

W H E R E

Places in the News

If the founder of the New York Herald, Gordon Bennett, were to be born a second time today, what would he say when he saw this palace of marble and gold that belongs to his illustrious descendant, Francis Bennett? . . . Two hundred years before, when the government of the Union had been transferred from Washington to Centropolis, . . . the government had followed the newspaper — and it had taken its new title, the Earth Herald. ¶ Francis Bennett, king of journalists, would then have been king . . . if the Americans would ever accept any monarch whatever. Do you doubt this? But the plenipotentiaries of every nation and our very ministers, throng around his door, peddling their advice, seeking his approval, imploring the support of his all-powerful organ.

—Jules Verne, “In the Twenty-Ninth Century” (1999, p. 193)

In the first half of the twentieth century, informed opinion held that “the world has become . . . close-knit,” and scholars set out to explain “how the world grew smaller” (Desmond, 1937, pp. vii, 96). The closer connections resulted from U.S. involvement in world events (Schulten, 2001), as well as faster communication and transportation, and required a public-spirited effort to catch citizens up on their new neighbors. About half a century later, Richard Mial, an editor at *La Crosse Tribune* in Wisconsin, wrote on his paper’s editorial page, “The notion of a shrinking world has become a cliché. It remains true nonetheless” (quoted in Hamilton, 1988, p. 154). The same motivation still inspires journalists: to inform the public about faraway locations, because as Mial put it, “as a nation and as a community, we can run but we can’t hide from the impact of world events on our daily lives” (p. 152).

But the U.S. public, when it comes to knowledge of the world, appears incorrigible. Prominent figures have argued for a century that

the citizenry is ill informed, especially about geography, and is stubborn to change, not merely inattentive and lazy. Former Sunday editor of the *New York Times* Lester Markel, after a year of studying what he called the global challenge to the United States in the mid-1970s, concluded that “the public has scant information” and “makes little effort to understand” (Markel & March, 1976, p. 16). After leading twenty panel discussions with media, academic, and government experts and conducting interviews and surveys, he reported that “well-known public figures” ranging from pollster George Gallup to *Times* editor C. L. Sulzberger were in consensus: the public had low foreign knowledge. Little has changed in the ensuing years. At the end of the century, James F. Hoge, Jr., then editor of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, pointed to “post-cold war provincialism” and the lack of public knowledge about foreign news (“Foreign News: Who Gives a Damn?” *Columbia Journalism Review* 36.4 November–December, 1997, pp. 48–52).

Despite the shrinking world and low public knowledge about it, informed opinion is that foreign news has been declining. In the 1920s, Walter Lippmann called “carrying distant news to the private citizen” a burden for newspapers, because it doesn’t build circulation (1922, p. 332). The political scientist Harold Laski wrote a decade later that the volume of foreign news “is too often pitifully small” (in Desmond, 1937, p. xxiv). Industry analysts throughout the century reported a dwindling corps of foreign correspondents, resulting in less diversity of views and perspectives from abroad (Lent, 1977). Especially in the 1970s, U.S. news organizations closed many foreign bureaus and cut back on foreign news because of economic factors and because technology (such as jet travel) made a permanent foreign presence less necessary (Kaplan, 1979). Observers wrote of the *starvation* and *plight* of foreign news. In the 1980s they noted continued cuts in foreign correspondents, saying “the costs are beyond the scope of all but a few news organizations” (Hamilton, 1988, p. 5). By the late 1990s, in a story titled, “ABC, CBS, NBC, Downsizing Overseas Bureaus, Discuss Shared Effort with CNN,” the Associated Press reported that “interest in overseas news has flagged” and quoted the chairman of the CNN News Group on the “need for more international coverage” (October 27, 1998).

That foreign news is declining is the first of two assumptions that dominate journalist and public understanding of the *where* of news. The second is that local news is growing. Locations are never simple or one-dimensional because defining anyplace always depends on someplace else. *Here* and *there* work in tandem. That even wealthy news organizations have repeatedly cut back on foreign coverage, ob-

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servers say, “reflects another trend: emphasis on local news” (Hamilton, 1988, p. 5). The prime example is the Gannett media group, which “has no full-time foreign correspondents of its own” but instead relies on the wire services. Its national newspaper, *USA Today*, “assiduously hones local angles” (p. 6). To enhance local coverage, large newspapers have subdivided at least part of their content, as well as their advertising and supplements, into zoned editions. The *Los Angeles Times*, the largest metropolitan daily in the United States, publishes different editions in five regions: for the L.A. metro area, for Orange and Ventura counties, for the San Fernando Valley, and for Riverside and San Bernardino counties, in addition to a national edition (see www.latimes.com). Even the *Ventura County Star*, an E. W. Scripps Company newspaper in the region with a circulation of 100,000, had six zoned editions in 2004.

Public discussions of news, especially among journalists, usually start from these two assumptions: the decline of foreign and the growth of local news. But has the amount of foreign news really dropped? Although industry analysis usually noted only the declines, academic studies measured periodic reversals at least in the downward trend in the number of foreign correspondents (see Kliesch, 1991). One way to get perspective is to take the longer, historical view.

Foreign News before the Twentieth Century

James W. Carey was among many scholars to observe that “news in early American newspapers was almost exclusively European” (1989, p. 152). Even so, some research argues that foreign reports increased in the 19th century (Dell’Orto, 2002). Although among publishers enthusiasm for news from faraway places grew, along with faster means of transport and transmission, the share of foreign news in the press could only go down from the highs of the early 1800s when editors relied primarily on correspondence and on clipping the contents of other newspapers that arrived by ship from Europe.

Historians suggest a broad change occurred in spatial understanding between 1880 and 1920, a period when the U.S. Census revealed that the American frontier had closed. According to historian Stephen Kern, “new ideas about the nature of space in this period challenged the popular notion” of space as “continuous and uniform” (2003, p. 132). Biologists and sociologists began to explore the distinct perceptions and organization of space in different species and different human cultures. Artists such as the Cubists rejected uniform perspective and depicted objects from several angles simultaneously. Novels and the newly invented cinema employed multiple perspectives, and in philosophy, Nietzsche and Ortega y Gasset developed “*perspectivism*,

which implied that there are as many different spaces as there are points of view” (Kern 2003, p. 132). At the same time, systems of railroads and canals knit the planet together, making it conceivable to go *Around the World in Eighty Days*, as in the title to Jules Verne’s only partly fanciful 1873 novel. The spread of bicycles and the automobile, along with urban transport systems, changed the sense of the local, giving rise to studies of crowd psychology. The great powers finished taking control of the last uncolonized spaces of the world, which led scholars to invent and study geopolitics (Pöhl, 1999). Travel to foreign places became accessible and tourists more common.

Kern suggests that information about foreign affairs became ubiquitous during the period, so that readers could learn about conditions throughout the world. Whatever the trend might have been in magazines and books of the era, the share of newspaper content could not have increased from the large proportion of foreign reports the U.S. press relied on for news early in the 1800s. One of the paradoxes of news is that it works in the obverse, so that when a topic becomes commonplace, journalists lose interest.

In the practice of journalism, location was the main obstacle to newsgathering early in the 19th century. Publishers trumpeted their feats of getting news from distant places and organized their news pages geographically, by where dispatches originated (not necessarily where events occurred). Once the telegraph, along with new modes of transport, had made long distances more bridgeable and the telephone made local distances even smaller, places lost importance (Rantanen, 1997). Close study of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* reveals that the number of items and diversity of places dropped off after the end of the 19th century (Brooker-Gross, 1985). As access to other locations increased, newspapers began to pay less attention. A study of the shift from illustrated news of the 19th century to the photojournalism of the 20th century found that a repertoire of decidedly local reporting techniques disappeared, such as *walking description*, in which the reporter gave a visual account of events told as an observer moving through the scene (Barnhurst & Nerone, 1999).

These changes in journalism accompanied the broader decline in spatial interest (but see Carey, 1989). According to Edward Soja (1989), the two main streams of social thought at the turn of the century, Marxism and social science, shared a conception of geography as either an incidental outcome or an external constraint. Despite their differences, Marxism and social science shared ambitions to discover explanations for events and to find interpretations for social practices. Both aims tended to erase sensitivity to geography, either by rejecting the idea that place or environment can cause phenomena (which oc-

cur in science without regard to geography) or by defining patriotism and loyalty to place (in the Marxian mode) as a brand of false consciousness. In the context of these changes in the intellectual climate, along with developments in the practice of journalism, the long decline in foreign news during the 19th century should come as no surprise.

Twentieth-Century News Flow

But did the trend continue throughout the 20th century, as journalists and critics believe? Social scientists seem to have documented a decline in a wide range of studies. International comparisons measuring what is called *news flow* tracked the 20th century movement of news across national borders, into and out of the United States especially (e.g., Husselbee & Stempel, 1997) but also other countries (e.g., Walmsley, 1980; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1985). The research began in the 1930s and comprises dozens of studies to date (e.g., Woodward, 1930; IPI, 1953; Kayser, 1953; Hester, 1971; Wu, 1998). Although researchers assume a long-term decline, the studies have usually covered only limited time periods. They employ a mix of methods and approaches, with some defining *foreign* by one rubric (such as the date-line, e.g., Emery, 1989) and others by another (*about* as well as *from* abroad), some including *international* news (e.g., about several countries, or about international bodies), and some using one metric (such as column or square inches) and others another (such as item count, e.g., Riffe et al, 1994). Some compare the total foreign news (however defined) to all the available space, although here again different definitions apply: some excluding advertising, editorials, features, some types of images, specific kinds of reviews (such as book but not theater criticism), or some combination of these (e.g., Gerbner & Marvanyi, 1977).

The differences give the wrong impression for several reasons. On the whole, domestic U.S. events, such as national elections, have tended to crowd out foreign news from year to year, and so the start and end year of any study can greatly affect the results over short periods. Studies that consider *foreign* only those stories with datelines originating outside of the United States (or outside of North America in some cases) measure only part of the coverage of other countries, missing visits of foreign dignitaries, events at United Nations headquarters in New York, activities of foreign embassies and consulates in U.S. cities, and other stories of substance. They are a better measure of the use of correspondents abroad, a number that has waxed and waned over long periods and represents others besides U.S. nationals working for U.S. news organizations (Wilhelm, 1963; Onu, 1979; Kli-

esch, 1991). Studies that count the number of articles miss the growing length (and shrinking number) of all news stories, as well as the growing bulk of newspapers and larger amount of space available to editors, the so-called *news hole* (Bogart, 1992). The studies tend to show dramatic declines in what they measure, without telling much about the state of foreign news in the U.S. press.

Research on the flow of television news across national boundaries suffers from the same problems: different definitions of *foreign* (Hester, 1978), differing time frames (Norris, 1995), and dramatic year-to-year variations in major events that confound the results (Larson & Hardy, 1977). But longer term studies have found very small increases in foreign news (Weaver, Porter & Evans, 1984), and one of the longest studies (two decades) with the most careful definitions found a “small but steady increase in the amount of attention given to the rest of the world” on evening newscasts of the three U.S. networks (Gonzenbach, 1992, p. 71).

Long-term Measurements

A better way to track news flow is to measure consistently over a much longer time period. Our study of U.S. newspapers counted each location mentioned within each story over a century (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997), and demonstrates a small but significant increase in foreign places in U.S. newspapers (Figure 4-1). Two types of location moved in diametrically opposed directions. The number of the most specific locations, street addresses, decreased significantly, while the broadest locations, other countries, increased even more strongly.

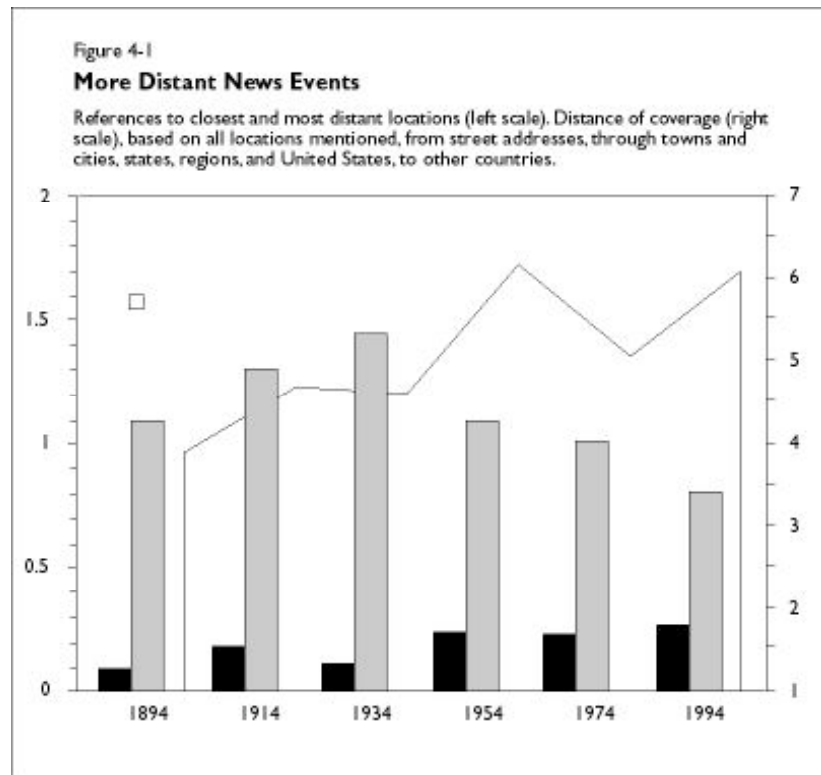
Two crime stories illustrate the changes. The first, from 1894, envisions a robbery by focusing tightly on a highly specific location:

The Post Office is in a small building a short distance from the Long Island Railroad station. There is a very little room outside of the partition. In one end of the latter is a door, and inside, near the door, stands a small safe. (*New York Times*, April 21, p. 1)

The second, from 1994, reports a murder quite differently. Two maps accompanying the article show the Caribbean and the island of St. Thomas, with the caption, “The slaying of a tourist in Charlotte Amalie has become a symbol of crime in the Virgin Islands.” It begins with the following paragraph:

According to the license plates on the cars and buses that hail tourists around this bustling port, the Virgin Islands are still an “American Paradise.” But a surge in violent crime over the last

year, including the slaying of a San Diego swimming instructor this week, has put that in jeopardy. (*New York Times*, April 19, p. A-17)



The story takes the entire island as its location and reaches the U.S. mainland. A subhead reads: “Island officials say mainland values are leading the young astray.” Unlike the 1894 article, which tells a story (fairly universal to human experience) at a particular address, the 1994 article does not narrate the event but instead elaborates a geographic thesis based on national origin. It illustrates both long-term trends: the shrinking of the most local dimension, along with an expansion of the international dimension.

Two Explanations

Existing research does little to explain these trends in the U.S. press. To understand the flow of news across national borders, scholars rely on either of two competing models (Hjarvard, 1995), one based

on the metaphor of transport and the other on the idea of critique.

The transportation model considers news workers (such as editors) the gatekeepers who make individual decisions to allow (or disallow) foreign reports into the media (e.g., White, 1950). The contents of different countries’ news media reveal the structure in the flow of news (Galtung & Ruge, 1981; Hester, 1978). Researchers trying to identify what factors channel or constrict the movement of news between countries quickly pointed out that mere distance is not a good predictor. The countries with elite status fill a larger share of other countries’ news (Östgaard, 1965), and neighbors within the same region get more coverage (Hester, 1971). In recent versions, the model identifies four factors (Roessler, 2003): elite status (*news centers*), regional interest (*news neighbors*), and the influence of major stories anywhere (*topical news*), in contrast to a country’s remoteness (*news periphery*). These factors seem to account for a limited amount of foreign news in U.S. media, located in an elite country with few immediate neighbors, which takes action and sets policies that tend to drive major topics.

But contradictions arise from that logic. The studies show, for instance, that the U.S. press generally has a smaller share of foreign news than does the press in Europe (Wu, 1998), but U.S. newspapers are much bulkier than those in other countries and have expanded their news hole over the past century (Riffe et al, 1994). A smaller foreign share of the larger U.S. news hole may result in a greater volume and bulk of foreign news in the U.S. press than appears elsewhere. And the greater distances involved should weight the comparisons. Sometimes journalists themselves have a clearer picture of how geography functions: “After all, if you’re in Omaha, you’re a lot farther from Chicago than you are from Paris if you’re in London,” says one (a Mr. Middleton, quoted in Markel & March, 1976, p. 53). The transportation model of news flow ignores these intervening factors, perhaps because of its own initial assumptions. It sets out to find explanations for the minimal or declining foreign coverage in the U.S. press, and not surprisingly it ends up finding some. The argument is circular.

Does the critical model fare better? It considers how organizations, institutions, and industries construct the news across national boundaries, finding that international news organizations dominate the flows (Tunstall, 1999), producing global uniformity in news (Golding & Elliot, 1999, see also Relph, 1976) and mapping reality onto an ideological code (Hartley, 1982) that advances capitalism and imperialism. The resulting news values are sensational, in the service of business interests, and Western, that is, serving the expansionist aims of the West (Hjarvard, 2000). In particular, a two-pronged ideological argument

pushes the economic growth of rich nations. First, talk about the free flow of information provides high-sounding rhetorical justification for big media to gain access to foreign markets for their information commodities (Schiller, 1974). Meanwhile, the rhetoric of free trade demands that those same markets export the raw materials needed to manufacture cultural goods (Carey, 1989). For example, U.S. companies expect Canada, first, to export — under free trade — the supply of paper they need (at a low, bulk price) and, then, to import — as part of the free flow of information — the American cultural products (at a premium price) manufactured from that paper. Economic benefits redound to the United States through both types of transactions.

In the critical model, news industries join in a containerized exchange of information commodities, with serious trade imbalances. The assumption that the United States imports little or declining foreign news fits the model. Those at the centers of power are net exporters of news (Varis, 1974), and so it stands to reason that U.S. Americans would focus more on their own country in an era of national power. But here again contradicts arise. The European press pays more attention to Europe than the U.S. press pays to North America (Gerbner & Marvanyi, 1977), and the U.S. wire services are less focused on North America than those in European countries are on Europe (Stevenson, 1985; 1996). The critical studies often indict Europe along with North America, but the model does not shed light on why references to other countries (in contrast to *beliefs* about coverage) have been increasing in the U.S. press. Perhaps a reasonable explanation can emerge from within the practice of journalism itself.

Big Domains in Practice

In the early 1990s, Tim Sullivan started full-time reporting at the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*, where he covered the standoff at Waco, Texas. After a year, he was ready for bigger things and left for New York City. There he landed temporary work with the Associated Press, which led to full-time deskwork and then a posting to West Africa, where he eventually became bureau chief. His beat included twenty countries: all of West and most of Central Africa. In mid-1999, he flew into Sierra Leone, where rebels had ended a campaign of terror. He and a photographer spent several weeks generating half a dozen stories, including one he was particularly proud of, “a feature about life in the city that was half destroyed by the offenses,” he said in our interview.

The story, Sullivan’s first of 1999 with a Sierra Leone dateline, went out on the AP International News wire on Monday, August 30 (784

words). “Sierra Leone Cleans Up After War” begins this way: “Nearly every day, the gray clouds that hang low over Freetown burst into a downpour, and thousands of umbrellas blossom across the seaside city.” The story traces the course of the “small rivers of muddy brown water” past several landmarks: the burned-out City Hall, “a refugee camp on the edge of town,” a place where heavy fighting occurred called Kissy Road, and finally “the once-ornate Holy Trinity Church.”

Sullivan then characterizes the entire capital: “Freetown, a city long accustomed to war, is also a city that refuses to be broken.” Shoppers and street vendors have returned, reconstruction has begun, and “bored soldiers sleepily wave drivers through many roadblocks.” What makes the feature good, Sullivan said in our interview, is its geographic sweep. “It wasn’t simply a story about these people,” he said, “it was also a story about this country,” a place “so stuck it had to sign a deal with this evil rebel movement.”

Six more articles from inside Sierra Leone appeared through October 5, 1999. One profiles a smaller place: “In Freetown, a Faded Remnant of Colonial Gentility Quietly Crumbles” gives an account of Sierra Leonean elites by profiling a watering hole where they “have congregated for more than 80 years”: “the Hill Station Club, a white-washed colonial compound crumbling under the weight of recent history” (September 14, Tuesday, AM cycle, 699 words).

Sullivan remembered most vividly a story focused on one victim in the conflict. After signing a peace accord, rebels who six months earlier would enter town, “executing children, suddenly were part of the government.” The story, long by AP standards (1268 words), conveys the entire country’s quandary through one person’s experience: Ishmael Dramane, an aging “itinerant miner and truck driver,” struggling “to find the words to describe” what the rebels did to him. “Instead, he kneels in the dirt of the Freetown camp for war victims where he now lives” to show “how the rebels tied his wrists behind his back” and then “one picked up a machete and chopped off both his hands.” They left him bleeding and in agony, twelve hours’ journey from a hospital. “‘How can I live with these people?’ Dramane demands angrily, waving his stumps in a visitor’s face. ‘I lost everything’ ” (“Hoping for Peace, Sierra Leone Grudgingly Accepts its Torturers,” September 4, 1999, Saturday, PM cycle).

“It was difficult to read because it was so explicit,” Sullivan said, but in response he received a rare thing for an AP reporter: letters from readers “expressing sympathy for these people.” The article drew the audience into the specific and detailed location of events in an unheard-of place. Sullivan hoped it also made readers “care a little, be-

cause Americans don't care about West Africa."

Sullivan's final two stories with a Sierra Leone dateline that year profile two others the conflict affected. One is Isatu Kaigbo, "a beautiful 13-year-old with both the shyness and the exuberance that come with adolescence," whose hands the rebels chopped off "halfway down her forearm," living in a camp for victims ("Joy of Youth, Pain of War: Sierra Leonean Girl Endures with a Smile," October 17, 1999, Sunday, BC cycle, 398 words). The other is "Tamba, a jug-eared sixteen-year-old with a broad smile and two years as a rebel soldier behind him." Through Tamba, the story profiles the place of its dateline: "In Lakka, in a blue, two-story clapboard building that used to be a beach resort, they are allowed to be children again" ("Children of Sierra Leone's War Find One Small Haven," October 21, 1999, Thursday, PM cycle, 561 words).

All these stories differ markedly from those Sullivan published that year before his September stay in the country. For example, "Background of Sierra Leone Rebels," appeared January 7 with the dateline of the bureau: Abidjan, Ivory Coast (Thursday, on line, 543 words). The story relies on quotations from rebel leaders, aid workers, and government officials, including those from other countries, and has no place descriptions. Beyond stating where some those quoted reside (Freetown and Washington, D.C.), the story mentions locations only in broad terms: "across the war-weary West African nation" and "across the country."

There is a clear progression from the abstract story of January about the entire country, to the initial story filed in September profiling the entire capital city, to the intimate and moving reports of October. Sullivan's output that year demonstrates how reporters in practice draw authority from being "on the ground" (Auletta, 2003, p. xvii), but also illustrates the tensions in professional practice that lead to the trend in foreign news. Journalists gain professional stature for taking a broad perspective, showing the big picture. The pattern of rewards for journalists joins with personal ambition to encourage a growth in those broad stories.

The Magic of Local News

What about the trend away from local news? American audiences have had a long romance with small places, according to former journalist Ben Wattenberg (1984), senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. Journalists consider covering nearby events the heart of their work. An editor from Missouri says, "The farther it is from Kansas City, the less it is news" (quoted in Hamilton, 1988, p. 1). At a 1998 roundtable the American Society of

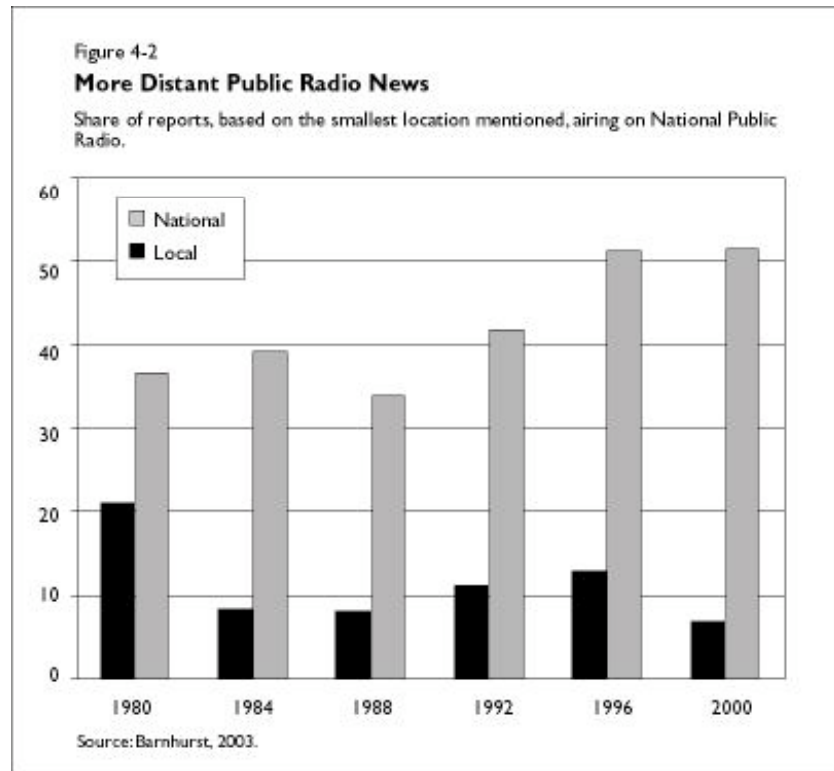
Newspaper Editors sponsored in Nashville, Tennessee, Kathy Trumbull of the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* in Florida said editors drum it into the heads of interns and reporters to focus on local news, and Chris Lavin, an editor at the *St. Petersburg Times* in Florida, pointed to the reliance on local advertising. Chris Waddle, executive editor of the *Anniston Star* in Alabama said that only local reporting has an *emotional tug* (Phyllis Lyons, "Making World News Matter in Hometown Daily USA," December 8, 1998).

Few studies have measured trends in the local dimension of coverage. Three of them showed changes in news originating in Washington, D.C. (Dominick, 1977; Whitney et al, 1989; Jones, 2005), with dramatic ups and downs through the early 2000s, but the relation of national datelines to local ones remained unclear. Critical scholars have also observed that "increasingly authority has passed to the more central and remote levels of government" (Relph, 1976), but few studies have attempted to measure the change. Some evidence suggests that, in references to government, national terms are increasing and local terms are decreasing slightly in major newspapers (such as a 1990 study by Willits, described in Danielson & Lasorsa, 1997).

Our newspaper study took long-term measurements of locations found similar trends away from small locations in the 20th century (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997). To explore further, my study of National Public Radio (NPR) recorded all mentions of places from 1980 to 2000 and analyzed them based on the smallest to appear in each report (Barnhurst, 2003). State and regional stories showed no significant trend, but an important shift occurred: NPR moved away from local news (Figure 4-2).

The share of local stories went down significantly, while two other locations — international and national — went up. The share of coverage from other countries increased only somewhat, but national news stories grew to fully half of the reports on the NPR programs after 1992. Looking at all references to locations combined, the data show a significant trend away from smaller locations. In other words, the geographic domain of general news became wider. The changes in reports extended deeply into all topics, so that, as historians have noted, NPR reports "abandoned the local in favor of the universal" (McCourt, 1999, p. 183). As the public radio reporters gained wider geographic areas as their stage, they paid less attention to local events.

These trends in the stories journalists produce contradict how they say they cover the news. In interviews I attempted to find out what could explain the difference between their initial intentions and the concrete outcomes.



Small Domains in Practice

Matt Bai wrote for the *Boston Globe* and was a national correspondent for *Newsweek* before joining the *New York Times Magazine* to cover national politics. In our interview, he said that in 1989 “I did my first profession internship as a junior in college at the *Providence Journal Bulletin*,” where he worked with middle-aged staffers, “in these far-flung rural bureaus.” He remembers that most “reporters were not in the downtown office. Everybody wanted to be downtown — the competition when the slots came open was intense.

But you went to work in a shopping mall, a strip plaza (that’s where most of the bureaus were), and you filled the pages — you had one page that was just your region, and your job mostly was to fill the page. So even though the *Providence Journal* was covering a large media market, you were going to the town council meetings at night, or examining the water sewage management issues, or

the local police blotter, because you were essentially doing a local paper *inside* the paper every day.”

Bai says it was fine experience for a beginner, but he couldn’t see himself doing the same job when he reached forty. “It just wasn’t me,” he concluded, although he said he thinks that experienced reporters who cover local news are doing “a genuine public service.” He wrote about sixty stories for the *Providence Journal*, some of them “pretty big for a college intern.” He cited this example:

I was alone in the bureau one weekend. And you had to man the police scanner — this was in the main regional bureau. . . . There came a car chase over the scanner. I heard an officer say, “We’ve had a gun shot.” And I called the desk in Providence, and I said, “There’s a gun shot report.” And they said, “Well, check it out.”

I called back, and the police said that that didn’t happen. . . . But somebody wrote a letter to the paper and said, “I saw that chase, and some cop fired a gun at the car. What were they thinking? Are they crazy? They’re on a main street, and they fired a gun — we can’t have this! And how could your paper fall down on the job and not tell us what had happened?”

The head of the bureau “just erupted at me,” Bai said. He explained that the *Providence Journal* was pushing local coverage so that readers living around the bureau would buy the paper. “There was a little paper called the *Westerly Sun*. It was one of the smallest dailies in the country — we were competing with them.” The *Journal* zoned editions targeted those small newspapers. The *Boston Globe*, where Bai later worked, was still a fully metropolitan newspaper, by contrast. “That was why I was so glad to work there,” he said: “They never zoned . . . never had to.”

Bai’s story describes a common experience for journalists: the humdrum of local reporting, the evening shifts at meetings, the recurring processes of local government, and so forth. Several journalists I interviewed told similar stories, and the explosive old-timer is a stock character. Reporters rarely witness dramatic events on the street; more often they hear about them over the phone. Editors may push neophytes to focus on the local, but journalists who want to advance, to have more latitude at work, and to enjoy the amenities of life must move to an urban center and cover a wider area than a small town or suburb. These urges tend to move reporters away from local news.

Location on TV

Television seems ultimately local. It relies on film or video on the ground in immediate physical places, a fact that produced much excitement when television first emerged as a medium. This invention would change the world, the prognosticators said. Thomas Hutchinson, who helped shape programming in its early years and taught the first college course on the subject (at New York University in 1940), believed television would conquer the distance separating nations. It would help bring peace on earth, because all peoples would become like next-door neighbors. To show how TV changed experience, he points to the 1940 Republican Convention:

The television audience saw and heard everything that took place in Philadelphia: the speakers, the demonstrations on the floor, and the final nomination of Wendell Willkie. Actually the television audience knew more about what went on than many people who were there in person.” (1948, p. 227)

Television promised to provide a window on the world. Hutchinson describes an incident when a presidential nominee brought in a herd of elephants to parade before the cameras. One of the elephants had a different idea and “affectionately put its trunk around the director’s neck.” The startled TV director “made a wild rush to leave,” and that’s when the cameraman turned toward the scene. The director’s wife, “viewing the program in Westchester County in New York, saw him hurrying away from his elephantine inamorata.” The moral: “When you are away from home, stay away from television cameras unless you want the whole world, and your wife, to know what you are doing” (p. 227).

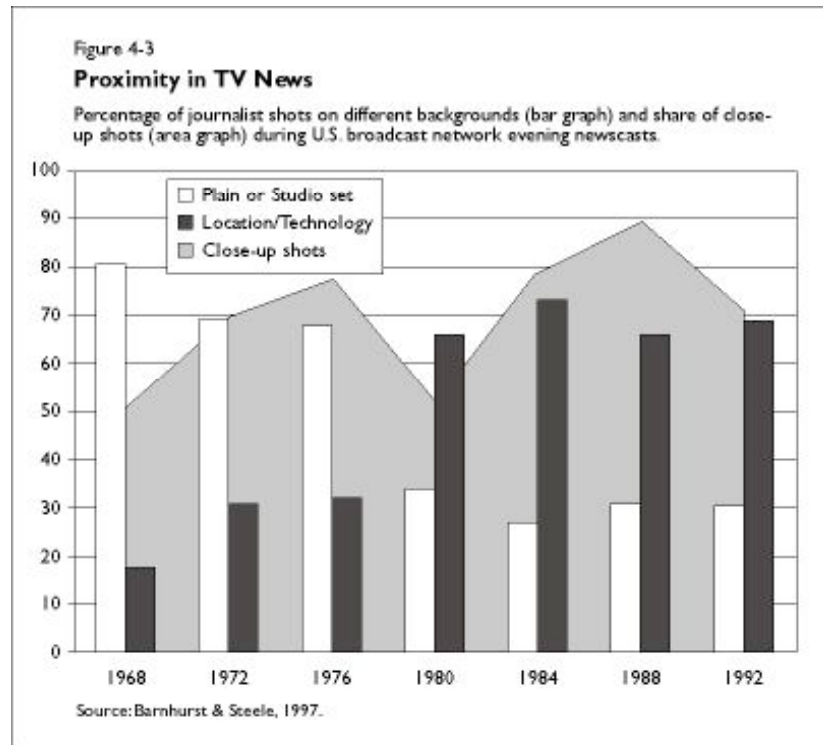
That all-seeing eye on personal and local life has guided TV journalists since then. Early in his more than twenty years as the anchor of “ABC World News Tonight,” Peter Jennings wrote, “It is a simple axiom of journalism that the most effective way to connect with your audience is to make your reporting relevant to an individual’s daily life.” There is just “no substitute for the powerful impression the local angle makes” (quoted in Hamilton, 1988, pp. *xii–xiii*). According to Tom Rosenstiel of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, “Newscasts that air more locally relevant stories are significantly more likely to hold onto or attract a larger audience than the preceding program” (“Special Report: Local TV News,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2002, p. 92 in pp. 89–104, [available](#)).

How does this focus on the local look on television? To find out, we took measurements of location on network evening newscasts

(Barnhurst & Steele, 1997). The backgrounds surrounding journalists is the primary indicator of location. The journalist can appear close to events by going *on location*, where they can stand surrounded by the scene of the event itself. If that’s not possible, they can appear surrounded by the technology needed for direct transmission. Sitting before a simple backdrop or a typical TV studio set with a desk and chairs produces the effect of being at a distance from events. The studio shot positions the journalist at a vantage point from which to observe events dispassionately. Besides their relation to the background, we also measured journalists’ relation to the camera. The placement of the camera can produce an impression of viewing journalists up close or from a distance.

We found two key changes in the visual vocabulary of location (see Figure 4-3). Over the quarter century covered in the study, cameras moved in much closer on the faces of journalists, conveying visually a sense of proximity to the audience. Close-ups helped collapse the distance between viewer and journalist, especially for anchors. These newscaster images grew larger or more imposing. Their shots also developed a standard length, about fifteen seconds, and became much more frequent (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). By the 1990s, journalists appeared three times as often on screen as they had in a typical story of the 1960s. Medium shots (the understated framing that dominates in the UK, for example, in images of BBC news readers) declined in the United States, making newscasters more appear dramatic on screen. The share of long shots was small and increased, but by the end of the period, close-ups, the most intimate shot in film and video, had become the predominant shot.

The other change involved the backgrounds behind journalists. In the 1960s, network news style amounted to a series of moderate shots of talking heads on a bland background. Plain backdrops, the most common in 1968, lent news a cool distance and neutrality. During the 1970s, the rise of celebrity journalism and redesign of sets made news more like other successful genres, following the model of sports on the ABC network. Those changes produced a dramatic shift. Images of equipment and technology increased as a background, replacing studio sets and murals. More important, all these backgrounds gradually lost ground to those from on-the-scene reporting, and by the 1990s, the plain backdrop had almost vanished. The greatest growth occurred in the use of locations, which build proximity between the journalist and the event and make the reporting authoritative (Zelizer, 1990; Raymond, 2000). By the 1990s, journalists for the first time appeared on location more often than before any other backdrop.



Proximity and its Consequences on TV

Journalists and others examining their craft consider *proximity* a key attribute of news. Proximity may go under several names, such as *meaningfulness* or *relevance* to the audience (see Campbell, 2004, for a summary), but it turns up consistently. Journalism manuals describe proximity as a core *news value*. One textbook that has trained several generations of reporters defines it this way: “The closer an event is to home, the more newsworthy it becomes” (Fedler et al, 2005, p. 129). Journalism educators consider it settled fact that “proximity is a basic news value” for producing news (Traquina, 2004, p. 97).

Most definitions of proximity include the audience and the event, but elide the journalists themselves, who in fact determine the *where*. Ethnographic studies in media organizations show that news usually occurs where journalists look for it (in official places, such as police stations and the like, Tuchman, 1978). Instead of a line between audiences and the sources of events, proximity involves a triangle formed from three points: the journalist, source, and audience. The pattern goes even deeper — each of the points in the triad includes a net-

work of relationships. The reporter has colleagues in the office, in other media, in the profession, and so on (Larson, 1984), to say nothing of other roles in life. Sources and audience members are likewise deeply embedded in their own networks. Each person in each of these networks simultaneously occupies physical, social, and mental spaces, which are perceived, conceived, and lived differently, having distinct formal, functional, and structural aspects (Lefebvre, 1991).

In producing news, journalists assign a location to events and to their audience (Hallin, 1986), and they imagine proximity simply. For them, achieving the news value requires drawing connections between events and the audience and making events resonate *as if* they happened next door. Proximity occurs for them along a direct line from audience to event. The subtle shifts in presentational styles in television news are in part an attempt to shorten that distance. In other words, journalists tend to blend themselves into one of the other two positions in the triad, the anchor in the studio joining the viewer at home in the easy chair, and the correspondent becoming one with the scene of events.

Collapsing their positions in this manner had a contradictory effect. Instead of building proximity between the audience and the events, it contributed to the general placelessness peculiar to watching television. Electronic media have changed the relationship between *here* and *there* (Meyrowitz, 1985), by accentuating another order of spaces. Media spaces call attention to the malleability of distance rather than reinforcing the fixity of specific physical locations. They suggest a vague citizenship of the world, a public life without roots in a particular locality (Relph, 1976). Walter Cronkite’s early Emmy-winning historical series, “You Are There” (1953–1957), based on the earlier radio series, uses a typical television phrase that, in effect, makes sense of nonsense. Cronkite was not there, nor were the actors playing roles of prominent historical figures, and neither were the writers (who worked at a further remove, pseudonymous because of McCarthy-era blacklists). The viewer was certainly not *there*. Televisual location is make-believe.

On the larger scene, the dream of bringing nations together through television did not make countries better neighbors, although the international reach of TV networks blurred boundaries (Friedland, 1992) and made conflict more present and perhaps more likely (Kern, 2003). Instead, television involves more people from different places in a kind of dream. Presentational technique makes reports from wildly divergent places follow the same pattern, so that places become interchangeable (Relph, 1976). TV news turns everywhere into nowhere (Epstein, 1973). The professional structuring of

news packages makes all events seem alike, usually full of conflict and danger. Daily newscasts do not bring viewers together, but do make a magic place where journalists tame distance and seem to join the viewers' family.

Space in New Media

The internet would seem capable of countering the pattern of shrinking local coverage we found in other media. New computer networks brought another wave of enthusiasm about the potential of a medium for public communication, but this time journalists generally resisted, and little wonder. Pundits said the internet would change the world, and its first casualty would be the media. Michael Crichton called them "The Mediasaurus," the title of his oft-quoted 1993 article for *Wired* magazine, predicting that then-familiar mass media would "vanish without a trace" within a decade (Issue 1.4, September–October 1993, pp. 57–59). Writing a year later, Jon Katz called newspapers "the biggest and saddest losers in the information revolution" ("On Line or Not, Newspapers Suck," *Wired*, Issue 2.9, September 1994, pp. 50–58).

Most U.S. news organizations hew closely to a small geographic area, because they depend on the revenues advertising generates from local businesses. Retail stories retain a link to places. Long-distance shipping is expensive for big-box items and shoppers like to see and handle many smaller items before purchasing. The workforce is also somewhat immobile. Business draws clerks, laborers, and other entry level employees from the local workforce — companies rarely pay moving expenses to fill less-skilled jobs. Television and especially newspapers have built local monopolies on these geographical barriers in the marketplace. "Newspapers' help-wanted ads," reports Saul Hansell in the *New York Times*, "inch for inch have been their single most profitable product." His article, "The Monster That's Feasting on Newspapers," cites news executives' fear the economic power of the internet, which quickly took away more than 10 percent of classified advertising from newsprint (Sunday, March 24, 2002, Sect. 3 Money & Business, pp. 1, 13). Other contents likewise have a local dimension that news organizations can lose to internet competitors: weather, sports, TV listings, obituaries, and school and society events.

The new electronic communication systems promised to scramble completely the differences between *here* and *there*. Has that happened? One study found that small newspapers in Colorado published fewer stories on line, mostly recycling items the staff had first produced for print (Singer, 2001). As a result, the on-line content had a higher share of local material than the print edition carried. The

study provides only a snapshot from the late 1990s.

To find out how the content of news changed at other kinds of papers over a longer period, my next studies added on-line sites to the long-term data from my earlier research examining local, regional, and national newspapers from different U.S. geographical areas (Barnhurst, 2002; Barnhurst, forthcoming). The results show that, unlike the Colorado example, other newspaper sites published contents almost identical to their print editions, and the trends occurring in print over the previous decades continued when the newspapers moved on line.

In two key dimensions, the most local and most distant, the trend lines crossed. References to street addresses began a long decline in the 1930s, sinking from a high of three addresses for each two stories (1.45) to less than one mention per story (0.81) in the 1990s (see Figure 4-1). In the internet editions, the trend continued, dropping to about one mention in three stories (0.37). References to other countries, by contrast, had been inching up since the 1930s, growing from only one mention in ten stories (0.11) to one in four (0.27) during the 1990s. By the time the newspapers moved on line, foreign places were approaching one reference for every two stories (0.44). That means that in the 2000s, newspaper reporters for the first time mentioned other countries more frequently than street addresses.

The results reveal a contradiction between what readers experience and what coverage reflects. An article on organized labor in the *New York Times* ("The A.F.L.-C.I.O. Organizes in Cambodia," July 12, 2001, Business page) had a Phnom Penh dateline. It mentions labor organizing in Texas and policy debates in Washington (and the World Trade Organization) and refers to China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Mexico, as well as the headquarters of Nike, the Gap, Levi Strauss, and Sears, Roebuck. Although readers experience employment at street addresses, most job-related stories had a business perspective, connecting to the reader through references to products a consumer might buy or chain stores a consumer might visit locally. The content, in short, referred less often to specific places nearby, and instead defined the local through familiar brands and franchises.

The form of the internet sites had a similar contradictory treatment of proximity (Barnhurst, 2002). The news sites structure stories across more pages, so that they take longer (more screens) to navigate. They may link to their own content, and especially their archives, where users can purchase access to stories, but they provide very few links to external sites. These aspects of form aim to hold users within a single cyber-location. In effect, the sites offered less local (physical) content

but sought to keep consumers within local (virtual) confines.

News organizations compete aggressively to control the geographical zone of their traditional markets. To protect revenues from local advertisers, news businesses define a parallel geographic space on line. There newspapers need to “build their own communities,” executives say, “if their papers are to survive” (Mark Fitzgerald, “Building Newspapers and Communities,” *Editor & Publisher* 129.47, November 23, 1996, pp. 26–7).

Ethnographic research on U.S. news internet divisions reveals their main strategy is to take possession of that virtual geography (Riley et al, 1998). To control the home market, news internet sites produce most of the content themselves, supplemented by chamber-of-commerce, yellow-page, and other civic information. By encompassing everything related to their market area, the sites become the de facto virtual city. Each site seems to connect to a larger world, but instead links mostly to other sites the organization owns or operates. As one executive stated, “We are adding to our site with acquisitions and strategic alliances with online companies” (quoted in Riley et al, 1998, n.p.). Once users enter the organization’s hometown site, they stay without necessarily realizing they are caught within a set of interrelated pages.

A key move involves ownership of domain names, which define the prime real estate on line. The principal news organization in U.S. major markets has purchased the rights to the locality name. Katherine Fulton, a technology consultant and former journalist, describes the clearest example for the *Columbia Journalism Review*: The *Boston Globe* “rethought old notions of proprietary products. Instead of just taking” the existing newspaper on line, the *Globe* editors “opened a gateway — *boston.com* — to their whole region. . . . all the major television stations and museums in the city” then joined them “as content partners, creating in the process an impressive new media genre (“A Tour of Our Uncertain Future,” 24.6, March/April 1996, p. 19, [available](#)). Owning the name lays claim to geography on line and then influences the web presence of and access to cooperating partners. Potential competitors have a hard time finding a foothold when the main site owns a city name. The move narrows the range of viable web sites and effectively marginalizes alternative voices.

Place, Space & Reaction

These content changes, design strategies, and market maneuvers are part of a larger transformation at the end of the 20th century. Since the beginning of human history, geographical understanding has changed along with political organization. When societies first established land ownership, for instance, that concept of place not only

changed understanding but also established a system of control (Innis, 1964). Cultural ideas about location tend to encourage some activities (that excite enthusiasm) and block others (that get ignored). The technologies of paper and printing disseminated cultural norms more widely and at a lower cost than older forms of oral communication could achieve; the new means have what Harold Innis calls a *spatial bias*. Instead of expanding communication consistently, new technologies result in “monopolies over space” that tend also to “check the movement of ideas” (Innis, 1964, p. 129). Not only can technology make communication more difficult, it can also make avoiding knowledge effortless (Carey, 1989). After the invention of printing, the then-new technology (the printed book) was much easier to avoid than the old (the storyteller at home). News on line is easier to avoid than a newspaper that lands on the front stoop every day or a newscast that interrupts the flow of entertainment broadcasting. It also restructures control over places.

The cultural transformation that has occurred tends to put less value on concrete *place* than on something more abstract, *space*. Several thinkers at the end of the 20th century identified the change in spatial conceptions (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 1989). The recent shifts parallel those a century earlier, and both linked to a contemporary mode of emerging production. The new regime of space contrasts with the old regime of place, because place is a product of first-hand *experience*, but space is the product of second-hand *information* (Burgess & Gold, 1985). Walter Lippmann called *space* “a good clue” (1922, p. 133) for detecting stereotypes, those oversimplified versions of geography so handy for picturing inaccessible places. Space (versus place) also makes distinctions between authentic and inauthentic experience less meaningful (Morris, 1988). Recent changes in technology allow a “locational indifference” in the work of producing things (Kellerman, 1984, p. 231), so that economic activity can happen anywhere.

The new regime had an unexpected impact on political organization. The documentary evidence shows that being able to work or shop at home produced less telecommuting and home shopping than expected. At the same time, cities grew and shopping centers proliferated. Manuel Castells documents the “simultaneous spatial dispersion and concentration” under the new regime (2000, p. 428). Global and local tendencies coexist, shifting political power. Workers connect to faraway places but work more at home, and they move to distant suburbs but cluster near industrial parks.

The new long journalism is one expression of those dual movements. The shift in content made foreign news more common, but the market strategies on line, along with zoned newspaper editions

and increased televisual proximity, suggest a self-contradictory kind of localizing also occurred. That these changes took place not only on line but also in print, audio, and video news, serves to confirm that new technology is not the cause. Something larger is at work.

Michel Foucault calls the emerging era an “epoch of space” (1999, p. 237), a time of simultaneity, juxtaposition, of near and far, but also side by side, a time of the dispersed and the networked. Space in the new era is holy or sanctified, so that Foucault contrasts the sacred quality of private, family, cultural, and leisure space with the secular quality of public spaces. Like others who have considered the issue, he sees space as a set of relations or interactions, some of them utopias as idealistic as they are unreal (such as the family) and others that he calls *heterotopias*, which connect the real and the unreal, as does, for example, a mirror that brings the virtual (the viewer’s reflection) into view of the real (the viewer). These heterotopias exist to manage deviations (segregating deviants into prisons and hospitals, for instance) and to accommodate liminal phases and crises (such as the honeymoon, which places the bride’s deflowering outside of the community).

News is one such heterotopia. It allows individuals to exert social control through collective consciousness. Hegel describes news “as a substitute for morning prayers” (in Anderson, 1991, p. 35), tying the act of reading the paper with an awareness that many others are following the same ritual (condemning, for example, the same deviant). By focusing on the distant, over which journalists wield control (at least when it comes to the news entering most U.S. homes), while rejecting the street address, over which audiences have more say, journalists set up a void, a gap between lived experience and conceptions of the world out there, that demands filling. News organizations fill the void in several ways, by structuring a market around it and anchoring concepts of the local in acts of consumption, but also by emphasizing cycles of holiday or religious activities, in a combination of pseudo-religious and commercial fervor.

Ordinary Americans, with the encouragement of journalists and others, fill the void with a variety of sacred locational constructs such as home and family. The most pronounced aspect in the recent shift in spatial consciousness is “the sentimentalization of home” (Relph, 1976, p. 82). In a world that seems to have abandoned concrete place in favor of abstract space, the response (or reaction) has been to enshrine family, religion, and so-called family values as placeholders. Political organization has followed, establishing monopolies of control in ring cities and on networks. U.S. journalism has participated in that wider transformation.

Audiences & Journalists

Journalists often warn each other against “giving people what they *want* instead of what they *need*” (George Garneau, “Foreign News Grows, but It Is Reported Here Less,” *Editor & Publisher*, February 10, 1990, pp. 18, 51). That formulation is a recipe for passive audiences. Those who prefer local to foreign news seem narrow and parochial, but such an idea of the audience is wrong. Audiences may be more susceptible to stereotypes in distant news (Gilliam, Valentino & Beckmann, 2002), but they say they want more foreign news, not less (Cohen et al, 1996). At the same time, the news the audience gets has less to do with the public roles of citizens and more to do with their private activities as consumers. The shift disperses local interests, encouraging audience members to focus not on their collective concerns as workers in a local factory, for instance, but instead on their interest in, say, discount prices (Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2003).

When journalists turn away from the local (to give audiences a dose of the bigger picture), the news also suffers. Reporters close to an event quote more, and more varied, sources (Martin, 1988), that is, they *tell stories*. Those reporting without personal knowledge of the community rely on officials and experts distant from the events, that is, they *convey information*. Television industry research indicates that local political news focuses more on issues than does national news, which concentrates more on strategy (Kaplan & Hale, 2001). A five-year study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that stations in smaller markets often produced news of higher quality (see Rosenstiel, cited previously). Journalists with closer ties to a community are more honest and less inclined to overstatement than are those more distant from events (Neveu, 2002). News centered on the local can also be commercially successful (Hjarvard, 2000).

All groups use space as a representational strategy, positioning group members in relation to others (Crang & Thrift, 2000). Journalists are no different. News is a narrative performance, and news stories present “alternative spatial stories” (Shapiro, 1999, p. 159). The current practice of U.S. journalism tends to remove places and substitute unexamined beliefs about locations, stereotypes that reduce them to fairytale lands, which are easy to ignore because they lack substance (Burgess, 1985). Daniel Boorstin identified decades ago the way that pseudo places eliminate physical places, by demolishing “sense regimes of place, locale, and history”(quoted in Morris, 1988, p. 3). In the mythology of journalism, the United States tends to be a superior and mighty place, and other countries are primitive or retrograde by comparison (Lule, 2001).

More than a century ago, the journalism of physical proximity grew up along with the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the practices of journalism came to focus on the fixed domicile, which was a major factor implanting bourgeois power, more important than either commerce or industrialism (Virilio, 1986). Journalism sets up a geographical metaphor based on center and periphery. The new spatial regime puts journalists at the center and the audience at the periphery, swallowing up the event itself in placelessness. News today builds horizontal bonds that tie journalists together, although with weak or competitive relations. Two forms of dependency result, one being the journalists' over-reliance on their employers and their profession, and the other being citizens' over-reliance on the journalist. "More people spend more time dependent on the journalist, the publisher, the program director," when information is a commodity (Carey, 1989, p. 168).

"The media have become the power brokers of our time . . . for better or for worse," writes Christiane Amanpour, a senior international correspondent for CNN, in *The Quill* (84.3, April 1996, p. 16). When governments lack a clear policy toward events, the media rush in. She calls the resulting pressure on leaders to do something *the CNN factor*. Less than a year after the article came out, a CNN freelancer described Sofia, Bulgaria, in January: Crowds demonstrating against the Socialist government chanted, "Where is CNN? Where is CNN?" When the network sent in a crew from London, a rally speaker spotted them and shouted, "Christiane Amanpour is here!" and the crowd cheered for her to speak (Flournoy & Stewart, 1997, p. 203). The journalist could confirm the importance of their location and bring it into existence for others.

Journalists may not benefit personally from their expanded power in the era of space. For every Christiane Amanpour, there are doubtless many hundreds of ordinary journalists who feel powerless, but they have also participated, perhaps inadvertently, in the ideological changes in U.S. culture by striving to incorporate more about distant locations into the news. Individual journalists may not recognize that what seem like high-minded and public-spirited reasons — because the world is shrinking and U.S. Americans don't know or care — serve personal advancement in a profession designed to serve hegemonic ends. The changes serve dominant elites by removing the sense of empowerment from citizens living at street addresses, while encouraging *hometown* consumption and a false localism.

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