyengar's thematic, structural, frame as just the starting point for its readings.

Before moving on to explore the structural terrain as such, developing the conceptual language of the contextual field, it is necessary to provide a stronger sense of what we might call the 'relative autonomy' of the media frame itself. This is the independent power of the media text, with its particular perspective, rhetorically conveyed through such things as the content, emotion and force of its language, and through the spectacle and the connotations of its visual images. The media text is able to convey a great deal about the world in a way that will be more or less impressionistic and

rhetorical, and which can leave the audience feeling they know much more than has been expressly stated, argued for or substantiated. It can suggest a sense of individual responsibility for poverty or of structural responsibility for poverty through a variety of techniques that would stand up more or less well to rigorous scrutiny on the basis of social theory. It's important to be able to analyse this 'rhetoric of the text', and in order to do so it is useful to adopt additional concepts from the wider media frames' literature to add to the ideas of the thematic and episodic dimensions of frames. These additional concepts allow more to be said about the character and content of any news and current affairs text, and to develop a more sophisticated sense of how audiences are guided to particular points of view. They provide scaffolding on the basis of which each text can be treated in its own terms, with analysis focusing on the ways in which it functions as 'a form of rhetoric . . . persuading us – the readers, the viewers – that something happened'.¹⁷ Analyses focus on the precise ways 'in which news stories work *as stories*; the way they generate a narrative, with protagonists, whose motives and actions assign causation and responsibility'.¹⁸

I will focus on a set of concepts that are highly influential among media frame researchers within media and communications studies, establishing themselves as an orthodoxy of sorts. These were introduced in a seminal article published in the 1990s by Robert M. Entman, then professor of communication studies, journalism and political science at Northwestern University, Illinois. Entman noted four main operations performed by the framing of news, namely: (i) the defining of problems; (ii) the diagnosis of causes; (iii) the making of moral judgements; and (iv) the suggestion of remedies.¹⁹ These operations can have a major effect on how news is told, and thus on the shape taken by the news of the day is relayed into homes across the nation and beyond. One can summarize by saying that the frame approach focuses on those processes of selection, emphasis, rhetoric and form by which texts, crucially, 'define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies'.²⁰ As frames are a way of selecting, categorizing and organizing the information available in a story, politicians of different stripes inevitably attempt to get their own 'frames' on each of these four operations accepted by journalists, while journalists may insist on their own frames, which might overlap with those of the politicians or be entirely different. In turn, audiences either accept the frame presented to them in the news or come to some kind of more or less conscious negotiation between a news frame and their own preconceived perspective and values.

Entman's characterization of these four main operations carried out by news texts is remarkably close to the key preoccupations of social theorists who are concerned with the status and adequacy of knowledge claims about processes within the social and political world.²¹ The reason for this similarity

is not hard to see, as both sets of analysts are concerned with the same phenomena and with presenting plausible, convincing accounts about those phenomena. The difference is that the focus of analysis in the media frames' literature is on the ways in which the rhetoric of the text persuades, while social theorists are concerned with the status and satisfactoriness of media representations of, and judgements about, social reality. However, social theorists have to pay close attention to both sets of interests. For in order for social theorists to be able to make judgements on the status and adequacy of media accounts of reality, they first need to be able to grasp the rhetoric of news texts, excavating or recovering the claims that have been made, making explicit what is often left as a message that is only partially stated or vaguely implied, but which leaves a powerful impression that such and such is the case.

At this point in the analysis – as one sees how problems have been defined, causes diagnosed, moral judgements made and remedies suggested within the news text – that social theory indicates a further moment. This is the moment when the analysis of how the media has framed reality gives way to an analysis of whether the media has framed reality in an adequate manner. This is the moment when the social-theory frame takes over. Thinking about events as embedded within a contextual field is a key part of this stage, providing a set of benchmarks against which to reflect upon the character and adequacy of the reality conveyed by a news text. Put another way, the purpose of this book is to present *social-theoretical frames* through which audiences can critically interrogate news *media frames*, keeping a particular eye on the extent to which they over-simplify and misrepresent social relations.

Social-theoretical frames situate events within contextual fields; they are attuned to the structural positioning of actors within networks of social relations. As we shall see in future chapters, they provide clear conceptualization of the entities, relations and processes that *exist in* the social world, that populate it. However, social-theoretical frames are not only about what exists in the social world but also about providing protocols for gaining systematic *knowledge about* what exists, both in general and in a particular place and time. They offer guidelines on how to ascertain the quality of the knowledge provided by a media text, and on how to judge the adequacy of that knowledge when compared to the claims the text makes for it.²² Drawing on social theory to approach news and current affairs entails a project of expressly cultivating and refining the usually tacit, taken-for-granted ways of seeing employed by current affairs audiences, so they become better equipped for the task at hand. Such a project is shamelessly pedagogic in its intent, and it is resolutely, patiently committed to the long haul. It is about audiences, citizens, having a greater capacity to minimize manipulation and set their own agenda. It is also about asking journalists to think about the intellectual agenda they bring to

telling news and current affairs, and to interrogate the room for manoeuvre within the sets of constraints they work within.

But this is to get ahead of ourselves. In the next chapter I will go on to outline the key concepts of the contextual field and how these can be drawn on to judge the quality of knowledge contained in media accounts. Before that, however, it's important to say a little more about the role played by the idea of the contextual field in my argument. I will do this through reference to a critique of journalism and news made by the celebrated French sociologist and public intellectual, the late Pierre Bourdieu, whose account begins to articulate how social theory can identify those areas of social context that need to be included in a news story if it is to be rendered more meaningful. Bourdieu was talking about the same phenomenon as that captured by the discussion of 'episodic frames', or 'bang bang stuff', when he wrote of the 'demagogic simplification of television news coverage'.²³ He argued that the lack of context reduces news events to the level of the absurd, rendering them so cut off from their antecedents and their consequences that it is impossible to make any sense of them. The result is a series of flash photos, a fragmented, deracinated, de-historicized, 'litany of events with no beginning and no real end'.²⁴ We could add that the events have no real beginning in that they suddenly appear on our screens without warning, and seemingly out of nowhere as we have usually been unaware that the antagonisms, conflicts or other dynamics in this or that part of the world have been bubbling away under the surface for months or perhaps years. But the events also have no real beginning in the sense that once they have appeared on our screens, there is very little provision, even then, of the relevant historical background, of antecedents, required to situate them and with which to begin to develop an understanding of what is happening, and why. Likewise, the events have no real ending as the stories just disappear at some point from our screens, more often than not without any clear sense of resolution.

Lacking historical context, a proper sense of the factors that have helped to bring about the present events-in-focus, or any account of the dynamic forces and pressures that make up the current strategic terrain, it is impossible to think cogently about how to address the issues being reported. Without adequate contextualization there can be no real appreciation, for example, of the probable consequences of intervention by agencies of goodwill, whoever these might be. Bourdieu recognized the importance for genuine understanding of embedding events within their appropriate contextual field. He wrote of the need for news and current affairs coverage to reinsert events back into the 'networks of relevant relationships' in which they are actually embedded. That is, there must be an attempt to 'make events (say, an outbreak of violence in a high school) really understandable' by reinserting 'them in a network of

relevant relationships (such as the family structure, which is tied to the job market, itself tied to government hiring policies, and so on).²⁵

From the perspective of systematic knowledge it's important to take very seriously the adjective 'relevant' that Bourdieu attaches to 'networks of relationships'. The aspects of a news event that are somehow 'relevant', the bits of information relating to the event that can be appropriately labelled as 'relevant', will depend on *the character* of the news story. There is a difference, for example, between a story that makes an argument that includes causal claims and one that is entirely descriptive, simply evoking a spectacle through words or images. If a current affairs documentary were to make a causal claim about an outbreak of violence in a high school, then the precise character of this claim would determine what was 'relevant' to substantiating it. Let's say the claim, to follow Bourdieu's lead, was that the violence was directly linked to tension in local households, that this, in turn, was due to lack of employment in the vicinity, and that this, in its turn, was due to cutbacks in public expenditure or the withdrawal of state subsidies, which had led to a large locally based employer closing down its operations. The claims about this causal chain would then determine the precise forms, contours and sites of the contextual field relevant to these claims. This would not prevent the same documentary from describing the outbreak of violence itself in some detail, from taking an interest in the history and organization of the school, or in the characters and idiosyncrasies of some of the teachers, or of various people's descriptions about what happened on the day in question. But many of these things would be irrelevancies in relation to the causal claims unless they happened to shed some light on whether the causes of the violence were indeed what the documentary claims they were.

Outline of chapters

Bourdieu's account adeptly begins the process of indicating how social theory can be used to shed critical light on current affairs accounts. However, his suggestions are still fairly rudimentary. In the next chapter I will begin to flesh out and elaborate upon the concepts required to look in detail at the social entities, relations and processes of news accounts. For more is needed if we are to adequately address the kinds of questions and claims in Bourdieu's example of high school violence, and of the analogous questions and claims that appear in virtually all news and current affairs accounts. I will start by outlining the core elements of the central idea of a *contextual field*, with a concentration on the key *objective factors* audiences should mentally sketch in when mapping the relevant contextual field of a story they are interested in.

Some of the exposition of concepts in this chapter will be quite abstract, and I make no apologies for this, as it is a necessary step in the argument. However, it is important that the clarification sustains the level of engagement with real lives and particular dilemmas that I want to be carried through into readings of current affairs. To try and achieve this, I interweave two sets of illustrative examples into the account. The first is an imaginative example drawn from the work of the political theorist Iris Marion Young, which focuses on the socially structured predicament of a young single mother, Sandy, starting its narrative from the point at which she needs to move out of her rented central-city apartment building in an American city because a developer has bought the building and plans to convert it into condominiums. This discussion illustrates how Sandy, as a social actor directly involved at ground level, *experiences the objective character of the contextual field* that she is faced with.

The sections that come after Sandy's story, told from the position of an involved actor, look at academic media analyses of stories told from the perspective of externally positioned journalists. Specifically, I will focus on journalistic coverage of transport policy in Denmark at the turn of the new millennium, and of news coverage in Sweden, in 2011, of the mistreatment of elderly people in private health care. The contrast between these accounts and Sandy's story should also ideally draw attention to the contrasting kinds of knowledge that are likely to be produced from the two situated perspectives – involved and external – and where the blind spots are likely to be. However, my emphasis in this section is on the ways academic media analysis tends to focus much more on the language, rhetoric and so on of the journalistic text and much less on what it manages to say about the objective characteristics of the contextual field as such. My purpose is to indicate that it is not only audiences and journalists that need social theory, but also academic media scholars. It is to insist that while we do certainly need the sophisticated analyses of media texts, with their emphasis on discourses and media frames, we also need the tools to look beyond these discourses, to analyse what current affairs texts tell us about the characteristics of the events they are writing about, including what they tell us about the relevant networks of relations that have produced those events. The analysis of the journalistic accounts also, importantly, allows us to see the limitations of the ways in which journalists perceived the contextual fields relevant to their stories.

There is just enough in the academic analyses of the media accounts of the two cases to allow us to glimpse some of the limitations of the way in which journalists do engage with the contextual fields relevant to their stories. Chapter 2 can thus also begin to clarify social theory's role in pointing to the limitations of the frames journalists tend to employ. It can thus begin the process of revealing more about the ways in which these frames fail – to return to Bourdieu's locution – to adequately reinsert events back into the

'networks of relevant relationships' in which they are actually embedded, and within which they would be understandable. The two case studies from Scandinavia reinforce one's common-sense knowledge that the frames typically employed in the presentation of, and in the audience reception of, news events tend to contain vague, thin and overly rhetorical ways of apprehending the social world. They show that these 'ways of seeing' lack the conceptual granularity necessary to guide specific pieces of information into their appropriate place within relevant networks of relations. Without this conceptual granularity, and the provision of the relevant historical and socio-structural context it enables, it isn't possible to make sufficient sense of the fragments of information that circulate around a topic. The chapter will begin the process of providing audiences (and journalists) with concepts that can allow them – as far as the content of particular news accounts permits – to embed events carefully within a suitable contextual field.

Chapter 3 will take the argument a step further by providing a detailed account and analysis of an episode from the Danish political drama, *Borgen*. The purpose of this analysis is twofold. The first intention is to use the genre of political drama, in which there is a range of devices for the representation and exploration of interior lives engaged with the immanent political context, as a benchmark against which to mark the weakness of this *subjective* dimension in the vast majority of news and current affairs accounts. The exposition of the ways in which, in one episode of *Borgen*, the contextual field is subjectively internalized and responded to by individuals and organizations complements the exposition of objective elements in Chapter 2. It enables us to introduce the additional concepts necessary to think systematically about the ways in which actors internalize the contextual field, the effects it has on them and the predicaments it presents. It will also allow us, later in the book, to make reference back to the relative depth of treatment of the interior life in this drama, as a means of highlighting the poverty of such treatment in specific news, documentary or radio texts.

The second purpose of this focus on the *Borgen* episode is to demonstrate that audiences already have interpretative skills that are much more sophisticated than they are likely to give themselves credit for. Audiences already routinely position key actors within broader contextual fields. They already mobilize, in nascent form, many of the concepts social theory suggests should be brought to the interpretation of events and processes within those fields. We should take heart from the fact that there are segments of the television audience who, without reaching for the channel switcher, routinely deal with exposition and perplexity, to use Postman's terms, and do so on the basis of their own stocks of typified knowledge which provide the necessary conditions, or prerequisites, for interpretation and understanding. And as audiences already deploy quite sophisticated skills of interpretation when

they engage with drama series it is not a great leap to ask them to deploy similar skills when it comes to their reception of news and current affairs, and for them to demand this of others. Greater awareness that these skills are, to a great extent, already there, can embolden, encourage and facilitate their transfer. None of this is to take away from my case that a serious explicit engagement with the concepts of social theory can appreciably refine and enhance these skills.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I will directly apply the ideas introduced in the opening chapters, and illustrated in the discussion of *Borgen*, to items from news and current affairs. For the analyses of all the examples in Chapter 4 I will adopt a particular method, which is to examine single items from the perspective of a reader or viewer who has no previous knowledge of the issue at hand. Their interpretation of this item consequently places a great deal of weight on the abstract typifications of concepts, fields and so on that can be transposed from situation to situation. The knowledge that audiences come away with from a single news item on an unfamiliar topic will hence be a combined product of two elements: of their transposable background knowledge and of the information provided by the single current affairs item at hand. A typology of types of knowledge is introduced in order to enhance audience abilities to assess the status and adequacy of the account provided by a current affairs item. The first three illustrative examples in the chapter will focus on the concept of 'interdependence', and will cover the following issues: an Israeli high court ruling in July 2011 ordering the destruction of settlers' homes in the West Bank, reported in the British *Independent* newspaper; a debate in the US Senate from June 2013, reported in the *Washington Post*, on the Immigration Reform Bill, which would give 11 million illegal immigrants the chance to become citizens; and an Agence France-Presse account, reported in the *Bangkok Post*, on the Burmese government's seemingly blithe decision to extend the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi in August 2009 in the face of international pressure to condemn its litany of human rights' infringements. Parallels are then drawn between the interdependencies at play in this latter example and those not far from the surface of events in reports of demonstrators on the streets of the Ukrainian capital of Kiev in December 2013. The final illustrative example in Chapter 4 switches the focus to the need to be aware of the rhetoric of the text within the media frame, and analyses an *Independent* report covering renewed popular street protests across Egypt in July 2011, concentrating primarily on the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Cairo, just after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak and his replacement by an interim military council.

The final substantive chapter, Chapter 5, is divided into two main parts. In the first I examine two current affairs pieces whose coverage is much broader in scope than those previously analysed, covering larger sets of social

relations, with a greater spatial and historical span. Attention is drawn to the *plural character* of causation within these pieces, and to the ways in which these pluralistic, spacious, stories with a large historical or geographical sweep, are typically made up of particular kinds of patchworks of varying types of knowledge. The first analysis focuses on a newspaper feature from the *Guardian Weekly* that argues that key aspects of Germany's recent economic success have been dependent on a deeper, more embedded set of structural preconditions, and the second analysis examines the script of a BBC radio broadcast, written and presented by Fergal Keane, situating the Rwandan genocide of 1994 in its historical and political context.

In the second half of the chapter the theme of plurality is continued, approaching two sets of news and current affairs accounts on very different issues with a view to foregrounding the complexity of relevant causal forces at work within their respective fields. The two issues focused on are the violent clashes on Bangkok's streets in May 2010 and the anger caused by the poor treatment of patients in a UK National Health Service hospital run by the Mid-Staffordshire Trust between 2005 and 2009. For each issue, attention is given to a number of different accounts, each with its own angle of vision on the events in question. Attention is accordingly given to the skills audiences require in order to make creative connections *between different items* of news and current affairs, either from within the same genre or from different genres. The theme of making connections between different items is a natural corollary of the recognition of the patchwork quality of the knowledge provided in a single item. Audiences are at the heart of this, as the implication is that the audience reception and interpretation of single texts needs to be integrated into a slowly evolving stock of knowledge – derived from a range of texts – about the same issue, and about the same complex of questions with respect to that issue.

Both of the issues focused upon involve a good deal of complexity, and the ideal for audiences is to be able to creatively combine sources in such a way that they would be able to address those key areas identified in the media frames literature. To remind ourselves, these are: ascertaining the appropriate definition of the situation or problem-to-be-explained; identifying the relevant causes of that situation; identifying moral judgements made with respect to this causation (and we should want to seriously probe and evaluate these judgements); and formulating strategies to improve or remedy the situation. In attempting to put together responses to each of these dimensions audiences have two broad options. They could take their cue from particular current affairs accounts, subjecting the assumptions of those accounts to critical analysis, or they could develop their own hunches, explanations and judgements, and seek to substantiate or falsify these through adding to their stocks of knowledge through further reading and viewing. The chapter shows

that it is no straightforward matter to be able to combine the information provided by different sources in a way that is able to adequately address the four dimensions of stories identified by the media frames approach. It is also shown, however, that the problems are by no means insurmountable, and that the more audiences exercise the skills necessary to the task, the more fluent and effective they will become in doing so. So, audiences can indeed be empowered, even when it comes to extremely complex cases, by close reflection on the relationships between the four different elements of media frames with respect to the substantive details of the current affairs story at hand. The guidance of the four elements, combined together and focused on the relevant contextual field, can indeed help audiences to decide on the extent to which they have been offered appropriate and sufficient knowledge by any one account. Such awareness provides the grounds on which it is then possible to identify the relevant additional knowledge available in complementary sources and genres.

It might well be that journalists already have a greater intellectual grasp of what is necessary to position events within contextual fields so as to provide a greater depth of understanding, but that they are prevented from acting upon this because of institutional and other constraints. I am not in a position to make a clear judgement on this. It might also well be the case that audiences, especially those among them who are experts on particular issues, have a better intellectual grasp than I sometimes assume. What I can say is that social theory is an invaluable intellectual resource that can, without a doubt, fortify and refine those categories used by journalists and by audiences to address the many issues that fall within the remit of the four dimensions outlined in the media frames literature. The concepts of social theory offer a fuller, more cultivated basis on which to: explain the *causes* of a *problem* or *phenomenon-in-need-of-explanation*; provide a grounded sense of what the likely consequences would be of a proposed solution or *remedy*; and identify the relevant context against which to make *moral judgements*. Each of these categories needs to be located within a contextual field relevant to the issue in focus, and carefully unpacked. The appropriate weight of detail and degree of precision necessary to grasp the relevant who, what, how, and so on, of processes related to a particular news story will vary. What is appropriate will be determined, as noted, by the degree of relevance of the detail to the claims the story makes, or to any alternative aspirations it might have. Journalists and audiences need to be more alert to what these claims and aspirations are, as they can creep into reports while backs are turned, often surprising their authors. Claims can stealthily burrow their way into reports in countless ways, through narrative, description, argument or rhetorical implication.

Conclusion

A social-theoretical frame elaborated along the lines I've sketched in can provide audiences with the ability to be more methodical and systematic in their reading of news accounts; at the same time it can provide journalists with similar abilities that could ideally be put to use in the construction of news stories. It has the potential to equip audiences with a heightened alertness and sensitivity towards the adequacy or inadequacy of the relevant details provided by a news story about the events it covers. Chapters 2 and 3 will outline this social-theoretical frame, and the contextual field which is its object of analysis, and Chapters 4 and 5 will then explore, through the analysis of a series of varied news and current affairs texts, how this set of conceptual tools can help journalists and audiences to raise the bar as they strive to make sense of news and current affairs events.