

CHAPTER 3

What: Events in the News

All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. ¶ The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. ¶ Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.
—Ecclesiastes 1: 8–10, King James Version

When Will Irwin, the famed muckraker for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Sun*, wrote an assessment of American journalism almost a century ago, a huge number of events entered the flow of news. “Every night there happen in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago a thousand events which fit the definition of news,” he said, and then, with great confidence, he added, “information on most of them reaches the newspaper offices” (Irwin, 1969, p. 34). Fifty years later, the wire editor of the morning *Peoria Star* in Illinois reported receiving twelve thousand inches of wire copy during the week. A well-known study of news described his work as *gate-keeping*, what journalists do to manage the flow of occurrences (Reese & Ballinger, 2001).

Since the early twentieth century, the number of news outlets has grown. Although many newspapers have closed their doors, radio expanded its news reporting, and then television news came on the scene. The outlets for news grew with the advent of cable and satellite systems. The conveyances for news also multiplied. Early in the century, telegraph lines expanded their reach, air flight made airmail possible, and transoceanic cables were laid and the first transcontinental telephone calls placed in North America. Later fax and teletype machines allowed instant document transmission. The reach of news organizations grew as well. By mid-century, the news-wire services had built networks that circled the planet. Although some newspaper and television network bureaus began to shrink later on, the rise of the internet and cellular telecommunications gave reporters access to ever more remote events. The multiplying modes of communication (physical and virtual), the

growing number of news conveyances, and the expanding reach of news gathering suggest a commonsense assumption: that the public today can get access to more events than ever before.

Are more events covered today than a century — or even fifty years — ago? Many journalists believe so. They call the deluge of occurrences a glut they must govern. Veteran beat reporter Diana K. Sugg, who has worked for the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Baltimore Sun*, describes it this way:

You are a beat reporter. . . . You have too many stories, too little time. . . . I’ve ridden the high of a streak of great stories, those days when my stories are coming in one by one, ripe and ready for the front page. But just as many days, I’ve cranked out two dailies and three digest items, and I’ve come home hungry and frustrated. . . . (2003, p. 114)

Veteran correspondent Mort Rosenblum, in *Coups and Earthquakes*, writes, “At one time, the main problem with the system was that there were not enough words. Now, it is that there are too many. The new technology makes possible such a flood of dispatches, broadcasts, tapes, films and photographs . . .” (1981, p. 3). When he updated his assessment a dozen years later, he found, “There is no shortage of news reports” (1993, p. 9).

Critics argue that television news has become more episodic, that is, more focused on events (Iyengar, 1991). Rosenblum cites Don Kellermann, of the Times-Mirror Company, who says, “We are all flooded with too much information. People are intellectually and emotionally capable of absorbing only so much” (1981, p. 14).

When people believe a thing to be true, they tend to act on that belief, and it becomes true in its consequences. In the case of news events, public opinion polls report that more U.S. Americans, especially those attentive news, feel overloaded (Pew, 2000). There seems to be just too much going on. The audience agrees with journalists.

In a recent column, Jack Rosenthal, president of the New York Times Company Foundation and former senior editor of the *Times*, describes the “relentless rise in the number of news outlets, the frequency of news reports, and the media’s clamor for every scrap of new information” (“The Public Editor,” Sunday, August 8, 2004, *Week in Review*, p. 4–2). He says “society is immersed . . . in a flood of facts,” and claims that the accelerating surge “has created a kind of widespread attention deficit disorder” among the public.

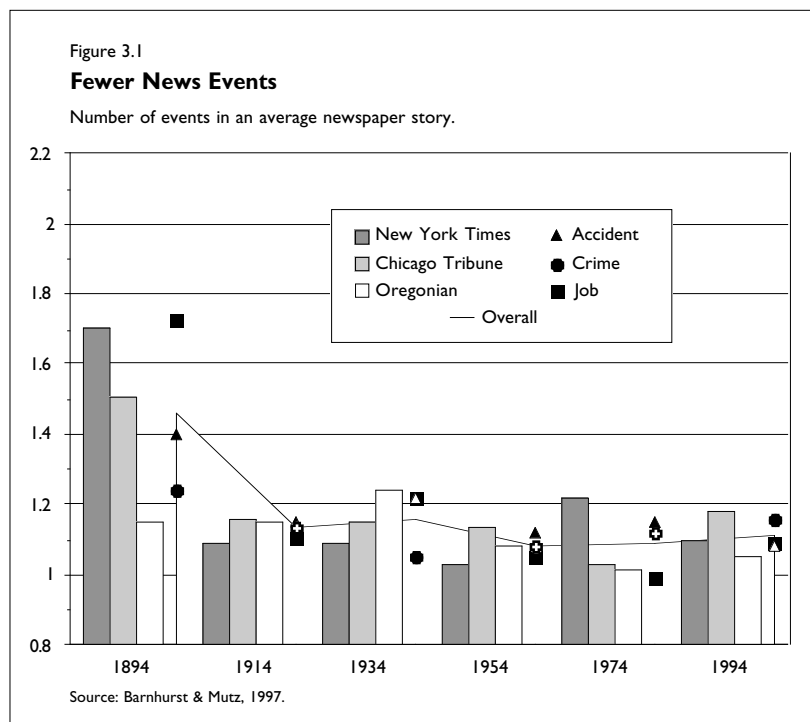
Commonsense, critical observations, and practitioner knowledge suggest that news has become more centered on events. The growth in technology and communication points to more events being covered in news reports, people say they feel overwhelmed, critics and some studies agree, and journalists say they are covering more. The texts that journalists produce, however, show the opposite. Fewer events get reported. [EO1]

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Fewer Events

Previous chapters show how the form and content of the news have changed: there are fewer stories, but those remaining are significantly longer. Studies that demonstrate the declining number of articles and items on the front page imply that fewer events get reported, but longer stories might themselves include more events. Initially I assumed that instead of running three reports on three different fires in the city, an editor would combine the information from all three into one report, or a reporter would write one story built around a similarity, a unifying element, or a theme in the three events. But instead, throughout the twentieth century, as individual news stories grew longer, they included fewer and fewer events.

Consider the pattern our one-hundred-year study found in newspapers (Figure 3.1).



The number of events per article declined significantly, regardless of which newspaper we looked at (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997). The two large newspapers in the study, the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, moved strongly away from multiple events, and even at the smaller Portland

Oregonian, the trend was significant. Events in crime stories stayed about the same, but accident stories included fewer events, and the number within stories about employment declined sharply. No topic went against the trend. The general consistency for newspapers and topics indicates a fundamental redefinition in reporting, not a simple change in the way journalists group the events they cover.

In other words, instead of chasing after every fire engine, journalists became more selective. Where once a typical reporter covered half a dozen stories in a day, now she would write two or just one (or in some cases only part of one). And editors, instead of running a roundup of several fires that day or week, would publish only the biggest (if they included any at all). One of the fires might become an example, representing all the fires of that sort, and the longer story might then focus on fire-related issues, but not on individual fires as events. The work of journalists had changed.

The biggest down-turn in event coverage occurred in the interval between 1894 and the beginning of World War I, a period of turmoil in Europe that produced large numbers of news events. After the Dreyfus Affair in 1896, scandals, diplomatic intrigues, and territorial annexations continued among the major European powers. Anarchists carried out a series of assassinations that reached beyond Europe with the death of U.S. President William McKinley. War flared up repeatedly, with the Italian army in Ethiopia, the British in the Boer War, the Spanish-American War, the Russo-Japanese War, and the Balkan War. There was unrest and revolt in Russia and a revolution in Mexico (Iavarone, 1996).

In the same period, journalists began to have at their disposal a wider means of gathering news. Telegraph lines expanded their reach, radio emerged, air flight made airmail possible, and transoceanic cables were laid and the first transcontinental telephone calls placed in North America. There were plenty of other events to cover: the Panama Canal excavation, the San Francisco earthquake, Halley's Comet, expeditions to the North and South Poles, and the loss of the Titanic. The range of outlets for news also expanded, with the number of newspapers published in the United States reaching a peak. In 1900, New York City alone had twenty-nine newspapers (Fang & Ross, 1996).

In short, as the pressure of occurrences increased and the means for transmitting them expanded, the number of events journalists included in their stories dropped. Rather than merely conveying occurrences, they began selecting actively what to include in the news, and then writing and publishing lengthier stories. The tools of journalism also changed. In the late nineteenth century, newspapers began to publish interviews (Fishman, 1980; Schudson, 2001), which were at first a shocking departure from straight reporting. Conducting an interview created an event at the behest and under the control of reporters and editors. These pseudo-events soon became a widespread practice. By the early twentieth century, journalists were not only selecting among available occurrences but manufacturing events of their own. They had taken control of the *what* of news.

Such a large redefinition of journalism didn't go unnoticed. In the wake of the change, an important and widely circulated critique of the press took place. The first salvo discharged when Irwin published his fifteen-part series on American journalism in *Collier's*, the weekly magazine that had taken a leading role in progressive reforms. Theodore Roosevelt called its brand of coverage *muckraking*, but it helped clear slums, limit child labor, allow direct election of senators, and give women the right to vote. Irwin's 1911 series of articles sought to extend progressive thinking to journalism itself.

The problem, Irwin argued, was slanted news. "Newspapers, good and bad, honest and venal, have come more and more to put their views into their news columns," Irwin wrote (1969, p. 8). "It looks simple at first sight" to report "just what occurs in the world" (p. 30), but that path is strewn with dangers: pressures from advertisers, corporate buy outs, and the tendency among newspaper conductors to become cronies of the country club set. "Most news is not fact anyway," he quoted a popular quip, "It is gossip about facts" (p. 36). In the last installment of the fifteen-part series, he proposed a solution: event-centered news, stripped of opinion.

World War I made the need for straight news even more urgent. In 1920, *The Brass Check*, Upton Sinclair's best-selling attack in the press, called the newspaper a mental "munitions factory" that was building the "bombs and gas-shells" used to impose ideas on and instill fear among the people (1936, p. 412). His solution was to call for a newspaper that was not "a journal of opinion, but a record of events pure and simple" (quoted in Goldstein, 1989, p. 157, from a final section omitted from subsequent editions of Sinclair, 1920).

The following year Walter Lippmann, who would later become the dean of intellectual columnists, and Charles Merz, who eventually left the *New York World* to become editorial page editor of the *New York Times*, published "A Test of News," in *The New Republic*. Their article examined three years of the *Times* — more than a thousand newspapers — for coverage of the Russian Revolution, documenting the handling of copy and other text. The two young journalists called the paper's coverage "nothing short of a disaster" (Lippmann & Merz, 1920, p. 3). In its news columns, the *Times* had reported events that never happened. And the stories and accompanying headlines and captions also emphasized unsupported (and, as it turned out, unsupported) interpretations.

How, the journalists asked, did such systematic misrepresentations occur in the *Times*? Driven by the wish for an outcome favorable to the Allies in World War I, the *Times* published not news of actual occurrences but "semi-editorial news dispatches" based on "what men wanted to see," wrote Lippmann and Merz. They concluded that "a great people in a supreme crisis could not secure the minimum of necessary information on a supremely important event" (p. 2).

Other critics agreed. In a January 1922 article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, the magazine journalist Frederick Lewis Allen, having witnessed censorship, propaganda, and "controlling or doctoring the news" during World War I,

wrote —

it is immensely important that the press shall give us the facts straight; and not merely the facts relating to department stores and other large business concerns, but the entire mass of facts about the world in which we live — political, economic, religious, scientific, social, and industrial. (1922, p. 44)

The need seemed urgent in the post-war period, as a wider public became aware that not only the Germans but also the British and even the United States government itself had mounted propaganda efforts. The U.S. Committee on Public Information went beyond circulating handouts, pamphlets, posters, films, advertisements, and exhibits, to creating a system of speakers and committees, all of which blanketed the country with messages designed to whip up and solidify public opinion in favor of an idealistic war portrayed as a battle between democracy and evil (Mock & Larsen, 1939/1968).

After the war, scholars led the reaction against propaganda. Historians, political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists developed a new paradigm, called propaganda analysis, to study the systems of social influence and control in modern societies. Their work became disseminated widely in magazine articles and popular books, and it reached into colleges, secondary schools, and adult education programs through study materials that an Institute for Propaganda Analysis distributed from Columbia University (Sproule, 1987). Propaganda analysis aimed in part to arm the citizenry against future efforts, either covert and overt, to slant the news.

In the decades following these critiques, the number of events covered in the average report appearing in the *New York Times* and other newspapers increased slightly, but then fell again after 1934 (see Figure 3.1). During the second downturn, fear of propaganda gave way to another urgent concern: that giving bare-bones information about occurrences could itself become misleading. This notion grew in reaction to the Great Depression and World War II, pioneered oddly enough by the wire services, first United Press and then the Associated Press (Mott, 1952).

The Dangers of Reporting Events

Beginning in 1947, important figures in journalism gave a series of addresses at the University of Minnesota under the auspices of the Newspaper Guild. The first three, by James Reston of the *New York Times*, Marquis Childs of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and Thomas L. Stokes of the *New York World-Telegram*, had a common thesis:

The press was not truly *communicative* in the early postwar years. It put before the reader a confusing welter of facts from the varied life of the nation and the world. Because of faulty news techniques or the lack of editorial will, vital issues were not interrelated and interpreted in understandable form for the reader. (Casey, 1963, p. xi)

The crisis that finally solidified thinking against event-centered news was the McCarthy hearings. When Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy mounted his virulent attacks in early 1950, accusing the Truman Administration of harboring Communists in the State Department, the press simply reported who said what. After the Republican Party won the 1952 election and took control of the Senate, McCarthy became committee chair and expanded his attacks, going after defense industries, universities, and the broadcasters themselves. ABC Television came into national prominence by airing the hearings about supposed Communist infiltration of the U.S. Army, riveting national attention with the live proceedings.

But the events could not really speak for themselves. Every name named exacted a human cost, as McCarthy dragged innocent people into the public eye, and his baseless accusations harmed their relationships and destroyed their livelihoods. These consequences, although not lost on the press, were not in themselves news events as then defined. Elmer Davis pointed this out (Casey, 1963). He had left reporting for the *New York Times* to become a commentator on CBS Radio, where he recommended that the U.S. government centralize information during World War II. President Franklin D. Roosevelt later named him to head the new Office of War Information (Widner, 2000). When Davis returned to broadcasting after the war, he not only challenged McCarthy and other congressional committees but also questioned the conventions of event-centered reporting.

In a speech entitled “Must We Mislead the Public?” Davis cited example after example when “the best papers in the country gave their readers . . . a seriously mistaken impression” (in Casey, 1963, p. 57). The “practice of reporting what everybody said” about an occurrence “and letting the reader make up his own mind” imposed “a considerable burden on the reader,” Davis said. It also gave a lot of attention to “proven liars”:

Consider Senator McCarthy; not a single one of his charges has ever been proved, most of them have been pretty conclusively disproved in public hearings — yet he can repeat those same charges and still get space in the papers, sometimes on the front page. (p. 61)

Davis pointed out that “editors may know that this is old stuff,” but “if a United States Senator keeps on saying it,” the norms of event-centered news require they print it (p. 61). “This kind of dead-pan reporting — So-and-so said it, and if he is lying in his teeth it is not my business to say so — may salve the conscience of the reporter (or of the editor, who has the ultimate responsibility),” Davis said. “But what about loyalty to the reader?” (p. 62). The answer, he proposed, was radio news commentary like his own, which provided “a mixture of news and interpretation” and could “admirably illuminate and explain the news for the customer” (p. 63).

He was aware of the dangers of this course, but even so, he said, “I believe the present tendency is toward more interpretation. But just how it can effectively be done . . . on the front page — that is something that must still be worked out” (p. 64).

Under the existing definition of news, the front pages could report a re-

buttal to Sen. McCarthy only when another *usable occurrence* took place. It happened in front of the camera on June 9, 1954, when Special Counsel for the Army Joseph N. Welch, in his now-famous testimony before the committee, challenged McCarthy’s needless defamation of a young lawyer. “Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness,” he said, and then, after further exchanges, concluded, “Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?” (“Red Scare,” 1998, pp. 149–50).

Other prominent broadcasters took up Davis’s critique. In a Newspaper Guild speech called “The Big Truth,” Eric Sevareid, who had started at CBS News as one of Edward R. Murrow’s so-called boys covering World War II, observed “the enormous flood of facts” and noted “we are not really getting it across, not really preparing the American mind” (in Casey, 1963, p. 79). After recounting specific episodes of McCarthy’s demagoguery, Sevareid said —

the warp and woof of what the papers print and the broadcasters voice — our flat, one-dimensional handling of the news, have given the lie the same prominence and impact that truth is given; they have elevated the influence of fools to that of wise men; the ignorant to the level of the learned; the evil to the level of the good. (p. 84)

Sevareid waxed philosophical. “For every age, there is one unpardonable sin,” he said, quoting an ambassador in Washington. “Do you know what is the unpardonable sin of the present age? It is superficiality, lack of depth, absence of perspective — a happy skimming over the surface of things” (p. 91). From start to finish, Sevareid implicitly condemned event-centered news:

We have not really moved into the era of three-D journalism, although some are trying; we are not providing the depth, not illuminating the background, making it a living part of the picture with the third dimension, which is Meaning. (pp. 79–80)

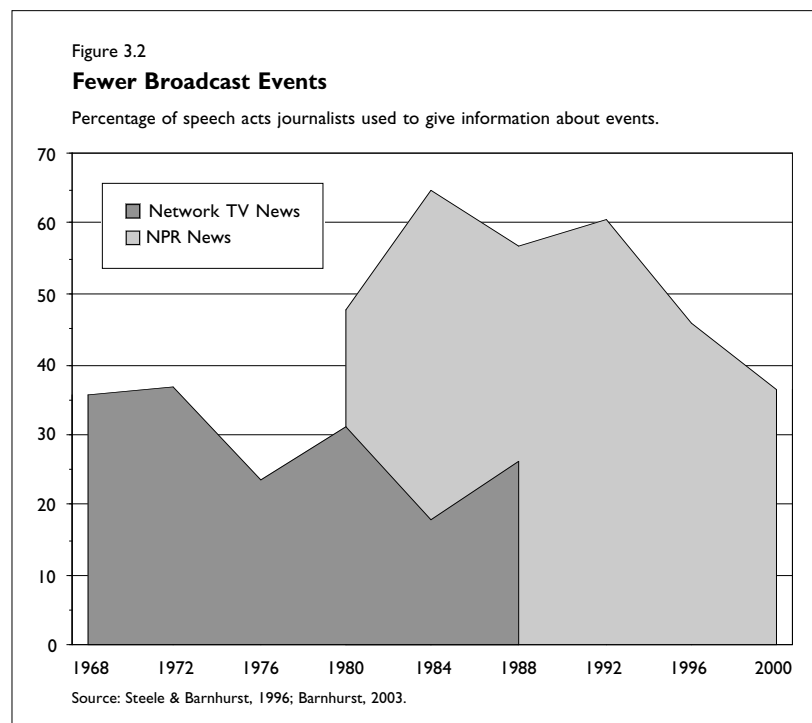
[EO2] Scholars of the period agreed with this assessment. The press historian Frank Luther Mott, for example, argued that processes “looming up as background” are “far more significantly important than most of the thousand little happenings . . . that fill so many newspaper columns” (1952, p. 31). Along with other researchers, he saw attending to the obvious events as the greatest failure of mid-century U.S. journalism.

To recap: the shift to event-centered reporting in the early twentieth century accompanied the widespread criticism that journalism had too often mixed event coverage with interpretations. As standards of objective reporting became more entrenched, another concern came to the fore: the need to go beyond reporting occurrences themselves. That explanatory approach has held sway since then, so that stories have stuck mostly to a single event and covered it in greater length, at least in the printed daily press.

The Trend in Broadcast News

Broadcast news came on the scene after attitudes toward event coverage had begun to change, and studies shown that event coverage on the air continued the trends found in print. One way to measure broadcast event coverage is simply by counting the number of stories in the average show. A thirty-year analysis of ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news found a consistent decline on all three networks toward fewer and fewer items each year (Riffe & Budianto, 2001). “World News Tonight” on ABC, for example, included a dozen stories on average in 1970, but had fewer than eight in 2000 (p. 23). The negative trends were statistically very strong, indicating that “network news was covering less” (p. 25).

But once again, it seems possible that the number of stories might not give a complete picture of how many events they include. Another way to examine event coverage is to look inside each story to take stock of the elements of news reporting. In our twenty-year study of network newscasts (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996), we measured how often journalists gave information about current events (Figure 3.2).



In their voice-overs, stand-ups, and other speech, television journalists shifted away from reporting merely on what happened. In 1968, they stuck entirely to giving information about occurrences at least a third of the times they spoke on the air, but that share of event coverage declined over the next two decades. The data followed a sawtooth pattern, going up and down — the study looked at four-year intervals during national elections — but the negative trend was statistically significant. [E03]Television journalists became less involved in the basic informational task of communication, spending a greater share of their activity on other things, such as offering opinions, showing agreement, and voicing reactions.

Unlike the television networks, National Public Radio (NPR) did not face the full brunt of market competition and the constant squeeze from more advertising (Barnhurst, 2003), but NPR news also followed the trend (see Figure 3.2). The 1980 election was the first when “Morning Edition” and its afternoon counterpart, “All Things Considered,” were both on the air. Over the next few elections, NPR journalists managed to stick to informing the audience about events nearly half — or even more — of the times they spoke. But then a steep decline began, dropping the share of information to nearly a third. The change becomes most clear by comparing excerpts from two reports, one early and the other late in the period.

In 1980, Correspondent Linda Wertheimer began her campaign story this way:

Wertheimer: Pres. Carter went to the Forest Hills Jewish Community Center to, as he said in his speech, “let the people of Queens know exactly where I stand,” but when the President began to speak, demonstrations began as well. [14 sec.]

Carter: Let there be no doubt where I stand. The United States opposes [heckling interrupts Carter] . . . The United States opposes and I oppose any PLO state. [16 sec.]

Wertheimer: Pres. Carter said he wished to confront without mincing words a question that has been raised in the Jewish community about the President’s support of Israel after the election, especially if large numbers of Jewish voters defect the Democratic Party. [15 sec.]

Carter: I want each of you, even including the demonstrators, to go back to the people in your communities and neighborhoods and tell them this: The President will never turn his back on Israel. I never have and I never will. [Applause] And this President will never use economic and military aid to Israel as a lever against Israel. Not in the last four years. Not now, and not in the next four years. [Applause] [39 sec.] (“All Things Considered,” October 13)

Wertheimer opened her story by focusing on the *what*: Carter, the Community Center, and the hecklers. Any judgmental terms — “mincing” and “defect” — come in a paragraph attributed to the candidate.

By 1996, event-centered reporting on NPR had begun to fall. That year Joanne Silberner reported on a health care discussion during the presidential debate:

Silberner: What a difference four years makes. In the last presidential campaign, then-candidate Bill Clinton drew plenty of support for his promise of universal health care. [9 sec.]

Clinton [1992 presidential candidate]: I have pledged that within the first 100 days of a Clinton administration, I would submit a comprehensive health care plan for real change that deals with cost and coverage and access, with quality and the maintenance of consumer choice. [14 sec.]

Silberner: In the 1996 campaign, both Republicans and Democrats are offering vaguer, less ambitious plans for changes in the nation's health care system. . . . [Goes on to introduce an expert source.] [15 sec.] ("All Things Considered," October 17, 1996)

Of course, the first noticeable change is in sound bites. Wertheimer allowed Carter to speak much longer than Silberner allowed Clinton — and both run very long compared to the standard ten-second sound bite on television news since the 1980s. But the shift away from giving information (and toward highlighting the reporter's opinions about what happens) is just as clear. She opened her story with a personal exclamation, and she then expressed her judgment about the politicians' current (and by implication, past) health care proposals.

Although the share went up and down from election to election, the overall trend was again significant statistically. The archetypal activity for journalists — reporting what was happening — declined during the NPR political coverage. From 1980 to 2000, NPR journalists moved away from the denotative focus on occurrences.

Journalistic Realism

How do journalists account for the shift?

Rick Kaplan (2001) started out as a copy boy in Chicago and rose to become president of CNN News. Along the way he produced national programs with Walter Cronkite, Ted Koppel, and Peter Jennings among others. He returned to ABC in 2003 to become senior vice president of news. When we talked in 2001, he suggested three points to consider:

First, journalists have a valuable resource to offer: knowledge. Long experience allows a journalist to "know the players, what to expect from them, and how they've gotten where they've gotten." In the case of a summit where world leaders first meet, often the journalists have been in place longer than either head of state. They bring more to the table than the description of what is happening now. "Ted Koppel is one of the smartest people I've ever met," says Kaplan. "I *want* his knowledge. This is a respected, trusted colleague, and he knows what he's talking about." Journalists also have depth in numbers. Kaplan says that the press corps is larger and stronger today than it was fifty years ago. "There are a lot of brilliant people in news, print and broadcast."

Second, reporting only who-said-what not only misses out on valuable

insight, it actually does harm by ignoring the larger context. Kaplan cites the case of global warming:

You'd always go out and find the two sides of the story. So never mind there were nine hundred environmentalists — experts — who believed in global warming, to every two who didn't. In a story of four minutes, it almost looked like it was fifty-fifty: "There's a debate over whether there's global warming." But journalists, in an attempt not to come down on one side, would portray to the audience: "There's this raging battle over global warming."

He calls global warming "a great example of stories where the 'unbiased' media did an enormous disservice to the public." A supposedly balanced report, he says, can be as misleading as quoting experts on "both sides" of the Holocaust would be. Good reporting should include what he calls *learned sourcing*, and "learned sourcing might even include themselves" — the reporters — as long as they make that clear. "If they know," says Kaplan, they "ought to communicate that to people."

Finally, he argues, the world has become more complex.

Kaplan was working for ABC News on the night when the Berlin Wall came down, producing the then-new program "Prime Time Live," which led with live pictures two hours after the wall fell. The program hadn't yet established a long track record of building viewer loyalty by covering serious stories, says Kaplan. "People did not remember or were not reminded about the history and context," and the event itself lacked any looming danger. The coverage didn't attract a big audience. Kaplan says it "was a huge shock to me and to everybody else" that it received low ratings. He sees in the experience the need for a pattern of authoritative insight conveyed within the larger context to explain the complex world.

Mainstream journalists, print and broadcast alike, argue that explaining the world requires more than simpleminded reporting of occurrences alone or relying on quotations that reduce all issues to two sides. They call for more context. In his book on Detroit, reporter Ze'ev Chafets says the local newspapers "relentlessly chronicle the events in America's most violent city" (1990, p. 30). "Average murders get reported on the inside pages under laconic headings like *IN THIS WEEKEND'S SHOOTINGS*" Such event coverage reflects but also reinforces stereotypes, leaving the news media open to charges of racism. In his account, Chafets reiterates the dangers of focusing narrowly on event coverage, and he joins Kaplan in his call for more context in the news.

Other print and broadcast journalists agree that event centered news is insufficient for the increasing complexity of the world. [E04]Rosenblum says the news system "responds inadequately when suddenly called upon to explain something so complex and menacing as a dollar collapse — or a war in Asia" (1993, p. 1). When complex processes get covered as a series of reports, with reversals and changes day after day, readers become "snow-blind," says Doug Clifton, executive editor of the *Miami Herald*. "We report on so many snowflakes that they can hardly see" (quoted in Lyons,

1998, n.p.).

These observations, of course, echo journalists from the mid-twentieth century. Fifty years ago, Davis said newspapers fall short “because of the vast and continually increasing complexity of modern life with which the news must deal” (in Casey, 1963, p. 51), and Severeid decried the tendency “toward oversimplification at a time when the substance, the truth, has become more and more complex and must be understood in all its complexity” (in Casey, 1963, p. 82). Even a century ago, Irwin waxed eloquent on the Progressive need for news, in “the complex organism of modern society” (1969, p. 30).

These days not only journalists but liberal critics argue for a better kind of expertise and knowledge to make sense of events (e.g., Alterman, 2003). Academics also oppose event-centered news. According to Todd Gitlin, professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University, the problem is that television news does not provide enough context (1980, 1987). Stanford communication professor Shanto Iyengar (1991) found that the preponderance of network news is episodic rather than thematic, that is, focused narrowly on specific events rather than on their broader socioeconomic or political antecedents. His study shows that episodic news leaves viewers struggling to attribute political responsibility when important issues arise. Event-centered news wastes journalists’ knowledge, its lack of context can do damage, and its narrow focus blinds it to the complex processes of modern society, as Kaplan points out. This view occupies the mainstream. [JE05]

Conservatives have taken up the task of arguing for event-centered news. They demand a return to the older type of coverage. Austin Ranney, an emeritus professor of political science at Berkeley and former president of the American Political Science Association, published a typical assertion under the aegis of the American Enterprise Institute: “The news is not a reporter’s perception or explanation of what happens, *it is simply what happens*” (1983, p. 18, italics in original). Anything else, says Bernard Goldberg, formerly of CBS News, is “junk journalism” (2001, p. 18). In a screed against network news, Goldberg describes coverage of presidential candidate Steve Forbes’s proposed flat tax as “an editorial masquerading as real news” (p. 15). This, says Goldberg, is the trouble with what journalists call *substance*. He goes on to describe the sourcing in the story, which included three experts. “Every single one of them opposed the flat tax,” he fulminates (p. 16). “Every single one!” Then, after mentioning several conservative economists in favor of the tax, he asks, “What about presenting two sides?” (p. 17). The problem, he argues, is complexity itself, which he illustrates by lampooning the current tax law. Everything needs simplifying, and news is a place to start.

Conservatives may prefer sticking to events, but the result in practice has not produced simple, straightforward reporting of the kind proposed almost a century ago. The outlet with the widest exposure, Fox News, chooses among events according to a Republican partisan agenda, according to opposing critics (Greenwald, 2004). Conservative newspapers in New York

City and Washington, D.C., face the same charges (Media Matters, 2004). Whether or not the critics are correct, the reversal is breathtaking: conservative news organizations today adopt the position Progressives first proposed a century ago. The turn-around illustrates not only the changing political landscape but also the shifting definition of news itself. Interpretation has become central to reporting, either as a filter for selecting occurrences (as in conservative practice) or as an urgent necessity too often missing (as in the mainstream view).

What the mainstream and conservative views share is the belief in a concrete reality open to observation and description. In other words, both views have in common a realist perspective. Modern journalism emerged as a literary activity in the nineteenth century, along with the modern novel (Hellmann, 1981), and both forms have continued to rely on realism. Under realism, all writers and their audiences have access to the real world, but journalists, unlike novelists and readers, have a privileged vantage point. They focus on documenting reality full time and have routine contacts with sources who themselves also observe reality. The efforts of journalists day after day build a comprehensive picture of the real world. Knowledge thus accumulates.

Whether one sides with the mainstream or with conservatives, the news has moved away from event coverage. In the mainstream explanation, the change amounts to progress. Journalists and academics provide a rationale for rejecting event-centered news based on the practical experience of journalists, on the need for context, and on the growing complexity of social conditions. In the conservative explanation, the change amounts to a decline, and the supposed liberal bias of the media gets the blame. If the mainstream view were correct, then the reality of journalism today would still be event centered, lacking enough expertise and explanation despite the change. But the data show otherwise. The news today concentrates on experts who explain things, and audiences readily recognize that explanatory journalism. On the other hand, if the conservative view were correct, then audiences would detect bias and cant on mainstream news, such as the Cable News Network (CNN), but would find conservative organizations such as Fox not only neutral but distinct in their focus on events rather than analysis. No such distinctive, event-centered news exists in the United States, and audiences easily recognize the political reputations of the existing news outlets. Neither explanation for the change carries the day. Journalistic realism isn’t adequate to the task of explaining why news is less centered on events than ever before.

The Sociological Explanation

Social scientists have something to say about practitioner realism and how knowledge grows, especially in the sciences. According to Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962/1996), scientists learn their craft not through abstract concepts in the classroom but through action in the labo-

ratory. Craft-based knowledge forms a *paradigm*, which is a lens to see the world. Kuhn calls that lens the “prerequisite to perception itself” (p. 113). Only when the controlling paradigm faces a crisis do scientists begin a conscious effort at rule-making. The process then sometimes produces a new paradigm to replace the old — in what Kuhn calls a scientific revolution.

Journalists, like scientists, learn their craft not through academic abstractions (despite the existence of journalism schools) but through action. Their laboratory is found in places like the police department, the White House, or the street, as well as the news room. Craft-based knowledge also forms a paradigm in news work, and journalists and editors have engaged in conscious rule-making when the controlling paradigm entered a period of crisis. Journalism during the past century has faced at least the two crises described earlier. The sociological explanation would see those moments of change as paradigm shifts.

The debacle of World War I coverage and propaganda shifted craft-based knowledge away from the partisan and literary paradigm of the older journalism. The crisis resulted in a new realism, subjecting reporters to rules that encouraged them to focus their coverage on what happens. The new paradigm valued facts and objectivity and demarcated news more sharply from opinion. Journalists considered chronicling occurrences their job — their lens for viewing the world. At mid-century another crisis took place. The McCarthy hearings debacle helped shift news away from event-centered coverage, and the new paradigm then reached its height perhaps with the success of Watergate. Journalists now consider making sense of events their job — it has become their lens for viewing what happens. The primary rule for what makes a good story is how well it explains events. Both paradigms, for all their messiness and overlaps, share a fundamental realism (as have several scientific paradigms): reality is still out there for journalists to observe and describe.

The transition from one to the other paradigm occurred through processes within the work routines of journalism. Partisan, literary journalists of the nineteenth century resembled early naturalists. As observers, both kinds of practitioner gathered specimens of the unique individual, who, they assumed, holds the key to understanding the world. In any practical human activity, the means can easily overtake the ends (Vaihinger, 1935/1968). Gathering and sorting occurrences can overwhelm the goal of describing the multifarious world. Categories themselves then become the focus. In journalism, the means include work processes such as covering beats under the pressures of competing with other journalists and news organization, but also include a set of mental tools called *rubrics*, such as relying on *types* or type-casting. Rubrics grow out of necessity when producing anything on a tight schedule.

In journalism, a type is a fictional construct necessary to the high-speed, high-volume practical action of reporting and production. Many types are familiar: the individual (as audience member or source), for example, versus a group, or a person-on-the-street versus someone in an official role, or a

generic American versus someone defined by a local identity (New Yorker, Texan, European). Some are simple stereotypes, such as those for jobs or vocations (a professor, a priest, a bricklayer), or are mere stand-ins (the President for the U.S. Federal government, or the Dow Jones Industrial Average for a large and inscrutable market). Others are larger notions: democracy, the public good, or freedom. When journalists turned away from the literary model of gathering unique specimens for storytelling, they began to rely more heavily on rubrics such as type-casting. The rubrics started out as conveniences for news work, but their use subtly helped move journalists away from the event-centered paradigm.

Under the new, explanatory paradigm, journalists focused on ideal types. They know these types to be mere constructs, and they know them to be false. Editors make ethical choices, for example, based on their internalized picture of the audience consuming news while sitting together as a family at breakfast. Faced with a decision about whether to run a grisly wire story, the editors may call up their audience picture to counterbalance other pressures they feel — from competitors, the market, and so forth. Does anyone really believe in that audience picture? The U.S. family is itself difficult enough to describe: it's *not* most often a father and mother with one- or two-point-something children, and it doesn't sit down for breakfast anymore, certainly not together. The picture is clearly false, but editors use it anyway. Journalists under the current paradigm employ the philosophy of *as if* (Vaihinger, 1935/1968), acknowledging a concrete world out there but relying on abstract types not because they're true but because they're helpful. (The types reveal values as well, the topic for a different discussion.)

Social science has also suggested that journalists are pragmatic in their everyday work. Rather than actively considering their relationship with the real, they work out what reality is through social interaction. In the classic description of the process (Molotch & Lester, 1974), a journalist encounters a plethora of *occurrences*. These are natural to the world out there and are a potential resource. The journalist's job is to find these occurrences and elevate them, through the procedures of journalism, to the status of *events*. Events are occurrences that are useful, and journalists become skilled at identifying usefulness. Politicians hold a news conference and parties organize conventions, for example, for their own uses, and journalists view such occurrences with skepticism. Informers also have their own use in mind for any scandal that grows out of occurrences they report. Politicians, informers, and others pursue their own agendas, but journalists find most useful anything that occurs unintentionally. Scoops and prizes go to the reporter or photographer who ferrets out occurrences that are accidental or serendipitous. Free of the uses and intentions of others, these occurrences lend themselves most to the uses of journalism. In other words, the journalists' use matters most. They are motivated by their own need to appear rational, competent, original, and so forth, and the news industry has organized itself to support and reward those motivations.

Sometimes the groups promoting a particular occurrence as worthy of be-

coming a news event come into conflict. They disagree about what type of event it should become, that is, about what the occurrence means or should mean. These contentions define an event as something else: an *issue*. For journalists, issues have ready-made usefulness, because the sides develop arguments for reporters to convey. There is an added payoff as well: the news organization itself can then take the middle ground, seeming more rational and competent than the various contenders. Although issues provide convenient access to usefulness, in the process of covering them journalists may unintentionally sow disharmony and foment strife. The opposing sides appear less than reasonable, while journalists appear not to be tendentious themselves. The problem solidifies in the most intractable issues of U.S. society, such as women's equality, gay rights, and access to abortion.

An issue story can have a distinct life from the time it first enters the news until it has run its course. Take the example of female genital cutting, first reported in the *New York Times* in 1980 (Boyle & Hoeschen, 2001). Initial stories described the practice as a human-interest drama, covered because feminists and activists, who spoke out at international conferences, disagreed with practitioners on its meaning (what kind of event it should be). Was it a ritual akin to male circumcision, as practitioners believed, or a mutilation and debasement of women? After a decade of infrequent reports, coverage expanded in the 1990s, when a novel and a documentary film came out against the practice. CNN then filmed the operation on a ten-year-old girl in Egypt, and other media joined the bandwagon to cover another case, of a Togo native seeking asylum to escape cutting. The shocking coverage gave way to legal and medical information, and then to the policy realm, as the U.S. government then took action. It banned the custom and made support for international institutions contingent on whether nations receiving loans also conducted educational campaigns against it. Once the policy debate ended, female circumcision coverage declined after 1998.

The entire *life cycle* of the story took two decades, as the issue coverage moved from human interest to scientific information, shifted to policy debates, and finally dwindled to the occasional report on enforcement. In the process activists brought their complaints into view, and the discussion widened to include scientists and government leaders. Journalists fashioned news (especially in the case of CNN) with a growing public looking on, until U.S. action resolved the issue, at least symbolically. In what was probably a foregone conclusion, the activist definition of genital cutting won the debate within the U.S. media, pushing aside the way practitioners defined their own activity.

The process of manufacturing news that's useful to journalists matters because information about events "does not merely *go to* publics, it *creates* them" (Molotch & Lester, 1974, p. 101). The philosopher John Dewey (1927) described the idea that a public takes shape in the process of forming events from the raw material of many occurrences. A paradigm shift in news says something broader about conditions in a society. When reporting can stick to events only, that event coverage can sustain itself because it de-

scribes a society in consensus. The predominance of event-centered reporting may mean consensus exists, or it may signal only the suppression of disagreement. In contrast, issue coverage describes a society in conflict. Issue-centered reporting may mean honest disagreement exists, or it may signal something less hopeful, a basic contentiousness of the society.

The sociological explanation sees the shifts toward event coverage in the first part of the twentieth century as a reflection of the increasing consensus in U.S. society, which had reached a high point by the 1950s. Internal debates about straight reporting emerged at about the same time that other dissenting voices returned to prominence, principally from those left out of the consensus, such as minority groups at the margins of economic life, peace activists opposed to the cold war military expansion, and others. The new paradigm of explanatory news grew throughout the second half of the century, as conflict erupted over racism and war, sexism and abortion, homophobia and AIDS, and the like. The long period of disputation has polarized U.S. politics, and journalism has participated in the trend by increasing issue coverage and partisan reporting.

Facts & Truth

Social science clarifies the stages in news production, from occurrences to events and issues, and it does a good job of connecting the work conditions of journalists through the paradigms or lenses they use to view the world to the broader social setting. Journalists, however, see a different connection between what they do and what they value. When they justify their work, they employ two other terms to explain their purposes or calling: *facts* and *truth*.

Journalists have practical definitions for both terms. First, the facts: although in ordinary settings they talk about events and facts almost interchangeably, facts are the larger item (White, 1970). Reporting facts carries a heavier burden than reporting events because factual coverage requires a journalist to say how the world *is*, and not just what happened in it. The first challenge when selecting and arraying events is to reveal facts. Journalists judge event reporting by whether it sticks to facts, and that means they try to align new occurrences with the accumulated experience of previous reporting.

Sometimes journalists simply don't have access to the facts of how things are, but must report events anyway. For example, in August 2001 the U.S. stock markets had entered a long period of declines. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell below 10,000, and brokerage firms announced a series of layoffs. The Charles Schwab Corporation "sent a pre-Labor Day ripple of tension" through the market, according to a two-paragraph item in the *New York Times* (August 31, p. C-1). "Additional Cuts at Schwab Add to Troubles on Wall St." ran the headline at the top of the Business Digest. Glen Mathison (2001), a spokesman for Schwab, was doing damage control. The layoffs went well beyond U.S. market conditions, which meant closing

down foreign offices, Mathison told me in an interview that week, but Schwab didn't want that fact revealed yet. The *Times* ran a twenty-inch story inside the Business section, "Schwab to Eliminate 2,400 Jobs in New Round of Cuts" (p. C-5), predicting similar moves by Credit Suisse and other firms. The story quoted a Schwab official who said, "To make up for the shortfall in trading commissions," the company would be "consolidating offices in cities around the country and merging some branches," but reporter Patrick McGeehan didn't recognize the larger move, despite an analyst's pointing out the unusually high cost of the layoffs. In coverage on NPR, reporter Scott Horsley used a sound bite from Mathison, who was also on message, pointing to investor decisions, not the foreign office closings ("All Things Considered," August 31, 2001).

Here the event report didn't encompass the defining facts. In the world of the story, the event at Schwab represented the U.S. economic downturn, as expressed in job cuts within the sector most closely connected to the stock market. In the world of Schwab, a fundamental shift in its business, away from foreign offices (which are less relevant to the U.S. market) was also taking place. Schwab was becoming a different kind of company, and the transformation would have been a much bigger story. But that change in the facts about how the world was becoming (in one tiny corner) wasn't the event reported.

The events journalists report are small, working conjectures about what the world is like. Think of those guesses as facts-in-waiting. If they succeed, they become facts, but otherwise they sink into oblivion. To decide what amounts to fact, journalists compare their own against their colleagues' work. "From my own experience," says Michele McLellan (2001), special projects editor for the Portland *Oregonian*, "there's sort of a self-reinforcing quality about the culture of a newsroom" not only in newspapers but elsewhere, especially television: "all media are probably guilty of it." She says that "in any given newsroom, you just get this herd mentality almost." Not that all journalists set out with the aim of telling "the same story," she says, "but that's all we're talking about":

I can imagine a news meeting, at 10 o'clock in the morning. Thirty people go in there to talk about what's happening for the day. The managing editor probably walks in every morning and says, "So what's going on with the war today." And it all kind of flows from there. It's self-reinforcing.

Change in reporting occurs because reporters are always trying to come up with new angles (which contain new conjectures about the world), and sometimes they succeed. McLellan describes the creative process:

A story appears — somebody may have just come up with it. A really smart reporter — on some topic — does a story and . . . creates a model. And people look at that in the newsroom. And they talk about it. They like it. It has whatever kind of a quality. Somebody does it, and it catches on.

A journalist demonstrates competence by going along with the consensus but showing occasional flashes of originality. Both uniformity and creativity receive reinforcement. Journalists check each others' work by replication, reporting on (or ignoring) similar occurrences and aligning them with the accepted facts. Normal reporting tends to be fairly uniform. Besides watching each other and watching the world, journalists are noticing who gets recognition and awards. When innovations occur, journalists usually move together, generally doing what others have found success doing.

Practical success drives the reporting of facts toward a larger goal: the truth. Truth is the highest aim and justification of the newer journalism, as Eric Sevareid's speech indicated half a century ago. Journalists today continue to seek the ideal. Edna Buchanan, a long-time police reporter for the *Miami Herald*, writes, "There is something noble about venturing out every day to seek the truth" (2003, p. 105). What works better is not only what produces events that match the facts but also what facts align best with a broader understanding of the world. As journalists participate in critiques of journalism, and as they join in the process of individual and then group innovation, they define truth by what has worked or failed as a way to view the world. The views of things that work tend to produce more facts that are reliable and useful.

Journalists also judge what others do by the same standard of truth. Competing political parties not only make conflicting assertions about what an occurrence means, they also take out advertisements with dramatically different claims about what their candidates stand for. Journalists then do truth-squad stories, in which they ask whether the statements (and sometimes the images) in the advertisements report the facts. Truth, by this definition, is a larger judgment about whether a statement squares with how the world is or what it is like. A claim about or an image of an event is true if it corresponds to the facts.

Sometimes the reports of events misfire, as they did during the U.S. stock market bubble of the late 1990s (Madrack, 2001). When *Fortune* magazine writer Bethan McLean questioned what the energy firm Enron did for its money, only TheStreet.com followed up. Within a year Enron had gone belly-up, but the truth emerged only later. The *New York Times* then reported on the ignored story in its multiple-page coverage called, Enron's Many Strands ("Early Scrutiny: 10 Months Ago, Questions on Enron Came and Went With Little Notice," Monday, January, 28, 2002, p. A-11). McLean's report presented facts that didn't square with common knowledge about the firm, and only in hindsight did journalists recognize the truth.

The job of reporting of events generates conjectures about the world (giving events their initial meaning), and through repeated event coverage, as well as through the resolution of issues, the guesses about things settle into established facts. Slowly knowledge of the world accumulates in the form of journalistic truth, which amounts to a broader statement that corresponds to the array of facts. When new occurrences fail to fit into the meanings available for events, journalism adjusts through discussion and through trial and

error. Journalists confronting the propaganda of World War I had to refocus on events, and the McCarthy hearings refocused news on the need to stand apart from occurrences and instead to emphasize issues. Both moves attempted to realign journalism with facts and truth. From a journalist's perspective, no big paradigm shifts occurred (as my interviews with them bore out repeatedly), but small changes growing out of new angles and practical necessity combined to transform the news.

The journalistic explanation for these shifts in the *what* of news adds to but doesn't differ dramatically from the sociological explanation. Scientists also generate conjectures about the world, which they call hypotheses, and they repeat their work, in a process they call replication. They seek to resolve issues in scientific theory, and their efforts they confirm or unsettle a larger picture of the world, or paradigm. They judge paradigms by "their *heuristic power*: how many new facts did they produce?" (Lakatos, 1970, p. 137). Although the vocabulary differs, the processes closely parallel each other. Both attend to occurrences out there, formulating guesses (which become events or hypotheses), both resolve issues to arrive at facts (or theories), and both seek to establish truth (or a paradigm).

The explanations from journalists and scientists also have something else in common: they both hew to realism. Like journalists, sociologists position themselves as observers and describers of the world. The insights of social science enhance the rationality, competence, and originality of *sociologists*. The sociological account of journalism makes its own claim to establish facts and truth of a sociological sort. The pictures of news that journalists and sociologists paint are not incompatible. They begin with occurrences at the foot, build a main body of events and issues, and add a head full of facts and a crown of truth.

Constructionist Views

Truth claims have come under fierce attack recently in science and in news. In the prevalent view, facts have two qualities: they are independent of what people may think about them, and they are stable in meaning over time (Mulkay, 1979). This view, which I've been calling realism and philosophers call *naïve realism* (or *naïve empiricism*), assumes "events out there to be observed and appropriately described" (p. 35). But there are two problems with the standard of realism, and they reside, not surprisingly, in the processes of *observing* and *describing*.

What does it mean to observe? Reporters sometimes go out on the streets to witness occurrences, but they can see only what happens in their limited range of vision. Other occurrences — some of them preceding, others simultaneous but separated by space — impinge on whatever the reporter observes. Interviews make the idea of observing even less concrete. Journalists select among many sources, make the interview take place, and decide the questions. When this happens by telephone, without any presence in the place of any other occurrence and without the physical cues of

face-to-face contact, does that count as observing? The stories a *New York Times* reporter invented, which led to his dismissal and to the resignation of senior editors in 2003, had some basis in other news reports (Journalism, 2003). What about the press or wire-service report that becomes fodder for a story with a local angle? When reclassifying distant events as cues for local occurrences, is the re-write person observing?

Invariably, "observation involves the application of categories to sense impression" (Mulkay, 1979, p. 46). Classifying things (or people and their states of being and doing) is itself an act of interpretation, and interpretations themselves generate expectations. A trivial case is the widely held belief about drinking different wines from different glasses. Journalists reported in 2002 that the shape of the drinking glass does affect the taste and even the chemistry of wine (Zwerdling, 2004). Although the story circulated widely in the daily press, in food and science magazines, and on the radio (Paul Harvey picked it up), the original reporting got the research wrong. Kari Russell, who did the study for her senior thesis at the University of Tennessee (and went on to study for a Ph.D.), says that she discovered just the opposite. Observers, however, find what they are looking for. In this case, other interests came into play, including the marketing efforts of a wine glass manufacturer, but the commonsense beliefs of a reporter had the greatest influence. Observing has a key limitation, because what researchers and journalists *want* to be the case greatly colors their perceptions and their reporting. Just as in the case of Russian Revolution coverage, the *New York Times* reported not observations about the build-up for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq but what those involved in generating stories wanted to be true, and the pro-war stories got more dramatic play, just as did stories leading up to World War I. [EO8]Unlike the case three quarters of a century ago, the *Times* itself investigated and published an extraordinary mea culpa, "The Times and Iraq" (May 26, 2004, n.p. [on line]), on the editorial page. *Times* editors cited the "strong desire" of sources, the eagerness of Bush Administration officials, as well as reporters "too intent on rushing scoops into the paper" (n.p.) These large errors of journalistic judgment underline the limitation to all reporting. Even if reporters covered only what they themselves witnessed, the limits to observation would remain. Observing means interpreting at every level.

What does it mean to describe? To say what happened, reporters have to draw on the linguistic resources at hand. Principally they rely on standard language, and some newspapers publish columns and news radio programs air commentaries that reinforce those standards. Journalists rarely make up new words, but instead pick up on newly popular terms and phrases. Any number of emerging trends, from crime waves to so-called metrosexuals, need not exist to enter into the vocabulary of news, and from there into commonsense reality. Philosophers and historians of science have debated inconclusively how much the limits of available language narrow or constrain what scientists can conceive (Mulkay, 1979). Journalists, who trade less often at the cutting edges of knowledge but instead in the commonly shared center,

adopt the language that their sources and audience members readily understand.

The way journalists learn their craft imposes a more serious limitation. An untrained reporter might describe (or fail to describe) just about anything while covering, say, an accident or a labor strike. Through a process of responding to the reporter's work, demanding revisions, and cutting out all or part of a story, editors communicate to the reporter the acceptable limits of description. This process, which analysts call *literary* reasoning, involves all that journalists do as they translate their daily work into stories, through composition for an imagined audience, peer and editorial review, and revision. The craft also imposes several other kinds of reasoning (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). Journalists must work through the routine tasks and processes of their jobs, using *practical* reason. They look for clues, tips, and opportunities (such as breaks, scoops, and editors' quirks) to stand out on the job, using what is called *indexical* reason (because the clues mark and sort experiences, providing an index to what matters). They emulate models of successful reporting, using *analogical* reason to seek familiar parallels when covering unfamiliar occurrences. They operate within systems of economic rewards, interpersonal relationships, and external resources and public demands, relying on their *socially situated* reasoning. And they must do all this while defending what they do as distinctive from what ordinary people do, but also as separate from and equivalent to the public service missions of other professionals — a process called *symbolic* reason.

From a constructionist perspective, knowledge of an objective world-out-there does not accumulate, because journalists construct news in a more fundamental way than previously described. [EO9] Sociologists and journalists alike manufacture facts and truth, connected to objects in the world but following social processes. Sociology has recognized the productive quality of such work, but cultural scholars bring the process of manufacturing facts into stronger relief. Their view returns to an older meaning of the word *fact*, which comes from the Latin *facere*, to make.

A concrete example of that construction in action is the recent (in historical terms) and surprising notion that *statistics make people* (Hacking, 1990). Two centuries ago, Europeans considered *chance* little more than a vulgar superstition. Enlightened society thought that events grew out of a set of previous conditions as a result of particular causes. Through the course of the nineteenth century, this account changed. Enumeration of just about everything expanded, and governments as well as scholars and amateurs discovered patterns in such occurrences as crimes and suicides. The science of statistics emerged to find that human behavior (as first measured among workers taking of astronomical measurements) happens along a bell-shaped curve, which swells in the middle and peters out at both ends. This normal distribution indicates that, far from being a superstition, chance reveals a picture of not only the aberrant (at the extremes) but also the normal person (at the center). Normal, of course, may mean desirable, right, and good, but it also can mean ordinary and mediocre, or worse. In the revised picture of chance, govern-

ments found a new source to control deviancy. By defining the outliers, governments and institutions can take measurements of those at the extreme edges of society, plan interventions into their lives, and track the changes that result. No matter the source, statistics feed back into society, defining what people are, and, thus, statistics make people.

The same applies to news. Although journalists don't think of themselves as agents of social control, their reporting furthers institutional power over those at the social margins. News tends to emphasize occurrences at the outlying edges of society, among those who strayed into crime, stood up against employers, faced calamity, or came into leadership. The outliers can define and reiterate the center of things, without actually pointing to the norms, through a process called *simultaneous contrast* — the idea that one can't say one thing without implying its opposite: saying black, brings to mind its antithesis. Journalists may consider their coverage of marginal groups a sort of progressive activism, intervening on behalf of the weak and down-trodden, but in social constructionist terms, it has just the opposite outcome. Pointing to the fringes reinforces the center. Everything about the structure of journalism, down to the organization of a newscast and layout of a newspaper, creates models of personal identity and models of society (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2002), and, thus, news makes people.

The rising popularity of constructionism, at least in academic circles, has faced a particularly strong reaction. Ian Hacking, a historian of science at the University of Toronto in Canada, says that “a great fear of relativism” is one thing at work. “What are we afraid of?” he asks. The answer is that, if everything is constructed through social interaction, then nothing is solid, concrete, or secure, and “any opinion is as good as any other” (2000, p. 4). He shows, however, that no one has seriously proposed that everything is constructed. There is a separation between ideas and objects, and no one doubts (as the philosopher Berkeley did) the existence of concrete objects. It seems simple enough to separate ideas from objects. The line between them may not always be bright and clear, but that's a minor quibble. Of the two, Hacking argues, ideas matter more because they exist in a matrix. For example: “The matrix in which the idea of the woman refugee is formed is a complex of institutions, advocates, newspaper articles, lawyers” and so forth (p. 10). The idea in its matrix has real effects objects: women may categorize themselves by the term *refugee*, take on the identity, and interact with the world accordingly. Hacking calls this a *looping effect*, when the classification (constructed for a particular use) produces a change in the persons classified.

He points out that scholars have suggested three types of things that are socially constructed: objects (including people such as women refugees), ideas (including time periods or qualities such as kindness), and something else he calls *elevator words*. Words such as *facts* and *truth* occupy a higher (elevator) level precisely *because* they try to say something about what the world is like (not what is in the world). Elevator words have two particular qualities: “First, they tend to be circularly defined,” deriving their meaning

from each other (as in the relation of *facts* to *truth* described earlier). And second, they “have undergone substantial mutations of sense and value” (p. 23). The angry responses to social constructionism rely heavily on elevator words.

Beginning in the 1970s, academics began to apply constructionist views to journalism. The Princeton University historian Robert Darnton, in his essay, “Writing News and Telling Stories,” described the reporter’s working reality, the complex relations between journalists and sources, and the pressures to standardize coverage. He concluded succinctly that reporters “bring more to the events they cover than they take away from them” (1975, p. 192). About the same time, Stuart Hall and his co-authors from British cultural studies examined news, and they found that the “media define for the majority of the population *what* significant events are taking place” (1978, p. 57, italics in original). The next two decades of critical scholarship sustained these views (e.g., Hartley, 1996; Esch, 1999).

In practice, constructionism found easy evidence in journalism. *Love on Trial*, a book on a 1920s scandal in the news, describes the efforts of prominent New York socialite Leonard Rineland to annul his marriage to Alice Beatrice Jones, a working-class girl from New Rochelle (Lewis & Ardizzone, 2001). The case turned on whether Leonard knew Alice’s race:

Throughout the trial, reporters carefully scrutinized Alice’s deportment, clothing, and appearance. They searched for any detail that might explain who she was and give a fuller hint of her race. They also looked to see if she betrayed any lingering affection for Leonard. The reporters characterized her as “fair” or “slightly tanned” or “dusky” or even “ebony,” her skin tone waxing and waning with the tides of evidence and scandal. At perhaps the most memorable point of the trial, Alice, at the request of her lawyer, partially disrobed before the court, baring her breasts, back, and legs. Although no reporters were actually in the judge’s chambers when she exposed her body, all were sure she had proven her attorney’s point: that Leonard must have known from viewing her body prior to marriage that she was not white. (Ardizzone & Lewis, 2001, p. B-9)

The authors found that journalists constructed Alice’s race to fit the context of ideas behind the reporting, so that she looked darker the more the outcome of the trial seemed to prove that she was indeed what people then called colored. Constructionists do not doubt that Alice herself existed but instead reveal how her existence takes on differences according to the reporters’ expectations. The journalists don’t construct Alice in a concrete sense, but that sense is trivial. To say Alice existed is meaningless without reference to her skin color and the intense debate over racial identity that surrounded her body at the time. The question was *which* Alice existed, a white or a Black one.

Some journalists do acknowledge the role of reporters and news organizations in the construction of news. Nora Ephron (2001) tells the story of standing outside, waiting and waiting for things to start, when she was a young reporter for the *New York Post*. Then she would watch the *New York*

Times reporters arrive, the activity would begin, and she would stand there wondering, “How do *they* always know when an event will *really* start?” (n.p.).

Ephron went on from the *Post* to work as an editor and columnist for *Esquire* and *New York* magazine and published two best-selling collections of essays, removing herself from the ranks of workaday journalists. But ordinary reporters do tell of similar experiences, if not for attribution. One I interviewed remembers working as a clerk in the *New York Times* Washington bureau during the presidency of the first Bush and witnessing reporters in the office receive advance warning that the Gulf conflict was going to begin in a few hours. The tipsters, presumably from the government, didn’t exactly say whether or when the war would start. They just suggested that the *Times* reporters put off going to dinner for a couple of hours. While journalists from lesser news organizations went to dinner, the *Times* reporters stayed in the office. Sure enough, they didn’t miss out on the big story. The whole process reiterated another constructed dimension of news by reinforcing the preeminent position of the *Times* in defining events.

Constructionism doesn’t replace the close analysis of journalistic processes that sociologists offer, but it does take some of the gleam off the realism driving journalism and sociology (which occurs even though some practitioners of both are also constructionists). It also provides another explanation for changes in the *what* of news during the twentieth century. After succumbing to propaganda in World War I and after conceding to McCarthyism at mid-century, journalists did not take opposite tacks, as they themselves and the sociologists studying them aver. Despite the superficial contradiction (toward events in the former case, toward explanation in the latter), both responses to the crises served similar aims and had similar results. In each case, journalists responded in ways that reasserted their power over news itself. Their responses put journalists in a central position in public discussion, playing the role of moderators and facilitators and taking a corrective view of political life. Like doctors of the public sphere, they prescribe a different remedy in each case, but they are in charge.

Sociology tends to see journalists as victims of their economic conditions and professional training. Cultural critics see journalism as a participant in social and political power, not because journalists build useful knowledge but because they participate in practices that define *what* is, *what* is known (or knowable), and *what* matters. Every member of a society does the same, but journalists have a greater reach than many others. And journalists’ definitions reinforce their own professional standing. Their cultural position, enhanced by their responses to previous crises, puts them on par with those who occupy powerful posts in the formal structures of government and business.

When asked, however, journalists take a humble, realist stance. They see themselves as mere laborers in the mines of information. Sociology reveals the connection of that labor to news economics and to professional status. Cultural scholarship dismantles the basic supports for realist observation and description, showing that in some ways the distinctions between event-

centered and explanatory news collapse. All the processes in deciding what's news involve interpretation, an activity that empowers journalists. Whatever the explanation one finds persuasive, a dramatic change has occurred in the *what* of news. News itself is an unstable entity, and the commonsense understanding of events in the news proves mistaken. There are fewer events, no matter how one measures them.

The Imaginary Journalist.

ARGAN. But let us reason together, brother;
don't you believe at all in the news?

BÉRALDE. No, brother; and I do not see
that it is necessary for our salvation to believe in it.

ARGAN. What! Do you not hold true a thing
acknowledged by everybody throughout all ages?

BÉRALDE. Between ourselves, far from thinking it true, I look upon it as one of
the greatest follies which exist among men; and to consider things from a
philosophical point of view, I don't know of a more absurd piece of mummery, of
anything more ridiculous. . . .

ARGAN. Still, you must agree to this, that journalists know more than others.

BÉRALDE. They know, brother, what I have told you All the excellency
of their art consists in pompous gibberish, in a specious babbling

ARGAN. Still, brother, there exist men as wise and clever as you,
and we see that . . . every one has recourse to news.

BÉRALDE. It is a proof of human weakness, and not of the truth of their art.

ARGAN. Still, journalists must believe in their art,
since they make use of it for themselves.

BÉRALDE. It is because some of them share the popular error by which they
themselves profit, while others profit by it without sharing it. Your typical
reporter has no wish to deceive; he is a thorough journalist from head to foot, a
man who believes in his rules more than in all the demonstrations of mathematics,
and who would think it a crime to question them. He sees nothing obscure in
news, nothing doubtful, nothing difficult, and through an impetuous
prepossession, an obstinate confidence, a coarse common sense and reason

ARGAN. It is because you have a spite against him.
But let us come to the point.

BÉRALDE. Alas! brother; these are pure fancies, with which we deceive
ourselves. At all times, there have crept among men brilliant fancies in which we
believe, because they flatter us, and because it would be well if they were true.

When a journalist speaks to us . . . he repeats the romance of news. But when
you test the truth of what he has told to you, you find that it all ends in nothing;
it is like those . . . dreams which only leave you in the morning the regret of
having believed in them.

ARGAN. Which means that all the knowledge of the world is contained in your
brain, and that you think you know more

than all the great journalists of our age put together.

BÉRALDE. When you weigh words and actions, your great journalists are two
different kinds of people. Listen to their talk, they are the cleverest people in the
world; see them at work, and they are the most ignorant.

ARGAN. Heyday! You are a great journalist, I see, and I wish that some one of
those gentlemen were here to take up your arguments and to check your babble.

BÉRALDE. I do not take upon myself, brother, to fight against news; and every
one at their own risk and peril may believe what he likes. What I say is only
between ourselves; and I should have liked, in order to deliver you from the error
into which you have fallen, and in order to amuse you, to take you to see some of
Molière's comedies on this subject.

ARGAN. Your Molière is a fine impertinent fellow with his comedies! I think it
mightily pleasant of him to go and take off honest people like journalists.

BÉRALDE. It is not journalists themselves that he takes off,
but the absurdity of journalism.

ARGAN. It becomes him well, truly, to control the faculty! He's a nice
simpleton, and a nice impertinent fellow to laugh at news, to attack the body of
journalists, and to bring on his stage such venerable people as those gentlemen.

BÉRALDE. What would you have him bring there but the different professions
of men? Princes and kings are brought there every day, and they are of as good a
stock as your journalists.

ARGAN. No, by all the devils! if I were a journalist,
I would be revenged of his impertinence

BÉRALDE. You are terribly angry with him.

ARGAN. Yes, he is an ill-advised fellow, and if journalists are wise,
they will do what I say.

BÉRALDE. He will be wiser than journalists, for he will not go to them for news.

ARGAN. So much the worse for him, if he has not recourse to their news.

BÉRALDE. He has his reasons for not wishing to have anything to do with
them; he is certain that only strong
and robust constitutions can bear news in addition to life

ARGAN. What absurd reasons. Here, brother, don't speak to me anymore about
that man;
for it makes me savage, and you will give me his complaint. . . .

BÉRALDE. But, brother, it just strikes me;
why don't you turn journalist yourself?

ARGAN. I imagine, brother, that you are laughing at me.
Can I study at my age?

BÉRALDE. Study! What need is there? You are clever enough for that; there
are a great many who are not a bit more clever than you are. . . . When you put
on the cap of a journalist, all that will come of itself, and you will afterwards be
much more clever than you care to be.

ARGAN. What! We understand how to discourse upon news
when we have that dress?

BÉRALDE. Yes; you have only to hold forth

—Adapted from Molière,
Le Malade Imaginaire,
 Act III, Scenes III & XXII.

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