

CHAPTER 2

Who: People in the News

A GROWING ELEMENT IN THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE of the past quarter century has been people news. Time, Inc., founded *People Weekly* in March 1974, and the Family Circle group brought out its first edition of *Us* magazine in late 1976. Other media outlets followed suit, increasing the number of people features and human-interest coverage. By the 1990s, a growth area for U.S. television networks was the prime-time news magazine, a genre oriented to people stories (Committee, 1998).

News can't happen without people. It wouldn't be surprising if daily journalism increased attention in the news columns to people, going along with the rest of the media. That's not what happened.

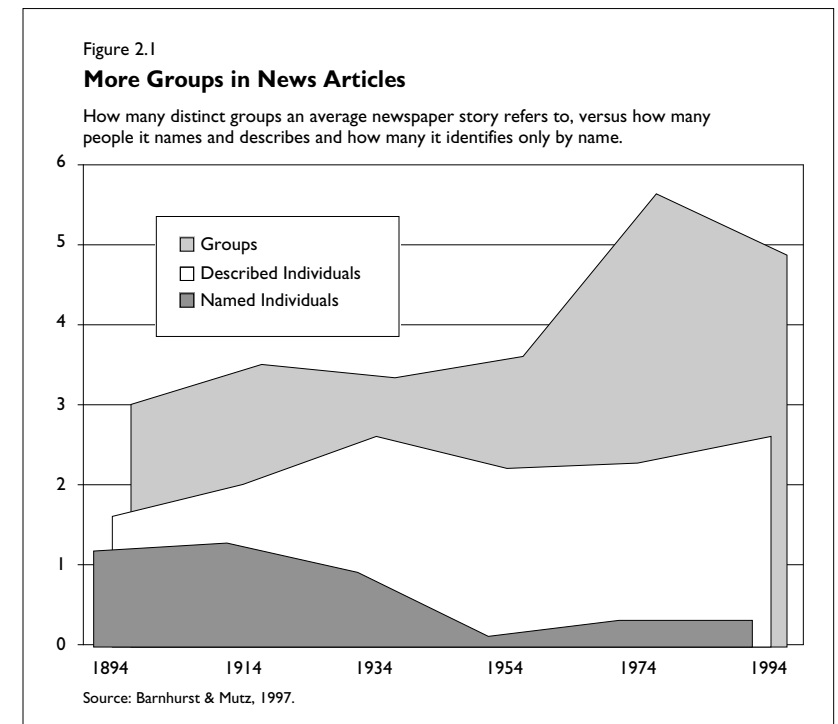
More than a decade ago, studies first noted that people were disappearing from the front page (see Danielson & Lasorsa, 1997). When feminists took measurements to see how women were faring, they expected to find female references increasing modestly while males continued to dominate front pages. The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* did refer more often to men than to women, but references to both genders had been declining over time. A follow-up analysis added other terms related to the human element in the newspapers, such as wife, father, child, or in-law. It confirmed that references to gender, such as *he* and *she*, had dropped, and the broader measure of human relationships had also been declining for decades. References to the human element have fallen by more than a quarter since 1900 (from more than 750 to fewer than 500 references per 10,000 words in 1960, with little recovery since then, Danielson & Lasorsa, 1997). The newspapers were presenting society "not from the point of view of single persons but from the point of view of groups" (p. 109). The newspapers also increased their use of quantitative words (from 140 in 1900 to just under 260 by the 1970s), leading the authors to wonder: Do these trends reveal that "people as individuals are becoming less important and numbers more important" (p. 109-10)?

The depopulation of front pages has many causes. One is that news stories are getting longer. There probably are not fewer people in the average news report — there may actually be more — but long journalism leaves room for fewer reports on any page. It spreads out the references to people over more column inches, pushing most of them off the front page (where these studies

looked). Beyond that simple observation, the studies are onto something deeper, something about the *who* in news. To explore people in the news, I first compare individuals to groups and then look at the sorts of individuals — officials and experts — who have supplanted ordinary people. Finally, studies of journalists themselves help make sense of the changes.

More Groups, Fewer Named Individual

Are individuals less important? To find out, a colleague and I started out by counting how many distinct individuals and groups appeared *per story* in content throughout the newspaper (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997). The results suggest three observations (Figure 2.1).



Individuals who are identified only by name became a minor element. Just about everybody in the newspaper these days is described, usually by a group affiliation. And the number of groups in an average news article went up more than half by the end of the century. My follow-up study that looked at the same newspapers in 2001, after they had established Internet editions, found that these trends went further (Barnhurst, forthcoming). Named individuals have all but vanished, described individuals jumped, and groups continued the

upward trend that had paused in the 1970s. Here are some examples from the studies.

On April 16, 1894, the *New York Times* reported a railroad accident in Hazelton, Pennsylvania. A front-page story listed every casualty by name, occupation, and medical condition. The format emphasized individuals:

The man killed was DAILEY, PATRICK, of Milton, Penn. He was riding on the freight train.

The injured are:

ARTHUR — Sunbury, Penn., conductor of freight train; back injured.

BIDDLE — brakeman of express train; body bruised and back wounded. . . .

Likewise, an 1894 *Chicago Tribune* story about an accident at a school listed each injured child's home address, age, and medical condition in a separate paragraph (April 10, pp. 1, 7). In 1914, individuals' names still ran in the lead paragraph in an article describing an accident:

Four men were seriously injured when their automobile rolled down an embankment near Gary, Ind., today. One of the injured men is F. W. Kurtz of Chicago. The others are Fred Hass, Thomas Murrey, and Frank Whitson of Knox., Ind. (April 20, p. 11)

By 1954, however, there was a greater emphasis on groups rather than individuals. Here is a typical lead: "A veteran West Seattle high school teacher who refused to say whether she ever belonged to the Communist party will be dropped from the Seattle school system, the school board announced Tuesday" (*Portland Oregonian*, April 21, p. 1). This job-related story has four groups — a high school, the Communist Party, the school system, and the school board — surrounding a person who is identified only by a job title that connects her to another group, a high school (the reference to gender also links her to other women).

In contrast to the earlier train and school accident stories, a typical 1994 report on a jetliner crash focused on the national origins of those involved and listed no names of casualties (*New York Times*, September 28, p. A9). In news stories today, most individuals no longer stand as individuals per se. The naming of individuals exists only in monuments, the Vietnam Memorial being the best known, and again the group connection tends to overpower the individual name. In news, names instead take on increasing importance as exemplars of particular human categories — Russians, women, or Latinos, say — or of particular types, such as workers, athletes, or small businessmen.

Citing someone's group affiliation is a balancing act. In a well-known letter to the Friar's Club in Hollywood, Groucho Marx wrote, "Please accept my resignation. I don't care to belong to any club that will have me as a member" (cited in Andrews et al, 1996). The comic actor plays on this irony: Although his words seem self-deprecating, they also assert his own fame. People who matter don't depend on group affiliation.

The push and pull between naming and grouping has played out in the

news throughout U.S. history. In the colonial era, government officials were introduced with their full names. An edition of the *Pennsylvania Journal* in 1757, for instance, identified the New Jersey governor as "his Excellency Jonathan Belcher," when introducing his address to the General Assembly (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p. 32–3). A less potent figure would be named less thoroughly. Reporting about a storm at sea in 1767, for example, the paper says, "Capt. Greenway . . . informs us . . . that one of his people was washed overboard and drowned, and himself narrowly escaped" (p. 42). The title and surname separate the captain from the unnamed sailor. The *Connecticut Courant* that year contained this item about a fire: "A few Days ago, a Dwelling-House, belonging to one Waterous of Marlboro' was consumed by Fire, together with a great Part of the Furniture." The property owner has a surname, but is introduced as "one Waterous," to indicate his limited claim on public attention. Another item from the same issue identifies a woman, who lost quadruplets after delivery, only as "the Wife of one Flint of Windham" (p. 41).

These examples illustrate the power of naming. It separated out a class of historical actors. They had names connected to property deeds in public records, and they held the right to vote as citizens interested in public life. The historical classes were capable not only of taking action but of saying what it meant. As verbal actors (Ekecrantz, 1997), they could stand on their own words. No one had to speak for them, and so their group affiliation could go unstated. Ordinary people were mere physical actors, who left no mark on ideas or history. Colonial news stories about "a farmer's wife" or "a laborer" or "a Negro servant" clearly showed who didn't matter as an individual. The class of everyday people engaged in labor, and their work followed regular cycles that reproduced conditions of the material world without controlling it consciously. Instead they were subject to control, like any other property. In news, they were reduced to social categories. Group identity put them in their place.

One analysis of who appeared in news coverage looked at an event that occurred with surprising regularity for a century after Lincoln: the death of U.S. presidents in office. We found that important people were named and, increasingly, pictured, not only in the elite *New York Times* but also in the popular *Chicago Daily News* (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, see Chapter 5). Ordinary people were depicted as an undifferentiated mass of mourners along the routes of trains that moved the deceased president to his grave. When William McKinley died, the *Times* depicted the category of workers as an elemental flow from nature:

A little later and the great down-town buildings began to empty their hordes of workers for the day, and then City Hall Square became a great sea of upturned faces, shifting and eddying in a struggle to get nearer the bulletin boards ("How the News Was Received in New York," September 7, 1901, p. 2.)

Reports of John F. Kennedy's assassination described the people as ants, as if

seen from the perspective of television or perhaps Air Force One, the presidential jet that returned the body to Washington, D.C.

In the time from McKinley to Kennedy, journalists began sorting people into demographic categories. With the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the *Times* showed groups that stood for regional and neighborhood geographies: South (Warm Springs, Georgia) and North (Hyde Park, New York), as well as Uptown, Downtown, East Side, and West Side in New York City. The Kennedy coverage divided people not only by their place of residence, but by race, class, age, and religion. The *Times* showed unnamed students weeping on campus, black children, commuters, and nuns — none identified beyond their group affiliation. The *Daily News* followed a similar pattern. The writing about ordinary people mourning relied almost exclusively on group identities. Here's a typical example:

At a crowded bar-lunch room at State and Kinzie Streets, laborers from a nearby construction project gasped as the announcement of the death came over a radio.

A husky Negro workman knocked a glass of whiskey from the bar, said "for God's sake," and rushed out the door.

Women at a table burst into tears. All was silent except for the radio announcer's voice. (Special to the *New York Times*, "People Across U.S. Voice Grief and Revulsion," November 23, 1963, p. 11.)

As ever more subdivided groups appeared, stand-alone individuals began to vanish. In 1894, nearly half of all individuals in the news went by name alone. The front page of the *New York Times* contains a crime story about two Long Island residents who "were speeding their trotters on the Oyster Bay Turnpike Saturday evening. As they tried to pass, their vehicles became locked together" (April 16, 1894). The drivers jump out, argue, throw punches and begin a "tussel." We see a gristmill and pond nearby, and suddenly the fight splashes into the canal. As the loser is about to drown, a passer-by intervenes. The case goes "this morning" before a justice, who fines the aggressor fifty dollars. Each person can simply be named — not tagged as representing particular subgroups — because the story's the thing. Narratives like this one (which ran about four column inches) packed front pages with people.

The practice all but disappeared over the course of the century. Journalists at first adopted one standard way to identify individuals, by name and domicile. In the late 1930s, a daily column called "City Locals" in the *Beverly Evening Times* in Massachusetts contained items like these:

Edgar Main, of 2 Bay Street, Alfred H. Massary of 13 Cherry Street, Salem, and Nathan Davidson of 43 Bow Street, three local merchants, launched their newly acquired boat this morning.

Mrs. Charles Callahan of 22 Mathies Street is visiting her brother in Nova Scotia for a week. (Bradlee, 1995, p. 37)

The reporter, a kid on summer vacation whose dad knew the publisher, would walk along the main commercial street of Beverly, a small town outside

of Boston, "stopping in one store after another and asking the employees what was new in their lives. Any birthdays, new arrivals, deaths? Illnesses? Any visitors at home? Any vacations planned? Home alterations? Parties, retirements, confirmations? College acceptances? Dean's lists?" (p. 37).

Name and address became the norm for ordinary people, rooting them in a neighborhood that labeled them with all the tacit knowledge about what kinds of people lived there (see, e.g., Ettema & Peer, 1996). Only notables and celebrities escaped the binds of social locations. They were identified by name alone. The sociologist C. Wright Mills called them "the Names that need no further identification" (1956, pp. 71–2).

As groups rose in importance, two things happened to ordinary people. Their street addresses dropped out of the news (who wants a home address published in an item about a pending trip that will leave it vacant?) The new standard identification used group affiliation. The other thing that happened was that fewer ordinary people were named at all. Instead news focused more on the well connected and well to do. In the 1950s, sociologists found that newspapers named the elite far more often than anyone else, while also mentioning hundreds of voluntary associations (James, 1958).

It's possible that the shift from individuals to groups, which peaked in the 1970s, reflected social reality, that people themselves took their identity increasingly from groups. By that decade, Vietnam War protests, the women's movement, gay liberation, and many racial and ethnic groups had taken center stage in American social and political life. In popular culture, Alex Haley's *Roots* was published in 1976, followed the next year by the mini-series on television. But earlier periods in U.S. history also had groups at center stage. It's also possible that the shift to groups reflected the way that journalists viewed the world. Instead of rousing stories of individual action, reporters and editors wanted to show the complex interplay of social forces. That required groups.

Now, after the turn of the new century, individuals act as stand-ins for groups. A recent front page of the Sunday *New York Times* features two individuals (August 4, 2002): "Joshua Hastert, 27," is "the eldest son of J. Dennis Hastert, the speaker of the House," and one of "numerous relatives of Congressional and administration officials" who are "employed in lobbying shops around Washington" ("In Capitol, Last Names Link Some Leaders and Lobbyists," pp. 1, 17). In a foreign report, "Adrian Wilkinson, 50," is like "most of Zimbabwe's white farmers" ("For Zimbabwe White Farmers, Time to Move On," pp. 1, 4). Both of them appear in pictures, giving the impression that the news focuses on people. But groups outnumber individuals on the front page by more than two to one (54 to 22, to be precise) and dominate the top half of page one. In column one, for example, the fourth paragraph contains only one individual (who was already named and described in the lead paragraph of the story) amid six groups arrayed for a legal battle:

The main combatants are the attorney general and federal prosecutors on one side and a network of public defenders, immigration and criminal defense lawyers, civil libertarians and some constitutional scholars on the

other, with federal judges in between. (“After Sept. 11, a Legal Battle On the Limits of Civil Liberty,” pp. 1, 16)

None of this list of groups is specified — and no individual speaks for them — until after the story jumps from page one to fill an interior page. Today more groups stand alone as the actors in news, and ordinary, named individuals almost never do. Newspapers have left behind one of their most powerful attractions to most readers: “‘Tis pleasant, sure, to see one’s name in print,” Lord Byron wrote in a couplet, “A book’s a book, although there’s nothing in ‘t” (1905, line 51, p. 242). The substance of news was always secondary to its power to name people (and involve them by naming them). But people’s names have given way because individuals can no longer stand alone. They act primarily through groups.

Groups & Individuals: One Case

Groups have been growing more central to everyday life for a long time. Before the middle ages in Europe, people belonged to fixed social orders, and although at times they acted in concert, even civil government was invested in a person: the body of the monarch. Among the first group actors were medieval cities, where citizens gained chartered freedoms to act together as a single entity. The creation of these corporate persons, including craft guilds and trading combines, led to modern capitalism and gave groups power. They not only gained the rights of natural persons, but unlike mere mortals, corporate persons could survive forever.

Even so, institutional actors didn’t take center stage in the popular imagination for some time. In the nineteenth century, people still held individuals responsible for the actions of businesses, sometimes using violence to make their point. In the case of newspapers, it was not unusual for an editor who published offensive material to be tarred and feathered and then run out of town on a rail (Nerone, 1994).

All that has changed. Public discussion today rarely holds individual company officers responsible for routine corporate actions, even when they devastate towns at home by transferring jobs to low-wage workers abroad. The worst possible cases of corporate malfeasance do not lead to local vengeance against individual executives, because accountability has been diffused into institutions.

News is something of a throwback to an earlier time. Journalists today try to stand up for individuals. That’s what gives news a civic purpose. It acts as an advocate, bridging the gap between (weak) individuals and (strong) groups. In some cases, reporters exert leverage on behalf of an individual by identifying the groups involved and assessing their responsibility. To press for justice, they use the power of naming.

When he worked for the *Courier Journal* in the late 1970s, Michel Marriott was one of very few black reporters in Louisville. He would get calls from people “who never called the newspaper before,” asking for his help (Marriott, 2001). Often there was little he could do, other than listening and taking the caller seriously. But sometimes he managed to help someone hold an in-

stitution to account. He tells the story this way:

A poor, really poor, teenage mother had a first child out of wedlock. She’s all by herself — lived at home with her mom (and her mom was a single mother too) — and the child was born prematurely but lingered long enough to have an identity. It had a name, and then it died after I think maybe six, seven days. And of course, this teenage mother is devastated.

So she goes home. Then she’s not thinking about these sorts of things, but the hospital calls and says, “How are you planning to dispose of the body? We can, or you can have a private funeral home take care of it.” And the mother got on the line and said, “No, we’re gonna have a funeral. We’ll have someone come.” So they contact the funeral home.

A day or so later the funeral director’s people go out there, and what happens is they can’t find the body. The hospital has lost the baby’s body, and they basically just brush them off — they were just very incredibly harsh to them: “We’re sorry, but sorry.”

So the mother calls me. I don’t know her or anything, but someone told her that “there’s this guy — maybe call the newspaper and maybe he can help.”

I listened to the story, and I thought this was the very thing that a newspaper is supposed to do — give a voice to the voiceless, give them some sort of institutional muscle that by themselves they don’t have, to right a wrong.

So now I’m “Michel Marriott of the *Courier Journal*” talking to the hospital. They’re not going to brush me off quite as easily, but basically they didn’t have any answers.

It happened to be that there are twin nurses in the maternity ward at that hospital who are my next door neighbors, and so I take them to lunch and say, “You’ve *got* to know something about this.” I conveyed the story in a way that made them feel just like I felt, but they knew about it. They didn’t know about the girl’s reaction or anything, and so they start telling me things, pointing me in directions where I could get more information.

At one point I talked to them and they said, “Guess what? They’re digging that baby’s body out. They know where it is. They buried the body by mistake, and they actually had somebody go in the middle of the night with a back hoe and dig it up.” And they were right on target.

The next day the hospital called me and said, “The hospital’s found the baby.” But they’re not offering any apology, any explanation of what happened. And she now wants to know How did this happen? and Where was the baby’s body?

The twins didn’t really know, but I went to the pauper’s field. There’s a black guy just sitting around, smoking a cigarette; so I went up and talked to him. He worked there and was actually the guy they asked to do it. He thought it was so crazy they made him do it, in the middle of the night. He had to put his clothes back on, leave his house. He was upset, and so he tells the whole story.

I never thought about this, but there's so much human waste from hospitals. You get your appendix taken out and where does it go? They freeze it in this big chest, and when the chest gets filled, then it's buried in a pauper's field.

So I'm standing in the pauper's field, and he's showing me where they dug the hole: "This is where we got it." When I knew the truth, I then approached the hospital spokesman and said, "This is what I know. This is what I'm writing. If this is not the truth or there is something the hospital needs to tell me, let me know, because this is what's going to be in the paper tomorrow." And they called a meeting that night.

I put my tape recorder in the middle of the table, and they put their tape recorders on the table, and they told the whole story. It confirmed everything — there was very little variation.

But what they really wanted to say was that they were going to apologize, and they were going to pay for treatment for her to go to see a therapist, and they were going to do all these things that you know she was never going to get otherwise.

It was very satisfying, and it hit exactly what made me want to get into this work in the first place: to make that kind of difference. It made a tremendous difference in her life. (Marriott, 2001)

In this story about a news story, the key moments are all institutional: when the hospital asks for instructions about the body, when the woman decides to call another corporate entity, the newspaper, and most important, when the newspaper calls the hospital. It's the newspaper acting through a reporter that effects change. The story pivots on one group's actions to help the helpless individual defend herself against another group's power. That logic is what makes it possible for the reporter to take on the story, and in the end that logic is what makes the story — and the work of the journalist — satisfying. It is also an exercise of power: "making a difference." Using power for a good end is what makes journalism worthwhile.

But what does the story say about individuals? Perhaps it depends on who is reading the story. People with power, the verbal actors who have a say in what groups do, may see it as an object lesson, teaching them to make decisions with care, and as a warning about their use of power: other groups are watching. People without power, the physical actors who nurse the sick and dig their graves, are all kept at one remove from the action. When the nurses and sexton speak, their words become the tool of the reporter, and they themselves vanish from the narrative: "This is what I know," he says, shielding his sources, who depend for their livelihood on the group they have exposed. And clearly the individuals in this story are also operating under a shared racial identity, collaborating to extract justice that they, as a group, have been repeatedly denied.

Michel Marriott is unusual. African Americans are scarcer at newspapers than they are in the U.S. population. At the *Courier Journal* he was one of the reporters on a series for Black History Month, "A Dream Deferred: Growing Up Black in Louisville," that won top honors from the National Association

of Black Journalists. After that he was really in demand. The *Washington Post* grabbed him, and he stayed for four years, although other job interviews came his way. He finally took an offer from the *Daily News* in Philadelphia, spending two years with the popular tabloid while being wooed by the *Los Angeles Times*, by his old employer in Washington, and by his next employer, the *New York Times*.

He's also unusual for having what he calls "a reputation for going into difficult places." Instead of doing the typical Black History Month feature by interviewing a few prominent African Americans, he and his collaborators went out into the community. At other newspapers he did the same. He covered riots in Los Angeles and Miami, becoming what he calls an "urban disintegration specialist." When working on drug coverage, he went into crack houses and shooting galleries and hung out in a Methadone clinic or with heroine addicts, and he brought back "some amazing stories." His journalism involves what he calls unsavory places that can be slightly dangerous.

This kind of journalism is Robin Hood all over again. The rich are no longer nobles (or usurpers who claim their good name) because wealth and power now reside in collectivities. Journalists play unlikely heroes, the Friar Tucks and Little Johns, who swoop in to the rescue of individuals held captive by groups. It's a romantic story, and it's not the usual journalism.

Official Sources

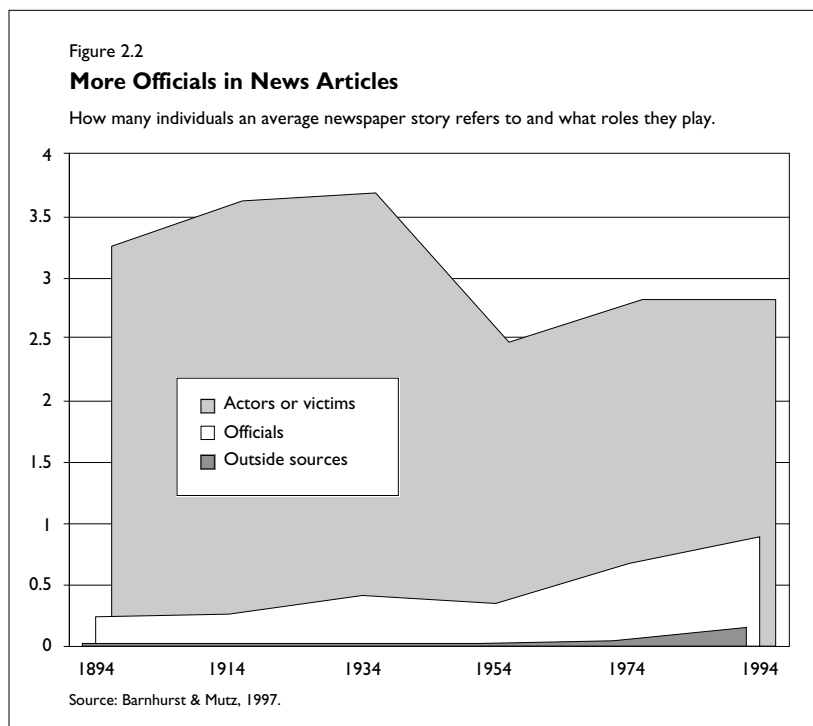
If more groups dominate the news, it follows that more people in the news play roles as leaders of those groups. The usual journalism is about those officials (Hall et al, 1978; Fishman, 1980; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989). Research in the 1970s showed how news organizations cast their net to gather stories (Tuchman, 1978). Most people slip through the holes in the net, which is built to pick up stories from the people most likely to know about them: officials. But sociologists say the share hasn't changed, at least in the past few decades.

In newspapers, an early study of sources reported that more than half were government officials (Sigal, 1973). In the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, front pages of the 1950s and 1960s were peopled by officials of American and foreign governments, in part because in any situation, reporters want to speak with someone in charge. A similar study conducted ten years later concluded that not much had changed (Brown et al, 1987). Although new technology intervened and the news industry reorganized, officials remained at the forefront in news stories, reinforcing the existing system of power and legitimacy.

For television, the sociologist Herbert Gans divided people on the evening news into two categories, knowns and unknowns, and reported that the knowns appeared about three times more often than unknowns (Gans, 1979). Among the widely known people in 1967, presidents and presidential candidates, members of Congress, and federal, state, and local officials amounted to about 45 percent of all people in the national news. Gans concluded that reporters relied on these knowns because they were not only accessible but also

suitable. They were ready and willing to act as sources (if not in fact seeking attention), and they were close by as well, both physically and socially. The sources were suitable because they were connected to the centers of power, had access to information, and could be counted on to speak articulately. A study conducted in the early 1980s found no change (Whitney et al, 1989). There was about the same share of knowns and about the same share of political sources on network evening newscasts then, and the same was true in the early 1990s as well (Jones, n.d.)

Each of these studies examined sources over the short run, but taken together, the research looks at newspapers for about fifty years and network newscasts for almost twenty years. In both print and broadcast news, the focus on official sources stayed about the same, sociologists say. But my long-range research shows that in crime, accident, and employment stories, the roles people play in the news has had some significant shifts (Figure 2.2).



The number of people who take action or become the victims of those actions dropped at mid-century, to fewer than three in the average story. Other people took their places. A century ago, an official would appear in only one out of every four stories. Officials who were involved in or had direct responsibility over activities in the news increased fairly consistently. Now at least one official appears in almost every news story.

My follow-up study of Internet editions for the same newspapers found that the number of officials continued to grow. When political stories were also included, more than two officials appeared in the average story (Barnhurst, forthcoming).

Studies that count words per page, rather than people per story, have measured a persistent growth in terms relating to officials on the front page, with steep increases since the 1960s (Danielson & Lasorsa, 1997). Regulatory terms related to the federal bureaucracy have also increased, as have terms referring to the national government in general. A related study found that verbs used to attribute information to officials have increased (Barker-Plummer, 1988).

Ordinary citizens and unaffiliated people are still twice as likely to appear in accident, crime, and job stories as people in other roles, but as news has grown longer, it has not simply added more officials. Instead, more and more individuals have been replaced in the news. In political stories from the newspaper Internet editions, the change is even more pronounced; officials and others in fact outnumber individual actors in the average story.

What is the relationship between actors in the news and the officials in charge? In a typical example from the *New York Times on the Web*, an article on the guest worker program, “Calls for Change in Ancient Job of Sheep-herding [sic],” begins with several paragraphs telling the story of a shepherd in the Mojave Desert. To close the anecdote, the writer says, “The man, who would not let his name be used for fear of angering his employer, is typical of shepherds in the United States, about 800 of whom toil in California.” The article then moves on to groups, officials, and their affiliations: the unchanging trade of shepherding, the geographic origins of workers, the broader labor pool, the bodies regulating wages, the California legislature and its proposed program, and so on through lobby groups, industry groups, labor advocacy groups, and legal aid groups. Official sources of various sorts speak for half of the ten groups in the story; the rest stand alone. Individual actors without an official role do not appear again until the end of the long article. After a general paragraph describing shepherds at work in Fresno and Kern Counties in California, the story closes with the man from the opening anecdote. “I get depressed here very often,” he says.

And while he has never seen a movie, eaten at a restaurant, attended a church service or even spent a free hour walking around the one city in the United States he has glimpsed, Bakersfield, he said he would renew his contract and do the work for another three years.

“My sons are 11 and 12 and I want the best for them,” he said. “That’s what I keep remembering all the time while I’m here.” (July 11, 2001, National page)

This powerful story turns the individual into a rhetorical device. Gans (1979) noted how television news reports most often used individuals as epitomizing cases. Reporters call the technique the *anecdotal lead*. These exemplars have become almost universal in print stories and appear in about half

of television news stories (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Exemplars have a strong influence on the audience and may particularly sway opinion if the anecdote is emotional or sensational. The anecdotes can be misleading when journalists choose an atypical or dramatic exemplar. Even when journalists explain that the exemplar is unusual and give details about the low frequency of similar cases, members of the audience will remember the anecdote and forget the statistical rate. If for example a story says two thirds of small family farms operate at a profit, but then tells stories about failing farmers and bank foreclosures, people remember the failures, not the success rate. Using exemplars is common in trend stories, especially if the trend being reported involves something threatening (Berger, 2001). In the story about shepherding, it's clear that the vignettes describing an individual are meant to build a dramatic opening and closing for the real work of the report, to cover the official exercise of power.

A news report, like biography, "assumes the value of an individual," in the words of novelist A. S. Byatt (2000, p. 26). "Whether you see that individual as *unique* or as a *type* depends on your view of the world." Journalism justifies itself and its civic mission by aiming to respect people as unique, but the everyday content of news treats the individual as a type. Individuals stand for problems that only officials can solve.

Besides playing the role of Robin Hood, journalists take on another role, as a watchdog. The press keeps an eye on the public estates (the government) and alerts its master (the voters) of any disturbance. For example, a reporter working on one of the zoned editions of the *Pittsburgh Press* gets a tip and files a story about a suburban town that forgot to pay withholding taxes for employees. At the next town meeting, citizens complain about the oversight, and the town council expresses outrage that the newspaper published a story. But people say, "No, then we wouldn't have found out." The town has to raise taxes, but there are also consequences for the council members: they get voted out in the next election. It's gratifying for the reporter to see people rally around the newspaper, and to see the newspaper make lives better by correcting errors in government. "It's a small story," the reporter says, "but it's important to the people involved" (Anonymous, 2001).

The story depends on the leaders of groups. The event itself was institutional, involving those in charge of the town and federal accounting and tax departments, the town council, and the newspaper. The people watch from the sidelines, as spectators who can groan or applaud. The reporter could have spent time with some of the town employees or residents, to witness the consequences for them as they file or pay their taxes, but those would have been different stories appearing long after the discovery of the missing payments. Long interviews with town council members would not have brought non-officials into the story.

The story also depends on the newspaper, which plays the pivotal role. It is the target of the initial tip and the focus of the council members' resentment. The idea that journalism is a loop connecting government to the people hasn't been the case for some time (if it ever was). That process has been short-circuited. Ordinary individuals watch and even hoot in dismay, but they're

out of the loop. It may seem that nothing can be done.

Soon after he started reporting at the *Courier Journal*, Michel Marriott got assigned to an evening event because nobody else wanted to go, a dinner the school superintendent hosted every year for the press. As the night wore on, the superintendent drank too much and said too much, describing his vision of separating the district into two, with one for poor kids, most of whom were from minority neighborhoods. The event was on the record, Marriott had a recorder, and so he taped it. He called in the story to the paper at ten o'clock that night. It ran the next day on page one of the Metro section, setting off a firestorm among black educators and the black churches in Louisville. Television coverage followed, and the superintendent claimed he was misquoted. That Sunday the paper ran a full transcript, and the superintendent eventually resigned.

Work that costs officials their jobs also burns a reporter's bridges (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989). Too much of it would put a newspaper out of business. Of course, in both of these cases, the burnt officials were then replaced, but any future leader would be wary, making it more difficult for the newspaper to cover routine actions of the town council or the school system. If journalists want to get the news, they have to make peace with official power.

Expert Opinion

A century ago, like many working-class people, journalists had little use for experts. News was a commonsense affair, written by an everyday observer, and targeted to an ordinary reader. Reporters continued to be generalists well past mid-century. Joseph Lelyveld, who covered South Africa in the 1960s before his rise to editorial positions at the *New York Times*, said that as a reporter he lived by the maxim, "Every person is an expert on the circumstances of his life" (1985, p. 113). The other kind of expert, an observer who watched events from a distance and had no direct stake in them, was the object of scorn in memoirs by journalists for much of the century. Sociologists also observed that attitude as late as the 1970s, when they studied journalism by spending time with reporters and editors in the newsroom. Journalists viewed Gans himself with suspicion as an academic (1979).

Somehow, despite the disdain of previous decades, experts recently became a fixture in the news. In the 1980s, researchers began to notice the large numbers of expert sources. Some turned up in obvious places, such as the health care specialists who were the sources most frequently mentioned and most often quoted in medical news (Stempel & Cuthbertson, 1984). Others turned up in stories that otherwise focused on ordinary people, such as the coverage of victims caught up in a 1985 hijacking of a TWA flight (Atwater & Green, 1988). On the three national television networks, experts, former government officials, and others were the most frequent sources after the hostages and their relatives themselves. When all sorts of news stories were studied, experts such as academics, professionals, and former officials commenting on their specialty areas accounted for around 20 percent of all network news sources (Whitney et al, 1989).

Long-term research shows that the number of experts has been growing for some time, not only in census data (Brint, 1994), but also in the news. The frequency of expert and professional words appearing on the front pages of the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* roughly doubled, from around twenty in the 1880s to around forty a century later (per thousand words, Danielson & Lasorsa, 1997).

When we measured the share of sources in the average newspaper story, we found that since the late nineteenth century the number of outside sources grew gradually until around 1974, and then increased more rapidly into the 1990s (see Figure 2.2).

Experts multiplied on television. People whom the newscasts identify as analysts, consultants, academics, former officials, and the like are what media scholar Lawrence Soley calls *news shapers* (1992). In the decade from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, the number of news shapers almost tripled on the three networks. By 1988 there were three in the average newscast. Appearing on national television enhances their expertise. Through what sociologists call *status conferral*, experts acquire an aura of knowing, just by appearing in the media. Journalists intensify that aura by relying on the same experts repeatedly. Soley found that thirty-four shapers accounted for nearly half of all appearances, and two shapers appeared as many as ten times. The rule in news is, the more you're cited, the more journalists will cite you. Some of the most widely used experts in the news, Soley shows, have very little expertise beyond an ability to deliver dramatic, quotable sound bites.

During the Gulf conflict in the early 1990s, researchers found that the large number of experts created an illusion of depth. Rather than understanding the Gulf region in depth, based on knowing the language, history or culture, shapers supply a different kind of expertise. Theirs is based on knowing the players, having an inside scoop on policies, and being willing to make predictions. TV experts deliver these three *p*'s — players, policies, and predictions — using a fourth, patter, the ability to talk in succinct sound bites (Steele, 1995). Other research found the same notion of expertise at work in major U.S. newspapers (Hallin, Manhoff & Weddle, 1993).

Journalism embraced this kind of experts, and people paid attention to them. When experts and others who comment on network news shift positions on major issues, research has shown, a parallel shift occurs in U.S. public opinion (Page, Shapiro & Dempsey, 1987). For example, during Senate consideration of the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II), each network put retired generals and arms experts on the air. They argued against the treaty because it had verification difficulties and would tip the balance of forces in favor of the Soviet Union. The research showed that public support for the treaty then dropped by almost a quarter. Such changes occurred for other policy issues over the fifteen years included in the study. Television journalists rightly conclude that expert sources do have an impact on the public.

As the cult of expertise grew, journalists themselves began joining the ranks of news shapers, acting as expert sources on topics they cover. In newspapers,

they tend to turn up as unnamed sources. A reporter from a major newspaper, who spoke (but not for attribution) at the Media Studies Center at Columbia University when I was a fellow there in 1992, described using himself as a source when covering a country in Asia. When he first began work as a correspondent there more than a decade earlier, he relied on sources called Asia-watchers. After he had been in the country for a few years, he thought he understood what was happening better than most of the Asia-watchers. From that conclusion, he took the next step: at times he explained events by attributing his own ideas to an unidentified observer. The practice was part of the growing use of what are called *veiled sources*, which the American Newspaper Publishers Association began examining in the 1970s (Brown et al, 1987).

In other news media, journalists appear openly as expert sources. Newspaper reporters go on television and radio to talk about events they are covering, and news anchors and hosts in many cases treat reporters from their own networks as experts by conducting interviews with them on the air. Content analyses of news indicate that the phenomenon has generally increased in the past quarter century. The well-known study of television sound bites from 1968 to 1988 observed a large growth in what are called *wrap comments* (Hallin, 1992), the concluding words that summarize the correspondent's expert conclusions. My own detailed study of journalist speech on National Public Radio also found more journalists acting as experts (Figure 2.3).

The share of speech by experts on NPR daily news programs grew by half since 1980, the first presidential election year when both "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered" were on the air. The appearances of expert sources dropped off during the 1996 election year, when Senator Bob Dole mounted a lackluster challenge to the incumbent President Bill Clinton. The share of journalist appearances as expert sources was small at first, but grew swiftly over the next four years. After declining in 1992 and 1996, the share of speech by journalists as experts ended up four times higher than it had been twenty years earlier (Barnhurst, 2003a).

To NPR listeners, the pattern became familiar. Hosts routinely interview other journalists. In the following segment, host Bob Edwards gives a typical introduction for his two sources on "Morning Edition":

Edwards: . . . Joining me now is NPR's Cokie Roberts and Kevin Phillips of *American Political Report*. Good morning.

Roberts: Good morning, Bob.

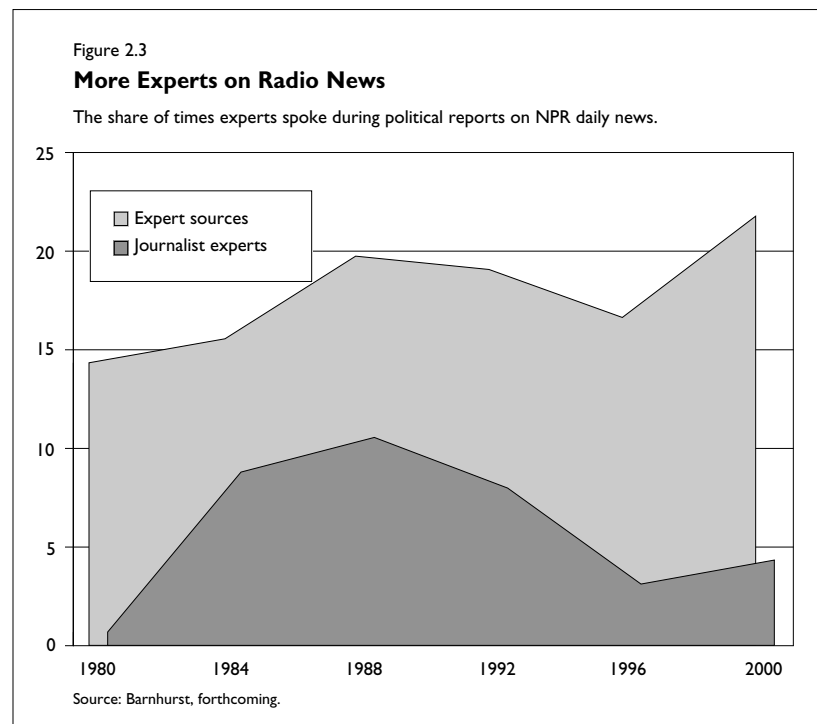
Phillips: Good morning.

Edwards: So, did last night's debate really change anything?

Roberts: I don't think so. I think that— that the polls coming out of it looked pretty much like the polls going into it. Now, they're highly partisan. . . . (October 17, 1996)

The series of exchanges that follow this one repeat the pattern more than a dozen times. Edwards asks, "So, do you think— was Dole's move into the ethics area too tepid? Should he have been— you know, should he have turned the heat up?" And Roberts responds, "I don't know how he could

have,” before describing examples from the debate. The questions and answers throughout the report place the journalist in the role of expert source. The number of cases involving journalists as experts grew significantly over the period.



Besides the share of speech, the length of speech for journalist-experts grew. All the voices on the NPR reports saw an initial jump in average speaking length between 1980 and 1984, but the voices of journalist-experts increased the most of any group. Other sound bites then grew shorter in subsequent years, but journalist-experts, after an initial decline, grew again, reaching almost a minute per speech by 1996. Although the length of their speech then dropped in 2000, the pattern was clear: journalists as expert sources spoke longer on average than all other journalists (and all other speakers) every year after 1980.

We found a similar pattern on television news (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). In 1968 correspondents asked questions of sources. Anchors didn't ask questions at all. Twenty years later the opposite became more common. Anchors asked more questions and correspondents gave more answers. The anchors had begun treating correspondents as experts. For example, in a 1988 ABC News broadcast, Peter Jennings gave this lead-in to a report:

Well, with both candidates claiming the high ground on defense and painting each other as unrealistic on the issue, we've asked our national security correspondent John McWethy to look at what each candidate is saying and at the realistic choices which the next president will actually face. (Barnhurst & Steele, 1997, p. 203)

In his revised role, Jennings treated the correspondent as a source. Hallin's sound-bite study accounted for part of this shift by noting an increase in what he called "truth squad stories," in which journalists played the part of experts who corrected the claims of candidates and their advertising (1992, p. 19). Being answer-providers gave correspondents higher status by recasting them as specialists. In other words, McWethy was no longer just any correspondent but a specialist in national security.

It's tempting to think that reporters rely on expert and official voices and even use themselves as sources out of convenience, because it's easier. For example, each year a local scout troop would earn its stripes by walking from Marion, Indiana, through a state park to a nearby town. It was a tough ordeal that lasted into the night during the cold of February. Typically the Marion newspaper, the *Chronicle-Tribune*, would send a reporter the night before to do some interviews and take pictures at the scoutmaster's house, where the group would sleep over before their early start. On the day of the trek, the reporter would get more pictures and interviews at the outset, then drive late that evening to the endpoint, watch the kids coming, and do some final interviews. The reporting would typically depend on interviews with the scoutmaster and some of the troop leaders — the obvious choices for a reporter with little time.

It didn't have to work that way. When Michel Marriott worked for the Marion paper, he was assigned to cover the annual event. But he thought, "Man, the real story is the journey." He asked his editors to let him make the entire walk, and because he was a young reporter on his first full-time job, the editors said yes. He did the whole trip, from spending the night in a sleeping bag at the scoutmaster's house, to the end of the walk. "It was tough," he told me. "It was a tough thing to do." He got to know the kids well and became a buddy, not just an outsider. He filled four reporter's notebooks, front and back, with stories about real people, the ones who faltered and the ones who helped them. He had so much stuff when he got back that he wrote not only the annual story but also a cover article for the Sunday magazine. "It was a big deal," he said (Marriott, 2001). His story gave ordinary individuals a greater voice. They didn't have to have status in the official hierarchy of the troop. They didn't have to be experts. But his reporting took more time and his writing ran longer.

Have news organizations turned to expert and official sources because it's faster and cheaper? The two main uses of a journalist's productive time are reporting (research, groundwork, interviews) and writing. Longer stories take longer to write, no matter whom the sources are. Because stories in general have been getting longer for more than a century, the writing itself didn't change the choice of sources for a story. What about the time spent doing the

reporting? When news had more individual actors and fewer experts and officials, someone was spending time with the un-titled people, or at least paying more attention to gathering events at the grass roots. Today, reporters are still talking to people — their anecdotal leads come from that work. In the example from the *New York Times on the Web*, the reporter traveled around the Mojave Desert, meeting and interviewing many more shepherds than the one in the published story. The cost of doing that sort of reporting didn't shift attention to officials and experts. Reporters write fewer stories today than they did a century ago, and they spend more time on both reporting and writing. Research comparing sources to staff bylines shows that individual reporters have some latitude when deciding whom to interview and include (Hallin, Manoff & Weddle, 1994). They slowly adopted the practice of focusing attention on powerful, expert sources for other reasons, not to save money. Stuart Hall called this *over-accessing* the powerful and privileged (Hall et al, 1978). There is no inherent reason that news could not have kept the same ratio of individual actors to authoritative sources as it grew longer, but it didn't. Journalists chose the authorities. Why is that so?

The Rising Status of Journalists

Ben Bradlee joined the management of the *Washington Post* in 1965. Soon he went on a hiring spree and shook up the existing staff. One of them, Gerald Grant, recalls:

After the first wave one of the editors invited a dozen young city staff reporters to lunch. As he sipped his Dubonnet on the rocks we nervously wondered about our fate. Most of what he said now escapes me. But I have a vivid recollection of his curiosity about the social circles we traveled in. Whom did we see? What parties did we go to? Whom did we know?" (1974, p. 263)

His editor made a practical point: the best place to learn what's going on in Washington is at dinner parties. After-hours social relationships often give a reporter the inside track on stories for work. "Some of the best journalists in Washington had grown in reputation as their sources had grown in responsibility," the editor said.

"At the time his message struck me as mildly offensive," Grant continues. "As I look back, however, his inquiry no longer strikes me as saying so much about upward mobility of journalists as about patterns of thought in journalism." Before tackling their patterns of thought, it's worth considering the question Grant rejects: Have journalists been upwardly mobile?

Once upon a time, the scion of an old Boston family grew up and went to Harvard, but then the United States entered World War II. He left school and joined the Navy, becoming an ensign and serving in the Pacific. When the war was over, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he eventually became prominent and powerful. Does this career sound familiar? It describes not only John F. Kennedy but also Ben Bradlee himself (1995), and it's more than a coincidence. Not long after starting out as a journalist, Bradlee and his wife

were taking a walk pushing a baby carriage when they met a Georgetown neighbor, the junior senator from Massachusetts and his wife Jacqueline, who were also pushing a baby carriage. The two families immediately became good friends, eventually even vacationing together. Bradlee wasn't upwardly mobile in the sense of moving from one social class to another, as his \$100,000 trust fund attested (he was fifty-second in the line of Bradlees who went to Harvard), but his reputation grew as John F. Kennedy became more powerful.

People in any line of work move up when they make social connections in high places, and their status also grows when they succeed in attracting higher class members to begin with. The stature of journalists, as documented in Washington since the 1930s, has risen since the end of World War II. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, writing in 1971, said that "twenty years and more ago the preponderance of 'the working press' (as it liked to call itself) was surprisingly close in origins to working people generally. They were not Ivy Leaguers" (p. 43). In the 1930s, about half of Washington journalists held a college degree (Rosten, 1937), but that figure grew to more than 80 percent by the 1960s (Rivers, 1962). By the end of the 1970s, more than 90 percent of Washington reporters were college educated, compared to about 17 percent of the general public (Hess, 1981). About 35 percent of the reporters had highly selective alma maters: Ivy League schools, small private colleges like Swarthmore and Carleton, and prestigious universities like Stanford and the University of Chicago.

Reporters outside of Washington also became more highly educated. The share of college graduate-journalists nationwide grew from 60 percent in 1971, to 75 percent in 1982, and 82 percent in 1992 (Weaver, 1999). The share of journalists holding graduate degrees also increased, especially among the Washington press corps. Most U.S. journalists are white and male. Women account for less than one third of U.S. reporters. Non-whites are also under-represented. Reporters from racial and ethnic groups grew from 4 to 8 percent between 1982 and 1992, lagging far behind the job growth of the same groups in other sectors. In the Washington press corps, the share of minorities and women is even smaller. Census figures indicate that these minority groups make up about 24 percent of the U.S. population.

Reporters, especially at elite news outlets, are mostly well-educated white men. As a group, they match the description of what sociologists call the power elite: upper income, professionally employed, urban sons of comfortable families. As members of a key institution — the media, where "serious public figures too, must now compete for attention and acclaim" — they share the origins, education, and styles of life that make it easy to intermingle with other power elites (Mills, 1956, p. 75). Research on the press and corporations, trade associations, policy groups, civic groups, and social clubs reveals "a web of affiliations" linking newspaper-owning companies "to the nation's power structure" (Dreier, 1982, p. 298). Similar connections exist with the power structure at the local level (Soloski, 1989). Does that intermingling matter?

It does to journalists, of course. Those who are well educated, connected,

or fortunate enough to get jobs in journalism have seen their collective fortunes rising. Many of them still put in long hours for low pay with little chance of advancement, especially at small town newspapers and within chain-owned operations (Hardt, 1998). This is typical of many professional groups. Those who work within large, prosperous organizations can afford to adopt lofty ideals, compared to those who work in smaller concerns at the mercy of market forces (Brint, 1994). Journalism has come late to professionalism, and while other groups have moved away from their early aristocratic *noblesse oblige* and now base their authority on expert knowledge, journalists have only recently moved in that direction. In any case, the lot of reporters generally was much worse fifty or one hundred years ago and has improved along with that of other social and cultural professions.

The rising status and lack of diversity among rank and file journalists also matter to people outside: to the audiences of readers, viewers, and listeners, and also to elites — the officials of government and other institutions at every level. Who journalists are has an impact on who gets included in the news throughout the media, on who has a face, who has a say, and who matters. That again raises Gerald Grant's observation about "patterns of thought in journalism."

By the late 1960s and mid-1970s, when Gans conducted his ethnographic studies among journalists, he found that "they learn from peers and personal contacts, notably relatives and friends." As a result, they "move within a relatively small and narrow aggregate of sources," "dominated by the people they contact or who contact them regularly" (1979, p. 126). Journalists considered their work companions, families, and neighbors and the people they met at parties credible representatives of the audience. They also used themselves as sources, relying on their own lives and experiences for story ideas.

Subsequent studies among newspaper and television journalists confirm what Gans found (Hess, 1981; Sumpter, 2000): journalists come up with story ideas from people like themselves, they rely on the same sources repeatedly when reporting and interviewing, and this small circle of contacts stands in for the audience while journalists are writing stories and choosing how to play them in print or on the air. The variety of contacts also tends to contract as journalists move higher in the hierarchy of news organizations. Reporters on the job get to know a greater variety of people than do editors who work all day in the newsroom.

Reporters and editors imagine their audience as being much like themselves or like what ethnographers call the *proximate* audience made up of people they know. News has always been personal. In the colonial era, editors relied on personal contacts with gentlemen and other editors, and that hardly changed despite two centuries of technological transformation. News is still "an information system based on personal contacts" (Hess, 1981, p. 126).

Personal patronage was once the norm for government. A new president, governor, or mayor in the nineteenth century could fill many official jobs by appointing friends, acquaintances, friends of friends, and perhaps even family members. The patronage system was one of the chief targets of the Progressive

Movement, which helped pass laws establishing a professional corps of civil servants who win their jobs through merit and hold them even when administrations change. Only the upper echelons of managers continue to be appointees dependent on political bosses. A similar movement away from dependence on charismatic leaders and toward rationalized systems has occurred throughout society (Weber, 1958). Large corporations and even religious groups, although not obligated by law, now customarily hire and fire workers at the lower levels based on something like a merit system. In the study of politics and organizational behavior, systems based on personal patronage are seen as unjust or worse, corrupt. They rely on what is called *personalism*, which focuses power on an individual leader who is in a position to pass out favors.

The other face of personalistic systems is called *clientelism*, the dependency of any group or individual who owes personal fealty or is in the leader's debt. Clientelism is more complicated than that definition suggests, because the agencies of power also become the captives of their dependent clients. Clientelism is a key element in business and political life in parts of southern Europe and Latin America, and also characterizes media organizations (Hallin & Pathanassopoulos, 2002). Even in the United States, an interlocking system of direct personal influence still drives news businesses, newsgathering, and journalists' concepts of the audience.

When sociologists and anthropologists do field work in the newsroom, they find the relationship of journalists with the audience oddly paradoxical. Reporters and especially editors have a hunger to know who is out there reading and viewing, but resist knowing the answer. They reject most all of the available information, except what they can gather from a few proximate stand-ins they know personally. Gans found that journalists "have trouble crossing social barriers that separate them from strangers" (1979, p. 126). Strangers, mostly from other classes, ethnicities, or gender identities, and often with less education, have difficulty reaching journalists as well. A case study of who gained access to and attention in a Boston newspaper found that non-elites had a hard time because they don't speak standard English (Goldenberg, 1975). Reporters want quotable speech that's dramatic, articulate, and concise. News now requires the language of elites, which poor people, immigrants, and outsiders don't normally produce. To get beyond the usual sources, one newspaper assigned reporters once a month to eat lunch with someone they didn't know and hadn't used as a source, and then report on their conversation to the metro editor (Sumpter, 2000).

Gans also found that journalists resist all formal feedback from the audience. They reject audience statistics, the television ratings and circulation audits that characterize viewers and readers as large groups. Journalists tend to dislike statistics. Many are trained in the liberal arts and are uncomfortable with numbers. Journalists told Gans that most statistical evidence is either obvious or irrelevant, and it doesn't change enough over time to be a useful guide. Following the dictates of statistics would require journalists to surrender their own news judgment, especially because advertising and business manag-

ers, who don't subscribe to the civic aims of news people, gather the statistics.

Gans observed that journalists fear the massive numbers of their audiences. These large aggregates seem to exercise poor judgment by preferring gossip to real news. Social science research has tended to confirm that view. Techniques for large-scale surveys of public opinion began emerging in the mid-twentieth century (Herbst, 1993), and the results seemed to leave little doubt about the low levels of information that most Americans possessed. The average U.S. citizen could not identify important political leaders and did not understand the processes of government or the workings of other institutions and corporations. That hasn't changed. If journalists of the nineteenth century considered the public attentive and astute, this new evidence from social scientists did not sustain the same respect.

The other form of feedback available to journalists comes unsolicited from individual readers, viewers, or listeners. Reporters and editors consider audience mail highly idiosyncratic. They treat the letters, phone calls, and electronic mail they receive just the way anyone treats messages or calls from strangers: with suspicion. And reporters are right. Gans found that letters to NBC News came from an entirely unrepresentative subset of the viewers. When call-in radio programs became popular in the 1990s, some editors began listening in, trying to learn more about the public out there (Sumpter, 2000). They gave it up after discovering what they already knew from their earlier experiences with letter writers: they are older and more conservative, and they are mostly disgruntled — unless they are fans of someone on the staff and want an autographed picture, something that happens mostly at network programs. Television reporters who answered calls from viewers routinely threw their notes in the trash, except during some media events, such as the verdicts that set off rioting and protests after the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles, when they receive large numbers of unexpected calls from people like themselves (Jacobs, 1996). When selecting what to publish in the letters-to-the-editor column, newspapers follow the same patterns set for other sources, preferring officials, experts, and other “authorized knowers” (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989, p. 362).

A typical white, male, middle-class journalist is stuck with the people he knows and can rely on: people who are like him socially, psychologically, economically, and so on, sources he talks to regularly enough to know that what they say will pan out. When those people aren't available, he goes first to people whose job titles and reputations make them seem most likely to be reliable. Studies have shown that who gets into the news depends on how closely they are connected to the news organization (Martin, 1988). Newspapers in Indiana and Kentucky published more stories with a greater number and wider variety of sources when a news staff member was directly involved in the community being covered. The diversity of sources is also greater for what's called *enterprise* reporting, when journalists explore or investigate new stories (Hansen, 1991). But routine daily news produces a less diverse array of sources, with journalists and authorities talking among themselves (Seymour-Ure, 1974), in what might be called *horizontal communication*.

The resulting product, based on the personalism and clientelism of everyday news work and the narrow range of views those contacts express, is still what most citizens rely on to get information. Perhaps as a result, audiences see the news media as biased and unrepresentative (Dautrich & Hartley, 1999). Surveys of confidence in the press have shown steep declines over the period when the status of journalists among elites has risen. In the 1970s, around 25 percent of the public expressed a “great deal of confidence” in the press, but by the 1990s the share had fallen to around 10 percent. Research on audiences and newspaper content shows that newspapers and television newscasts in fact provide the greatest exposure most U.S. citizens get to views unlike their own (Mutz & Martin, 2001). They encounter very little divergent opinion at work, and almost none in private activities within voluntary associations and at home.

In other words, the press has turned to group and institutional references and to official sources as journalists have become more elite and distanced from average people. Reporters with Ivy League educations or advanced degrees talk less often to people whose education ended with high school or perhaps community college. Editors even less so. To move out of the lowest ranks, reporters have to uproot themselves and move from smaller markets to larger markets. As outsiders to many communities, journalists turn to officials and other people like themselves. People recognize that distance and lose confidence in news as their own direct connections to the press, as well as their store of common experiences shared with journalists, grow weaker.

But the public is also stuck. The press is the only game in town, the only place they can easily go to find out about other people, important elites, yes, but also ordinary people with experiences and views unlike their own. Alternative outlets do exist and produce oppositional news that follows the conventions of mainstream journalism, but most U.S. audiences have no access to anything like Pacifica Radio (Eliasoph, 1988). The Internet at first seemed to promise a wider array of perspectives on the news, but that hope quickly faded. My own attempt to listen to Pacifica Radio over the Internet proved impractical because of obstacles ranging from software limitations to differences in time zones. Research on Web-based news shows a growing concentration of traffic at just a few sites owned by large old-media corporations. Newspapers in many markets have moved aggressively to close down or buy up on-line competitors, reinforcing their monopoly control of local news and other information (Barnhurst, 2002).

A Summary Case Study

A recent example can illustrate the interwoven strands that make up the who of news. In the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton began to give speeches and hold fundraising events among gay men and lesbians. No national politician had ever courted these voters so openly before. Gay men had begun to appear in the news regularly in the 1980s in health-related stories, but political leaders during the Reagan and Bush administrations preferred not to mention gay folks at all. Clinton's action suddenly brought the queer vote into

mainstream politics.

In the decade from 1992 to 2002 news organizations inadvertently ran something rare, a natural experiment in what happens to people when they become a regular element in the news. To measure the changes in who spoke on the air as gay groups moved out from the margins, I did a case study of National Public Radio (Barnhurst, 2003b).

From 1992 to 2000, reporters shifted away from using sources who were citizens involved directly in the events being covered. In a 1992 story on the anti-gay-rights amendment in Colorado (“Morning Edition,” Wednesday, November 11), reporter Mark Roberts included two sound bites from involved citizens, both of them participants in a rally on Capitol Hill in Denver. Unidentified Man No. 1, in a talk at the rally, described the expressions of fear and support pouring in from LGBT communities around the country after the amendment passed. Unidentified Man No. 2, who participated in the rally, gave a reaction sound-bite: “It is a terrible feeling to be hated by other people for something that you had no choice in.” Reporters referred to non-elite speakers as activists, and these gay men (most often unidentified) generally contributed coherent, fully formed thoughts in complete sentences. In other words, individual citizens who took courage and stepped forward were allowed to speak out for themselves. But ordinary citizens do not have office hours or job titles, they are hard to find on deadline, and they cannot be relied on to give good sound bites. They don’t move in the same social circles as most journalists. They may add a little spice and realism to reporting, but they lack authority.

Over the course of the next two elections, NPR news replaced active citizens as sources. Two types of speakers took their place. Uninvolved citizens almost quadrupled in number. The average report allowed one or perhaps two onlookers to speak in 1992, but included more than twice as many in 2000. The typical quote from non-elites became very brief, such as the repeated shouts of “That’s right!” at a rally against the civil unions law in Vermont (“All Things Considered,” Tuesday, October 24, 2000).

The other type of speaker grew even more dramatically. Leaders of interest groups, associations, policy think tanks, and lobbyists acted as sources almost ten times more often. These professional voices included spokespersons for organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the major U.S. political parties, as well as for gay-supportive groups, such as the Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal Defense Fund. The Christian Coalition figured most prominently among anti-gay groups, along with the organizers of initiatives against political rights for sexual minorities. The representatives from all these groups are typically the most like elite journalists and the least likely to offend the ears of dominant groups: well-spoken, professional, upper-middle class, and probably white.

In a nutshell, a habitual NPR listener heard the following sources in a typical week of gay-related coverage during the 1992 campaign: two citizens and one onlooker, one official and no spokespersons for groups. Two decades after gays and lesbians first appeared in mainstream political news, the habitual

NPR listener might hear two officials and as many as three group leaders along with an expert, but only one active citizen spoke, along with several bystanders who uttered short phrases. The voices of experts and officials replaced the citizenry, and ordinary people’s voices were reduced to mere fragments.

When previously ignored communities come into mainstream politics, journalists at first do the job they dream about: giving voice to the outsiders. But then the topic gets folded into the routines of news work. Reporters eventually fall into a pattern of relying on people like themselves, on people with authority and expert knowledge, and on people who speak for organized groups. There is nothing in the ways news work is organized to stop this process.

The different currents in the who of news may seem confusing, and of course they are complicated, but they all involve something central to human experience: the relation of self to others in all their variety. The who of news is something like a love story. It would seem that the people — the citizenry, the audience — should play a leading role. Instead, the central character is the journalist, and the central relationship — between journalists and their audience — seems to develop offstage, in the imaginations of journalists.

Reporters and editors hunger to know real people, but audiences always remain elusive, just beyond the newsperson’s reach. There are two reasons that, despite their yearning for knowledge of their public, they are unable to find it. One is perceptual. When any bit of information or insight comes their way, either general or specific, journalists must reject it. They want to know personally and understand their public at close quarters. General measurements of the entire audience are vague and disembodied, tainted by the measurer. News people cannot know their public through statistics, because any collective is not directly knowable. Specific responses, when individuals reach out through letters, calls, or other means, are personal but also too visceral. News people cannot know their public through strangers who speak most often in anger. All the responses from audience members are always insufficient and inadequate for journalists.

The other reason news workers cannot gain a knowledge of the audience is conceptual. Knowing their public would, by definition, require that journalists yield control over their craft. Accepting the available information, or any conceivable information, would involve ceding news judgment to others. No journalist can do that and remain a journalist, especially given the anxiety journalists feel over their professional status (Zelizer, 1992). News judgment — the nose for news — is a key professional attribute for any reporter, the skill that gives pride of place to editors. It is not taught but learned through tough experience, through failure, through watching seasoned correspondents, and through hearing the stories of veteran editors. Journalists consider it an instinct (Sumpter, 2000). Obeying statistics would abdicate control to sales people, marketing types, advertisers, the business office, or someone else who doesn’t understand journalism. Obeying what comes over the transom would abandon control to disgruntled cranks. But there’s nothing else available from

audiences. News people simply cannot know their public. That is their tragic flaw in this drama.

So like an unrequited lover, the journalist turns to surrogates. Sources play the third role in the triangle. Politicians and officials from every sort of group sell themselves to journalists. They want the journalist's attention to gain the hard currency of news: public attention (the people again, imagined but out of reach). Journalists may satisfy their professional needs through their relations with officialdom, but they treat their sources with disrespect, cutting their sound bites shorter and disdaining their eagerness to please (Levy, 1981).

Officials speak for groups who seem to stand in for the audience, but groups themselves represent only vaguely the definable segments or attributes of the real public. For instance, the real public has some concern for the environment, but environmentalists have let that concern take over. Journalists don't see them as part of the real public. When using individuals as typifications of groups, journalists once again reject the specifics. The downtrodden shepherds are not our readers, the reporters say. The disconsolate mothers of children lost in infancy hardly ever read a newspaper. As soon as a private individual comes under the bright lights of news, she stops being representative of the public and becomes either exceptional or deviant. The audience remains elusive.

Finding no comfort in groups and their officials, the lovelorn journalist turns to experts. Experts themselves are by definition distant from the mass of readers and viewers (who claim no expertise). The particular kind of expertise journalists find attractive requires fast talk, insider access, and other skills not found among the audience. These specialists at media talk stand outside the general run of people. The audience again cannot be found.

Unable to get satisfaction from any quarter, in one last scene — the most recent development in the who of news — journalists turn to the mirror, contemplating their own image. They cover the beat of their own lives, they quote themselves, they interview each other. They themselves have become speaker, source, and listener. They have become like Narcissus in Greek myth, and the audience, like Echo, seems only to reflect back whatever the journalists say.

In their defense, it must be added that journalism is like any other profession. No one has access to the real "people." Studies of professionalism show that doctors, lawyers, and even university professors all claim to have a public mission. As professionals, we carry in our heads a picture of the public that is so deeply ingrained we hardly think about it. Theorists call this image an internalization (Robbins, 1993). When I asked Umberto Eco, a prominent theorist who is also a practicing journalist and author, about how he conceives of his audiences, he said they are like a ghost, but much smarter than editors and publishers give them credit for (Eco, 2002). Professionals argue that each decision we make serves our public, when in fact what we decide serves only what we imagine as the "people." The distinction is important. Because we don't examine our imagined public very often or with very much rigor, we all fall into the habit of equating the people with ourselves. We feign to speak

from two minds, but we are of only one. When journalists argue among themselves, one — usually an editor — will seize the high ground by claiming that her position serves the reader, listener, or viewer. As the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observed (1990), the "people" is often what is at stake when elites struggle among themselves. Journalism has always covered elites, but today journalists themselves are among the elite.

That's why more groups, officials, and experts have replaced freestanding individuals and ordinary people in the news. And that's why journalists quote themselves and interview each other in the news. It's also one reason that audiences for news are shrinking.

Echo & Narcissus

The audience was an imaginary being, fond of the outdoors and devoted to sports, but had one failing; it was fond of talking and would have the last word. One day the goddess passed sentence in these words: "You shall still have the last word, but no power to speak first."

The audience saw a reporter, a beautiful youth, as he pursued a story. The audience followed his footsteps and longed to address him, but it was not in its power. It waited with impatience for him to speak first, and had an answer ready. One day the reporter, being separated from his companions, shouted aloud, "Who's here?" The audience replied, "Here." The reporter looked around, but seeing no one called out, "Come." The audience answered, "Come." As no one came, the reporter called again, "Why do you shun me?" The audience asked the same question. "Let us join one another," said the reporter. The audience answered with all its heart in the same words, and hastened to the spot. He started back, exclaiming, "Hands off! I would rather die than you should have me!" "Have me," said the audience; but it was all in vain. He left, and the audience went to hide in the recesses of the woods. From that time forth the audience lived in caves till at last all its flesh shrank away. Its bones were changed into rocks and there was nothing left but its voice. With that the audience is still ready to reply to any journalist who calls, and keeps up the old habit of having the last word.

The reporter's cruelty in this case was not the only instance. He shunned all the rest of the audience, as he had done in the first case. One day someone who had in vain endeavored to attract him uttered a prayer that he might some time or other feel what it was to love and meet no return of affection. The avenging goddess heard and granted the prayer.

There was a clear fountain, with water like silver; the grass grew fresh around it, and the rocks sheltered it from the sun. Hither came one day the reporter, fatigued with following a lead, heated and thirsty. He stooped down to drink, and saw his own image in the water; he thought it was some beautiful source living in the fountain. He stood gazing with admiration at those bright eyes, the parted lips, and the glow of health and exercise over all. He fell in love with himself. He could not tear himself away; he lost all thought of food or rest, while he hovered over the brink of the fountain gazing upon his own image. He talked with the supposed source: "Why, beautiful source, do you shun me? Surely my face is not one to repel you. The audience loves me, and you yourself look not indifferent upon me. When I stretch forth my arms you do the same;

and you smile upon me and answer my beckonings with the like." His tears fell into the water and disturbed the image. As he saw it depart, he exclaimed, "Stay, I entreat you! Let me at least gaze upon you, if I may not touch you."

With this, and much more of the same kind, he cherished the flame that consumed him, so that by degrees he lost his vigor which formerly had so charmed the audience. They kept near him, however, and when he exclaimed, "Alas! alas!" they answered him with the same words. He pined away and died; and when his shade passed the river, it leaned over the boat to catch a look of itself in the waters. The audience mourned for him. They prepared a funeral pile and would have burned the body, but it was nowhere to be found.

—Adapted from Bulfinch

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