

CHAPTER I

LONG: The Length of News

Picture it. Nineteenth-century man with his horses, dogs, carts, slow motion. Then in the Twentieth Century, speed up your camera. Books cut shorter. Condensations. Digests. Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending. . . . Classics cut to fit fifteen-minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two-minute book column, winding up last as a ten or twelve line dictionary résumé. . . . Speed up the film . . . Click, Pic, Look, Eye, Now, Flick, Here, There, Pace, Up, Down, In, Out, Who, What, Bang, Smack, Wallop. Digest-digests, digest-digest-digests. Politics? One column, two sentences, a headline. Then, in mid-air, all vanishes. Whirl man's mind around about so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters, that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought!
—Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1993, pp. 84–5)

Everything is going faster these days. First radio and then television picked up the pace, requiring shorter attention spans. Along came faxes, then electronic mail, and now text messaging on cellular phones. Television commercials get shorter, and the images on MTV move by faster. Critics call it sound-bite society or MacDonaldization.

Has daily news gone along with the trend?

Some journalists say yes. They point to the impact of *USA Today*. Science writer James Gleick, in his book, *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, summarized this view: “*USA Today* caters to your more modern reading habits by keeping copy short. Other newspapers have catered to them by going out of business” (1999, p. 140). They also point to the shrinking of sound bites on television newscasts and the rise of images everywhere. Critics say these two trends are related: as pictures become more prominent, they squeeze out words. In magazines, according to the *New York Times*, “the 4,000-word article has become a relic, first replaced by the 800-word quick

take and then further boiled down to a 400-word blurb that is little more than a long caption” (Carr, 2002, p. C-8). Following the trend in magazines, journalists say, daily news has gotten shorter.

Others aren't so sure. Jon Franklin, in an article for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, says that long-form writing has waxed and waned in news. He began working as a journalist in 1959 for the Navy magazine, *All Hands*, then spent a couple of years at the *Prince Georges Post*, in the Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., before joining the Baltimore *Evening Sun*. He remembers being “constrained by the hoary old rules of ‘real’ journalism” in the 1960s. “If we ran longer than twenty inches, our endings were subject to arbitrary amputation” (1996, p. 37).

He then describes a scene in the early 1970s, when managing editor Phil Heisler changed the rules at the *Sun*:

I will never forget the day Phil came out, plopped down on the edge of the city-editor's desk and announced in a voice loud enough to carry halfway across the newsroom that all important stories would henceforth be at least fifty inches long. He sat there for a few moments, listening to the silence crackle, and then he got up, marched back into his glassed-in office, and closed the door. . . . Similar scenes were being played out across America . . . (pp. 37–8)

Franklin became something of a specialist in long-form journalism. He won a Pulitzer prize for feature writing — the first ever given — for his 1978 article, “Mrs. Kelly's Monster,” an extended close-up of how a neurosurgical operating room works. He later won the first Pulitzer prize for explanatory writing. At the *Sun* he remembers “taking two to three months to do a story.”

Then in the 1980s the pendulum swung back, he says, and long stories fell out of fashion. Industry research showed at the time that readers didn't stick with a story once it jumped to an inside page, and so the era “ended by thousands of managing editors popping out of their offices and announcing that, henceforth, no story would jump off the front page” (Franklin, 1996, p. 39).

Trends in journalism recur about every twelve to fifteen years, Franklin quips, “calculated by the periodic rediscovery of the killer bee story.” The cycle began again in the mid-1990s, he says, when the American Society of Newspaper Editors published a new study showing the value of longer stories to readers. Five years later, the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University began sponsoring an annual conference on narrative journalism, but the *American Editor* magazine, in a theme issue on “Writing Long,” began to question the “mistaken belief that the more important a story, the longer it must be” (Burrough, 2001, p. 5). Long stories may have reached another peak in a series of ups and downs.

Andy Glass doesn't remember it that way. His career as a reporter, editor, and columnist has spanned almost half a century. When he began working as a

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journalist at the New Haven (Conn.) *Journal Courier* in the 1950s, news came in on a teleprinter hooked to a teletype machine that set the type and justified it in columns. “It was virtually impossible to edit,” he says, except by snipping from the bottom.

I remember once there was an execution that occurred in California at two in the morning our time, which was eleven o’clock at night in California. It was a sensational execution in 1957. So I had to change the tense of the story because the prisoner died literally on — not on deadline, but on press start in New Haven. So I had to go into the copy and actually edit the copy. And I remember that because it was so rare that we changed things.

Glass concludes that “stories tended to be longer” back then. “You couldn’t go in and cut a paragraph, other than to go to the stone and physically throw the type away after it had been set.” Reporters wrote about two stories a day, he recalls, and the general rule they followed was, “Tell the story in as much length as you need to tell it properly and then stop.”

He joined the *New York Herald-Tribune* in 1959 and landed an assignment with the Washington bureau in the early 1960s. During that time, he says, “I cannot remember any prolonged or any sustained discussions about story length. It literally never came up.”

In the late 1960s he moved to the *Washington Post*, then under the editorship of Ben Bradlee, and began doing work that had an impact. He says he broke the story in the mainstream press about CIA connections to the student movement. A few years later he left the *Post* and, after a stint on Capitol Hill as a press secretary for Sen. Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.) and executive assistant for Sen. Charles “Chuck” Percy (R-Ill.), he returned to journalism at the *National Journal*, a magazine publishing long (20–25,000-word) pieces.

In 1974, he joined the Cox newspaper chain, where he became the Washington, D.C., bureau chief and a columnist. He recalls “editors generally pressuring the bureau to keep it short: ‘You’re writing too long.’” During the 1990s, the Cox newspapers went through major redesigns, with new layouts and type that introduced more white space, what editors call *air*, and more graphics. The formats of the papers were changed, *re-webbed* in the jargon, so that “their physical size went down by 15 to 20 percent.” Glass says that under those conditions “there has been a direct — not implied, but a direct — demand,” passed from the top editors through the news editors, “to keep the story short.”

In other words, Glass remembers stories running long in the 1950s and 1960s due to technical limitations, and then: “What I have felt as a manager is strong pressure for shorter stories, consistently since the nineties (since the newspaper recession of ’91 particularly), not so much in the seventies and eighties.”

Most journalists I’ve talked to tell similar stories. What they see depends at least partly on their job title. Editors and producers, who have to manage the demands for space in the newspaper or for time on the air, always pressure

reporters to be concise. If editors are succeeding, news is getting shorter. They remember their success. Reporters sense that the demand for briefer stories has been waxing and waning. The best writing — articles that attract the attention of colleagues, have a political impact, really change things, and win Pulitzers — tend to be long. But they’re seen as the exception.

Journalists think of their writing as short. That makes sense. News by definition is brief. Everyday experience on the job pushes journalists to write shorter. It should come as no surprise that they see the trends the way they do. If they had to place a wager, many journalists would put their money on the faster horse: that daily news — on the whole — has been getting shorter along with everything else lately.

The Long Odds

But the journalists would be wrong. A series of studies shows that news is getting longer. Newspaper journalists are writing longer. Television journalists are speaking more. Even journalists on public radio, the home of extended reporting, are talking more in longer stories.

First consider newspapers. In three different papers, with different circulations in geographically dispersed cities of different sizes, news articles grew longer (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997). Figure 1.1 shows how much.

At the *New York Times* and the Portland *Oregonian*, the length of stories doubled in the last century. The *Chicago Tribune* stories ran longer, too, although not as much. Stories about three different topics — accidents, crime, and employment — all went up. The changes are statistically significant, not only overall but for each newspaper and for each topic. In other words, stories grew longer, at different newspapers, for different topics, and in different places across the country.

Compared to a 1-paragraph *New York Times* story on a factory adding jobs in 1894, a 1994 story on jobs on Staten Island ran 27 paragraphs describing the revival of the port. Here’s a typical one-paragraph crime story from the *Chicago Tribune* of 1894:

James McCune of 319 South Green street, a packer, is at the County hospital with a fractured skull. He was knocked down by William Warrington of 528 South Halstead street, a teamster. The men quarreled at West Congress and South Halstead streets. The police held Warrington without booking him. (April 15, p. 10)

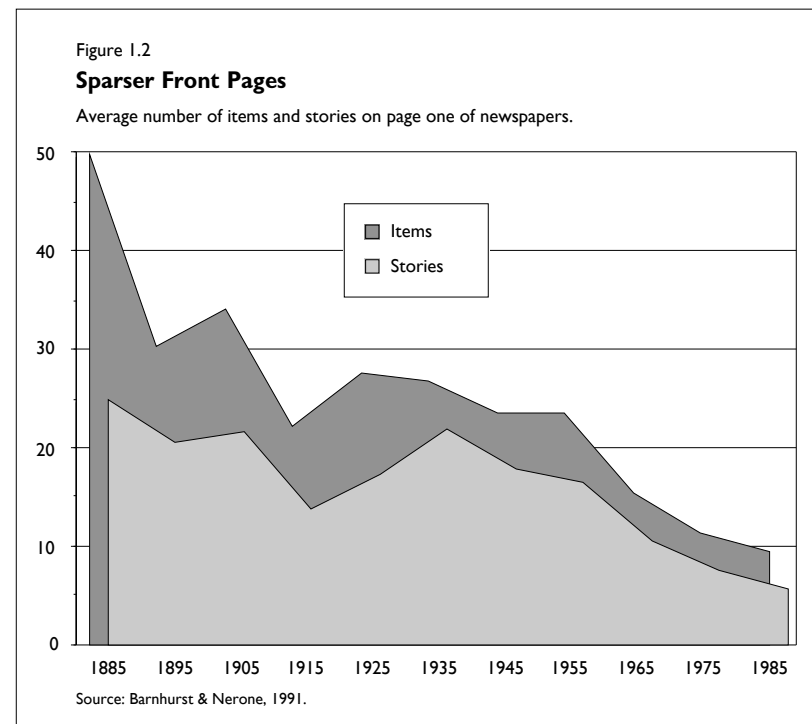
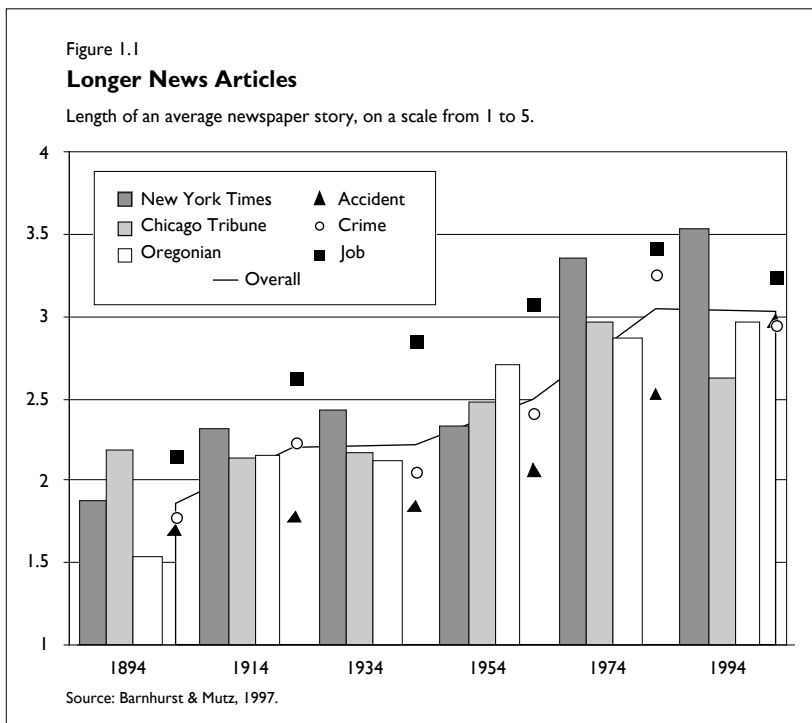
Search the *Tribune* today, and you’ll never find a crime story that short. After the 1960s, accident stories showed a steep increase in length. Two examples of accident stories illustrate how news got longer. Shortly before the turn of the century, the *Times* contained a two-paragraph item that began this way:

Four-year-old Dora Cohen was run over before her father’s eyes by a horse and wagon in front of her home, at 87 Hester Street, at 7:30 o’clock last evening. The child’s ribs were crushed in and she died an hour later in her

father's arms. (April 17, 1894, p. 8)

The second paragraph reported a chronology of the accident, describing the street, express wagon, and driver. Such items disappeared over the century, so that by 1994 the *Times* covered only much bigger accidents. For example, a report on a flooding incident in Fort Fairfield, Maine, on April 19 that year ran much longer and included information on previous floods, state emergency measures, the damage, as well as what triggered the flooding (p. A-2).

course: the pages themselves got smaller, the text type got larger, the ads disappeared from front pages, and more photos and illustrations took their place — but at the same time the stories themselves got longer. A century ago most stories that began on the front page ended on the front page. Only the biggest stories continued on another page. Today the five stories on a typical front page run long enough to jump to another page inside the paper, and the segment inside can be longer than an entire story from a front page of the late 1800s.



Another way to look at the length of stories in newspapers is by counting the number of items on the front page. That's what a separate study did (Barnhurst & Nerone, 1991). Figure 1.2 shows the result.

Once again, the study included three newspapers: a major metropolitan daily, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a smaller urban daily, the *Springfield, Illinois, State Journal-Register*, and a small-town weekly, the *Peterborough (formerly Contoocook) Transcript*, of New Hampshire. For every story (including the headline, text, and any related pictures), one other item also ran, such as a stand-alone illustration or an ad, and that didn't change in a century. What did change was how many stories could fit.

A typical front page in 1885 had room for almost twenty-five stories, but by 1985, the number dropped almost to five. Other things happened, of

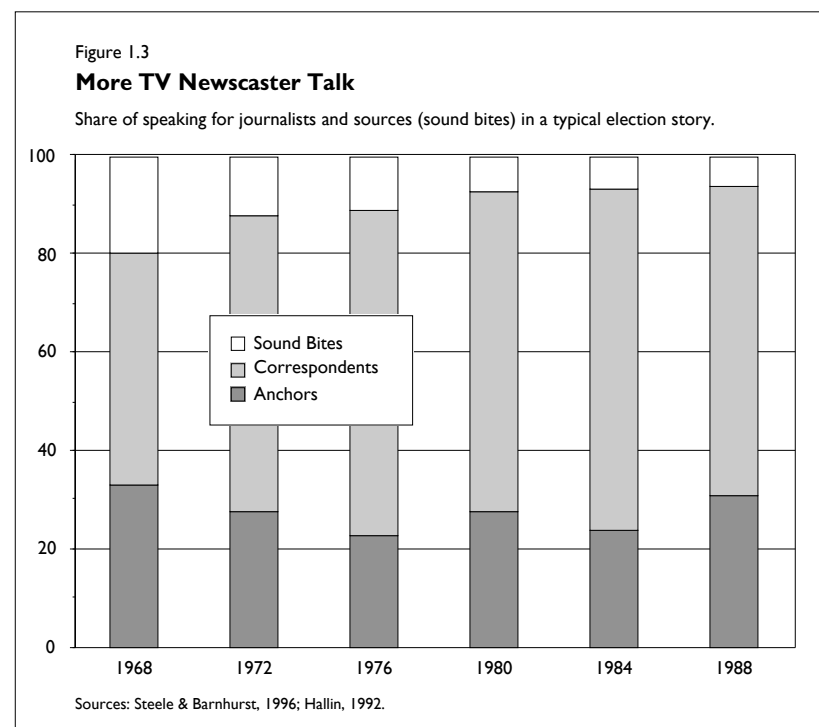
U.S. newspaper reporting is famed for its brevity, especially compared to the European press. Despite the pressure they always feel to be brief, U.S. journalists today write longer news stories than they did a century ago, at least in the case of newspapers.

What about Television?

The picture on the evening news is a bit more complicated. Overall, news reports have grown longer. Some studies have extrapolated from the number of news stories, which is declining, and the overall length of newscasts, which is not (Riffe, 1996, 1999; Riffe & Budianto, 2001), to surmise that stories are longer. Two studies took direct measures of story length, showing that the average news report grew from just over a minute and a half (96 seconds in the

first period, 1982 to 1984) to more than two minutes a decade later (28 seconds in the 1992 to 1994 period) on the big three broadcast networks (Whitney, et al, 1989; Jones, n.d.)

In other ways, television moved faster. Election reports on ABC, CBS, and NBC went from about three minutes in 1968 to two and a half in 1988 (Hallin, 1992). These reports were always short, the equivalent of about twelve inches in a column of newspaper text. As election stories grew shorter, journalists cut down on pauses by the end of the 1980s, but most of the change resulted from the shrinking sound bite. Audio and film or video clips of sources speaking went from 43.1 seconds in 1968 to 8.9 seconds in 1988, a drop so dramatic that the sound bite became a household term,



fueled debates among media critics and journalists, and spawned a cottage industry of books and articles.

What's interesting is that journalists themselves were talking more. Length can be measured several ways: how long they went on each time they talked, how often they talked in a report, and what share of the total time they spent talking in a report. By these measures combined, journalists gained ground (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). Although they ran slightly shorter each time they talked, they spoke more than twice as often, and their share of the average election report grew significantly. Figure 1.3 illustrates the trend.

The anchors and correspondents spoke significantly more often, and correspondents spoke significantly longer as a share of each report. Sources had a much smaller share (Hallin, 1992, Table 3). Here's what a typical election report sounded like in 1968:

C R O N K I T E: The presidential campaign today featured a long-range debate over presidential debates. From Portland, Oregon, Vice-president Humphrey issued another challenge to Richard Nixon. (11 seconds)

H U M P H R E Y: Yeah, I've been trying to get Mr. Nixon to come on a platform like this. I think you ought to ask him; I've been asking him. Why can't we have national debates along the style of the Lincoln-Douglas debates? Why shouldn't the American people hear from Mr. Nixon, Mr. Wallace and myself at the same time? Why shouldn't we be able to come to Portland? You've got a fine auditorium here, you have television, and the national networks, they wouldn't miss it, you know. It'd be just too much fun, and besides that, it would be free, it would be our men, instead of some of us having to go around and ask you to contribute to our campaign coffers. In all candor, I think the time has arrived in a city, in a country of over 200 million people, where we have the media that we are privileged to have today. Where candidates quit acting like they're running around playing games with each other, talking to partisan audiences. I think we ought to have the candidates side by side, sitting up here, just as these men are here, and we take our turn on a subject like this, present our case, answer your questions, and you go out of here like the jury, and make your own decision. (69 seconds)

(1-second pause)

D E A N: Humphrey has been all fired up over this debate issue for weeks now and is especially miffed today. In a talk prepared for tonight, he scornfully labels Nixon as the Shadow and Brand X. "Where is he?" Humphrey taunts, "Where is the Shadow? When will you meet with me somewhere that the American people can look at both of us?" Hubert Humphrey on the attack — it's been just about that way at almost every campaign stop. Morton Dean, CBS News, with the Humphrey campaign in Portland, Oregon. (30 seconds)

CBS aired this report on September 27 that year, followed by a second report on Nixon's response, including the anchor's introduction and wrap up (totaling 23 seconds), correspondent John Hart's introduction, description, and sign-off (48 seconds), and four sound bites (82 seconds) of Nixon rejecting any debates (including the quip, "It's one thing to 'Give 'em hell,' but it's something else to give 'em Humphrey, believe me!").

That's ten more seconds for Nixon. In these reports the central element is the politician talking. Journalists do a lot of talking, too, but they use some of that time to quote directly or paraphrase what the candidates said.

Now compare that pattern to coverage from 1988. An ABC newscast on

September 28 also includes two political reports. In the first, Peter Jennings introduces (in 27 seconds) Lloyd Bentsen’s “strong words” against Dan Quayle: “I would pray for the good health of George Bush every night.” Then, to describe “the new post-debate rock ‘em, sock ‘em Michael Dukakis,” Sam Donaldson speaks six times (for a total of 78 seconds) and weaves in five sound bites, four by Dukakis and one by the Soviet foreign minister (47 seconds total). That’s four more seconds for the journalists. Coverage continues with a second report:

JENNINGS: Well, it was a shirt-sleeved George Bush who added a bit of country flavor to his campaign today. ABC’s Brit Hume was with him.

HUME: The Bush campaign rolled up the spine of Illinois today in a bus caravan intended to portray the vice-president as a man in tune with rural America. Indeed, the tunes were supplied by country music stars Loretta Lynn, Crystal Gayle, and Peggy Sue. (14 seconds)

(The three stars inside the tour bus sing, “Stand by George Bush,” to the tune of “Stand by Your Man,” for 9 seconds.)

HUME: Bush’s bus, by the way, had a microwave oven, a fancy restroom, and, best of all, no reporters. They now travel with Bush, but not near him. At a series of small town rallies, a shirt-sleeved Bush was introduced by Loretta Lynn. He told folks he was with them, unlike the other guy who wants to tighten tax collection to cut the deficit 35 billion dollars, something Bush said would require doubling the Internal Revenue force. (21 seconds)

BUSH: No, I do not want to create an auditor army of IRS agents, and I believe that everyone should pay his or her fair share, no question, but I’m not for a program that is going to increase IRS seizures and give the IRS more power. (19 seconds of video from a street rally.)

HUME: Earlier Bush also worked the IRS into an attack on Dukakis’s college loan plan, which would be financed by continuing payments much like Social Security. (10 seconds)

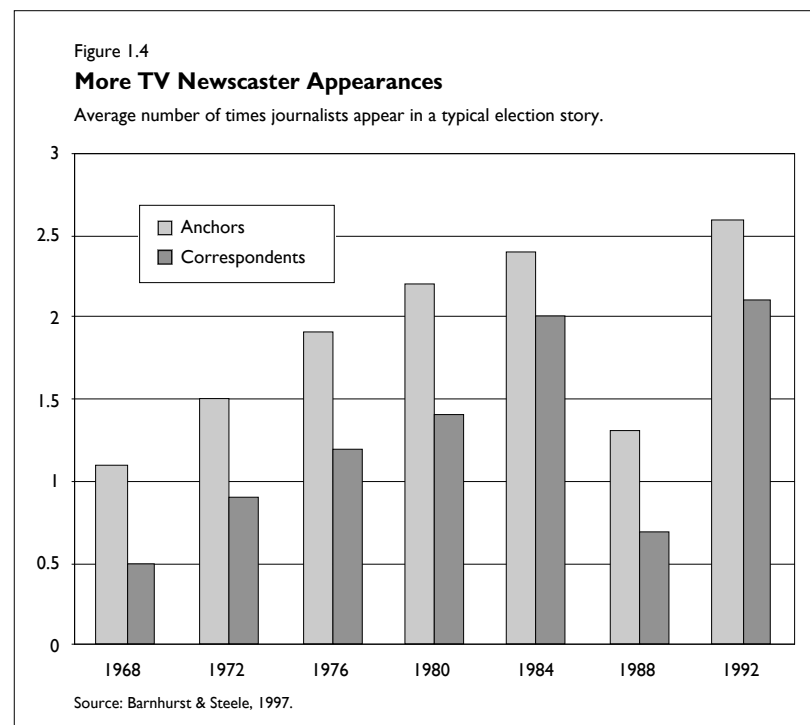
BUSH: We do not need to put the IRS on your tail for the rest of your life as a reward for a college education. (7 seconds)

HUME: Polls show Bush behind in Illinois and he apparently thought getting out among the people would be just the thing. Did that also mean he would answer reporters’ questions? Not today. After all, you can carry this accessibility stuff too far. Brit Hume, ABC News, Ottawa, Illinois. (17 seconds)

Although these reports are slightly shorter, journalists talk more often and speak longer overall, unlike the politicians, whose sound bites now average about 10-seconds. The reporters again use some of their time to paraphrase and quote each candidate, but they also do something new: they talk about themselves — about how they’re being treated.

Another way to look at the change on television news is by counting the number of times journalists appear on screen. A study of election reports on the

ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news did that (Barnhurst & Steele, 1997). Figure 1.4 shows that the rate more than doubled.



In the late 1960s, a typical report during the Nixon–Humphrey campaign was presented by an anchor, with a correspondent appearing in only half the stories. By the mid-1980s, the anchor would appear twice during an election story, usually at the beginning and end, and the reporter covering the campaign would appear twice as well. That means the correspondents were appearing four times as often as they did twenty years earlier.

In 1988 there was an interesting drop in shots of journalists as well as in other visual elements such as graphics, captions, and video clips. One cause was the budget. Networks were making less money from advertisers, who pay less when programs attract smaller audiences. In the mid-1980s several things cut into the audience for network news: The use of VCRs, remote control devices, and satellite dishes gave viewers more freedom, and the new networks of broadcast stations, cable systems, and superstations gave viewers more options. The big three networks eventually lost almost a third of their audience. Facing severe budget cuts and staff layoffs, they simplified news reports by reducing the number visual elements and the frequency of journalist shots.

Another cause for the cutback was political. By the 1988 election,

candidates had learned the lessons of the image-conscious Reagan era. Bush and Dukakis postured for cameras in media events designed to convey a message through images. Political handlers set up scenes for the media and distributed video press releases. The networks reacted to these visuals with skepticism, scoffing for example at the image of Dukakis on a tank, his helmet perched awkwardly on his head.

For the 1992 campaign, the networks began to pool their resources, buying more stock video footage and funding a joint exit pool. These cost-saving measures made them look more alike, and so they again added more visual elements. They used graphics, sets, and a cast of journalist personalities to differentiate themselves from the competition. Visual techniques also insulated the networks from the flow of ready-made images that the Clinton, Bush, and Perot campaigns distributed and from the growing influence of their spin doctors. The numbers of journalist appearances climbed to a new high that year.

What happened on the small screen is related to what happened in print. For modern U.S. journalism, newspapers were the mother ship, where the first newscasters got their training and where they looked for standards and inspiration. In newspapers the length of articles jumped between the 1950s and 1970s, during the time when, on television, network newscasts moved from fifteen to thirty minutes and became more than headline-reading services. Newscasters didn't make TV stories longer, but they did try unsuccessfully to expand the evening news to an hour. And they followed the lead of newspaper reporters who were writing longer. On air, they did a bigger share of the talking and appeared on screen much more often.

The Long Got Longer

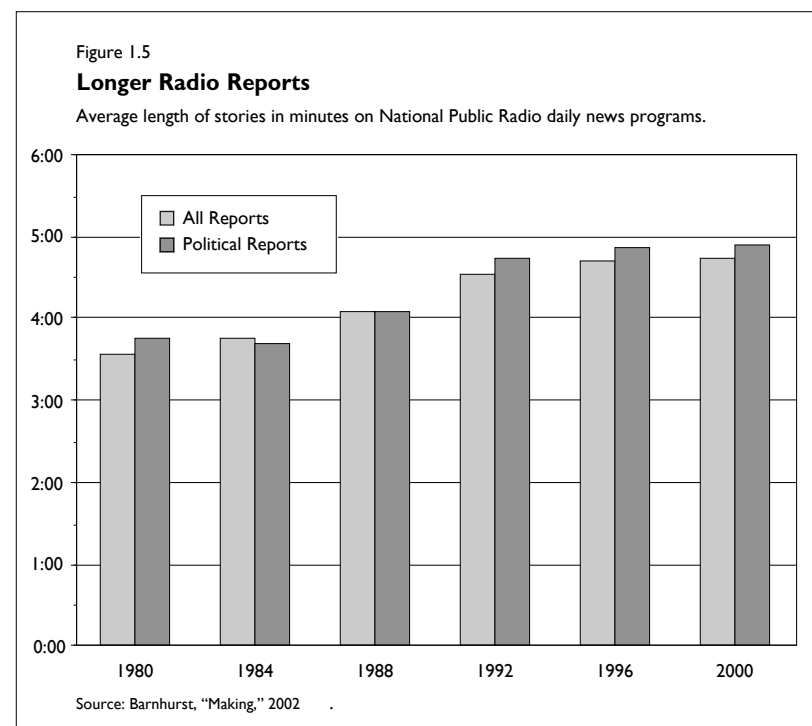
Newspapers and television are main sources people turn to for daily news, and in both places journalists were going longer, contrary to what audience members and journalists themselves might expect. With results like these, any social scientist begins to look for an exception to the pattern.

National Public Radio was a likely candidate. "All Things Considered" started out in 1970 to provide alternative news during the early evening, when the television networks broadcast conventional news. It built its reputation on long, sound-based features unlike anything on commercial radio. Historians say that by the time "Morning Edition" joined the program schedule late in the 1970s, NPR news was already moving into the mainstream, becoming less an alternative and more like other news. So it seemed probable that the reports were getting shorter. But a study of election-year content from 1980 to 2000 found that instead they grew longer. Figure 1.5 shows how much.

The typical report on NPR got almost a third longer. The study included only regular stories, not the news roundups and teasers that open each half hour segment. Longer reports meant less room — there were fewer stories in each broadcast. In 1980, the programs would air about eight segments in thirty minutes, but that fell to seven in 1984 and six in 1988. By 2000 only four segments aired during a typical half hour. That's half as many after two

decades.

Initially the two programs followed different patterns. "Morning Edition" was standardized, with short features designed to fit the needs of commuters. "All Things Considered" was less tightly structured, with more variety and some very long reports. Slowly the two programs began to resemble each other. In 1992, "Morning Edition" went from ninety to 20 minutes, matching its afternoon counterpart — another expansion.



One factor making the news longer was politics. Political reports run longer than other topics on NPR news. A typical day's coverage of the U.S. presidential campaign includes two reports from the trail, but on average, the coverage ran more than a minute shorter for Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan in 1980 than for George W. Bush and Al Gore twenty years later. The largest jump, of some forty seconds, occurred in 1992, when Bill Clinton first ran for election.

There were other political stories as well, covering more than the U.S. national elections: federal and state policies, court decision skirmishes, and foreign government actions, for example. NPR reported on more and more politics of all sorts. The share of political reports doubled between 1992 and 1996 alone. In 1980, one story in six covered politics. In 2000 the share had

grown to one out of three. In other words, all sorts of stories grew long, the broadcasts extended longer, and one of the longest topics took a bigger share of air time.

Were journalists talking longer? The study showed they were. Although sound bites (the recordings of sources) shrank on NPR, the average speech of journalists stayed about the same. In a 1980 story on a speech where he was heckled, Ronald Reagan has three sound bites (averaging 34 seconds) and takes up more than half of the time (in a report of almost 3 and a half minutes). The reporter provides transitions between the excerpts:

CRAVEN: And in response to anti-ERA chants, he defended his position on women's rights.

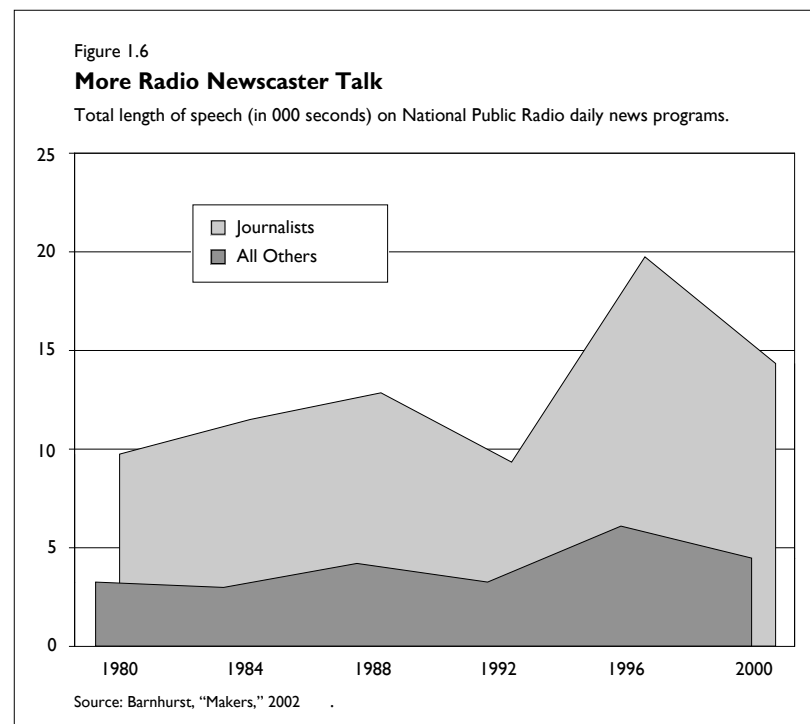
REAGAN: I don't believe that there is anyone in this crowd who does not support equal rights for everyone in this country. [long applause and cheers] Now it just so happens that I do not believe that simple sounding amendment is the answer to securing those rights. [cheers and applause] It will remove from elected representatives, and put in the hands of unelected judges, that entire matter.

CRAVEN: Most of the speech, however, was on education . . . ("All Things Considered," October 13)

Sound bites got longer on NPR over the next two election cycles, but then began to shrink. By 1996, in a report on a health care discussion during the presidential debate, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole speak five times (averaging 2 seconds), for less than a sixth of the report (that ran more than 6 minutes). The journalists, on the other hand, speak eleven times (averaging 24 seconds). The shrinking reached a low point in 2000. During a routine campaign update from Michigan, two of Al Gore's sound bites amounted to a greeting, "Hi guys," followed by the sound of laughter in a day-care center, then his departing "Bye-bye" ("All Things Considered," October 5). The journalists spoke seven times, always at length (averaging 21 seconds).

Several things were changing at the same time. Longer reports and expanded programs made room for everyone to talk more often. Journalists spoke more often too, but their speech didn't shrink when the NPR sound bite began shrinking, and they also began interviewing each other as sources. One way to see the overall result is by adding up all the talk of journalists and comparing it to the total for other people during the programs. Figure 1.6 shows the change.

Although it bounces around from year to year, the trend is significant, moving up almost 10 percent on average every four years. Journalists always do the lion's share of the talking during NPR news, and they talked even more, increasing their total time by more than half. The increase for others was smaller, about one-third. Are these numbers inflated by the reports growing longer? No, after controlling for the length of reports, the difference between journalists and others is still strong. The journalists' portion changed the most, expanding as an element of the longer reports and the longer broadcasts.



The Economic Explanation

What made news grow longer? Journalists say it happened because of competition. In their 1992 history of television news, Robert J. Donovan, former Washington bureau chief for the *New York Herald-Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and Ray Scherer, former NBC White House correspondent, say that newspapers had to change because of television. They quote journalists from the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Atlanta Constitution*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, among others who witnessed the change. Before the 1960s, newspapers thrived on telling the story first. Eugene J. Roberts, who reported for the *New York Times*, says, "Papers were event oriented" in the 1950s (Donovan & Scherer, 1992, p. 281). But television began to scoop print reporters every day, outstripping even the fastest presses.

Newspapers responded by publishing longer stories. The change began in the major papers and spread through the wire services. The Associated Press (AP) distributed a 40,000-word report — a previously unheard-of length — after North Koreans seized the USS *Pueblo* in January 1968. Long stories seemed like an antidote to TV news. Afternoon papers faced the most direct competition, losing readers to the evening newscast. They fought back. The

Minneapolis *Star*, for example, redesigned in 1978. “Small insignificant stories were replaced by long” ones, and the increased white space and larger photos meant the paper “contained a smaller volume of news” (pp. 302–3). The effort failed; in 1982 the *Star* merged with the morning *Tribune*. Even so, Ben Bradlee of the *Washington Post* concluded in 1988, “We no longer write as if our stories were breaking the news for the first time” (p. 273). Once they could no longer beat the competition with a first-day story, newspapers instead published what’s called a second-day story, which reports the event at greater length.

But news articles got longer well before television arrived on the scene (see Figure 1.1). They grew in the early decades of the century before leveling off somewhat, and they grew again in the latter half of the century, during the television era. Newspapers dominated the media landscape through the first half of the century, with many millions in combined circulation. Before television, the newspaper Goliath confronted a different small challenger that delivered blows through the air: radio. “Since the early 1920s, newspaper executives had been disgruntled by . . . radio delivering headline news and selling advertising” (Donovan & Scherer, 1992, p. 258). Beaming a bulletin by radio required less equipment than by television and took the first bite out of newspaper advertising revenues. In response, newspapers started publishing longer stories during the radio era.

The same thing occurred as news magazines emerged. In the 1930s, news magazines began publishing much longer accounts of each week’s events. Magazines could do extended pieces looking back over several days, besting what newspapers could manage in a second-day story. But the daily press responded by making stories longer. In the 1950s, when television emerged, newspapers used weekly news magazines as a model. The former editor of *Newsweek*, John Denson, took over the reigns of the *New York Herald-Tribune* in 1957, promising to do every day what news magazines took a week to do. His period as editor of the *Tribune* “had a lasting influence on other papers” (Donovan & Scherer, 1992, p. 272). As newspapers again made their stories longer, magazines in the 1960s “turned from summarizing news of the week” to writing longer, “thoroughgoing articles” (p. 306).

In the 1990s, the Internet began to carry news from all sorts of existing and start-up news providers. Because it lacks either the time limits of television or the space limits of print, the Internet can be the king of length. How did newspapers respond? They published even longer stories. A study measured the length of articles for different newspapers and story topics and compared print editions to Internet editions (Barnhurst, forthcoming). By 2001, the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Portland Oregonian* were all publishing longer stories in print and then posting them on their Internet sites. The average article reached a new high (3.55 on the scale, compared to the previous high of 3.04 shown in Figure 1.1). Besides crime, accident, and job stories, the study also included political stories, which ran much longer (the topics scored 3.25, 3.46, 3.62, and 4.47 respectively).

Journalists experience competition as a never-ending game of short-term thrusts and parries. But no matter what kind of competitor emerged — shorter broadcasting, longer newsmagazines and Internet — newspapers responded the same way, by publishing longer articles. On the air, newscasters talked relatively longer, not only in the highly competitive evening news on television, but also on National Public Radio. Competition presents a paradox. Journalists remember making their own product different, but the opposite occurred.

Newspaper, television, and NPR journalists all saw each other as competition. They were all producing the same product: the latest news. Each outlet might get its scoops and pride itself in telling the whole story, but in the end, everyone had to cover all the important stories. When products compete in the market, they tend to become more fundamentally alike. The differences that distinguish one from another become more superficial, although the claims made about them become more exaggerated. For example, entertainment programming on television began with a wide variety of forms in the 1950s, but within a decade settled into a limited menu, with all sitcoms, to take the most common genre, very much alike in structure. The same thing happens in consumer products, such as those designed to clean teeth: the nineteenth century powders are gone and the toothbrushes claim big advantages but have mostly cosmetic differences.

The clearest example is the length of newspaper and television coverage. For years TV stood accused of being a mere headline service. When Walter Cronkite started out as anchor for CBS News in the 1950s, he wanted to end each program by advising viewers: “For more information, read your local newspaper” (Media, 1995, p. 11). After network executives nixed the idea, he instead chose the phrase, “And that’s the way it is . . .” He thought that short reports, whether on television or radio, could not “deliver all that a citizenry needed to be well-informed” (p. 5). Almost forty years later, at his urging, the Media Studies Center at Columbia University compared newspapers with television.

Cronkite reported the results during a 1995 special on cable television for the Discovery Channel. The ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news had room for about 4000 words a day and were very similar in other ways. They covered mainly the same stories and spent about the same amount of time on each one. Only a fifth of their time went to unique stories. As any viewer who tired of the O. J. Simpson story could tell, the three newscasts, then as now, were almost identical.

What is surprising is that network news compared favorably with the sorts of newspapers that most American newspaper readers read. Mid-sized dailies like the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Des Moines Register* have room for more words, what editors call a larger news hole. These papers dedicated about 7750 words a day to all national and international news stories, but almost three-quarters of the coverage overlapped with the evening network news. The stories newspapers covered exclusively were short, averaging only 175 words apiece, the equivalent of less than a minute of network air time. The

important stories — the long journalism — overlapped with television news.

The study also found that “network news coverage of several top stories was either comparable to or in some cases superior to coverage in the midsize daily papers” (p. 9). The newscasts dedicated more words to some major national stories, including flooding in California and the reform of the welfare system. The assumption that newspapers always provide more extensive coverage than the evening network news, the study concluded, “is not true” (p. 9).

These days the news is the news, at least in the major U.S. media. The main stories get similar coverage in newspapers and on television (and occupy much of the news hole in print). Unique or original coverage is very limited in either medium. For years I’ve played a little game with myself on Sunday mornings. Reading the *New York Times* while listening to the NPR news program, “Weekend Edition,” I keep score. My sons used to marvel at my ability to do both at once, but I never really did. On major news stories and even on many features, the two are interchangeable. If I’d read the story in the *Times*, I didn’t need to listen closely. If I’d heard it on “Weekend Edition Sunday,” I could skim over the *Times* report. The market hasn’t forced news organizations to differentiate. Journalists may remember the push and pull of everyday competition in the short term, and they may feel especially constrained on television. But the market did what it has done with everything from shampoo to hamburgers: it made competing products more alike. In daily news, journalists have been going longer for a century, through all sorts of economic conditions.

The Longer View

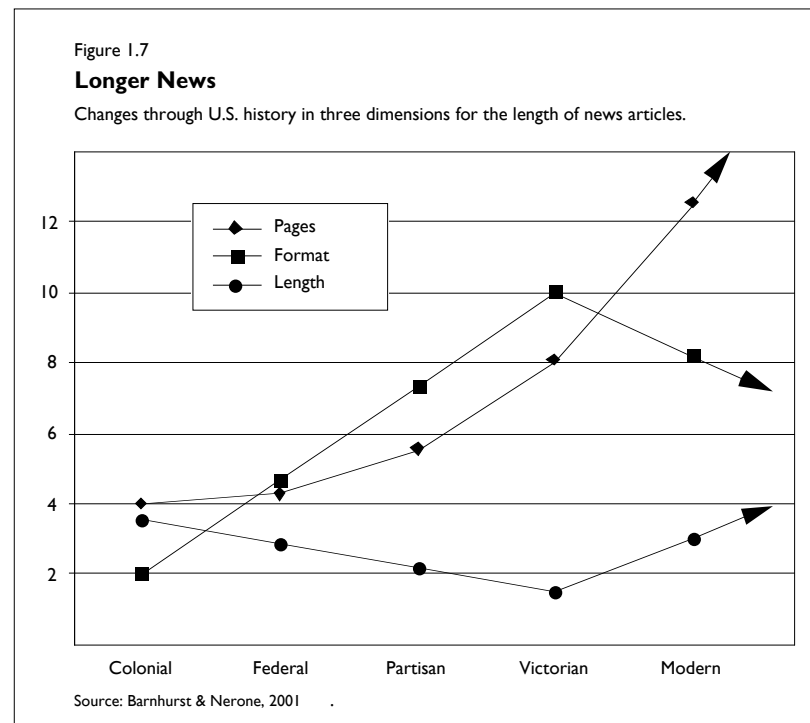
Words are one of those things that come in an almost unlimited supply. Talk is cheap. Economics has a hard time explaining anything that defies the iron law of scarcity. Oversupply has resulted in disaster ever since the fairy tale pot made boundless porridge on demand: porridge soon fills the town, driving everybody out, and no one can return without eating a pathway back.

Where to put the endless supply of words? In any news medium, it’s a problem of containers. In newspapers, each page imposes a constraint, but publishers can make the pages bigger. Or they can add more pages. Within those limits, they can also make each story longer, and story length is flexible — it’s the easiest thing to change. That means length has two external dimensions: the number of containers (page count) and the size of container (page format). Page count and format are somewhat rigid; story length is not. Looking at the former over a long period of time may help make sense of the latter.

How have the physical containers for news changed through history? A study of U.S. newspapers tracked all three dimensions from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). The result is summarized in Figure 1.7.

Newspaper operators decide how many pages to print. The decision sets, in essence, the number of containers — how big should a newspaper be? Early on, the decision was controlled almost entirely by custom; the number of pages

started out as a rigid given. Newspapers were limited to four pages during the colonial era and stayed that way for a century, continuing through the federal period of the early republic. Even when newspapers came under the control of political parties during the partisan era, most newspapers printed the two sides of a single sheet and folded it in half to make four pages. Back then a news periodical was called a news sheet because it was just that, a single sheet, and the singular term *newspaper* also derives from the long period when custom developed a vocabulary about news.



Publishers didn’t have to increase the number of pages as long as they could increase the size of the sheet they already published. The format, or size of the container, was initially driven by the political climate. Newspaper pages in the colonial era were the size of book pages, but the American Revolution changed that. Under pressure to present more news during the conflict, printer-editors increased the page size. During the early years of the republic, newspaper pages were about the size of magazine pages today. Wider readership during the partisan era, along with a growing market with more goods being traded (and advertised), continued to push on the limited page size. Technical changes allowed the format to grow consistently larger. U.S. newspapers reached the size of standard broadsheets and then surpassed them in the nineteenth century. At their height, Victorian newspapers used sheets of

paper as large as a good-sized baby blanket found in cribs today, and they were called, appropriately enough, blanket broadsheets.

Newspaper publishers considered the huge pages and huge capacity for news a technical achievement of imperial proportions. They wedded the politics of empire with technology. To fill such large pages, they industrialized news-gathering, hiring more reporters and correspondents to generate a reliable supply of news. First the telegraph and then the telephone helped increase not only the speed of transmitting information but also the quantity of news material available.

The blanket broadsheet pushed things to their limit. Presses had gotten larger, and might grow larger still, but paper itself was expensive, and the format itself bumped into a human boundary: how big a page any user could physically handle. If newspapers were to continue growing, they had to expand in another direction. Slowly the custom of printing and folding a single sheet gave way. The change began in the larger cities, where some papers went to eight pages in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Not coincidentally, “politics lost its old prominence as papers grew longer” (McGerr, 1986, p. 134). Articles on many other topics filled the extra room.

At first, custom controlled the number of pages, but politics began changing the format. Later economics took over, controlling both the page count and format. First politics, then economics controlled the format. Technology and practical limitations influenced them both, but profitability of publishing eventually became the biggest factor for both. In the 1870s, James E. Scripps founded the *Detroit Evening News*, expanding newspaper circulation into the under-served working-class market by slashing the price by more than half, to two cents a copy. To cut costs, Scripps reduced the size of the printed page, cutting paper costs. His *News* “was approximately one sixth the size of other papers” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 107). The same economic logic spawned another competitor by the turn of the century: the tabloid press. The smaller format required less folding and assembly and was cheaper to produce. Working-class readers found it easier to handle on crowded subways and streetcars. Led by Scripps and the tabloids, the formats of all newspapers began to shrink after more than a century of growth.

By the 1920s, newspapers had begun to modernize. Modern newspapers strove for efficiency. Each time the cost of newsprint increased over the course of the century, broadsheets again reduced their page format. As other competitors emerged and newspapers began to lose circulation, installing more efficient presses that produced smaller formats became a favorite cost-saving measure. Little by little the grand broadsheet of the late nineteenth century contracted, until today it’s not much larger than a tabloid once was.

The large investment in presses makes the page format inflexible from day to day, but the number of pages in any edition is more expandable. As the format for news pages got smaller, the page count became more variable. Initially the Scripps newspapers were all four pages, but by the 1890s the economics of newspaper publishing had changed. Department stores were established and began to place large advertisements, newsprint prices fell, and

newspapers began to publish more pages. Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* reached sixteen pages and added new sports, comics, and women’s pages, and other newspapers followed suit (Kaplan, 2002). As their management became more sophisticated, newspapers might publish only a dozen pages on a day when advertising sales were slow, but then put out a mammoth Sunday edition running into dozens of pages during a busy advertising season. Big stories — during wartime, for instance — could have the same effect.

How did the length of stories track with the changes in format and page count? Most of the time, it moved in the opposite direction. The colonial newspaper could carry long articles, written as letters from distant correspondents or transcribed from the actions of governments nearby. Much of the content was borrowed from other newspapers. The unit of writing was the essay. During the nineteenth century, all the political and economic factors that pushed up the format also pushed down the length of articles. The discussion among elite gentlemen during the colonial era gave way to a partisan debate by the mid-nineteenth century. The partisan press still published plenty of sermons and essays, but with the emergence of cheap newspapers in the 1870s, writing grew shorter. “Even editorials . . . partook of this more condensed but lively style” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 131, fn. 20). The unit of writing became the paragraph, a form better suited to working-class readers without leisure time, as well as to the give and take in a courtroom of public opinion. By the end of the century, the number of lists and tables increased dramatically; debate had given way to something more like a shopper’s catalog. Entire columns were filled with tiny items, called *sparks*, that made the newspaper a compendium for all sorts of facts.

But then the direction changed. While economic logic came to rule the other dimensions, story length somehow escaped. Throughout the twentieth century, news stories grew longer. The economic constraints on newspapers increased, curbing page counts and shrinking formats, but news stories defied those pressures. The same occurred in other organs of the daily press, under very different technical and financial conditions.

For television news, the container capacity is the number of news programs. Custom at first required only a few, enough to satisfy the Federal Communications Commission when it came time to renew a local broadcast license. The number of news programs remained stable early in television history, when networks (but not news divisions) were most profitable. Meanwhile, the format of news programs grew from fifteen minutes to half an hour in the 1960s. The networks made several attempts to expand the evening news to a full hour, but local affiliates resisted losing control over another half hour of prime time. Other types of news programs in other time slots did adopt the one-hour format as standard.

Once the format (length of program) reached a peak, the actual space for stories during news shows began to decline. In the 1980s networks became less profitable, and the number of news programs grew more responsive to the market. Talk really is cheaper to produce on television. On the network evening news, formats became a marketing tool as well. Advertising minutes

increased along with the time spent in audiovisual introductions, teasers, closing sequences, and the like, but the format had less room left for the news reports themselves (and, not coincidentally, less time for politics). And yet journalists expanded their relative share of talking. They went longer, just as the writers of newspaper articles had been doing for some time.

This account of the development of newspapers and televisions is greatly simplified. The original studies describe the process with more nuance, but the broad strokes seem clear. Market competition can explain changes in the containers and formats of news, especially in the twentieth century. The length of news stories is another matter. Perhaps economic forces and the pressure of big events and more information made news stories shorter in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the new long journalism was not an economic phenomenon. It came from some other quarter.

The Status of Length

Longer news of course has more words per story, and all those additional words must be doing something more. But what? One possibility is that the added words make news more coherent or more rational. That's what words can do.

Each period in news history has presented a very different view of the world (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). The colonial era and early republic organized news according to a scheme of global history, moving from the important events at world capitals such as London through regional to local events in, say, Boston. Modern news is organized the other way around. Journalists begin from what they see as the concerns of the audience and only cover more-distant affairs that they consider important enough to have an impact at home. This is especially true in the local and regional press that most U.S. newspaper readers see each day.

Each succeeding period of the nineteenth century added another view of news. In the era of partisan politics, editors organized news as a national stage for political partisanship. Later, as economic life became more focused on manufacturing, publishers of the Victorian era organized news as an abundant marketplace overflowing with facts, including lots of information about industrial goods. During the modern era, news organizations have retained some elements from previous periods — you'll find the partisan newspaper holed up on the editorial page of twentieth century papers, for example. But on other pages, news has been reorganized, this time as a map of the social world. One reason sections such as Entertainment, Business, and Women's Health developed was to bring the right readers together with the right advertisers. Critics say that treating information as a commodity to sell readers (and then selling those readers in turn to advertisers) will be the end of journalism (Hardt, 1998).

The end of one journalism and its view of the world has always given birth to another journalism. Each of these world views was coherent and sensible in its time. The length of news stories didn't change that. The crowded Victorian newspaper, its front page filled to the brim with scores of unrelated ads, doesn't

make much sense to readers today, but it made sense to Victorians. The longer news of the twentieth century might have bewildered the Victorians but seems rational to people today. The point is that, over history, longer news hasn't automatically made better — or worse — sense of the world.

Going long does seem to track with the status of the writer. The authors of the epistles that ran in colonial newspapers were the elite, from the class of landed gentry who sat in government councils and eventually formed the United States. Writing and then seeing it published in journals of the era went hand-in-hand with political status. Gentlemen like John Adams and James Madison didn't really write for newspapers so much as for a public that at first was made up entirely of their peers among the ruling elite. Each succeeding generation of news-authors through the nineteenth century was less autonomous.

Partisan editors had considerable power, but unlike colonial gentlemen, they worked within the constraints of the party. Party newspapers contained a record of political life and documented its speeches, political manifestos, and the like. The editors of the partisan press had a good chance of advancing into politics. More than fifty printers, editors, and publishers of political journals were elected to national office from 1789 to 1861 (Pasley, 2001). Perhaps the most famous was Horace Greeley, a printer who worked almost forty years in journals of the Whig Party. He founded the *New York Tribune* in 1841 and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1848, where he served one term. The prominent publisher ran unsuccessfully as the Liberal Republican candidate for president in 1872, shortly before his death (McGerr, 1986). At the opposite extreme was Missouri Democrat Thomas Hart Benton, a lawyer who served thirty years in the Senate, followed in 1853 by one term in the House. Before returning to Congress as a member of the House of Representatives in 1821, he spent three years working at the *St. Louis Enquirer*, which supported the Republican party of the time. In the partisan era, a revolving door developed between politics and the press. More than twenty-five former members of the first thirty U.S. Congresses took up newspaper work after leaving office (Pasley, 2001).

By the end of the nineteenth century, a new journalism emerged. It relied less on transcribing the documents of public life and instead manufactured its own items. These were concise, compact, and easily digestible. They were called facts, and at first they were shocking. At the time they appeared, "the bald assertion of fact outside the conventions of public speech was a violation of good behavior" (Matheson, 2000, p. 569). Reporters who transcribed public discourse were replaced by something new: journalists. A journalist was a pieceworker, paid by the line for the work of factual news production. Although their bosses, publishers like Joseph Pulitzer, continued to have political aspirations (McGerr, 1986), journalists did not. The editor Lincoln Steffens likened New York news workers of 1880s to machines stamping out facts. The sociologist Max Weber, in a lecture in 1918, remarked, "The journalist belongs to a sort of pariah caste," with very little chance "to attain a

position of political leadership,” and noted that in “the salons of the powerful on this earth,” journalists are called the “scavengers from the press” (1946, pp. 96–98).

Only within the corporate newspapers of the twentieth century did the status of journalists change and the length of news reports grow again. Journalists today are university educated and have a claim to (if not the reality of) professional status. There are still plenty of piece-workers, the part-time stringers and unpaid interns who crank out facts, but full-time journalists lead a middle-class life. Some do much better than that. Elite journalists at major news organizations, especially television, wield political influence. Walter Cronkite, at his height as an anchor, was mentioned as a viable vice-presidential candidate (Donovan & Scherer, 1992). Although professional status usually prevents journalists from aspiring to elective office, they may accept high appointed positions in government.

Examples abound. Long-time Washington editor Andy Glass did a turn on Capitol Hill, then became an editor and columnist. From television, Bernard Kalb, entered government typically. He interrupted a thirty-year career as a correspondent for CBS News and NBC News to become assistant secretary of state for public affairs and spokesman for the State Department. His departure drew attention only because, after less than two years, he resigned in October 1986 to protest a disinformation program by the Reagan Administration. After placing professional journalism above political office, his return to journalism was again typical: as a commentator. He became host on “Reliable Sources,” the CNN program then airing on Sunday morning, and his critiques on the media appeared as the Back Page.

Going long is a sign of status. Elite writers write the longest and elite readers read the longest daily news. Elite news outlets put out the longest news reports on a given topic. There is something to be said for keeping the elite well-informed. They are the most likely to vote and the most likely to have leisure time to spend on politics. It takes time and a good education to write persuasively to representatives and bureaucrats. Although elites are usually too comfortable to join in civil protest, they are the most likely to contribute to political parties and to run for political office. Long journalism may serve them well.

But a press primarily benefiting elites does not broaden democracy. Short news articles match the limited time and resources of the non-elite: the wage laborer, the working parent, the foreign-language-speaking immigrant, the less educated, the young, the poor. Through history, longer news accompanied the rising status of journalists, but shorter news accompanied the rising popularity of news media. In newspapers, long news of the colonial era gave way to popular politics and wider newspaper circulation. The paragraph is a much more accessible unit than the essay for most citizens. The number and variety of people who appeared in the newspaper grew quite large in the Victorian newspaper, and the number of readers was burgeoning as well, especially among the working classes. News was at its shortest then.

Modernists objected to shorter news. They considered the old journalism

nasty and brutish, as well as short. It was noxious to readers because it gave them only facts. Longer journalism could tie those facts together. It was brutal to reporters because it doomed them to menial work. Longer journalism could free them from the assembly line. As modern newspapers adopted longer news, they became more exclusive on the whole, and simultaneously their popularity declined.

That’s the quandary of the new long journalism. It brings into stark relief the interlocking fates of journalists and their audiences. Long essays made the colonial newspaper a nation talking to itself, in the phrase of Arthur Miller. But it left out most Americans of the era. It would be too simple to conclude that length, by itself, is either good or bad. On television, shorter voice-overs and other speech by journalists were most common when newscasts were most widely viewed, during the decade beginning in the late 1960s. The erosion of the network news audience coincided with the period of lengthier talk by journalists, after the 1970s.

Even when the capacity for words shrinks in any news format, the status associated with length encourages journalists to say a little more. In hundreds of small moments, all sorts of journalists in all sorts of markets covering all sorts of topics are making a choice. They are defying the editorial pressures to “Keep it short!” and the economic pressures that limit the available space and time. They are going long.

But the long-term trends are not the simple product of each journalist’s free agency. There are bigger things at work here. Political institutions and social structure leave their tracks in the day-to-day decisions of individual journalists. So the question becomes: what have they done with those extra words? Perhaps as it grew longer during the twentieth century, journalism really did serve well the core cadre of dedicated, active citizens. Perhaps news abandoned its audience of common citizens because they abandoned news. Or perhaps something else entirely was going on. In the past, each new journalism may not have made more (or less) sense of the world, but it made *different* sense. The next five chapters analyze the who, what, when, where, and why of daily news in newspapers, on television, on public radio, and on the Internet to discover how their sense of the world changed as journalism grew long.

Sweet Prose. There was a poor but pious reporter who worked alone with her editor, and they no longer had anything to publish. So the reporter went into the forest, and there an old columnist met her. The columnist knew of the reporter’s sorrow, and presented her with a little pot, which when she said, “Little pot, write,” would write good, sweet prose, and when she said, “Little pot, stop,” it stopped writing.

The reporter took the pot home to her editor, and now they were freed from their poverty and hunger for words, and published good, sweet prose as often as they chose. One time when the reporter had gone out, her editor said, “Little pot, write.” And it did write, until she published her fill, and then she wanted the little pot to stop writing, but did not know the word. So it went on writing and the prose rose over the edge, and still it wrote on until the

newsroom and whole publishing house were full, and then the next house, and then the whole street, just as if it wanted to satisfy the hunger of the whole world. It was terrible, and no one knew how to stop it. At last when only one single house remained, the reporter came back and just said, "Little pot, stop," and it stopped writing, and anyone who wished to return to the town had to eat her words all the way back.

—Adapted from Grimm (2000)

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