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# Choice, Capacity, the Possible, and The Nightly News

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## The Two Sides of Power: Choice and Capacity

**I**n note one to proposition thirty-three of part one of his *Ethics* Spinoza underlines the deterministic aspect of his system by indicating that there is no such thing as the contingent and no such thing as the possible. All things are necessary: everything that exists must exist and anything which does not exist cannot exist. There is only the necessary and the impossible. To say that something is either contingent or possible involves either an inadequate understanding of the thing's essence, or an inadequate understanding of the causes which bring that thing about:

For when we are not aware that the essence of a thing involves a contradiction, or when we are quite certain that it does not involve a contradiction, and yet can affirm nothing with certainty concerning its existence, as the order of causes has escaped us, such a thing can seem neither necessary nor impossible to us: and therefore we call it either contingent or possible (Spinoza, 1992: 28)

We think that something is possible because we know how it might come about but we do not know whether it is in fact determined to come about. The idea of 'the possible', then, for Spinoza, is an expression of the inadequate nature of human knowledge rather than a reflection of the true state of things. If we possessed the adequate knowledge of Spinoza's God we would be able to recognise the true order of causes which necessarily brings a thing about, we would be able to understand the true essence of a thing which determines that it is this way and no other way. The notions of 'the possible' and 'the contingent' merely reflect our own impotence in the face of God's omnipotence. Indeed, the determinism here follows logically from a system which insists that God is both all powerful and the unique substance of the only universe which exists. God is absolutely everything and all-powerful which means that he must be able to realise all possibility because if anything that were possible were not realised God's power would have to be understood as limited. If something can be brought about, then, it will be brought about.

To say that God is the ensemble of everything that is possible is merely another way of saying that God is all powerful and absolutely everything. The necessary realisation of what is possible is intimately connected with Spinoza's conception of power.

For God, then, there is no such thing as the possible, but for we humans with our inadequate knowledge, the possible remains a crucial concept. Before considering the notion of the possible from the human point of view, then, it is worth turning to Michael Hardt's helpful comments concerning Antonio Negri's reading of Spinoza's conception of power. What must be noted at the outset is that while in English we have a single term 'power' Spinoza uses two Latin terms to define this concept: *potestas* and *potentia*. According to Hardt, the debate concerning what is involved in the distinction of these terms, while having received considerable attention, remains unresolved in Spinoza studies. While a distinguished translator such as Edwin Curley has suggested that there is 'no effective difference between the two terms' (Hardt, 1991: 233), Negri and his translator Hardt contend that the distinction is crucial, if not in the *Ethics* (where the emphasis is on a metaphysics in which God's omnipotence completely effaces the difference between *potestas* and *potentia*) then in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (where the emphasis is on politics and history, the realm of humans rather than God). Having kept in mind Spinoza's wariness of dualistic opposition Hardt concludes:

From the idealistic perspective of the *Ethics*, Power [*potestas*] is recognized as an illusion and subordinated to power [*potentia*]; but from the historical perspective, in Spinoza's world, power [*potentia*] is continually subordinated to Power [*potestas*] as political and religious authorities suppress the free expression of the multitude. (Hardt, 1991: xiv)

What is the nature of the distinction then? It concerns the possible because, as I will attempt to explain below, the terms are concerned with choice and the ability to act on choice; the distinction, then, concerns that power which allows the realisation of the possible (for while, unlike God, we are not all-powerful, we do have some power: that is, we are able to realise certain possibilities). The distinction might be familiar to those who are acquainted with the work of French 'post-structuralists' such as Deleuze and Foucault, because as in Latin, there are two words for power in French which correspond to the Latin terms: *pouvoir* and *puissance*. *Pouvoir* is sometimes rendered into English as 'power over' while *puissance* is sometimes rendered as 'power to'. The distinction is underlined by Brian Massumi who (in his translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*) notes that *pouvoir* represents 'an instituted and reproducible relation of force, a selective concretisation of potential' while *puissance* 'refers to a range of potential' (Massumi, 1987: xvii). Oppressive order, then, a kind of constraint or limitation, is instituted through *pouvoir*, while *puissance* involves our capacity to exist, to be affected, our potential for being. The distinction is further clarified by Hardt in relation to Negri's reading of Spinoza:

In general, Power [*potestas*, power over, *pouvoir*] denotes the centralized, mediating, transcendental force of command, whereas power [*potentia*, power to, *puissance*] is the local, immediate, actual force of constitution. (Hardt, 1991: xiii).

It might be useful to consider a human example of the realisation of the possible, a human act of power, to get our bearings. To this purpose it might be helpful to think of the construction of the pyramids. The Pharaohs embody power over, *pouvoir*, and they command that the pyramids be built. For their commands to be realised, however, they require *puissance*, or power to, and this largely rests with those who are commanded: the artisans and labourers who actually construct the pyramids. Power has two sides then, and requires both sides to bring something to pass. The pyramids could not have been built with *pouvoir* alone or *puissance* alone: the realisation of the idea requires the interaction of these two sides of power.

While Hardt and Negri are most concerned with human power and the direct antagonism between the Prince and the multitude ruled over by that Prince (two sides of the body of the state), it might be useful to think about this again with regard to human power in relation to the realisation of any goal whatsoever; that is, in relation to any body whatever (be it that of a subject, or group, or state). The act of bringing something about might be termed the realisation of a possibility. For we humans with our inadequate knowledge, we will remember, 'the possible' refers to something whose causes we understand but whose existence has not yet been determined. Realising the possible involves giving an idea an actual existence. To realise the possible we require both *pouvoir* or power over, the ability to determine, to command, to choose that a certain thing be brought about, and *puissance* or power to, the capacity or ability to bring that thing about. The terms are no doubt problematic and flawed, but for the sake of clarity I will emphasise two aspects of the two sides of power, calling one (power over, or *pouvoir*) choice (as choice involves command and precedes it) and the other (power to, or *puissance*) capacity (the ability to bring about or satisfy the desires selected by choice).

We can now reflect on the possible once more. For Spinoza's God there is no possible because what he is is everything that is eternally and immanently. He has infinite power and so requires no choice because everything He has the capacity to bring into being is brought into being. We, as modes, on the other hand, are finite and our finite nature is reflected in our finite power. We are limited in what we can choose and realise (we can choose anything but can only realise some things) and indeed we limit ourselves or define ourselves in part through the choices we make and manage to actualise. If our choices are limited by our capacity to act, then, so too our capacity to act is limited by the choices we make or which are made for us. Following this line of thought our goal is to achieve our potential. A weak individual might be understood as one who continually chooses things which cannot be realised, which s/he lacks the capacity to realise or, on the other hand, one who does not choose to realise things which s/he has the capacity to

realise. A strong individual would be one whose choices would be in accord with his or her potential or capacity. Being free and happy, then, would involve expressing our power to the extent of our power. On the other hand, each time we choose we exclude other choices, and the field of possibilities changes and in part diminishes.

One might begin to see, then, how possibility is determined by one's power. I might choose to build myself a car, but unless I have the capacity to build a car or engage others to build it on my behalf there will be no car. My choice to build the car will then represent my own true powerlessness to realise this goal. So my choice is necessarily limited by my capacity. On the other hand, however, it is clear how my capacity, or what I am able to do, is limited by choice: that is, both by the choices I take and the choices which are determined for me by higher powers. To give an example: I have no power to live at any other time—in fact, my being, my being myself (however problematic such a notion that might be) is generically and socially determined. I am the combination of a particular set of genes which could only have come into existence had I been conceived at the precise moment of my actual conception, so too, I am the subject I am because of the specific and unrepeatable set of social subjectifications I have undergone; none of these things could have possibly come about at another time or another place. Another time and place would necessarily produce a different human being, one who similarly could be no other than he or she would be.<sup>3</sup> I am already limited, then, by powers outside my control which determine who and where I am. Similarly, I am limited by my own choices. Throughout my life any number of desires announce themselves to me and I choose which desires to act on and attempt to actualise and it is the effect of these choices which, to an important extent, help determine who I am. On this point see Hegel, who discusses this aspect of choice in paragraph twelve of his Introduction to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel, 1991: 46).

There is a complex play between capacity and choice here to which I will not be able to justice in this paper. It should, however, be noted at the very least: choice limits my capacity (in choosing to do one thing I exclude the possibility of doing any number of other things) but choice also allows me to act, allows me to use and develop my capacity to act (after all, if I fail to choose, I am unable to do anything at all). Realising the possible, as Deleuze notes in *The Exhausted*, always proceeds through exclusion (Deleuze, 1995: 3-5). This is the way of order, of finite existence (as opposed to the infinite existence of God or Chaos), and it works through giving priority to choice over capacity: you must choose before you realise, actions must come after commands. As I say, I can't do justice to this kind of complexity here, instead I will attempt to engage with a problem these complexities bring to light. The problem is a problem of existence and freedom. The question is: how can you increase your power by decreasing the choices that are made for you by powers which determine and limit your capacity to act? How do you restore the mobility, flexibility (freedom if you like), which external powers are always serving to limit?

We can begin to skirt around the edges of these questions by considering the question of determinacy as outlined with regard to Spinoza in relation to the media and television nightly news in particular. What might it mean to say that the form and content of a given television news story, one that was screened on SBS news on the April 10 1996 concerning the crisis in Liberia for example, is completely determined; that it is one way and can be no other?<sup>2</sup> At first we might look at such a notion of determinacy and find it paralysing: we can't say or do anything because nothing could possibly have been any different. But clearly the temporal is getting us confused here. After all, we can never change the past and this has never disturbed us before. Insofar as the possible exists for us (due to our inadequate knowledge) it exists in the future. The notion of determinacy might be more useful for us, however, if we try and think about it in relation to power. Here, then, I refer the reader to Appendix One (a transcript of the SBS news item on Liberia from April 10, 1996) and, by way of contrast, Appendix Two (a transcript of the National Nine News item on Liberia from April 10, 1996).

### The Shape of News Stories

What might be the nature of the innumerable powers which determined the shape of each of these news stories? What were the choices taken and how did they come to be taken? Obviously it is impossible to quantify all of the choices which were taken which make these stories as they are and no other way. A few of them might be inferred, however, by comparing the SBS report with the Channel Nine report. In the SBS clip, (as opposed to the Channel Nine version) there is a failure to indicate that certain of the images from Liberia we are shown are taken from file footage, pulled off the wire from American news sources, and actually filmed in 1989. This choice clearly has implications for the viewer<sup>3</sup>. At the very least, however, this indicates the usefulness of having a variety of sources to turn to when gleaning information about an issue: that is, the SBS story contains information not available in the Channel Nine story and vice versa, but moreover, an ability to compare the two sources allows one to gauge the kinds of information which circulate about an issue such as this. Clearly, for example, there is a limited amount of resources available to Australian news programs when considering certain international issues, and this is underlined by the fact that the channels utilise many of the same images in presenting their stories. Further, the two stories have in common the decision to highlight the angle of Australians in trouble (and this angle was also used by the ABC News of that night which I have not reproduced in an Appendix here), and to turn the story towards human interest by providing portraits of those Australians and, in the case of SBS, speaking to one of her colleagues. A number of other differences underline choices taken by each production team. Firstly, SBS chose to make this item the lead story to their news report whereas it is used fifteen minutes into the Channel Nine News, and SBS allocate more time to it than Channel Nine (two minutes fifty five seconds for SBS,

one minute thirty seven seconds for Channel Nine). Choices such as these are clearly aligned to more global decisions about the nature of each news service. SBS, for example, has a tiny budget: their response, in part, seems to have been to reduce the level of wholly locally produced stories which are more expensive to make and to concentrate more on overseas stories, which largely only require re-editing. Such a policy is also in line with the SBS ethos, which requires that it provide a service to Australia's large migrant population, many of whom maintain ties with their countries of origin and who are, accordingly, very interested in overseas news. Channel Nine, however, is largely committed to more local and national issues. Clearly these choices have effects on the way the story is perceived by an audience, and clearly these choices were taken by those with the power to do so at SBS and Channel Nine. But it is also worth noting, firstly, how the producers were clearly limited by their own capacity (there was a need to use file-footage because, despite the misleading subtitle in the Nine story which seems to place Nick McCallum at or near the scene, there were no reporters on the ground in Liberia, no current film, for example). Secondly, it is interesting to consider the extent to which the form and content of this story were limited, or determined by powers external to and higher than those at work within SBS and Channel Nine. To make an apparently banal point the stories correspond to conventional formats (from a limited range of conventional formats) of the news story: there is limited time, and the need to show striking pictures in part determines the story's shape.

Before finishing with this comparison, for the moment, however, there are two more points of difference I would like to underline. Firstly, there are apparent, stylistic differences between the two stories. There are more and faster cuts between images with the Channel Nine story than the SBS story, for example. This, of course, might be interpreted in any number of ways, and one might also argue that the pace of the Channel Nine story might, in part, be influenced by its choice of apparently pre-edited footage taken from the American network 'abc' (see Appendix Two for a series of images which carry the 'abc' logo). Perhaps, however, the pace of the story might be seen as a means of keeping the viewers' interest.

Secondly, the Channel Nine version is impressively slick and self-contained: in one and a half minutes we are given a potted history of Liberia and of this conflict, offered an interpretation of the nature of the anarchy at play by an expert, and are left with a conclusion which indicates a) that the conflict seems to be ending for the moment and b) that the evacuations will nevertheless continue. One might argue, then, that we are left with a sense of closure, and so, as viewers, we shouldn't be surprised not to hear anything further of this story. The SBS version, however, is somewhat more open. For example, we are offered sound bites from those Western authorities charged (at least with regard to the fate of the foreigners in general and the Australian foreigners in particular) with taking the situation in hand: Bill Clinton, Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Alexander Downer. Yet rather than their comments proving totally reassuring, one is, perhaps, left

with the sense that the SBS story is, in effect, struggling with a lack of information which it is beyond its capacity to redress. All three of these major players offer the impression that information is scarce, and despite the assurances from Clinton that the powers that be have made the right choices so far, and from Boutros-Ghali that the UN has chosen to remain (in some capacity) on the ground in Liberia, we are left with the impression, which is underlined by Kathy Kallos's concluding remarks, that anything remains possible: that all the choices have not been taken, and that no one is quite certain of the capacities available to the various rebels, or the capacity of the UN or US to safeguard the interests of foreign nationals. The SBS story, then, allows us to see how issues of power are being played out through this story. Further, along with the notions of choice and capacity, which we have been discussing to date, the SBS story also highlights the importance of information to power. This is an idea which I will develop at greater length below; suffice it to say here, however, how effectively powerless Alexander Downer appears when he makes the following remarks:

We don't have an embassy there so we're clearly dependant, in the case of these three Australians, on information coming from the Americans and we'll need to get some more information (see Appendix One).

The interaction between power and information is indicated here, then, and this is an issue which I will return to below.

### Power and the Order-Word

Our power to act is constantly being limited by various kinds of orders. The things, in short, we commonly call powers: institutions, ideologies, the sociohistorical and socio-economic world we find ourselves in. It might be worth examining the extent of this constraint and control with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the order-word. What is involved is nothing less than the taking away of most of our choices, with our very desires already being determined by extrinsic systems which are intrinsic to language itself; language which comes to us through others, and, while no doubt adding to our capacity, reduces our choices. I will attempt a reading of the first part of Plateau four here (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 75-100), in an effort to shed light on these notions.

Deleuze and Guattari start by letting us consider the order-word as involving an order, an imperative in the conventional sense; they state that, 'Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience' (76). They then move on to indicate that the order-word, like the speech act, is present everywhere:

Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a 'social obligation.' Every statement displays this link, directly or indirectly. Questions, promises, are order-words. (79)

Order-words are the links which hold social groupings together; Deleuze and Guattari

speak of them as involving 'implicit presuppositions' (79) and this notion might be compared to Austin's idea of the conventional where he suggests that the illocutionary act (arguing, praising, and so on) is always conventional (Austin, 1975: 103-104). When something is conventional it is instantly recognised by the group to which the convention pertains, in effect, it indicates or affirms allegiance to that group; my allegiance to that group is presupposed implicitly because I use and conform to the conventions through which the group is defined. We might remember the example of the news reports I have referred to, then, and reflect on how they follow (and fail to follow) conventional forms. In following these forms they determine themselves as certain kinds of discourse—a television news report in Australia on SBS, or a television news report in Australia on Channel Nine—kinds of discourse which in turn align them with certain groups.

Deleuze and Guattari, then, oppose the first postulate of linguistics, that, 'language is informational and communicational' by stressing that, 'Information is only the strict minimum necessary for the emission, transmission, and observation of order words' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 76). That is, you just need enough information so as not to confuse one order with another.

When you speak, the already said in what you say sounds again: the words you use link you to a social group, a language group whose conventions adhere to those words. It is this process of adherence to a group through language which defines the essence of language (77).

If language is not in essence informational, what could be involved in the transmission of true information? I will return to this point later in considering the concept of information in the media. Perhaps it is worth offering a definition of information which differs from Deleuze and Guattari's usage here; that is, it might be useful to consider information as involving the transmission of different perspectives. These would then not simply adhere to one group, but to several, a range which would allow the viewer to choose between the different perspectives to which he or she might wish to adhere.

That language might be considered a map, one which places the speaker in given ways, is backed up by Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of the order-word in terms of redundancy. You can only say something within preestablished rules of what can be said, therefore, what you can say will merely affirm what is implicitly there in the kind of statement you make (which will be predetermined by the kind of language it belongs to). The statement, then, is redundant, it reaffirms what has already been affirmed. So too the kind of subject you might be is pre-determined by the social groupings to which you adhere; your subjectivity just echoes the order to which you are subjected. Like a map language constantly places us (as if with an arrow stating 'you are here'), socially, ideologically, and you give out this message whenever you speak (79-85). The news reports I have referred to, for example, are redundant in that they reinforce the ideology behind the 'free press'; part of which involves the idea that we are being kept



informed; part of which involves a strange sense that events are given significance in being reported.<sup>4</sup>

A body, that of an individual, is subjectified, trained or disciplined into identification with an order or regime of signs. When the trained body speaks the ordered language it transmits what it has heard, it passes on the order which has trained it. Of course, however, there was a body before it was disciplined, and there always remains the possibility of indiscipline, disorder, which might involve direct confrontation of an order (which will, however, necessarily involve the confrontation of one order by another) or perhaps more damaging still, simple misunderstanding, simple inability to comprehend orders. You have these individual bodies, then, and they are ordered or disciplined by being subjected to a collective assemblage, by being given over to order-words. The order-words create the social body by annexing these individual bodies to the collective assemblage: a collective assemblage needs converts, without them you have a dead social body, a dead language, a class that has disappeared, a profession that no longer exists, an extinct religion (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 97-107). As I say, then, on one hand the order-word is enacted on bodies, those of individuals such as ourselves, and on the other hand it constitutes or rather seeks the continuation of social bodies.

Because the circumstances are constantly changing the collective assemblages of enunciation are also constantly changing. This is perhaps a revenge of bodies over language, of life over language. We have seen how language gives life orders, well here it is clear how life constantly varies language, because to work language must reach out and inhabit contexts which are constantly changing, and in inhabiting these contexts language itself is subject to continuous variation. In speaking, then, you pronounce an order-word which ties you to one or several orders, but you are also varying that or those orders by the new circumstances you lend to it/them, and in turn you yourself are varying in relation to the new relations presupposed by those orders. The order-word, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, seems to float on the sea-swell of this process of continuous variation, it is the order-word itself which indicates or effectuates this variation. Because of this Deleuze and Guattari dismiss that linguistics which attempts to fix language. Language is in constant flux, and is defined by constant flux. What is needed is a pragmatics; a definition of language tying it to the ongoing process of variation through which it exists; this would involve tying it to the social processes and so the political process. The variation of order-words allows the formation of new social bodies which in turn produce new subjects who adhere to those bodies. As Deleuze and Guattari state, 'Pragmatics is a politics of language' (82).

There is a difference, then, between the determinism of Spinoza's God and the determinism involved with the order-word. The order-word always serves to determine or limit, but the capacity of any group (any collective assemblage) to fix and direct the nature of this determinism indefinitely is limited by the complex interrelationships of

powers other to it which serve to place the order-word in continuous variation. Here we might see the positive effect of the media (what I called information above) from another angle: the media has the potential to allow differing interpretations of the order-word, to show other parts of the map (allowing you to vicariously experience the other than 'you are here'). Here information might again be understood as allowing a range of perceptions rather than choosing a single side. It thus might give back the power to choose to the viewer, requiring that the viewer is not merely affected by a yes/no reflex but needs to reflect (and question his or her own opinions) before choosing.<sup>5</sup>

Radically simplifying this concept we could, for the moment, primarily identify the order-word with command or choice, power over. It is clear however, as we have seen, that there are two sides to power, and command or choice without the capacity to effectuate that choice involves, in truth, powerlessness. The order-word limits us by directing and determining the kinds of choice we are able to make, by attempting to fix us in place, to tie us to a given set of possibilities. But the language which conveys order-words is in continuous variation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 97-107), and this opens up possibility again, as there is always the possibility not so much of not obeying, as of misunderstanding. The command might be misinterpreted or misunderstood, or rather, reinterpreted or understood differently. Reinterpretation moves the subject from the position of simple obedience to a position in which choice again becomes possible.<sup>6</sup>

Revolution involves, perhaps, the reversal of the structure of power whereby capacity acts on choice rather than the other way around. When command or power over directs and determines capacity or power to we have what is commonly termed order in society. Certain possibilities are realised by casting aside other possibilities. After all you can't do two things at once. When power over or command is subordinate to power to or capacity, on the other hand, we have what is commonly called anarchy, chaos, and this involves the re-emergence of a plurality of possibilities among which a choice has not yet been made, and this, in short, might be termed the revolutionary moment. Such a moment was perhaps that experienced, for example, by the Dadaists of the 'Cabaret Voltaire'. To quote Hans Richter:

Dada not only had no programme, it was against all programmes. Dada's only programme was to have no programme ... and, at that moment in history, it was just this that gave the movement its explosive power to unfold *in all directions*, free of aesthetic or social constraints ... The frailty of human nature guaranteed that such a paradisaical situation could not last. But there was to be a brief moment in which absolute freedom was asserted for the first time (Richter, 1965: 34).

This, no doubt, was a moment full of adrenaline and fear because the death of the old order, the old habit which determined our choices, was at hand. To quote Beckett quoting Proust: 'If there were no such thing as Habit, Life would of necessity appear delicious to all those whom Death would threaten at every moment, that is to say, all Mankind' (Beckett, 1987: 29). This program of no program perhaps provides a gloss on

certain of the revolutionary tendencies in contemporary philosophy and the interest in chaos (the ensemble of all possibilities) expressed by Deleuze and Serres among others. To quote Michel Serres:

The philosopher is no longer right or rational, he protects neither essence nor truth. It is the function of the politician to be right and rational ... the philosopher does not wrap himself up in truth ... he wants to let the possibles roam free. Hope is in these margins, and freedom (Serres, 1995: 23).

### The Media and Information

It is clear that the media might be effectively used as an institution which cuts down or limits the power of individual groups or subjects to act by limiting choice. Few would argue with the suggestion that television news provides a limited representation of events: it is limited not only by kinds of capacity (there are only so many cameras, journalists, and so on), but by kinds of choice (decisions are made concerning what is/is not newsworthy). Noam Chomsky and ES Herman have written at length on this latter aspect of the media's relation to power: the choices of newsworthiness often reflect the opinions and conform to the interests of the dominant ideology helping thereby to determine that public opinion be in accord with this ideology (Chomsky and Herman, 1988). With regard to 'infotainment' certain stories might be valued over others: those stories which evoke drama or violence, (the siege, the killing) or illicit strong (but familiar) emotions, indignation, fear (the paedophile, the siege, or the killing which occurs close to home). The consumer's interest must be kept at a high level and so the familiar is given priority: that to which the viewer will feel a part is stressed, events which concern Australia or Australians are therefore valued above stories which do not. On the other hand, however, there is the possibility that the media might open up choice, allow a range of choices.

One could conceptualise this through two concepts concerning contemporary reporting of the news and current affairs. The concepts, of course, are general, and their actual interaction in real media forms are no doubt highly complicated, but they are useful none the less. In a recent program entitled 'The Future Role of Public Broadcasting' on ABC Radio National's *The Media Report* the New Zealand sociologist Pahmi Winter describes her research on New Zealand television (*The Media Report*, 28/3/1996). She suggests that there has been a fundamental shift in TVNZ's approach to news reporting since it has been privatised.<sup>7</sup> The argument runs that public broadcasters, such as the ABC and SBS, see their role as primarily informational. They consider that their programs offer a public service, and as such their obligations are primarily to the viewers, understood to be 'citizens' who need to be kept informed of events so that they can make 'informed' decisions rather than decisions based on pre-digested opinion. The argument continues that the commercial channels, on the other

hand, see their obligations as being owed primarily to advertisers. The viewer is then understood as a 'consumer' and the consumer, rather than needing to be informed, needs to be entertained. The viewers must be entertained so that they will watch in numbers sufficient to attract advertising.

The distinction is interesting and might be understood in relation to the concepts which are being developed here. Providing information, ideally, allows for a plurality of views; for a more detailed examination of the apparent causes of events; for scrutiny and debate around issues. Armed with this information viewers are then in a better position to decide on or choose a position, and ideally to grasp the complexity of an issue which might make them realise that it might be difficult to choose simply by reflex. In short, information has the power to challenge the viewer's habits, to cause the viewer to re-examine opinions which had previously been taken for granted. Information, then, might open up possibility.

Infotainment, on the other hand, requires punchy and flashy delivery. The sound bite, the graphic pictures, which catch the viewer's attention but which are cut off from any reflection on the causes of events. Viewers are then unable to reach a position which might be named — according to the logic of this argument — 'informed'. Choice, in the sense in which the term has been discussed above, is not available in the same way to the viewer.

One might consider this opposition between information and entertainment as involving an opposition between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The social category of 'entertainment' can be understood in various ways. For example, critical writing has noted that the assignment of cultural texts to the categories of 'art' and 'entertainment', or 'information' and 'entertainment', often maps onto class distinctions - that what 'the masses' consume is dismissed as being merely 'entertainment' (Radway, 1992). Accepting that there might be textually distinctive aspects of 'entertainment' texts, it might be possible to argue that they tend to work with what is familiar, using a familiar language of signs and symbols. The viewer recognises familiar images which are perhaps linked to familiar ideas (and this is where it is useful for propaganda) and these also encourage the viewer to experience familiar emotions. The unfamiliar image—the killing the disaster—is only apparently unfamiliar; one gasps at the spectacular image but it is already readily identifiable, one knows or is told what one is expected to think of it: horror, indignation, amazement, the laughter shared by those who are comfortable in that they hold the same opinions. The conveyance of information, however, must of necessity work by emphasising the unfamiliar. Information, as defined in this paper, allows us to see the causes of things which we did not know before, it initiates us into foreign cultures and attempts to explain things from unfamiliar perspectives. In short it challenges us to leave our habits, to see differently. Information and infotainment, then, are diametrically opposed: infotainment wants us to recognise the real as something we already know very well, something we feel in our bellies and it also attempts to teach us what to recognise and value, working

through habit. Information, on the other hand, challenges us to experience the real by testing our habits, so that we might really see. The former, then, cuts down our choices and therefore our capacity to act, while the second opens up our range of options, allowing us greater choice and therefore greater power.

All of this, then, clearly concerns current debates over the usefulness of public broadcasters like SBS and the ABC. We are left with a choice (one which might, however, be taken for us by the current Federal Government): do we want information or infotainment from our news sources; that is, do we want more or less power?

## Appendix One:

Transcript of Lead News Item broadcast on SBS News, 6.30, April 10, 1996 [Duration: 2 minutes, 55 seconds]. Spoken script is in normal typeface, italics indicates shot description. Note: boldface indicates that the same video footage is used in both the SBS and Channel Nine versions.

*[Medium shot: Newsreader Mary Kostakidis at news desk against a background showing a map of Liberia, the word 'Liberia' and Liberian flags]*

Mary Kostakidis: ... we lead tonight with the crisis in Liberia. There is concern for hundreds of foreign nationals, Australians among them, with the West-African country the scene of yet more blood-letting. Despite reports this evening of agreement on a cease-fire, fears remain that matters could deteriorate once more into full-scale civil war. The United States, which has long-standing historical and political links with Liberia, is evacuating all its citizens and many from other countries as well.

*[Long Shot: Military aircraft and troops at air base.]*

Subtitle: Sierra Leone.

Subtitle: Kathy Kallos reporting/WORLD DESK.

Kallos (voice over): From Liberia's West-African neighbour Sierra Leone, US military forces have begun a major humanitarian operation *[Long Shot: US airforce helicopter landing in US Embassy compound in Monrovia, Liberia]* already more than two dozen Americans and one Australian *[Medium Long Shot: Group of civilians and troops waiting for helicopter]* have been air-lifted from Liberia. Hundreds more *[Long Shot: Civilians boarding helicopter in US Embassy compound]* are set to follow along with other foreign nationals caught in a country that has *[Long Shot: Streets of Liberian city in chaos — young armed rebels dancing, civilians in background]* descended once more into murderous anarchy. Among those still stuck in the US Embassy compound there: *[Long Shots: US Embassy compound]* two Australian missionaries and a nun, *[Still in Close Up: Sister Mary Louise Slattery]* Sister Mary Louise Slattery from Sydney.

*[Close-up: Sister Margaret Reed]*

Subtitle: Sister Margaret Reed/FRANCISCAN MISSIONARY

Reed: She is [sic] a very outgoing vivacious personality. *[Cut]* She would be apprehensive, but she would be caring for those around her, and probably be very concerned about those people who she must leave there.

*[Close-up: Australian Foreign Affairs Minister, Alexander Downer]*

Kallos (voice over): The Australian's safety, as Canberra admits, is now very much in the hands of the Americans.

Subtitle: Alexander Downer/FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER

Downer: We don't have an embassy there so we're clearly dependant, in the case of these three Australians, on information coming from the Americans and we'll need to get some more information.

*[Long Shot: US President Bill Clinton at Presidential desk. At his back are seven male advisors and one female advisor]*

Kallos (voice over): President Clinton says everything possible is being done in the most difficult of circumstances.

*[Medium Shot: President Clinton at desk]*

Subtitle: Bill Clinton/US PRESIDENT

Clinton: ... Well, we've done the best we could, you know, it's hard for anybody to assure their safety in the sense that there ... conflict is going on in the capital. But we believe that we've made the right decisions so far.

*[Long Shots/Close-ups: US military helicopters at air base, taking off and landing]*

Kallos (voice over): Heavily armed helicopters equipped with sophisticated electronic devices flew a special army team to Monrovia to determine the most efficient means of evacuation. *[Long Shot: Camera in car moving over dirt road flanked by crowds, and following vehicles containing armed rebels]* Tension continues to build in Liberia now experiencing *[Medium Shot: Three Liberian soldiers, armed with semi-automatic weapons in trench watching camera]* its worst fighting in three years.

*[Maps of Liberia, indicating its position in Africa and the position of Monrovia]*

Subtitle: voice of Dudley Sims/US EMBASSY, LIBERIA

Sims (voice over): The last forty eight hours were like hell. Ah ... chaos, confusion. Ah ... the use of heavy weapons including mortars, RPGs, heavy arms, it was terrible, *[Long Shot: Panning over ruins of burnt-out building]* chaotic, lots of looting, burning, *[Long Shot: Burnt out semi-trailer beside road]* just an awful state of affairs.

*[Long Shot: Several Liberian civilians beside a dirt road, some carrying belongings on their heads and, in the foreground, one child following an adult male who holds him by the hand. A Liberian military vehicle carrying troops drives by on the dirt road as the civilians move quickly away]*

Kallos (voice over): While many are now preparing to move to safer ground the United Nations chief Boutros Boutros-Ghali insists *[Medium Shot: Boutros Boutros-Ghali at UN headquarters]* it will not abandon its presence in the country.

Sub-title: Boutros Boutros-Ghali/UN SECRETARY-GENERAL

Boutros-Ghali: ... because without this presence the situation will get worse.

*[Long Shot: Small truck carrying several people drives down bitumen road past three onlookers and the camera. The camera pans to reveal, in Medium Shot, a human skeleton strung up by a shack beside the road at which a young man shelters]*

Kallos (voice over): But the Liberian crisis is already bad enough. Apart from the blood-letting, six hundred hostages are being held *[Medium Long Shot: Crowd scene, Liberian civilians congratulating Liberian soldiers]* by one of the warlords *[Medium Shot: Dancing armed rebels]* including foreign nationals *[Medium Shot: Boy with semi-automatic weapon]* and a group of Lebanese diplomats. *[Medium Shot: Another boy with semi-automatic weapon dances past the camera].*



## Appendix Two:

Transcript of News Item broadcast fifteen minutes into broadcast on National Nine News, 6.00pm, April 10, 1996 [Duration: 1 minute, 37 seconds]. Spoken script is in normal typeface, italics indicates shot description. Note: boldface indicates that the same video footage is used in both the SBS and Channel Nine versions.

*[Medium shot: Newsreader Brian Henderson at news desk, behind him a graphic containing an image of the Liberian flag, a military aircraft taking off and the heading 'Rescue Mission']*.

Henderson: An Australian man has been evacuated from the civil war in Liberia while three of our missionaries are tonight preparing to escape. *[Cut to full-screen graphic: map of Africa indicating the position of Liberia. Then zooming in on map of Liberia]*. All had taken refuge with hundreds of other westerners in the African state as American military planes begin the job of flying people to safety.

*[Long Shot: Military aircraft and troops at air base.]*

Subtitle: NICK McCALLUM reporting/Sierra Leone/9'

McCallum (voice over): Waiting their turn to join the American airlift out of Liberia to neighbouring Sierra Leone Sister Mary Louise Slattery *[Still in Close Up: Sister Mary Louise Slattery]* a Franciscan nun from Sydney *[Still in Close Up: Jim and Lynette Mason]* and Jim and Lynette Mason, Lutheran missionaries from Geelong. *[Long Shot: Military aeroplane landing at airbase]*. Another unnamed Australian man has already been evacuated. *[Medium Shot: US soldier with semi-automatic weapon in combat position at gates of US Embassy compound]*. Some seven hundred foreigners have been sheltering in the US Embassy in Monrovia.

*[Long Shot: US Embassy, Monrovia, zooming in to US flag at top of building]*.

Subtitle: Monrovia, Liberia

Unnamed American voice: we are, *[Close Up: Sign reading 'Embassy of the United States of America']* ah ... [inaudible] ... to extract *[Medium Shot: Two US soldiers in full combat gear and standing beside a military vehicle speak into field telephones]* foreign nationals.

*[Long Shot: Civilians boarding helicopter in US Embassy compound. Sound effect: Noise of helicopter]*

Subtitle: 1989

McCallum (voice over): The last American mass evacuation from Liberia was in 1989. *[Long Shot: Streets of Liberian city in chaos — young armed rebels dancing, civilians in background]* when civil war gripped the country founded by *[Long Shot: Camera in car]*

*moving over dirt road flanked by crowds, and following vehicles containing armed rebels*) freed American slaves. [*Close Up: In foreground a Liberian rebel in civilian clothes and with a semi-automatic weapon dances, numerous other rebels dance in the background.* Subtitle: 'abc' (US TV network)]. Fighting between ethnic groups since [*Long Shot: Liberian women in impoverished market place.* Subtitle: 'abc'] has left [*Medium Shot: Seated Liberian girl peeling vegetables and watching camera.* Subtitle: 'abc'/'FILE'] one hundred and fifty thousand dead [*Medium Shot: Liberian woman in hammock staring at camera.* Subtitle: 'abc'/'FILE'] and more than a million homeless.

[*Medium Shot: UN peacekeepers at make-shift station accept weapon being handed in by Liberian civilian.*]

McCallum (voice over): A peace treaty last year brought hope, but it collapsed over the weekend. [*Medium Long Shot: Two Liberian men in civilian clothes fire semi-automatic weapons left to right into jungle. Sound effect: semi-automatic gun fire.*]. Experts [*Medium Long Shot: Two Different Liberian men, running along roadside fire semi-automatic weapons right to left into jungle*] paint a grim [*Medium Long Shot: Several young boys running away from camera fire semi-automatic guns right to left into jungle; one looks back at camera*] picture of life there.

[*Close Up: Herman Cohen*]

Subtitle: Herman Cohen/Fmr. Assistant Secy. of State/'CNN'

Cohen: ... these wild drug addicts who are running around with guns [*Medium Long Shot: One of the first two men above continues to fire at random into jungle with semi-automatic weapon*] it's one of these [*Medium Long Shot: Civilians and armed rebels walk along road through jungle*] almost anarchy situations [*Medium Shot: Black soldier in full combat fatigues standing at ease with semi-automatic weapon at ready*].

[*Still in Medium Shot: Sister Mary Louise Slattery by seaside*]

McCallum (voice over): Sister Mary Louise has been in Liberia for a year teaching at a convent [*Still in Close Up, panning left to right: The Masons, panning from Lynette to Jim*] the Masons have been working with refugees. [*Medium Long Shot: US troops in fatigues unloading equipment from planes at airbase*]. Late today the warring factions [*Medium Long Shot: Different angle, US troops unloading equipment*] announced a cease-fire but the evacuation of foreigners is expected to continue. [*Long Shot: US military supply aircraft taking off*]. Nick McCallum, National Nine News.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> One might object, half-seriously, that one day there might be time machines, but this would by no means alter the relationship between power and possibility: the time machine would add to my *puissance*, my capacity to act, and would determine my ability to exist elsewhere. Less fancifully, I might choose to live elsewhere, and this might change who I am: but this too would be determined by my power: my power to choose (determined by my capacity to act on my choices).
- <sup>2</sup> It is not my intention to single out SBS or Channel Nine, or even the format of television news, for criticism here. The coverage of international news offered by SBS, for example, is clearly very strong, which is even more remarkable given the financial constraints under which they are obliged to operate. What interests me here, rather, is the necessity of the notion of constraint itself; the nature of the interaction between choice and capacity (which confronts not only producers of television news but all of us pure and simple, and affects me in the production of this paper as much as SBS in the production of their news story) in relation to the production of television news. My purpose, then, is not to attribute blame, but to shed light on the nature of the interactions of power in the production of a news item so as to roughly outline some of the strengths and weaknesses of the TV news format.
- <sup>3</sup> The failure to acknowledge the film as file footage is interesting: it is either a calculated strategy or a simple oversight. Convention determines that the words 'File Footage' be shown but one might argue that disregarding this convention has itself become a convention of sorts in most newsrooms. What this does, strangely enough, is to open up a range of interpretations. I can now either be unaware of it, read it as manipulating my response, or think of it as a simple mistake: a range of possible readings opens up which would not exist had the convention been completely followed. This might seem an obscure point for the moment, but its importance becomes clearer when the nature of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the order-word is considered below.
- <sup>4</sup> What would be involved in a major event which remained unreported? A sense of somehow being removed from reality? It is the idea that facts are being hidden which gives conspiracy theories their fantastic quality. One might think of the chemical spill in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* which, for some of the victims of this event, attracts insufficient attention among news outlets, causing those victims to cluster together in affirming the reality of their own experience (162). Perhaps we are back with Bishop Berkeley as interpreted by Samuel Beckett in *Film*: To be is to be perceived. Part of the ideology of the news, then, is that it constitutes the authorised perception of a given society. For a fuller consideration of issues related to this see Paul Patton's essay in this volume.

- <sup>5</sup> Firstly, It is worth noting that while initially we might understand it in strictly negative terms; that is, we might think that it is wholly and always a bad thing, Deleuze and Guattari end by indicating the double-sided nature of the order-word; how it might not only be understood as invoking death but as a warning, a call to flight, escape. The order word then might have positive effects, effects which can assist the revolutionary (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 107).
- <sup>6</sup> For a fuller description of some of these issues see Uhlmann, 1996a and 1996b.
- <sup>7</sup> For an in depth consideration of these changes to the New Zealand 'mediascape' see Hutchison and Lealand, 1996.

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#### Radio Broadcasts

- The Media Report* (1996) 'The Future Role of Public Broadcasting', ABC Radio National, Thursday 28 March 1996.

#### TV News Broadcasts

- SBS News*, 6.30 pm, 10 April, 1996.
- National Nine News*, 6.00 pm, 10 April, 1996.