

Good

The Glasgow University Media Group

In 1974, through involvement in a social science research project, a small group of 'academics', Jean Hart, Alison McNaughton, Paul Walton, Brian Winston, John Eldrige and Greg Philo got together to produce the book *Bad News*. Their analysis penetrated the surface appearance of neutrality and balance of the news media and found the partial and restricted reality.

They did not present a crude notion of bias. Their central question was simple enough: 'Does television news as presently constituted help explain, and clarify events in the real world or does it mystify and obscure them.' The BBC were hostile to their research – even before it began obliquely threatening them with the possibility of copyright action, complaining to the Principal of the university and pressurising the Social Science Research Council to limit the freedom of researchers. With ITN there was 'no hostility and equally almost no co-operation.' When the book emerged the group was described by Lord Annan—who had conducted the government's own inquiry into broadcasting—as "a shadowy guerrilla force on the fringe of broadcasting."

They had called themselves the Glasgow University Media Group simply to collectively represent their work. Follow up books *More Bad News* and then *Really Bad News* completed a trilogy. According to Greg Philo the group didn't really exist—it was just a collection of academics who

were still writing—he encouraged a slightly more organised structure so that they could carry on working together. This was a significant move enabling them to involve more people—the Glasgow Media Group became anyone who wrote with them to produce the books. That included journalists working on the production side of news media together with their own content and audience studies. At the same time they also set up the Glasgow University Media Unit which could apply for research grants. *War And Peace News* (Open University Press 1985) with its focus on the twin sub-

jects of the Falklands conflict and Nuclear Defence highlighted the wholesale abandonment of impartiality in the news media. With their work on subjects such as the miner's strike the group gained something of a reputation for not shying away from a whole range of politically difficult social and political issues. *Getting The Message (News Truth and Power)* Routledge 1993 saw the group investigate media treatments of areas such as food panics, health scares, public understanding of health issues, AIDS in the media, mental health and Ireland. John Eldrige's work moves towards a critical position of the Chomsky/Herman model on how the media functions.

The new works are: *Message Received*—a collection of work from '93—'98 with various writers with subjects such as race, migration and media; disaster and crises reporting and violence, mental illness and suicide. *Cultural Compliance (Dead Ends of Media/ Cultural Studies and Social Science)* by Philo and David Miller (of the Stirling Media Research Institute) is a shorter critique which turns its attention to sociology as taught in universities.

Both works set out serious indictments of the political failure of media and cultural studies as they are presently taught in Britain's universities. The 'cultural compliance' that they speak of is not specific to sociology but has a relevance to the effects of the absorption of the inadequate political assumptions of post modern writers, such as Baudrillard, into artistic interpretation and production. Here too, if we view contemporary art as a form of media and social science, we see the same symptomatic loss of the ability to engage critically with the society in which it exists and a similar drift into irrelevance.

'Within the post-modern vision, there can be no agreed reality or 'facts' because meanings are not fixed but are re-negotiated in the constant interplay of the reader and the text. This focus on the text and the negotiation of meaning has reduced the ability to study the real and often brutal relations of power which form our culture (and the perspective actually legitimises the absence of such studies). If texts have no inherent meaning and 'it all depends on how they are interpreted and used', then it is not possible to argue that some elements of our culture are oppressive and damaging.'

Greg Philo, from the Introduction of *Message Received*.

The following interview with Greg Philo was recorded last autumn in his office in the Sociology department of Glasgow University. The questions were by William Clark and Ian Brotherhood.



IMAGES: Euan Sutherland

News

Cultural compliance

Greg Philo: We've got a new book coming out at the end of this year [1998] called *Message Received* which is a critique of contemporary cultural studies; the media, in this country and abroad. We've basically said it's lost its critical edge, that it's ceased to have the ability to comment critically on the society which exists. That it's become, really, a celebration of the popular, without any critical edge in terms of the negative elements of the society that's developed. That the market for a long time in the '80s was seen—by many people—as potentially positive in that they focused on elements of consumption and saw the market as a liberating force in some way. I think a number of people went down that road. *Marxism Today* did, but then at the first hint of capitalist crisis they neatly did an about turn and, ha ha! marched in the other direction. Opportunists to the last.

Variant: Yeah well...They brought out that recent edition?

GP: It's ghastly. It's depressing watching people who've moved so far in the direction away from what was the original critique of the market.

V: Well they've brought it out and it's all 'Tony Blair's got it wrong'. *Marxism Today* has Stuart Hall, but from what I gather Hall taking over in Birmingham was seen as a big push for media studies. The introduction of Marxist critiques, semiotics, but that was some time ago.

GP: I would think Stuart has done some very interesting things. I think in his early work for the *New Left* he wrote some very important material and I think we did use some of his work when we first started doing *Bad News*. He wrote an excellent article called *The World at One With Itself*, which was, I think quite inspirational at the time. Having said that I think a lot of what the Birmingham Centre went on to do was to move between one or other branches of increasingly obscure academic theories. And it moved away from—I would say—empirical work which could be used to mount a sustained critique of the society as it developed in the '80s. I actually think that it moved into obfuscatory and non-critical work, and I think some of the problems that now beset cultural studies come from that. The emphasis on the encoding/decoding model—which they used—was basically wrong. It was full of flaws. I think it led them into a concern with audiences, and audiences having the ability to make up their own meanings and make up their own worlds. And once you start to go down that road you lose sight of the power structures which exist in society which actually position people. Power structures which relate to what I would see as key issues like ownership and control. They stopped talking about who owns the society or who owns the world; and instead focused on small ele-

ments of how people construct and develop their own systems of language and meaning.

V: There seems to be a division of people who are just interested in a theoretical approach—arriving at some sort of theoretical model, and there's work which I would say is quite polemic. I'm sure that's a big insult for people seeking to be objective. But your work seems to have more of a scientific spirit about it.

GP: I've nothing against theory at all, I've nothing against science—what I'm talking about is abstract theory: theory that proceeds in the absence of any practical empirical critique of the society which we're in. The post-modern turn in social science left people moving away from what I would say is any serious critique—which was empirically evidentially based—of the society which they exist in. *Cultural Compliance (Dead Ends of Media/ Cultural Studies and Social Science)* is very much a critique of what you might call the 'discursive turn' in social science: The move towards the obsession with meanings and meaning construction; without looking at the social practice which position the possibility of action. It moves towards meaning to the detriment of any analysis really, of the conditions under which meaning can become possible.

...Its really quite a long critique, it takes on most of the contemporary theories and theorists in cultural studies. What we did was to say that first of all there have been a series of major changes in the last 20 years: The rise of the market, the free market and deregulation; the release of market forces in the society as a way of disciplining trade unions, as a way of lowering wages, as a way of changing the balance of power in society was pushed through very effectively. But it had a number of very powerful influences in the way in which people related to each other in society, so the influence wasn't just in the workplace—in the sense that there's a change in the shift of power at work, that trade unions were broken, there was a series of strikes which were successfully defeated by the government of the time.



All of those things happened but at the least the market changed our culture as well. It increased the levels of insecurity in our society, it increased the stress levels, it changed the way in which people worked—we brought in part-time contract type labour. That is going to have all sorts of implications for the way people address each other, relate to each other, the sort of clothes people wear, the way people relate to commodities, the way in which conformist dress-styles are likely to increase. Children now all wear the same kind of clothes, very tightly defined dress styles now occupy almost the whole of society. It's not the kind of invention you saw in the '60s and '70s because people are just very conformist. The nervousness and insecurity of society produces those kind of changes.

So what we did was to go through a whole series of material cultural changes that occurred in the last 20 years. And then we said why is it that contemporary cultural studies cannot explain any of these, or is not addressing any of these things? That the actual conduct of children in schools, the way in which they relate to films, the way in which they identify with new kinds of role models—like the characters from *Pulp Fiction*—all sorts of things that we've been doing here—are not being typically done in most of cultural studies. They're actually not looking at the power structure of society, and how that structure is impinging upon tastes, style, what is possible and the everyday lives of most people, the everyday problems that most people confront in their lives. In this country it's that you can't get a job or if it's Africa you can't get water. That everyday culture is not any longer part of most social science studies.

So what has happened? Basically in the '80s the bulk of academia stuck its head in the sand, and went up a very easy road: Which was to go along with the post modern account. Which is to say well we'll focus on small groups of people who in different ways construct their own little worlds for themselves, and we'll see this as a liberating force in society. And in fact they very rarely even looked at what anybody was actually doing because they never got beyond discussing the theoretical implications of that kind of position. If you look at the quotes at the beginning: There's one which is actually a quote from Stuart Hall:

"The 'discursive turn' in the social and cultural sciences is one of the most significant shifts of direction in our knowledge of society which has occurred in recent years."

(Introduction to Open University course book on *Culture, Media and Identities*. 1997)

Now I have to say we think that's wrong. We follow that with a quote from Raymond Tallis which is:

"When the emperor is restocking his wardrobe, he usually shops in Paris."

Which is pretty much what we thought was happening—that they simply moved into one after another of a series of increasingly obscure and really pointless academic debates, which I think went from Althusser, to Lacan to Baudrillard, just one after the other of these theorists who were posing these questions at a theoretical level and had no empirical base for what they were saying. If you read Baudrillard's work I mean it is just rubbish. He makes statement after statement about audiences, about beliefs, about what people think in society, about how all the population is deceived by the simulacrum. If you read his book on the Gulf War I mean it is simply rubbish. I mean we studied in detail both the Falklands war and the Gulf war...

V: I've always felt so distrustful of the adulation—this is similar in art theory—with all that kind of stuff. I understood it to be pushed by a lot of film theory people, Colin McCabe from Strathclyde University—it was just so dull...

GP: But it works in a certain way, because it has no empirical base. But the value of that is that you can make outlandish statements which have a sort of...

V: Entertainment value?

GP: A kind of entertainment value, ha, yes! And a kind of happy ring to them. And then people can use them with their students and they're catchy. It's like 'The Medium is The Message' or 'The Global Village'. These are wrong—this is actually not how it works. But the process of actually going through different cultures and finding out what does actually happen in culture and how people did really relate to the Falklands war or really did relate to the Gulf war is

very, very complicated. It takes a long time, you've got to interview hundreds of people. It's really bloody hard work. And you can avoid all that by saying 'all of the population is taken in by the simulacrum'.

The first question a real social scientist would ask is: 'do you mean all of the population except you'. How did you escape? Are you the only one who did?' As soon as you start to question the premises of these people their statements all collapse. *Reality is constructed in language, the classic post-modernist philosophical position*: And then you say now that last thing you just said—is that true, or is that just for you, did you just construct that? So what you're actually saying is all reality is constructed in language except what I just said which really, really is true. You see—you go round and round with these crazy circles.

V: Also a lot of this stuff is so based on 'text'?

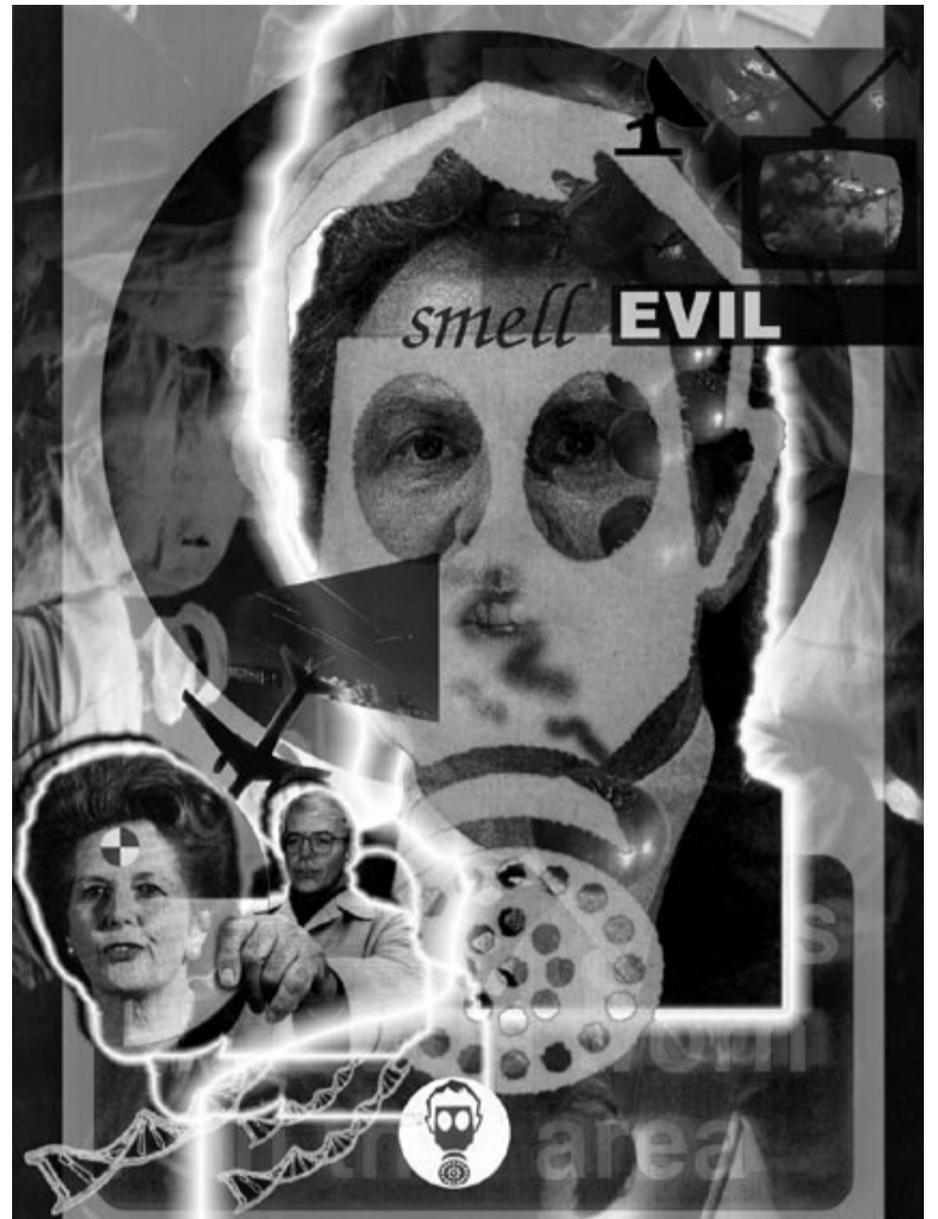
GP: Exactly.

V: Most people must be able to see through that.

GP: It's great for students you see—actually students hate it—but it has a kind of cachet in teaching because it's easy to do, it can be applied across borders—because you're not actually relating it to anything very special, other than the most general statements about 'this is what the Gulf war was like and this is what happened'. But you're not actually relating it to the different conditions in different countries; there's no point in which Baudrillard for example discusses whether the French press was different from the English or from the Scottish press, or whether American television is the same as British television. Nothing like that—he's quite happy to make statements about how everybody relates to the media without the slightest bit of work on the issues that—actually the media are quite different and audiences are quite different and there are many different audiences within a single national audience. So none of those kinds of issues are discussed. And in a way that's its strength. You can have an all purpose theory which is applied to everybody everywhere and you simply say oh well there's no difference now between reality and its image.

This seems to us to be ridiculous. If Baudrillard dressed up as Napoleon Bonaparte a picture of him would not show the real Bonaparte, ha ha! An image is not the same as what it represents, and that you can't collapse one into the other. And that in order to say that, to even raise those kinds of things you have to have in your own head that there is a clear division between the image and the reality. The sorts of examples they give constantly depend on making the division that they say doesn't exist.

You know the one about how television stories are constructed as news events. So they say for example the timing of bombings is done so it times in with the Nine o'clock News or something like that. The first question we would ask is are you sure that was what was done? You're absolutely clear that this actually really occurred that they actually did time the bombing in this kind of way? So someone's done some empirical research to know that's really what they did. As soon as you tell the audience that's really what they've done—there is an immediate division in the



audience's mind between the reality of what they've done and between the image that's been constructed. And of course that happens all the time and audiences do pick those kinds of arguments up. And that's what we find. We find people very distressed at the actions of governments because they start to be aware of these kind of things. Television journalists start to reveal that sort of thing, they start to deconstruct it and to constantly point out the difference between the reality of what's occurring and the image that's attempting to be constructed. To say that it's all one bundle of images and you can't distinguish one from the other is just nonsense.

What seems to be most peculiar was that as the society got worse in material terms, as it created more and more problems for the people who actually lived in it, at the same time cultural studies seemed to be less and less able to actually analyse that or to talk about what was going on

V: You're describing certain academics who have got all this material and are saying we'll just give this to the kids, that'll give them something to do: There's vague amorphous stuff which we can check if you've actually been reading or not. This is very much painting a picture of academia as having just a Bourgeois agenda—and that it always will have, even when they get hold of quite radical stuff—it will always fold back into this...

GP: Yeah that's fair enough, ha ha ha! There's a marvellous quote here from Nick Garnham which describes exactly what you've just been saying. Post modernism was the perfect practice for academics because it came with lots of cheap research opportunities, it in no way challenged anything, you didn't get into any trouble, it didn't require any major movement out of their offices...

He says that the focus on the text, the postmodernist approach:

"Developed out of literary and film studies and carried its textuality into versions of structuralist and post-structuralist Marxism and on into post-modernism. It took with it the bacillus of romanticism and its longing to escape from the determining material and social constraints of human life, from what is seen as the alienation of human essence,

into a world of unanchored, non-referential signification and the free play of desire...It is also perfectly designed as an ideology of intellectuals or cultural workers for it privileges their special field of activity, the symbolic, and provides for cheap research opportunities, since the only evidence required is the unsubstantiated views of the individual analyst."

What you find is this odd combination where you have a complete relativism in what is being taught to students combined with an absolute demand that they toe the line. If people come round and say what about material structures or...this is just dismissed as oh that's old fashioned. This is what you have: a movement through intellectual fashions. And I do think the Birmingham school were terribly susceptible to that, not just them, a lot of cultural studies moved in that direction. But it left it in the end unable to address the everyday life of most people in the world.

There's a section of the book called '*Critical Journalists and Silent Academics*'—which is saying that the great bulk of critical work done in the 80s was not done by academics at all. There are one or two people at it, but the actual analysis of power all but disappears and is not a fundable area—so we find the whole of the '80s, if you look at research councils, the way in which funds were given out, it was very difficult to do any kind of research that was critical at all. If you wanted to, for example, investigate even something like the relationship between unemployment and ill health: very difficult to do—to get funds for it. It was a kind of area which would be almost impossible to fund through normal research-type channels because it would be regarded as an absolute no-no, a very politically difficult thing to look at. And you can imagine how much trouble we had when we wanted to look at Northern Ireland, when we did all that work on the broadcasting ban. We had to do that entirely out of our own resources, people were working for free.

V: What I've never understood about that was when Thatcher banned the BBC from reporting, all the independent journalists just fell into line, they just complied with the ban. What power has the government got over independent journalists? With the Independent network why did it comply?

GP: Fear. That's the main issue. I think they are much more tightly controlled than people imagine. 'I've spoken to some friends on the *Sunday Times*: They were talking about short-term contracts, how quickly people just get tossed out if your face doesn't fit, if you do something wrong. People like Andrew Neil who you would not see as a radical by any means was hooped out of the *Sunday Times* because of the story on Malaya and the dam. If somebody like Andrew Neil can go well what about the lesser mortals. This friend who was on the *Sunday Times* was saying to me that it's like Watership Down working here—people just disappear, you look around and someone else has gone.

V: Would you say what is happening in the Glasgow media group is unique...it was hardly really taken up as a model throughout the country was it?

GP: I think it was used a lot by journalists. I think we are closer in that sense to the practice of journalism, we are contacted as a source of information, because we're the ones who have done the empirical work, there's so few people doing it and they keep coming to us...there's a few people, we're not the only ones. There's people in Leicester, in Loughborough (Peter Golding), James Curran in Goldsmiths, in Liverpool. There are quite a number of people who are in the same tradition as us on empirical work on the media.

V: I'd like to ask about the development of your research methodology...

GP: First of all we started with the study of television news—we looked at the content of it, we did a very big study of the news and what was available in terms of explanation. Then we started quite quickly to move into production processes. One of the first studies was '*From Buerk to Band Aid*'. We started to look at the conditions under which stories became stories and who made decisions and what the basis of the decisions being made were and things like that. And the difference really between the media's version of how wonderful they were in covering such an issue and what had actually occurred if you look at it—the cack-handed series of accidents...

V: Yeah it almost never got shown...

GP: Absolutely, if Mohammed Amin hadn't have gone and met Buerk at the airport you would more or less not have had the whole Live Aid thing. The point that we made in that particular case, was that the story was turned down by most of the media. It was 'just a new famine.' They were really quite shocked at the public response to it. So we continued with a lot of work on production, interviewing people about particular stories.

David Millar came to work with us in I think about '85/6. He started to work for the Media Group then later formally in the Media Unit. He pioneered all the work on Northern Ireland. We had done some work on Northern Ireland before, but David did a PhD on it and then later published a book '*Don't Mention the War*'. He worked in areas of production processes and began to look at audiences as well. Just before that I had started to move into audience work—so I did the Miner's strike stuff. Apart from theoretical and academic interest, it just seemed to me to be a crucial issue to show how the media did in fact inform public opinion; we couldn't go on just doing content studies we had at some point to say well look it does make a difference. So I interviewed a large amount of people up and down the country with the intention of seeing whether it was possible to show in a definitive way what the power of a media message was.

It seemed to me that all of the previous studies had not been able to do this because—I don't want to be too rude about people, ha ha ha—they had not managed to identify very clearly what the impact of specific messages were on audience beliefs or understanding. That was the problem—they had a blunderbuss approach. They would use divisions like heavy watchers and light watchers. It's not very clear

how you draw a line between a heavy watcher and a light watcher. Then they would say heavy watchers are more scared of the dark, or more scared of strangers, or more scared of being attacked in the street. You weren't clear whether they'd actually watched violent programmes or which programmes they watched. So there was a lot of work which seemed to me to be not very methodologically adequate.

There was also a lot of work which had relied upon showing people a video or a television programme and trying to measure whether there was any difference in their beliefs. It was very difficult to work out what the contamination was—all the other possible factors which they could be bringing to bear on that. Anyway you were putting people into very artificial situations, by forcing them to watch something which otherwise they would not have watched.

So all of those things seemed to me to be wrong. What we did was to develop a method which turned all that on its head; and said the first thing we've got to do is empty people's minds of what they already know. The way to do that is to give them a very minimal stimulus and to get them to write the programme. Then you can find out what's already in their head about that particular issue. Then the next step is to take apart all the things they've written and to work out what the sources were. But tie it to very distinct and very measurable issues which are new so that you can date the entry of this information into the public arena. That was why the Miner's strike was so good because there was a whole range of new information which was coming in: Like 'Miner's pickets are violent', things like that, which have never really been in the public area before that or been associated with violence.

One of the things we did was to give photographs and tell them to write [a headline]. What we found was that people could reproduce actual headlines from the strike—over a year after it had taken place. These lines—almost word for word—the juxtapositions of the failure of the strike and the apparent increase in violence were very deeply rooted in people's minds. We then traced the source of people's beliefs and we found huge differences between people who had any kind of experience of the strike, even at the level of a solicitor driving to work in the morning and who would go past a picket line: His vision of it was completely different from anyone who had got their ideas from television news. That sort of person would say 'oh... they just lay about on the grass all day'. Ha ha ha! While people down in St. Albans or something—who'd never seen a picket line were terrified of even meeting a miner in case they were set upon! We showed very clearly that this had occurred.