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Making the most of what we already know: Interpreting single reports on unfamiliar issues

Introduction

In this and the subsequent chapter 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. One key aim of this and the following chapter is to show how audiences can draw on social theory to assess the *status* or quality of knowledge provided by a given news and current affairs item as it presents a case; that is, as it transmits certain impressions, narratives, claims and arguments about what is happening in the world. However, when a current affairs item is more than just a description of what is going on, but also makes explanatory claims about causes, and strategic claims about appropriate remedies, then active, critically aware, audiences need to go beyond assessing the status of a piece to a position in which they can judge the adequacy of those causal and strategic claims. So, the second key aim of these chapters is to show how audiences can draw on social theory not just to assess the status of a piece, but also to assess the *adequacy* of the knowledge it provides when judged against the claims it makes.

In the course of the chapter, I will make a point of focusing in on discussions of quite specific social relationships, paying a good deal of attention to how these relationships are conceptualized, and to how much evidence is provided to 'fill in' the details of what the concepts suggest we are likely to find (or to meaningfully challenge those assumptions). In doing this I will draw attention

to the specifics of the character of knowledge provided by each news item, and, as part of this, will indicate how items are typically made up from a patchwork of different kinds of knowledge. Awareness of this heightens the appreciation that viewers and readers have of the quality of the information they are provided with, and of the adequacy of that knowledge with respect to various purposes.

For all of the analyses in this chapter I will adopt a particular method. This is to examine single items (in one case I draw from two closely related newspaper reports) from the perspective of a reader or viewer who has no previous knowledge of the issue at hand. The assumption is that these single current affairs items refer to a time, place and social domain that readers have not previously been exposed to. This means they have no previous knowledge of the specificities of the case at hand, and so are unable to draw on such in interpreting the single item they are now confronted with. Their interpretation of this item consequently has to rely entirely on the durable background typifications of concepts, fields and so on that can be learnt about in an abstract way, or which they have transposed, on the basis of analogy, from previous current affairs situations they are familiar with. The knowledge they come away with from the latest item they are exposed to will hence be a combined product of two elements: of transposable background knowledge and of the information provided by the single current affairs item at hand.

Constructing the chapter along these lines can be justified on pragmatic grounds, because current affairs audiences often find themselves being presented with a completely new story about a part of the world they have no knowledge of, or about an unfamiliar aspect of the world they do know. However, there are also theoretical grounds for approaching things in this way, as it allows us to home in on what, precisely, can be gained from applying the transposable ideas and concepts gathered together in a social theory frame on contextual fields. Putting it the other way around, the method allows us to clarify with some precision what a single news or current affairs item provides us with, and what it doesn't provide, while allowing us to highlight the role played by transposable and durable background concepts in the making of such judgements.

Concepts within the contextual field: A focus on 'Interdependence'

I will analyse four newspaper stories in this chapter, and in three of these, as I will explain below, the concept of 'interdependence' will be the focus of attention. In examining the fourth story I will alter the emphasis, foregrounding

what I've been calling the 'rhetoric of the text' or 'textuality', the ways in which the form and details of the text's presentation of events can be a powerful means of persuasion in and of itself, with the potential to deflect attention from the status and adequacy of the knowledge it provides. Critical audiences need to be aware of the relationship between concepts pertinent to a particular story – such as interdependence – and the evidence provided by that story. What does the evidence look like when judged against the relevant concepts? Audiences also need to heighten their levels of reflection on the ways in which knowledge claims are stealthily, slyly, suggested and insinuated by the text. For heightened attention to this draws attention to the need to carefully excavate and recover the shapes, textures and specificity of these claims – establishing what the claims actually are – as a prelude to the task of assessing whether the evidence to substantiate them is provided. For the sake of clarity of exposition I will keep reference to textual rhetoric to a minimum in discussing the first three reports, but will foreground these aspects in examining the fourth.

The first report is from the UK broadsheet newspaper the *Independent*, covering an Israeli high court ruling in July 2011 ordering the destruction of settlers' homes in the West Bank. The second story, whose contours are drawn from two newspaper reports appearing in the *Washington Post* on 8 and 12 June 2013, revolves around a debate in the Senate on the US Immigration Reform Bill, which would give 11 million illegal immigrants the chance to become citizens. The third, an Agence France-Press feature appearing in the *Bangkok Post* in August 2009, 2 days after an extension of the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi, asks how the Burmese government is able to so blithely resist international pressure in the face of this and other instances of human rights' abuse. A comparative exercise is included at this point, drawing on reports of demonstrators on the streets of the Ukrainian capital of Kiev in December 2013. The interdependencies that are not far from the surface of these events are seen to have close parallels to the character of the interdependencies within the Burmese situation. Noting these similarities allows us to closely examine the extent to which a reader can benefit by carrying their background knowledge of a concept – in this case that of interdependence – from one story to another. The final story, which focuses on the need to be aware of the rhetoric of the text, is an *Independent* report dealing with renewed popular street protests across Egypt in July 2011, focusing primarily on those in Tahrir Square, Cairo, just after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak and his replacement by an interim military council.

I will marshal the analysis of the reports on these different topics around the concept of 'interdependence', which is one of the objective elements of the contextual field included in box 2 in Chapter 2. The concept of interdependence is relevant to all these pieces, albeit in varying ways that will become clear as

we examine the reports in turn. A moment's thought tells us that the emphasis placed on networks of relations within the model of the contextual field means that interdependencies are never going to be far away from any current affairs story. The concept is closely linked to other generalizable aspects of contextual networks, such as the dependence of collective and individual actors on each other's power resources, the various hierarchies relating to the differential possession of such power resources, and so on. I want to convey how the nature and treatment of the subject matter in each of the reports means that it will be productive for audiences to draw on the concept of interdependence in making sense of them. Readers can begin by drawing on their background conceptual knowledge to imaginatively map out a contextual field in the way advocated in Chapter 2, using the material offered in the current affairs item as the evidential basis for this. This material is all the situational knowledge they have. In the first instance I will show how the background concept of interdependence is particularly useful in all these cases in helping to identify the status of the knowledge provided by these particular pieces.

Before moving on to the first of the pieces let me first say a little bit more about the concept of interdependence itself. The concept of interdependence can allow us to identify, with some precision, just how much and how little a report tells us about the nuance and detail of interdependent relationships. My choice of this concept as an exemplar does not, of course, indicate that it is always the most appropriate or useful one to draw on for all news items. For other pieces, other concepts could be more appropriate. The point is simply for me to focus on one concept at some length here in order to demonstrate what is involved in doing so, and to indicate how, by analogy, audiences can employ whatever concepts they decide are most pertinent in order to make sense of the current affairs item they are engaging with at any given moment.

Issues of interdependence broached in a current affairs item can initially be mapped on the basis of the kinds of objective elements mentioned above. By objective elements, it is worth reminding ourselves, we are referring to those aspects of reality that can reasonably be identified by an external observer without access to the interior worlds of the actors involved.¹ Some current affairs items are rich in such elements, allowing a very dense set of objective networks and interdependencies to be mapped, while others will only afford a very rudimentary sense of the relevant networks of relations. The same is true for the mapping of subjective features onto these objective relations, with some items providing a thick, dense, account, and others a thin, sparse, picture of how situated actors subjectively experience and mediate their objective position at the intersection of these interdependencies.

The subjective perception of actors situated within an objective relationship of interdependence lies at the very heart of the concept. One of the keys to the significance of the objective interdependence is how much value an actor

places on it. If a particular relationship of interdependence is *perceived as* vital for an actor, if it is *seen as* an indispensable precondition for achieving prized goals, satisfying keen wants, sustaining valued relationships or realizing well-being of some kind, then it takes on a much greater force than it has when simply identified as an objective interdependence. In any given situation, much rests on how much the actor-in-focus will do to defend and sustain that interdependence, how much they will sacrifice for it. In attempting to grasp the meaning of a relationship of interdependence within a current affairs item, it is therefore important how much we know about the character and intensity of the relevant situated actors' attachments to that relationship. Without a sense of these subjective dimensions, of how the objective dependencies within the contextual field are internalized within the minds of key actors, it will be difficult for us to grasp what is going on. In order to understand this systematically we need to be able to combine a grasp of how to conceptualize this internalization with an ability to combine these concepts with evidence.

In discussing the various aspects of actors and agency in the chapter on *Borgen*, in Chapter 3, we laid out in some detail the concepts involved. We noted how actors internalize various forces, expectations and demands from the contextual field. These are the kinds of pressures that are often associated with a relationship of interdependence. Actors don't internalize these forces, pressures and so on in a direct, unmediated way, but from within a set of cultural, ideological dispositions (*habitus*). These dispositions are informed by their worldview, itself moulded by the way in which they have internalized aspects of the various discourses of the age, and by their more specific social positioning within this age. Their discourses, in turn, will have played a part in informing the development of the actors' goals and ambitions, and the development of the values underpinning these. All of this means that their immediate situational knowledge and the significance they give to it is apprehended and understood on the basis of this cluster of discourses, meanings, values and ambitions. In social-theoretical terms one would think of this as the actor's specific *phenomenological perspective* on situational knowledge.

But it is not only actors' subjective perceptions of objective relationships that are vital to the realities of interdependence within a current affairs event. We need to stay alert, also, to the objective realm itself. For the other, closely interrelated, aspect at the heart of the realities of interdependence is, as we have noted, the objective density and character of the networked interdependencies relevant to how an actor thinks about a particular event, process or decision. We've seen that in order to understand how situated actors will respond to a particular objective situation, one needs to know a good deal about how an actor's situational knowledge of dependencies and interdependencies are perceived from within *their ideological and cultural point of view*. However, as this is not a matter of free-floating perception,

it matters that actors are anchored in quite specific sets of social positions situated within networks of relations. The possibilities of these actors pursuing their ideals and achieving their goals will be closely linked to the dependence of preferred outcomes on other actors, powers and processes within these networks. This means it matters, in terms of consequences, how well an actor perceives their situation (*situational knowledge*), and this places an onus on their taking into account as many relevant networks as possible. If they fail to take important networks into account then they are likely to be faced with unforeseen, unintended and unwanted consequences. Having a firm and sufficient grasp of the character and density of relevant networks matters a great deal to the actors at the heart of them.

In turn, this means that if current affairs *audiences* are to feel fully secure that a report on an event provides them with enough information to get an accurate sense of what is going on, they would, likewise, want to have been provided with an adequate picture of the character and density of relevant networks. Pulling all this together means, therefore, that in an ideal case current affairs audiences would be provided with intensive, dense, knowledge of all the objective networks of relations relevant to a story, together with an account of how these are interwoven with differently positioned actors' subjective orientations to these networks. This knowledge would include a feel for the ways in which situated actors' were likely to actively and creatively balance the various demands and pressures coming towards them from the contextual field. One salient element of this would involve an understanding of how, and to what extent, situated actors were likely to order their interests into relative priorities, into a hierarchy of greater and lesser concerns. This means that some relations of interdependence are likely, ultimately, to turn out to be more important than others.

In the discussion of the newspaper reports that follow, we'll see that active, critical, audiences need to be very conscious of the fact that: they are only provided with relatively cursory, thin, accounts of the objective networks of interdependence that are mentioned; that some significant networks are not discussed at all; and that the subjective internalization of interdependence is left more or less entirely unexplored. This latter characteristic is in marked contrast with the centrality of internalization to political drama and other arts oriented narrative forms, such as the novel, or to approaches such as oral history, biography and autobiography – including the political or professional memoir. The rarity of this dimension within news stories is a state of affairs that is to the detriment of adequate understanding. The purpose of drawing attention to the distinctive poverty of many news and current affairs stories when it comes to the interior worlds of key actors, and, of equal importance, of the thinly drawn, or entirely absent, character of the networks they inhabit, is quite simply to indicate how important it is that audiences are

highly attuned to these characteristics. The idea is to foreground the silences and the presumptions of journalism with respect both to the networks of interdependencies themselves and to how these interdependencies are perceived and managed within the interior worlds of individual and collective actors.

Netanyahu and the ‘Destruction of Settlers’ Homes’

A story in the world news section of the *Independent* on Saturday 23 July 2011, bore the headline, ‘Netanyahu may be forced to destroy settlers’ homes’, with the by-line, Matthew Kalman, in Jerusalem. The account is less than 200 words long, including the title, and it’s almost axiomatic that the account is going to be relatively thin at that length. However, from another slant, one might well be struck by just how much information about a particular world can be conveyed in so few words, and by the skill involved in managing this. It is important to remember the achievements when looking at such reports in technically critical terms. For the most consistent underlying purpose of the critical stance I’m proposing is to enhance an understanding of what is and isn’t conveyed by a text, and how this is done, rather than to always and necessarily mark out texts as falling short. Two hundred words is not a lot to play with, and, as we’ve noted, it’s important to be realistic about what one should expect from a particular genre of news reporting.

In any event, an appreciation of both perspectives – of plenty and of dearth – can be given emphasis and precision through reference to the contextual field. In presenting the relevant field for this first example, I will continue the practice begun in the last chapter of sketching out some salient features in figurative form, something that is particularly easy to do when dealing with relatively short, simple accounts. The purpose of this, here, is to indicate how useful a visual picture can be to the intellectual exercise of thinking about what a newspaper report provides. Translating the report into the terms of a contextual field makes it easier to be clear and precise about the information being conveyed, and its relationship to relevant concepts. In turn, this provides audiences with the potential for an enhanced critical perspective.

The article’s main focus has a relatively shallow time span, recounting how, the previous month, Israel’s high court had ‘ordered the destruction within 45 days of three permanent dwellings in Migron, near Ramallah, an outpost of 48 families mostly living in caravans’, and that this period would expire tomorrow, on 24 July. The order was given because the dwellings were ‘built illegally on land owned by the Palestinians.’ This state of affairs

is what gives rise to ‘the problem’ or dilemma that is said to face the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, which is whether to comply with the court judgement and in doing so initiate his government’s ‘first major clash with Israeli settlers in the West Bank’. The fortunes of both the settlers and Palestinians with claims to this land are clearly dependent upon whether the Israeli Government complies. One can picture the site of the dwellings built on a ‘hilltop outpost’ near Ramallah, the three permanent dwellings, life going on around the caravans and the potential spectacle of the clash with Israeli soldiers or police. This latter image references a degree of historical depth to the story through the evocation of the last time ‘Israel had destroyed permanent settler buildings’, which was in 2006, ‘when the bulldozing of nine houses in the Amona outpost triggered violent clashes with Israeli police’. The historical depth is suggested, but this is all the content we get, all the rest is left hanging, vague and insubstantial.

Drawing on our account of objective relations, **Figure 4.1** (below) is a very simple representation of the relevant networks of relationships between actors, conveyed in relation to that prior episode of 2006. Advocating that readers of short news stories adopt this way of thinking – a mapping or configurational way of thinking – about the events presented to them, facilitates a perspective that is different from that which could be gained by interpreting them only in terms of a linear, sequential, narrative. The linear narrative is there, but it is seen to be only part of the story, because even such a simple mapping as this furnishes a more unavoidable sense of the weight of institutional orders, of their spatial relatedness to each other and of their continuing existence beyond the story at hand. It gives a sense of situated comparative powers, of interests embedded within relatively enduring positions and roles. In doing all of this, in directing an attention to these matters that is more than fleeting, it also nurtures a greater sense of how much more there is to know that isn’t covered in the account. Even more clearly, it offers a different perspective to the one called forth by a more spontaneous reading of the kind of live action available to film cameras, and made central to television news bulletins.

FIGURE 4.1 *The last time Israel destroyed settlements – 2006.*

As we've remarked, texts often work in surreptitious ways, whether or not their authors intend this. The parallel drawn by the author of the *Independent* article between current events and those of 2006 serves to reinforce a taken-for-granted view that the demolition of the dwellings in Migron would lead to clashes between the Israeli authorities and the settlers. This goes beyond description and is a causal claim about probable consequences within this contextual field. Interestingly, it also plays another role, inherently challenging the confidence of any overly presumptuous world weary reading presupposing the authorities would inevitably ignore the injunction of the high court; this is so even though we aren't explicitly told whether the high court played any role in the previous sequence of events, in 2006.

Figure 4.2 (below), as with the previous figure, is derived entirely from the short newspaper report, and represents a similar ambition in suggesting a reading that lingers on relevant networks rather than the spectacle of dramatic events. The most visually compelling scenes nestling in this story, which a television news team could prepare itself to record, would be the possible bulldozing, the subsequent clashes between settlers and police, and, less of a spectacle but often deemed necessary and acceptable, men in suits, protected, deliberating, walking, shaking hands and making brief statements. The reading of the newspaper report that I'm suggesting directs attention somewhere else, to the configuration of institutions, individuals, interdependent relations and events wrapped up together in an organic process of mutual influence and response.

It's instructive here to focus on the roles that time and space play in how interdependence is handled within this contextual field. Time 1 was not explicitly indicated in diagram 3.1 (page 74), as this period covered simply all the represented activity except that indicated by 'Time 2' and 'Time 3'. I do label Time 1 in the current figure (4.2), in order to draw attention to a degree of historical depth, one that stretches over months and years. It is a fairly substantial period of time, covering as it does a period in which the Israeli Government was responsible for the provision of roads, water, phone lines and electricity, as well as establishing and sustaining permanent army patrols. The relationship between this provision to the settlement at Migron and the broader provision to the other Israeli settlements on the West Bank is left unaddressed, and so these spatial aspects remain vague and imprecise. The absence of something as simple as a conventional map of the region is significant in that it means that a reader new to the subject, even if they have a rough idea of what constitutes the West Bank, will have little idea of where to situate Ramallah, let alone Migron and Amona. In terms of this kind of raw information, the advent of news' websites affords a number of very positive opportunities, in their capacity to provide links to general contextualizing features such as maps, timelines and regional and actor profiles.

Time 1 also embraces the period in which the Ministry of Housing gave \$1 million to the Migron hilltop outpost, although we don't know exactly when this was, or whether it was in the period in which Netanyahu's government was in office. Visualizing the network of relations between Netanyahu's government and the Ministry of Housing raises these and all kinds of other questions about the relationship between the two organizational units of the Israeli state, including the possibility of various degrees of autonomy and control, and issues about the degree to which they share ideological perspectives and values. When there is the mention of 'land owned by Palestinians', graphically represented in Figure 4.2, the emphasis on time within the contextual field would draw the attention of anyone with even a basic background knowledge of the Israeli–Palestinian situation to large gaps in what we can glean from this particular article. But a reader new to this subject would be unaware of how much they would need to know, for example, about the events of 1948 and 1967, in order to place this statement within a meaningful context. Without at least some idea of the role that history has played in the current configuration of relations readers would struggle to understand why the Ministry of Housing gave \$1 million to the Migron settlement '(a)lthough illegal, even under Israeli law', or why the journalist felt it appropriate to include the qualifier 'even' in this observation.

There are two sets of social mechanisms embraced by time 2, a period whose starting point I've drawn 44 days before the newspaper report, at the point the High Court made its ruling that the three dwellings had to be destroyed within 45 days. Drawing the boundaries around the period of time 2 in this way, indicates that it is useful to think about everything in time 1 as providing the past and enduring structural context in which the various actors of the High Court, the Israeli Government and its proxies, the Migron settlers, and other Israeli settlers will soon engage, or refuse to engage, in actions. It gestures towards certain potential constraints, such as the formal obligation of the Israeli Government to abide by the rule of law, the time frame for this and the apparent powerlessness of the settlers in material terms against the might of the Israeli state. Relations of interdependence and dependence are clearly evident. The Palestinians, whose land the article unequivocally says this is, are heavily dependent on both the willingness of the Israeli High Court to rule in their favour – the officials of the High Court, in turn, may well feel their actions are dependent upon, constrained by, what the law itself requires – and on the Israeli state to implement that ruling.

I haven't yet mentioned the final few lines of the article, which are ominous but ambiguous in terms of their implications for what will happen the day after, on the 45th day. I also haven't included the import of these words in Figure 4.2, although the reader should add a sense of them to their visualization of the contextual field. This final, very brief, paragraph states that '[c]ommunity

leaders and politicians, including prominent members of Mr Netanyahu's Likud Party, pledged their support for the settlers.' This might seem ominous for any hopes that the Palestinians and advocates of the rule of law might have that the Netanyahu Government would, in fact, comply with the High Court ruling. As well as ominous, however, it is also markedly and significantly indeterminate. By this I mean that it is elliptical in all sorts of ways relevant to the reader's ability to make an informed judgement as to the likely effect this pledging of support for the settlers by the group of actors mentioned (the members of the Likud Party) will have on the Government's compliance. There is so much that we don't know about the contextual terrain that we would need to know to fathom what is likely to happen.

Many of the questions one needs to ask here are generic. They are dependent upon the reader's general, transposable knowledge of social relations, networks, meanings and strategy, all of which may have been learnt elsewhere but which are sufficiently generic to be useful here. Even without knowing very much about the Israel-Palestine situation, a politically literate reader wanting to reflect further on the import of these last few lines would recognize, for example, the importance of knowing whether Netanyahu shared the views of the community leaders and members of his own party who had taken the side of the settlers. This by itself, however, wouldn't be enough to know which way Netanyahu would lean. For as we have insisted (see above, and also the discussion of *Borgen* Chapter 3), in order to understand how social actors will behave we typically need to know about their principles and values (embedded in their value *dispositions or habitus*), but not only about these. We also need to know about their *situational knowledge* of the more immediate networks of relevant relations in which they are embedded.

Hence, if we take the viewpoint of a critically competent reader with no prior knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian situation, reflecting on Netanyahu's own *internalization of the social context*, we might also query whether the reference to 'Mr Netanyahu's ruling Likud Party' was to a party that had formed the government by itself or in coalition with other parties. It might be that Netanyahu did share the views of those who supported the settlers but that his knowledge of the balance of power within the immediate contextual terrain of a working government majority – that might be functioning on the basis of a majority within his own party with different views to his own, or on the basis of a majority opposing the settlers within a broader government coalition – told him that he needed to ignore the pro-settler views and pragmatically follow the injunction of the courts. However, given the very limited nature of our reader's knowledge both of relevant networks and of the subjective perspectives on these, any one of these variables may be other than what we have just supposed. Netanyahu may oppose the views of those supporting the settlers, and oppose them intensely, or he may be relatively indifferent to

the whole issue. Alternatively, it might be that he shares the views of those supporting the settlers; that he feels he can command a majority to follow through on this; and that he will be able to avoid any sanctions from the legal context in doing this. From the point of view of a reader who knew little about this issue before reading Matthew Kalman's article, exposing the fact that any one of these various scenarios could represent the actual state of affairs, is a way of shining a light on just how little we get from the article itself. Again, it's not that we should be surprised at this. We've already noted there are limits to what a 200-word article can do. The point is that social theory provides tools that help us to be much more attentive, and precise, about what we do get and what we don't get from the piece.

Netanyahu's knowledge of the relations of dependence and interdependence within the immediate strategic terrain may tell him he has a lot of room for manoeuvre, or very little. In addition to the relevant factors already discussed that the article doesn't cover, there may also be other relevant but absent factors emanating from the interdependencies within the contextual terrain and entering into his deliberations as he considers the space he has for autonomous decision-making. These factors might lie, as with consideration of majority support within the government, within the terrain that is relatively proximate. An example of this could involve thinking about straightforward legal considerations, or about possible effects on the electoral support for his party. Or the salient factors might come from the broader contextual field, akin to the consideration of international forces that played a pivotal role in the *Borgen* episode. It's clear that considerations emanating from sites that are spatially more distant, such as general international opinion or the predicted response of major financial donors, trading partners or military allies, can still be highly relevant to local decision-making. These spatially distant forces can also be just as *immediate* in the sense that all of them enter into the decision maker's subjective thoughts and consequently into his reflections and discussions. Our conceptualizations have told us that these areas of subjectivity are a critical part of the real processes that take place within the contextual field, but they are not covered in the *Independent's* report.

Identifying the status of knowledge in current affairs stories

The two figures shown below, **Figures 4.3 and 4.4**, are a way of illustrating in graphic form key aspects of the *status* of the knowledge provided in current affairs items in general and in the reports we're looking at in this chapter in particular. The figures are designed to distinguish between varying degrees of

	Subjective Analysis	Combined Subjective and Objective Analysis	Objective Analysis
Contextualising			
High level of Contextual Detail	1a) Detailed subjectivity	2a) Detailed subjectivity situated within dense networks of relations	3a) Detailed, dense networks of relations
Floating			
Low Level of Contextual Detail	1b) Thin, partial subjectivity	2b) Thin, partial subjectivity situated within thin, partial networks of relations	3b) Thin, partial networks of relations

FIGURE 4.3 *Types of knowledge of contextual field conveyed by current affairs accounts.*

	Subjective Analysis	Combined Subjective and Objective Analysis	Objective Analysis
High Level of Contextual Detail	1a) Detailed subjectivity	2a) Detailed subjectivity situated within dense networks of relations	3a) Detailed, dense networks of relations
Low Level of Contextual Detail	1b) Thin, partial subjectivity	2b) Thin, partial subjectivity situated within thin, partial networks of relations	3b) Thin, partial networks of relations e.g. fig 4.1 see page 102

FIGURE 4.4 *Illustrative examples of variations of types of knowledge of contextual field.*

coverage of objective and subjective factors within current affairs accounts. They do this along the lines we sketched in before embarking on the analysis of the Netanyahu article, with attention paid to the density of the relevant networks of relations provided by an item, and to the depth of relevant subjectivity conveyed by the text.

There are three key differentials to pay attention to, corresponding to the three headings along the top row of **Figure 4.3**. The first, which refers to boxes 3a) and 3b) is whether a current affairs item situates the spectacle or events it focuses upon within a dense network of relevant relations, or only provides a thin or partial network of relations. We'll remember that Bourdieu believed it necessary for a news item to place the events it covered within an appropriate network of relevant relations in order for it to genuinely enhance understanding. The implication here is that when a report includes only a thin and partial network of relations then this will substantially limit the understanding that can be acquired from that report. This is graphically illustrated in **Figure 4.4**.

The kind of knowledge indicated by boxes 2a) and 2b) is that in which the knowledge provided about networks parallels that in boxes 3a) and 3b), respectively, but in which there is also a corresponding degree of knowledge provided of relevant actors' subjective perceptions of, and orientation to, those networks. As such, box 2a) represents that *ideal benchmark*, mentioned earlier, in which current affairs audiences are provided with detailed, dense, knowledge of the relevant networks of relations, but also with a full understanding of how these are interwoven with differently positioned actors' subjective orientation to these networks. This type of account allows the reader to grasp the internal worlds of actors in an intricate manner, as if able to step into their shoes as they engage in the social practices we are interested in. One could refer to this sort of knowledge of interior worlds as 'experience-heavy'.² Such 'ideal' accounts foster empathy and a grasp of the actor's own internal experience and deliberations, in what we have called *agents' conduct analysis* (see Chapter 2), but they also allow the reader to have a clear cognitive grasp of the external, objective, worlds that provide the contextual fields for the situated actor's perceptions and judgements. This is made possible because the heavy subjective experience of actors is placed in a context that is also 'structurally dense'.³ This can be contrasted with accounts that fall into categories 1a) and 1b), which refer to accounts of subjectivity that are uprooted from context, in which the point of view of actors, no matter whether detailed or 'light', is presented without any useful anchoring in a defined contextual field.

The Netanyahu article, as can be seen from **Figure 4.5**, below, is a long way from the ideal of 2a), and is better represented as falling into a combination in which most of the account falls into the category represented by box 3b). This is because there is, for the most part, an exclusive, but relatively thin, emphasis on the objective structures mapped out in Figures 4.3 and 4.4. However, a fleeting, subsidiary part of the article, as we have seen, alludes to the subjectivity of community leaders and politicians 'pledging their support' for the settlers. The status of the knowledge provided here falls into box 1b)

	Subjective Analysis	Combined Subjective and Objective Analysis	Objective Analysis
High Level of Contextual Detail	1a) Detailed subjectivity	2a) Detailed subjectivity situated within dense networks of relations	3a) Detailed, dense networks of relations
Low Level of Contextual Detail	1b) Thin, partial subjectivity <div>Aspects of Netanyahu article</div>	2a) Thin, partial subjectivity situated within thin, partial networks of relations	3b) Thin, partial networks of relations <div>Aspects of Netanyahu article</div>

FIGURE 4.5 Positioning of different aspects of Netanyahu article within types of knowledge of contextual field.

rather than 1a) as, in fact, we are told very little indeed about these actor’s subjectivities. It is also 1b) rather than 2b) because our analysis quickly revealed that the report provides no anchoring at all of the subjectivities it does allude to in any of the relevant networks of interdependencies, which could potentially help one to consider the subjective orientation to priorities, alliances, strategy, tactical manoeuvre and negotiation. This is a problem for, as we have seen, internal worlds shouldn’t be thought of as radically separate from the external world. Rather, the external social structures, cultures and practices of the external social world, while naturally having their own existence, should also be seen as entering into the consciousness of individual actors as they make judgements on courses of action and perform their roles, duties and so on.

The various features of the article all fall into the bottom half of Figures 4.3–4.5, and hence when looked at according to the categories in Figure 4.3, they are appropriately characterized as ‘floating’ accounts. The category of a *floating text* suggests an analysis made from a viewpoint metaphorically akin to that of traversing geographical space and historical time from the vantage point of a hot air balloon, taking a somewhat distant, bird’s eye, view of what is going on below. Accounts provided from such a vantage point often have the strengths and advantages of breadth and scope, but can lack the ability to provide a more detailed fleshing out of, and contextualized embedding of, the relevant networks of relationships, events and processes in focus. It is not unusual at

all to find that much of the content of short newspaper accounts, such as that within the Netanyahu–Migron article and in others we will come to below, is of this kind. To this extent, they fall squarely into Bourdieu’s category of news accounts that require greater embedding within networks of relationships in order to truly make sense. Floating accounts are also typically uneven, missing out important tranches of time and space and the relevant social processes that went on within them, as if their hot air balloon has periodically sailed above the clouds, shrouding the events below from sight.⁴ In terms of time one can see this in the Netanyahu–Migron article in the missing tranche of years between 2006 and 2011. At other times, the position of the balloon in relation to the clouds means that spatially some networks can be seen, but others are occluded from view, leaving a partial, incomplete appreciation of the sum of networks that are relevant to an understanding of the account. In the Netanyahu case, a number of the key relations and interdependencies sustaining the government are entirely invisible to the reader. The distinction between *contextualizing* and *floating* accounts will always be a relative judgement made when comparing one account with another, or made against a benchmark of what a reasonably exhaustive account would look like.

Border controls, the Latino vote and the US Immigration Reform Bill, 2013

Similar themes arise in the accounts provided by two *Washington Post* articles of June 2013 discussing deliberations over the 867-page US Immigration Reform Bill. Again, one can usefully begin a critical understanding of what lies behind the immanent spectacle – in this case the debate on the bill taking place on the floor of the Senate – by focusing on key actors within the relevant contextual field and then looking for key objective interdependencies. An article appearing on 8 June covered the beginning of the floor debate, and noted that the legislation would give 11 million illegal immigrants the chance to become citizens.⁵ It reported that a small bi-partisan group of senators – four Democrats and four Republicans – negotiated with various key actors whose situated practices would be affected in one way or another by aspects of the bill. These actors included labour unions, the US Chamber of Commerce, technology companies and pro-immigration groups. Republican dissenters denounced what they saw as the failure to sufficiently take account of the lobby for the radical strengthening of border security measures, which they saw as a basic precondition before support for other aspects of the bill could even be considered. The article conveys tensions between Republican dissent with respect to the bill and the party’s electoral dependence on the votes of

those who could be alienated by such opposition. The Grand Old Party was said to be aware that this could provoke a ‘backlash among immigrant groups that Republicans have sought to woo since Obama won more than 70 per cent of the Latino vote in the 2012 election’. Given that the Republicans’ perceived reliance on the support of the Latino vote might have been expected to substantially temper their opposition, the report raises queries for an attentive reader as to the precise source of their continued resistance. Not least, one could wonder whether it is to be found in enduring principles relevant to the issue, or in more transient dependent relations with another set of key actors in one or other part of the contextual field that offset or neutralize their concerns about alienating the Latino vote. In not providing answers to these questions the piece also necessarily leaves the reader in ignorance as to the intensity and likely durability of the resistance in the face of potential electoral costs.

We can see from this and a second article – appearing on 12 June, focused on a speech in support of the bill from President Obama in the East Room of the White House⁶ – that the Republicans would want to use the bill’s dependence on their support as a means of leveraging various concessions from the Democrats. A key potential concession is identified as that of giving Congress more authority over measures the Department of Homeland Security would be required to implement along the United States–Mexico Border. However, without greater insights into the details of the interior worlds of the dissenting Republicans, and of the character of their debates with more acquiescent members of their own party, it would be impossible to know how they weighed the kinds of electoral concerns we’ve mentioned against other factors, or to know what the most important of these other factors consisted of. We are very low down in the territory of box 2b) in the terms of Figures 4.3 and 4.4. That is, the *Washington Post* articles provide us only with very thin, limited, knowledge about the subjectivity of the relevant actors. Moreover, they embed these actors only very vaguely and partially within the objective networks of interdependencies that would inform their subjective deliberations and judgements. From the perspective of a newcomer to this issue, there could be all kinds of unknown external structural or contextual issues vying for priority within these politicians’ hierarchy of concerns. Such a reader would be hard put to know, to spell out the point, whether the agitation for additional border security measures resulted from long-standing, durable, personal principles concerning citizenship and immigration, or whether it was to do with more situational pressure from, or concerns about, lobby groups of various kinds at state or federal level.

It is worth pointing out here that a significant part of the interest commanded by these articles stems from their concern with *causation* and with *strategy*, which we’ll remember were the second and fourth elements of media frames, as identified in Chapters 1 and 2. In fact, many short newspaper articles, or

large portions of them, are so diffuse and fragmentary, lacking a clear focus, it is difficult to say they are anything more than *descriptive* of a general domain, lacking a discernible position on causation or strategy. However, we have noted concerns with issues of causation and future consequences in the Netanyahu article, and in this discussion of the US immigration bill there is a concern with causation – whether in the form of certain aspects of the bill producing resistance among groups of Republicans, or about what such republican resistance could do to the Latino vote – and with intimations of related strategic manoeuvrings behind the scenes. It isn't possible, however, to identify any detailed concern with precise causal mechanisms within the pieces, and here there is a grey line between what one would label as description and what should be seen as (causal) explanation. Explanation requires that an *explanandum* – an event to be explained – be raised within the text, within its *definition of the situation*, the first element of the media frame. The problem-to-be-explained (e.g. why are Republicans risking the further alienation of the Latino vote?) naturally needs to be cogently identified before it is possible to ask whether it has been adequately addressed. A text can often imply the existence of such a puzzle, and can also imply that this or that factor explains it without making these cases explicitly. In such cases audiences need to expend some energy in order to mine these claims from the text, to bring them clearly to the surface, as this is a precondition for examining the adequacy with which they have been substantiated.

The distinction between an account's status and its adequacy is important here. For the ability to ask whether the quality of information actually provided by an account (its *status* as a particular kind of knowledge) is *adequate* to establishing a specific claim made by the text, or is adequate to answering a particular question the text has set up, will naturally depend on whether such claims have been made or questions set up. This is significant because the virtue of establishing clear claims and questions is that it greatly narrows down the aspects of an account one needs to pay close attention to. Questions and claims narrow down what it is relevant to focus upon. Where an explicit or implicit question can't be found, it is still possible for critically alert, active, audiences to introduce their own questions of causation and strategy on the basis of what the text has provided. The issue in these latter cases would not be whether the status of the text is adequate to its own claims, but whether the knowledge it allows is adequate to answering the questions set by the reader or viewer. Sometimes addressing a question or substantiating a claim will require dense, contextualized, accounts that are both experience-heavy and structurally dense, but at other times, the issue at hand can be resolved with an experience-light, structurally sparse account. It depends on exactly what the issue is and how the claims about it, or the problem posed in relation to it, are characterized.

Rights abuses and Burma's powerful neighbours

An Agence France-Presse (AFP) report, 'Burma "protected by its powerful neighbours"', appearing in the *Bangkok Post* on 13 August 2009, is a story of interdependence with plural causal mechanisms at work, but with one of these said to be more powerful than the others. The article appeared 2 days after the Burmese state had extended the house arrest of the Nobel laureate and 'democracy icon', Aung San Suu Kyi, by 18 months. Suu Kyi was the focal point for opposition against the Burmese Junta. A virtue of the report for our purposes was that it clearly stated both its *problem-at-hand*, or outcome to be explained and what it believed to be the key *causal* mechanisms producing this outcome. The problem-to-be explained was how Burma seemed to be able to ignore the widespread condemnation by the international community of this and many other instances of rights abuses.

One possible approach to answering this question would be to place all the emphasis on individualistic, agency-based, or culture-based factors, putting the entire explanatory weight on a lack of moral resolution or will power on the part of either key individuals or the international community as a whole. In the latter case, the international community would typically be thought of as a homogeneous, undifferentiated, whole, thus over-simplifying matters twofold. Such answers pay little attention to the positioning of key actors within networks of contextual fields, to the balance of power and interest relations within these networks, and therefore to the constraints and potential consequences facing variously positioned actors within the international community. A significant part of a more adequate answer can already be found within the news report in the *Bangkok Post*, which identifies Burma's positioning within a network of interdependencies with its powerful neighbours, China, India and Thailand. These interdependencies provide the causal basis for a more adequate, less free-floating, explanation. That is, the existing system of mutually beneficial interdependencies was such that those parts of the broader international community who could well have been minded to place human rights and democracy at the apex of their dealings with Burma were stymied by the support for the junta provided by the powerful neighbours just mentioned. This support prevented any effective international response to Suu Kyi's arrest. Relations with China are said, in the report, to be the most decisive within this contextual field, 'keeping Burma afloat through trade ties, arms sales, and by shielding it from UN sanctions over rights abuses as a veto-wielding, permanent member of the Security Council'. This was part of a reciprocal set of arrangements whereby:

In return, China is assured of a stable neighbour and gets access to Burma's natural resources – overall, trade between the two grew 26.4%

to US\$2.6 billion last year, according to China's Ministry of Commerce. Yesterday it called for respect of Burma's judicial sovereignty in reaction to Mrs Suu Kyi's house arrest. India was once a staunch supporter of Mrs Suu Kyi but shifted its strategy in the mid 1990s as security, energy and strategic priorities emerged. It is also eyeing oil and gas imports from Burma, needs Rangoon's help in countering separatists operating along their common border and is particularly concerned about not losing strategic ground to China in the military state.

However, it would be a mistake to feel too comfortable just reading off the perspective and the intentions of a government, or other key actor, directly from knowledge of some structural relations. Thus, in this case it is important to be aware of exactly what we know from the text of the article about the perspectives of the actors involved. The AFP report tells us directly that the Chinese government 'called for respect of Burma's judicial sovereignty', and, very precisely, that it did this yesterday. However, we should be clear that the link between China's statement of support and the prior information about its interests in having a stable neighbour, access to natural resources, and in mutual trading arrangements, is imputed rather than directly stated or evidenced. No matter how plausible it seems, it is important to note that the claim is an interpretative (hermeneutic) one about the intentions of the Chinese, and that there is no subjective analysis or evidence to accompany it. We would certainly have very little to go on if we were minded to try and reconstruct the relevant interior world – the relevant phenomenological perspective – of either the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, or whichever actor it was that made the call to respect the judicial sovereignty of the Burmese. A similar picture of inference and imputation is evident in the textual presentation of India's relations with Burma, as the mention of certain objective interdependencies is likewise used as licence for the conclusion that these are causally responsible for India's withdrawal of vocal support for Aung San Suu Kyi, and for its support of Burma within the sphere of international diplomacy. We are simply told that this shift happened 'in the mid 1990s as security, energy and strategic priorities emerged'.

Taking the time to adopt the insights gained from the socio-theoretical perspective alerts us very quickly to the fact that we actually know very little about the nuanced details of the internal motivations, values and strategic calculations of the Chinese and of the Indian politicians and officials that have shown their support for the Burmese authorities. The text claims some knowledge through a coarse imputation from their actions, from the timing of shifts in their strategy, and from certain visible actions of the two states. In addition to this, however, it also makes some direct references to the internal worlds of these actors. It does this through references that rely more on the rhetorical use of third-person attribution than on any suggestion of evidence,

as in the intimation of close familiarity conveyed in the reporting that the Indians are 'eyeing' oil and gas imports from Rangoon, and in the suggestion that they are 'particularly concerned' about not losing ground to China with the military state. We may, it is true, think this is quite enough for our purposes, especially if we have learnt over time to place our trust in the sources and the interpretation of AFP as opposed to, say, less esteemed new media sources lacking equivalent status and lineage. However, we need to be clear that this is the evidence we are agreeing to base our conclusions upon, and that these are the grounds for whatever convictions we form.

In terms of the contextual field as outlined in Chapter 2, there is, it seems, a less than substantiated jump within the report from the identification of some objective relations of interdependence between actors to assumptions about how this translates into a subjective sense of obligation or desire to support that actor. In this instance, as we've said, it seems a reasonably plausible jump, and one that is facilitated by thinking in terms of interdependencies within contextual fields, but, precisely because it is indeed a jump, with only the slightest of attempts to provide evidence, we need to be aware that we cannot be entirely sure of our ground. We have made a leap from knowledge claims befitting the perspective of an external, relatively distant, observer (box 3b) to claims that would need to be derived from a much more involved and intimate position. For there are claims here that presume knowledge of intricate inter and intra-organizational webs at the meso- and micro levels, and of how these webs are internalized within the subjective worlds of key actors. There is a mismatch between the claims and the basis for the claims, which means that although we have learnt a good deal about interdependencies, there are still question marks over both the status and the adequacy of what the text purports to know.

Employing the contextual field as a conceptual benchmark allows us to make something of the fact that the report does not provide us with any information on the finely textured webs of interdependent relations *within* the relevant national policy spheres (hence, with reference to box 3b, the networks that are presented in the text are not only thin but also 'partial'). And, clearly, without such an account it would be impossible to go a step further and look for the ways in which objective and subjective factors are interlaced within national policy arenas. In terms of causation and likely future developments, we would need to know much more about these *meso-level* domains in order to judge with any degree of confidence that the Chinese, Indian and Thai support for Burma is likely to be robust and enduring rather than fragile and potentially short lived. A stronger causal account, one able to provide greater confidence about the durability of the current state of affairs, would need to look not only at the macro-level objective interdependencies it outlines (see **Figure 4.6**, below), but also at

FIGURE 4.6 Burma's macro-level interdependencies as context for diplomatic protection.

more middle-level and micro-policy spheres, and to show how the objective and the subjective interweave within these.

One can see the same kind of presentational handling of objective elements at work in the article's subsequent observations about Thai–Burmese relations. An argument about causation is constructed by simply juxtaposing objective interdependencies. Thailand's maintenance of diplomatic relations with Burma in the face of the latter's human rights record is simply noted and then placed alongside the fact that Burma's 'biggest source of foreign exchange earnings is by far the revenue it receives from gas sales to Thailand – around \$3billion annually. Thailand, meanwhile, is largely dependent on Burma for its energy needs and also has investments in telecommunications there'. The imputation about causation is clear, and again is highly plausible. At the very least we should be fairly confident, unless we are to conceive of a highly dysfunctional national policy sphere, that such major objective factors would enter into the subjective calculations of Thai policy-makers. However, a moment's reflection on general categories of policy-making – including further elements of structural interdependence we may have overlooked (but which could loom large in the internal worlds of key actors), issues of competing vested interests and their refraction through different national ministries, divergent ideological motivations and the balance of domestic forces at any one time – would alert us to the fact that the level of our detailed knowledge of many parts of the relevant contextual field is exceptionally low.⁷

Once these important caveats to any simple and straightforward acceptance of the strongest claims of the AFP report have been made and incorporated, it remains the fact that the objective interdependencies providing the basis for the article's argument, relating to trade, energy resources and finance, are significant enough to provide a major *initial*, provisional, orientation to the reader. They are key structural types that can be profitably incorporated into an audience's general 'stocks of knowledge'. Their generalizable quality means they are ready to be transposed into new situations, suitably adapted to the specifics of those situations and contextual fields, just as long as they aren't made to take on too much of the burden of explanation all by themselves.

Analogous interdependencies were at play, for example, in the structural relations underlying the spectacle of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators on the streets of the Ukrainian capital city of Kiev in December 2013. The protesters were attempting to occupy government buildings to force out the government of President Viktor Yanukovich and his prime minister, Mykola Azarov, with the trigger for the protests being the failure of the government to sign an association deal with the European Union.⁸ But not far behind these sights and scenes was said to be a struggle between the two trading blocs of the European Union, with its \$US18 trillion market, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's ambition to bring former vassals of the Soviet Union back into

a powerful Russian-led trading zone.⁹ Key mechanisms within this contextual field revolved around energy and economics, including: Ukraine's almost total reliance on Russia for its gas imports; and the fact that more than 60 per cent of its exports are to the former Soviet market. Both of these dependencies were offset to a degree by the leverage afforded to Ukraine by the fact that it is the major transit route for Russian gas to the European Union.¹⁰ It is clearly important to include a consideration of these interdependencies in looking at any Ukrainian government's actions and room for manoeuvre. In 2006 Ukraine agreed to pay almost twice the former price for Russian gas after the latter cut supplies, a move that the Russians repeated in January 2009 in the midst of a subsequent dispute over unpaid fees.¹¹ The structural analogies between the Ukrainian and Burmese contextual fields are clear to see, and raise interesting comparative issues about the influence of power relationships in the two cases.

We must always remember, however, that the transposable, typified, conceptual ways of seeing are always only the beginning, the initial orientation. They can't be a substitute for the more extensive and detailed knowledge of the case at hand. As a simple point of reference, it is chastening to reflect on the clear truth that in both the Burmese and the Ukrainian cases, the structural dimensions alone would be an inadequate basis on which to construct the best available picture of how events would be likely to unfold over the next 2 years and more. In complex, open, systems, there are always likely to be other significant objective elements that haven't been taken into account. It is also the case that the relations between the objective and subjective elements will play a major role in any unfolding process. If we use the case study of the relatively closed world of the *Borgen* episode as a close to ideal point of reference, then we can note that the most adequate knowledge comes from a combination of objective and subjective typifications *and* the specific details of the unique situation. It is this combination that allows audiences to follow the twists and turns of that story, and to be able to begin to anticipate what might happen. This is analogous to audiences for current affairs items being able to combine a keen and fulsome sense of the relevant objective and subjective transposable concepts, an immersion in the details of the specific case, including the pertinent details of all the networks of relations relevant to the problem-at-hand, *and* the capacity to combine the two dimensions with skill and acuity. In the *Bangkok Post* story, we ultimately just have a few transposable typifications acting as the organizing basis for a thin sprinkling of evidence, and all of this is overwhelmingly focused on just objective elements.

A major difference, however, between a political drama such as *Borgen*, with its beginning, middle and end already plotted out, and real-life current affairs processes, is not only that observers of current affairs items are all too often situated in the middle of events that are still unfolding, but also that it is

much more likely that there are key causal factors still lying beyond our sight. Significant, far from entirely predictable, events have taken place in Ukraine and in Burma between the time the newspaper reports were filed and the time I now write, and no doubt the situation will have changed further by the time you are now reading this. Uncertainty about the future, even with the finest, most contextualized, plausible apprehension of relevant contextual fields, places a particular set of limitations on the confidence we can have in judgements about probable consequences, and on strategic and tactical advocacy regarding the future. A certain set of political and ethical sensibilities should come along with this recognition, sensibilities not all that different to those fitting the awareness that our knowledge of current contextual fields is almost never sufficient to allow us to say with certainty that we have grasped the essence of what has gone on thus far.

Renewed protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square, July 2011

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, before it's possible to carefully evaluate what a current affairs account is claiming about the relationship between arguments, concepts and evidence, it's necessary to be very clear what the text is actually saying about this relationship. And there is much in the power and rhetoric of many texts that is not easily and straightforwardly translated into clarity on this issue. In this final section I'll try and demonstrate further what I mean by this, indicating how one sometimes has to work quite hard in order to recover the claims to knowledge embedded within a text. Such recovery has to be undertaken, however, if one is to construct even a rudimentary mental map of the contextual field, and the processes said to be going on within this field, contained within a news report.

The report I will use to illustrate this point is a fairly typical article in a UK quality newspaper, the *Independent*, on the unfolding Egyptian situation of 2011, just after the fall of Hosni Mubarak and his replacement by an interim military council.¹² Appearing on the 9 July 2011, the title of the piece is 'Return to Tahrir Square: Egypt Erupts in Protest', with the by-line of Alastair Beach, in Cairo. In line with the standpoint adopted throughout this chapter, I will look at this from the perspective of a reader who has little prior knowledge about the subject, and so has to rely heavily on the report-in-focus.

At first glance, as is the case with many articles positioned in the world news section of the quality press, the 'media frame' for the article seems almost entirely *descriptive* in style, simply and neutrally relating 'what is happening' with respect to events of the day deemed significant enough

to merit coverage. However, one soon also sees rudimentary elements of *causal explanation*, with the narrative indicating that the reason the hundreds of thousands of protesters have come out again onto the streets of Cairo, packing themselves into Tahrir Square, is because of their simmering 'suspicions over the conduct of the ruling military council' that had replaced the ousted Hosni Mubarak in February. *Moral judgements* can also be discerned, as the article constructs a set of meanings in which the two sides are conveyed in very different ways, coming to be identified with two distinct clusters of symbolic associations.¹³ The protesters gathering in Tahrir Square are presented as energetic and vivacious, and these qualities are conveyed in an easy, positive register, with Beach writing that '(T)ens of thousands of men, women and children arrived throughout the day carrying Egyptian flags and banners, and by the afternoon central Cairo was awash in a sea of street vendors, tents and ebullient slogans'. The rally is said to have been boosted by the official support of the Muslim Brotherhood, 'Egypt's largest political organisation', and this implies the consolidation of a new unity as the Brotherhood had 'until now' refused to take part in most of the protests since February. On the other side of the binary divide is the newly installed government, the ruling generals, who are the target of the demonstrators' demands for quicker reforms and for the punishment of those responsible for abuses of power and the deaths of more than 800 protesters during the uprising that led to Mubarak's ousting. Any pre-existing qualms the protesters harboured with respect to the government are said to have been further fuelled by perceptions that it is colluding with members of the establishment, allowing a judge, for example, to suspend the trial of Habib-el-Adly, who the author characterizes as 'the widely loathed former Interior Minister accused of ordering police to fire on civilians'.

Through these kinds of characterization the journalist, Alistair Beach, sets up a sense of identity between himself and the protesters, and a degree of distance between himself and the military, old and new.¹⁴ This is probably only partly conscious and intentional, and mainly a consequence of professional training, convention and the exigencies of getting a story out quickly. The sense of identity he creates is compounded by the fact that the only speech reported in the piece belongs to the protesters, who are consequently afforded a privileged position in establishing the perspective from which events are to be seen. The mechanisms of identification between the journalist and particular groups involved in the story are overlaid by what the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, talked about as the literary transmission of a sense of 'being there' or 'I-witnessing'.¹⁵ The article's rhetoric suggests that both journalist and protesters share an authenticity, and an authority, derived from being there, on the ground. The implication is that they can quite straightforwardly tell it like it is. The effect of the combination of these textual devices is to guide

audiences to a particular point of view, and to do so through means that can easily pass by unnoticed.

These devices, establishing the credentials of credibility and guiding the audience's point of view on the authority of this, are reinforced by the *faux* solidity created by what the French semiotician and literary critic, Roland Barthes, called a 'reality effect'. This is when the impression of intellectual mastery of context is rendered through textual conventions of 'knowingness'. These can include, at an elementary level that is no less effective for being so straightforward, the confident, naming of individuals, organizations and the places where demonstrations took place – in the northern Mediterranean city of Alexandria, Sharm-el-Sheikh, and Islamia on the Suez Canal, and, of course, in Cairo's Tahrir Square.¹⁶ A range of key collective actors is introduced through little more than the names of their organizations or groups: the ruling military council, the Muslim Brotherhood, the police and the Interior Ministry. Two high profile individuals are named: Hosni Mubarak, the toppled president, and Habib el-Adly, and also a number of demonstrators, alongside quotations expressing their views. We learn very little of any substance about this configuration of entities, or of the relations within the configuration, to provide us with raw materials as we begin to try and map a contextual field. Much of what we are able to gather has to be inferred from the reported worries and grievances of the protesters. The latter include the summarized view of 'many Egyptians' that the ruling generals are using the bad health of Mubarak as a 'ruse to scupper' his impending trial, and that of his two sons, set for 3 August. At a similar level, and as an indicator of a possible counter-trend, we learn that the Interior Ministry had just announced that 'hundreds of senior policemen would be sacked over their alleged roles in the killing of protesters'. Also, this time by way of the testimony of a protester identified as being from the Muslim Brotherhood, Khalid Dawood, we learn that in recent months the Brotherhood has been riven by internal splits, but was 'persuaded to attend because it was worried about the ruling military council's lack of transparency'. The last two examples do begin to convey fragments of potentially significant information about internal relationships and force fields between the police and the Ministry of the Interior, about relations within the Muslim Brotherhood, and about elements of the political-normative discourse of the latter with respect to issues of government transparency and accountability.

However, so much of this attribution of causal and moral responsibility is a combination of rhetorical textual certainty and weak (conceptual and evidential) substantiation. When measured against the benchmark of a socio-theoretical frame on contextual fields, it is the *absence of knowledge* of relative powers, or of positionings, pressures and forces within and between organizations, and of the interpretative processes internal to positioned individuals, that are most

apparent. Rather than the text providing depth of knowledge about networks of relevant relationships, its rhetoric serves to push into the background those things of which our knowledge is vague, insubstantial or non-existent, to gloss over or efface significant gaps in what we know. The idea of contextual fields allows critical audiences to make an assessment as to the *quality* of what a text has communicated. However, it can also play a significant prior role in prompting audiences to initially interrogate the rhetoric of the text in order to recover exactly what the text *has* communicated.

Conclusion

Given the emphasis I want to place on the situated and partial quality of our knowledge, it is worth noting that I wrote most of the analysis of the final news report in this chapter immediately after the article was published, before the elections that brought Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood to power, and so also before the subsequent fate of that government was played out.¹⁷ It was already clear, then, how little one could glean from one article, but it is sobering to look at it now from the vantage point of the future, where that initial sense is greatly magnified. In the next chapter I will move from an emphasis on how much knowledge we can acquire from quite short single reports covering relatively specific, demarcated, processes, to looking at current affairs accounts that attempt to interpret the bigger picture. The initial focus will be on accounts that do this within a single text, while subsequent sections will suggest ways in which audiences can combine knowledge acquired from different current affairs accounts and genres, making creative connections between them, as they build their own more complex accounts, accounts that are more adequate for the purposes they have in mind.