

The Form of News: Thoughts on the Newspaper as Environment

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This essay outlines the ideas of Urie Bronfenbrenner, who developed the notion that human experience occurs within four interdependent levels, from the proximate experiences with *microsystems*, through the layers of a *mesosystem*, an *exosystem*, and a *macrosystem*, which range from immediate experience with other persons through an institutional level to the broadest ideological field. Using these ideas, we explore newspapers as environments that have presented these levels in several aspects of their visual form and textual contents through U.S. history. Specifically, we consider the visual style of newspapers, the type of production techniques used in their manufacture, and the larger metaphor or ideal that organized their view of public life. These combined into several formations: the printerly, partisan, Victorian, and modern. After considering how the understanding of the newspaper relates to conceptions of the audience and the citizenry, we examine the typical imagery the newspaper used to represent its readers through history.

Besides thinking of communication as a system of transmission, moving information and money back and forth among public institutions, advertisers, journalists, and citizens, or as a daily ritual that helps form and sustain communities, we find it useful to think of the media as an environment (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001).

We developed this idea after reading Urie Bronfenbrenner's 1979 book, *The Ecology of Human Development*. Bronfenbrenner himself adapted an ecological approach to psychology, looking at child and adolescent development as occurring within a complex system. He began from the notion of Kurt Lewin (1936) that the psychological field can be mapped topologically into different territories, which phenomenologists had earlier called realms or "provinces of meaning" within the life world (Schutz, 1970, p. 252). His model identified four dynamic and

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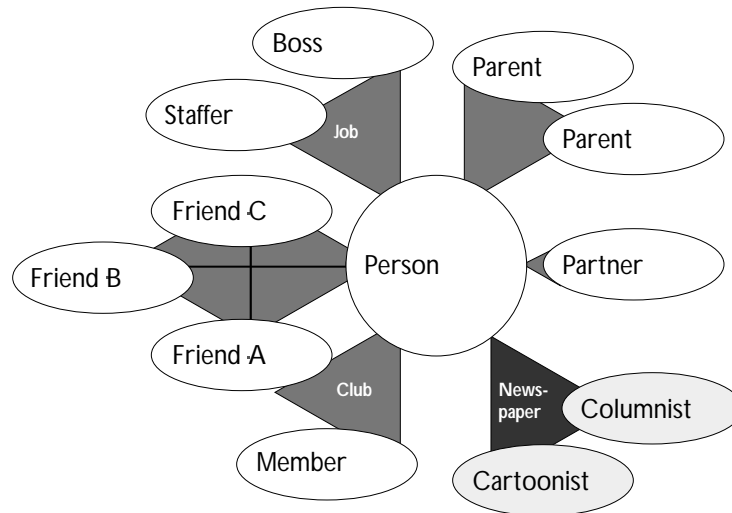
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interdependent levels, beginning from the most proximate experiences with *microsystems*. These are nested within a *mesosystem*, an *exosystem*, and a *macrosystem*, each one more distant and more indirectly influential on personal experience.

Bronfenbrenner identified television as an element in these wider levels and criticized studies from the effects tradition which do not consider the wider ecological environment involved when children view television. An ecological approach is also useful at the other levels of Bronfenbrenner's model. What follows will outline his levels and give a few thoughts on each of them.

A *microsystem* involves the immediate physical and social surroundings. Each person occupies several of these: at home, at work, at a local hangout, and so forth. A person's experience with the newspaper can also be understood as a microsystem, although mediated in an unusual fashion. The newspaper provides a three-dimensional experience, with particular sights, sounds, and smells that become reassuring through repeated exposure. Readers can feel as moved by reporters, columnists, political cartoonists, and letter-to-the-editor writers as they do by their next-door neighbors. Readers enter the newspaper environment willingly because it is both comfortable and unpredictable. They may get jostled and annoyed, but they feel smarter and better connected, if only because they know what to grumble about. In this sense, the news microsystem is like the weather, surrounding people, providing an outlet for discontents, and lubricating small talk.

► Microsystems



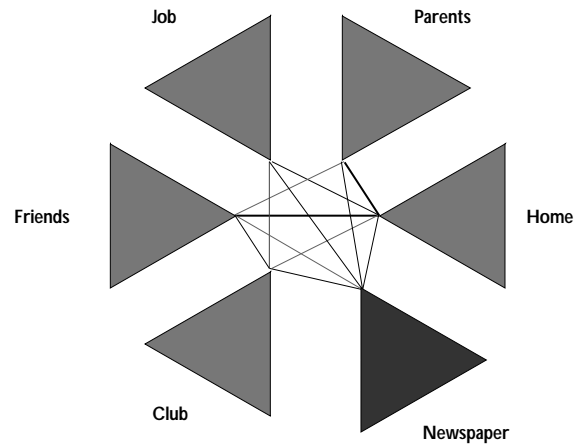
A *mesosystem* involves the interactions among microsystems. A friend may also be a member of a health club or of the staff at work, and may do business with your parents. In a dynamic system, all these relationships have at least some impact on your environment. The newspaper can likewise have many connections with other microsystems in the life world. Your parents may not know your boss, but they might read about her in the paper. Your friends may see reviews, discuss them, and choose a movie based on what you have all read. Some microsystems are closely related and the connections between them heavily trafficked. Others are mere byways (your actual encounters with a reporter, for instance).

Interconnections are a central element of ecological thinking, and they shed light on the newspaper as a nexus. Newspapers set up a complex diorama that places many other microsystems into physical relations to each other. A person plays multiple roles, usually only one or two within each microsystem, but a newspaper reader can switch through many roles in

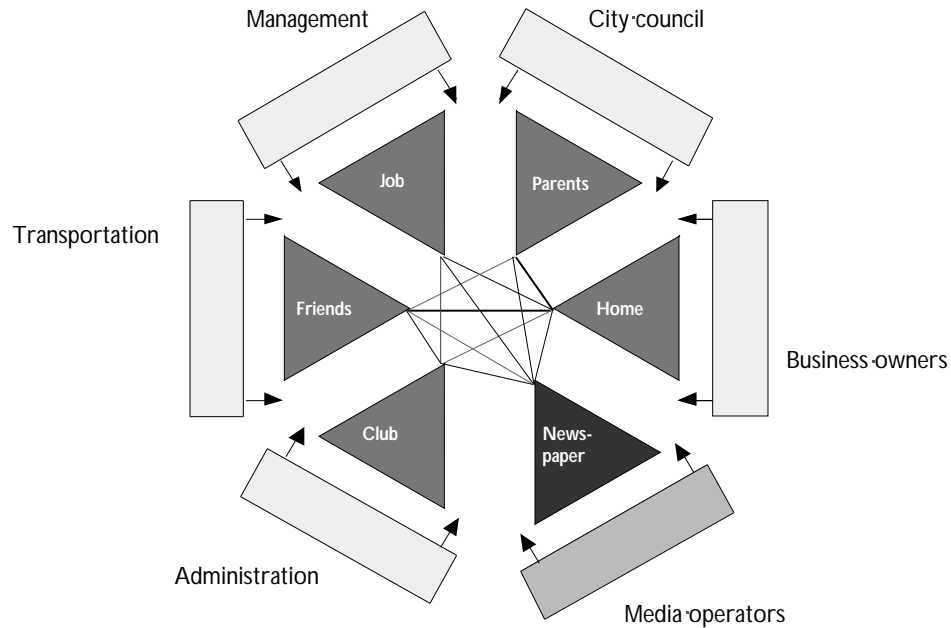
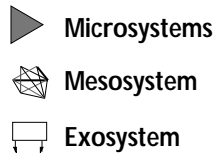
short order: citizen, baseball fan, concerned parent, shopper, and so forth.

▶ Microsystems

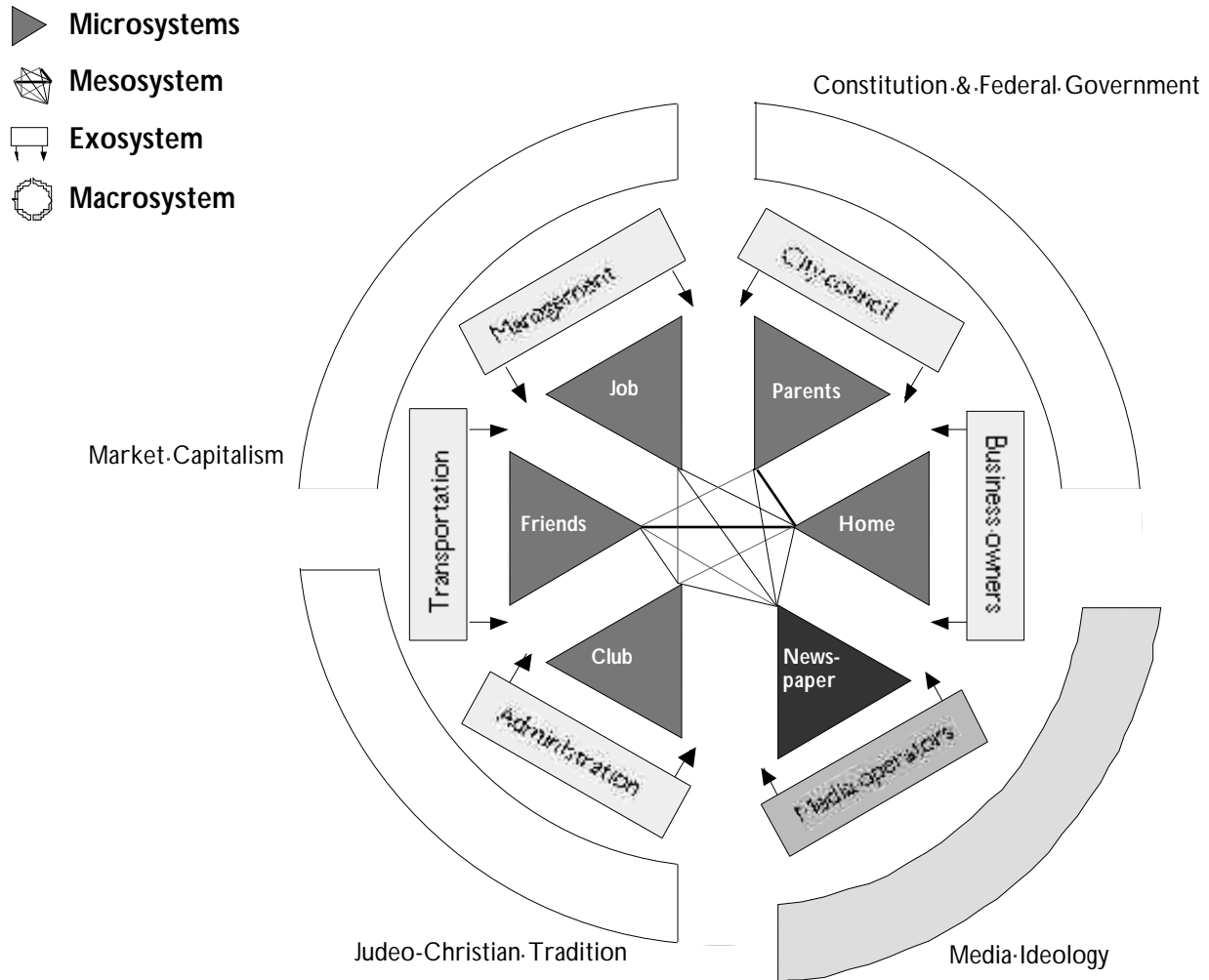
⬠ Mesosystem



An *exosystem* includes the settings of the community at large. You may not know the town counselors, the superintendent of the local transit system, or the owners of businesses nearby, but their decisions affect your environment. Besides creating these widely felt influences, each part of the exosystem is also interconnected. As on every other level, participants overlap. Members of the board at work are likely to be connected to government, for example. A newspaper microsystem is subject to the material conditions of production, including all of the complexities of management, the division of labor, and the state of technology. The operators of the newspaper are connected externally as well, to advertisers, unions, paper and ink suppliers, wire services and syndicates, professional associations, competing news outlets, and the like.



A *macrosystem* is like an ideological containment field. Any person in the United States, whatever one's role within subsystems, cannot usually escape common assumptions about the market, the Constitution, and the like. These are a sort of ground plan, an interlocking set of values that guide everything from religion, to public policy, to personal choice. During each phase of U.S. history, the newspaper existed not only in inter-personal and –institutional relations but also in prevailing ideology. In our study of form, we identified several dominant metaphors, or ideals, for the relationships a newspaper was supposed to embody (Authors, 2001). The content and design of newspapers during the printerly era expressed an ideal of coffeehouse discussion that was distinct from the metaphor of courtroom dispute during the partisan era or of the marketplace during the Victorian era or professional expertise during the modern era.



Newspapers accumulate and give physical shape not only to their own position but also to other aspects of the macrosystem. In other words, the form of news acts as a canvas, presenting a backdrop or a panorama of accepted institutions and beliefs. The newspaper is unusual among microsystems because it manufactures each day a printed record of its intra- and extramural relations (the meso- and exosystems) and its ideological context (the macrosystem).

Most newspapers end up in the trash, and the consumer may easily associate their value with their fate as physical objects. Here we espouse the opposite view. Cultures leave behind a record

of their lives, concerns, and power arrangements not only in self-conscious, lofty venues — chronicles and books, works of art, and monuments — but also in their litter. The detritus of daily life contains another record of public spaces, practices, and politics, one that describes the environment where people confronted and shaped those loftier ideals. Ordinary folk throw away the paper once they've read it because they think of news as information, and they assume that content matters, not form (separating the two).

News comprises more than the sum of its informational content, which arrives embedded in what we call form. The form of news creates an environment; it invites readers into a world molded and variegated to fit not only the conscious designs of journalists and the habits of readers but also the reigning values in political and economic life. The newspaper provides a three-dimensional experience, with particular sights, sounds, and smells that become reassuring through repeated exposure. At any moment in its history, news form seems natural and pretends to be transparent — an order of words, images, and colors within pages and sections, reflecting and containing events that remain distant and yet distinctly present. Form structures and expresses that environment, a space that comfortably pretends to represent something larger: the world-at-large, its economics, politics, sociality, and emotion. Not that form is autonomous: the range of forces operating in daily life themselves mold the space we call the newspaper along with everything else, leaving clear scars and embellishments on most cultural forms. The form of news wants to hide these scars; it wants to present itself as a picture of the changing world, an unchanging witness to change. But it has changed profoundly. At each phase of U.S. history, newspapers have matched that history not with a picture of the world or a particularly reliable witness of events but with an environment: a paper armchair, a newsprint backdrop, a surround that itself proposes a way to see.

System and Formation: Style, Type, Ideal

In our research on form, we found that U.S. newspaper development proceeded through a series of what we call *formations*. These formations were in turn moments when developments on the levels of style, type, and ideal assembled into some meaningful arrangement. The levels of style, type, and ideal each had a complicated history, which we have described in detail elsewhere. The whole course of development is summarized in tabular form here.

Table 1

Early Newspaper Formations

A timeline of the principal formations, and the style periods, newspaper types of production, and controlling ideals that comprise them

| FORMATION | PRINTERLY | | | | PARTISAN | | | | VICTORIAN | | | |
|-----------|-----------------|------|--------------|------|----------------|------|----------|------|-------------------|------|------|--|
| YEAR | 1780 | 1790 | 1800 | 1810 | 1820 | 1830 | 1840 | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 | 1880 | |
| STYLE | Federal | | Transitional | | Partisan | | Imperial | | Victorian | | | |
| TYPE | Printer's Paper | | | | Editor's Paper | | | | Publisher's Paper | | | |
| IDEAL | Town meeting | | | | Courtroom | | | | Marketplace | | | |

Table 2

Modern Newspaper Evolution

A timeline of the stylistic phases, types of production, and ruling ideals for transitions in the modern newspaper formation

| FORMATION | VICTORIAN | | | | | | MODERN | | | | | |
|-----------|------------------|------|------|-------|------|------|--------------|------|------|-----------|------|------|
| YEAR | 1890 | 1900 | 1910 | 1920 | 1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | |
| PHASE | Traditional | | | Proto | | | Classicist | | | High | | Late |
| TYPE | Industrial | | | | | | Professional | | | Corporate | | |
| IDEAL | Department Store | | | | | | Social Map | | | Index | | |

An environmental view of the newspaper articulates with this scheme of development in interesting ways. The different levels of formal analysis in the development of newspaper formations fit loosely with the different levels of the environment: style has much to do with microsystem; type with exosystem; ideal with macrosystem. All affect the news environment as encountered by any particular reader.

Each newspaper allows a reader to create a particular microsystem, and habitual readers can pick up a copy of an unfamiliar newspaper and establish themselves in relation to it: figure out its character, dope out its politics and its target readership. Our research on form showed that the microsystem found clear expression not only in a newspaper's set of writers and artists but also in its visual *style*. Style includes all of the elements of makeup and organization that give the newspaper a particular appearance that readers encounter first hand. We found that changes in style signaled important changes that radiated through the other levels of environmental systems. Changes in newspaper formations also alerted us to deep changes in the civic function of news, the rituals that citizen-readers can and do perform within their environment.

These changes, unlike the weather, do not come out of thin air. One reason we pay such attention to newspapers is that they have an integrative capacity within the mesosystem. They involve the reader in a process of connecting the dots between microsystems. Your father's friend has died, you learn from the newspaper, or your coworker's daughter has won a scholarship. By contrast, television rarely invites such activity. The Internet has only the potential for this sort of integration, at least for many users today.

In our research, we found that the exosystem aligns with what we call *type*, or the mode of production. U.S. newspapers developed through a complicated series of types. In the eighteenth-century, printers controlled newspaper production and content, applying the standards of their

era to the newspaper. In the nineteenth century, when page galleys were filled by compositors sitting at Linotype machines late in the nineteenth century, publishers and managing editors controlled newspaper production. Today, when professional designers construct entire pages on a computer screen, the ultimate control of the newspaper usually resides in a corporate ownership.

Other factors besides newspaper type also inflect the exosystem and shape the form of newspapers. Historically, allied technologies and institutions, like the telegraph and wire services, advertising and the department store, and the practitioners of public relations interacted with the forms of news. All these factors are material forces present in the news environment, although newspapers obscure some and talk up others.

On the level of the macrosystem, the form of news records the imagined terrain of the social and political world and prescribes the maps and binoculars needed for navigation. Every newspaper proposes a normative model of the world, explicitly on the opinion pages, implicitly in its routines of categorization, narration, and illustration. In gross terms, the normative model of the world and the newspaper's role in it is summarized in the dominant metaphor or ideal of the newspaper. The form of news always encodes a version of a society's dominant ideology.

As a result of these observations, we describe ourselves media environmentalists. In any activist agenda, the first step is to raise consciousness. Our aim has been to describe the newspaper as an environment that has been given a shape. We have dedicated time and energy to the project of documenting the changing form of news to raise awareness of its power. We also hope that newspapers of the future will combine the best aspects of the past and present: the participatory opportunities found in printerly newspapers, the civic gaze of early illustrated news, the universal reach of the industrial newspaper, and the factual reliability of the modern

newspaper. The form has changed before, and we think it might be nudged to change again for the better.

News Environment and Newspaper Readers

A newspaper's form inscribes its own *readers*. But, just as it hides its own form by pretending that it's natural or given, the newspaper hides the way it inscribes its readers by proclaiming them to be sovereign individuals, self-conscious users of transmitted information about the world. Critical scholars object to this account, arguing that information is presented in ideologically fraught forms, but they imagine that ideological effects occur because readers read ideologically constructed stories and pictures. Their account is wrong in a couple of ways. Readers do not read bits of text and pictures. What they read is *the paper*, the tangible object as a whole. They enter the news environment and interact with its surface textures and deeper shapes. They don't use the news; they swim in it.

Research has tended to examine readers as receivers, detached from the things they read. First, media professionals developed an arsenal of techniques to describe and predict the impact of messages on audiences. These social-science techniques treated the media as the source of meanings. Then, using reader response theory as a rallying cry (Tompkins, 1980; Radway, 1984; Iser, 1989), critical scholars insisted that the act of *reading* (instead of publishing) is the pivotal moment in the circulation of meaning. Historians in turn set to work recovering the experiences of historical readers (Brown, 1989; Leonard, 1995; Zboray & Saracino Zboray, 1996). Studies of reading practices, past and present, have provided a welcome corrective to crude notions of an all-powerful culture industry, often attributed to Frankfurt School theorists (such as Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944). But we think they have overemphasized the sovereignty of the reader.

Readers may make meaning, but not under conditions of their own choosing. In the case of

newspapers, the form constrains meaning making. Once readers enter the newspaper, they continue to make choices, but the form imposes tacit rules that allow for certain reading practices and work against others. Even when readers resist, they do so within an existing environment. Their practices, along with media industry practices and for that matter a host of other cultural practices, become implanted in media forms. The resulting environment can survive for decades (and some aspects become fossilized for centuries). We therefore incline away from individual sovereign readers. Instead our critique follows the premise that the form of news constructs the audience's field of vision.

News form has an impact by establishing the environment of power. Our claim here goes beyond that usually made by critical scholars: they challenge mainstream research by arguing that the power of news operates not by manifest content but by subtext or as superstructure. Scholars interested in the power of news texts to encode biases, representations, and ideologies focus on the meaning lurking beneath the surface, the latent as opposed to the manifest content. Scholars who document the power of media businesses and institutions see content as alternately expressing or mystifying these underlying structures (Schiller, 1989; McChesney, 1999). The form of news acts as the canvas of institutions and ideology alike, a physical and cultural backdrop, an environment that itself feeds back into practice. Taking the analogy further, we arrive at the notion of media environmentalism. The form of news records the imagined terrain of the social and political world and prescribes the maps and binoculars needed for navigation. We aim to describe the topography as something given a shape that has changed before and might be nudged into change for the better.

The environment of power has a greater impact because the form of news plays out right under the reader's nose, clearly visible and yet somehow beneath attention. The citizen reader has

a crude but usable vocabulary for distinguishing the flora and fauna in this environment, similar to but less sophisticated than the vocabulary of news professionals. But these taxonomies conceal the grand form even while they isolate and reveal the various species of little forms. Distinctions that seem the most obvious — separating images from text, or splitting images into classes such as photographs, illustrations, charts, and the like — can go only so far toward understanding the overall form (Author, 1994).

Histories that grow of such distinctions can work against understanding when applied to news. Take the commonsense distinction between word and image. Ordinary people readily distinguish between neighboring texts and images as they skim the whole paper; some readers program themselves to not even see the pictures, assuming that all meaningful discursive content will be most usefully presented in text. But the distinction between word and image is far from natural. Making words and making pictures both originated from drawing, but no one confuses the two, at least partly because the distinction has been institutionalized. Schools train students to write in one class and to make pictures in another. Workplaces clearly organize photographers to work apart from writers, despite efforts to encourage teamwork. Researchers do the same. The theories and methods at hand, as well as the scholarly societies and journals, reflect the industrial divide between word and image work. The resulting studies of journalism pay scant attention to visual devices, and visual communication studies usually bracket the text.

Form understood as news environment bridges this divide. Newspaper content has run predominantly as text through much of history, but the words always contained visual descriptions and came arranged in physical space. In pursuit of form, our analysis crosses over into text, blurring the line between visual and textual communication. In this we avoid playing words against images and declaring a front-runner (as does, for e.g., Stephens, 1998).

How Newspapers Depict Readers

With the implicit ways in which newspapers inscribe readers in mind, we became interested in looking historically at how newspapers have explicitly imagined their readers. A foray to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass., provided an opportunity to look at images from newspapers that depict newspaper reading.

What we found were images of readers making meaning from the news under the environmental conditions presented by the press. Readers primarily make choices. Once they choose to enter a newspaper, they continue to choose, but news form imposes tacit rules that allow for some reading practices but not others. Readers may resist, but only within the existing environment.

Newspaper form not only carries content but presents it in ways designed to reach an imagined reader. Printers during the colonial era and the early Republic, however, equated newspapers with the public itself, and perhaps this is why their iconography did not depict readers. Being integral to the audience, newspapers experienced no urgency to represent an external, hypothetical reader. In our perusal of the earliest phases of U.S. newspaper history, we found no illustrations of the audience, and in fact images of newspaper reading did not emerge generally in American painting and graphic arts until the second decade of the nineteenth century (Leonard, 1993). Before then the press had a limited capacity to publish illustrations. One exception, where illustrations did appear, was newspaper nameplates.

Newspapers typically promoted their inauguration by printing a broadside prospectus. In its announcement, the *Massachusetts Centinel* (see Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p. 28) presented itself in typography as a guardian for the commonwealth in imagery that represented it as not military but civilian and not masculine but feminine. The seated figure faces right, in the direction

of advancement, and holds a large tablet. She is not primarily a reader but a scribe in the act of writing, her page only partially filled. She represents an ideal surrounded by symbols of virtue: scales for justice and a book for knowledge, on a platform rooted in Nature. This depiction is allegorical, not ethnographic. The body (this goddess-like extension of the public) is pure and possessed of democratic virtues. Its task is first to write, and in doing so it actually makes itself, both as a public and as a guardian of the public. The newspaper is thus an appendage self-made by the body politic. Its relationship to the public is immediate and unproblematic.

Later imagery would separate out the newspaper, as something for the citizen to challenge. For example, a book illustration after the turn of the century shows a gentleman leaping from the barber's chair, gesturing at the newspaper in his hand. Objects of ordinary life fill the scene — a wig hanging on its rack, fish hanging from the ceiling — and two men look on. “D—n, D—n, The Author & Publisher I Say!” reads the inscription (Huggins, 1808). The newspaper stands rigidly away from its reader, the one quotidian prop to give offense. As an external object the newspaper keyed to power, and that led to its use by the mid-nineteenth century as a symbol of male authority.

Family portraits in the nineteenth century began to show newspapers in the hands of fathers and heads of households. The best-known example, *The Tilton Family*, an 1837 watercolor by the folk artist Joseph H. Davis, balances the father and his newspaper, books, and writing tools with the mother and her child, pet, and flowers (see, Zboray, 1993, p. 88). The two sides of the composition contrast the tools of public (masculine) to private (feminine) life. In the hagiography of the Victorian era, a newspaper in the hand indicated the presence of a publisher (in Mathew Brady's portrait of Horace Greeley, for instance), the knowledge of the man of affairs, and the domination of the patriarch (as in Thomas Nast's illustration, “Col. Juggins Reading the

Somerville Star to his Wife,” see Leonard, 1993, p. 388).

In another Nast cartoon (see Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p. 108), a news boy, one of the ubiquitous icons associated with newspapers, walks away (to the left), while a railroad traveler peers out from under a mass of goods distributed en route: snacks, an envelope and booklet, along with newspapers. The traveler is the patient victim of abundant manufacture and distribution, and the newspaper is again a source of frustration. The boy has given him a taste of his own merchant-class medicine, and the reference to the iconic newspaper-as-power gives the frame its comic touch. Of course, serious images of newspapers on the railways also appeared during the period (see, for example, the publicity image reproduced in Leonard, 1993, p. 319), as rail travel attempted to associate itself with the icons of the ruling classes. The newsboy served as a counter type, the merchant class writ small.

The children who regularly appear in nineteenth century illustrations of newspapers draw attention to the relation of the press to power and the powerful. One 1812 children’s book illustration, for instance, shows a dog in formal dress alongside a monkey reading the newspaper by candlelight (*Pompey*, 1812). The dog pounding a bed warmer with a spoon is all noise and nonsense, offering an ironic comment on the news the monkey reads. More commonly, childhood figures as a realm of play contrasted to the world of affairs. This opposition, usually understood as the contrast between the home and the world, is all the more compelling in some illustrations because it is inscribed *inside* the home. An engraving of a domestic scene from the 1840s shows a father with his spectacles on his forehead as he leans forward to watch his four children play with a blanket broadsheet so large that the oldest boy stands on a chair to hold up one end, the next eldest kneels over the top edge and holds on while a girl crawls across an expanse of newsprint columns, and the youngest peers out from the bottom end (Alden, n.d.). The lifted

spectacles indicate the suspension of the proper use of the press, suggesting that the appearance of the blanket sheet, a novel form of popular newspaper, marks a historical rupture in the uses of literacy. The normal uses are depicted in a stock scene in children's books from the latter half of the century: the child at play with a cat, while a father sits in the background reading the newspaper. Sometimes the father pauses to observe, or he may simply ignore the child (*Prints*, ca. 1865).

These pictures of reading fathers suggest that if newspapers were supposed to be adult, they were also supposed to be male. Although images of women reading newspapers appeared in nineteenth century art, the form clearly aligned with masculinity well into the twentieth century (see the examples in Leonard, 1995, especially the suffragist who holds the paper and dominates her husband). This habit was iconic and not ethnographic. In fact, by mid-century women had become great readers of newspapers (Zboray & Saracino Zboray, 1996), although little in the editorial matter of the mainstream press would indicate that. The illustration regime, like the overall form, has always had less to do with facts on the ground than with an imagined world more or less removed from those facts.

During the key years in the rise of modernism, between the 1890s and 1940s, pictures of newspaper readers took an objective turn. They represented readers as if engaged in the rational process of seeking information. Imagery of reading aligned itself with the Progressive ideal of a democratic citizenry. Newspapers appeared in the hands of ordinary folks, suggesting the spread of information from authoritative experts to the mass of readers. The representations imagined news publication as a process of diffusion.

The use of newspapers as sources of information has a long ancestry. An 1848 painting by Richard Caton Woodville, *War News from Mexico*, showed a single newspaper as the source for

information shared aloud with an audience of eleven on a hotel front porch (see Brown, 1989, p. 259). William Sidney Mount's 1850 painting, *California News*, likewise shows diffusion, with a single newspaper and (at least potentially) an audience of nine (see Leonard, 1995, p. 16). Images from the nineteenth century clearly illustrate the hierarchy of readers, with white men holding, reading from, and standing closest to the newspaper and with women, African Americans, and children in the periphery.

As the turn of the century approached, the hierarchy began to break down. In an 1897 *Scribner's*, for instance, an engraving of "Wagons Distributing Evening Papers at Union Square, New York" shows a crowd of fifty-odd receiving copies (at least a dozen are shown in people's hands and many more in stacks) from white men, who stand (perhaps on boxes) head and shoulders above the audience (*Scribner's* 22: 455, see Leonard, 1995, p. 156). The distributors however, look down or away, while the most prominent readers, a white woman and a black man, occupy the foreground, dominating the image above the mass of newspaper pages in their hands, and they look out at the viewer of the engraving. The gaze of subjects in painting has special significance in the case of women. The downcast eyes of the nude made her body the object of male desire, and an odalisque (as such reclining figures are sometimes called) could be considered shocking for looking directly toward the viewer, challenging male dominance (an effect found in Eduard Manet's painting, *Olympia*, from the realist movement of the nineteenth century). In the case of the *Scribner's* illustration, the white men demurely attend to their holy office, distributing newspapers. In the new industrial hierarchy, men became subaltern.

Jack Delano's photograph of men reading headlines posted in the front windows of the newspaper office in Brockton (Figure 1) shows a practice that had existed at least since the use of the telegraph for news transmission. The readers, five men and a woman, are anonymous and

faceless, all looking away from the camera in long coats, their heads covered with hats. Every individual is reduced to a reading role, although the color of their skin is visible, and their gender can be surmised from their dress (trousers for men, exposed calves for the woman). The newspaper is giving away news but attracting readers who may want to know more. The newspaper office also houses a commercial printer whose sign, visible in the top of the frame, proffers Office Supplies. Reading happens en masse but not in a community. Each reader acts alone, suggesting an audience as a particulate substance composed of individuals who seek information and make separate decisions.



Figure 1. Jack Delano, “Men reading headlines in street-corner window of *Brockton Enterprise* office, Brockton, Mass.,” black and white photograph, Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Collection (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division LC-USF35-23), December 1940.

The audience as mass also emerged in the nineteenth century, as a component of the market. The publisher's newspaper was involved in the news business, and publishers used any means, including gimmicks and stunts with or without newsprint, to get attention, spread news, and sell more copies. To reach the largest audience, according to *Chicago Times* editor Wilbur Storey's famous dictum, publishers had two duties: to print news and raise hell. Alden Blethen, renegade publisher of *The Penny Paper* in Minneapolis, projected election returns in the early 1890s on the side of a building (see Boswell & McConaghy, 1996, p. 85). By beating the competition he participated in the culture of the scoop, which is widely misunderstood as a product of pure journalism, and not only that but also as one of its defining characteristics. In fact, the scoop mentality provided a natural-seeming ideological justification for bending men's activities to the purposes of commerce.

The audience standing in rapt attention provides the other side of that equation. News as an industrial product could hold the faceless masses captive. Its power was never shown more eloquently than on the street, where it arrested people from the flow of their private pursuits. In the picture they align their gaze, forming a cohesive visual unit: the reading public. The image, however, contains a contradiction, because a public attending to a message board without interacting is no public. In Arthur Rothstein's (1938) photograph of street reading at a newsstand, the steelworkers likewise look down, wearing hats. One man looks over the shoulder of another, but all three are engrossed in private reading. They too are faceless subjects — the self presented in industrial attire melded into an audience. In other words, industrial processes define and control them not only in work (steelmaking) but even in a moment of leisure (news reading).

Although actual moments of public reading would largely vanish in the modern period of news form, the image of the audience facing the authoritative source of information and

entertainment flowed through and covertly defined the relationship of news to audiences through much of the twentieth century. Movie viewers became a ubiquitous icon in the overt representations of audiences. The most memorable images come from the 1960s and show moviegoers wearing cardboard spectacles fitted with cellophane that were supposed to make the film look three-dimensional and by accident made the individuals look identical. The audience represented in this manner typifies the ways that form imposes its vision of the world and also reduces the supposed autonomous citizen into the atomized viewer.

Images of the mass audience represent one dimension of the media as an environment. In everyday life, the news represents aspects of experience that are far away or largely out of reach: the invisible regulations of Federal and state government, the inaccessible power of corporations, the unapproachable behavior of the non-conformist *other*, and the distant events in foreign countries. The form of news not only conveys a diorama of such things, it also contains the rules for representing them and for responding to them. Those rules enter the environment of news at the level of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

At the level of the microsystem, the individual reader encounters and makes reply to a host of other voices and images that seem to exist nearby: columnists, reporters, sports figures, politicians, and cartoon characters. Unlike face-to-face microsystems, where people confront the complexity and unpredictability of, say, co-workers, the media environment provides simpler personalities acting in repetitive and predictable ways. The fact that they arrive on paper or on screen does not make them seem less real or proximate to the viewer. Imaginary friends and enemies in the press fully engage the emotion, for example, sparking fear and anger as well as love and joy. Readers encounter them in the home (or other familiar place), and not in the indeterminate locations where their words originated.

A photograph from the Gottscho-Schleisner Collection depicts two such microsystems (Figure 4), the long-familiar newspaper and the then-novel television. Since television spread through the consumer market in the 1950s, domestic architecture has reconfigured living space to enhance the experience of viewing. A separate tee-vee-room (later rechristened a family room) provided the ideal conditions for entering into television space, a microsystem that best radiated its blue-gray shadows away from the light of day. Television allowed a surprising degree of social interaction among viewers — certainly more than movie theatres permitted. Here the two children watch together, and in anticipation of domestic rearrangements, a screen cuts them off from their father and shields the television from sunlight. Of course, the picture has the children staring absurdly at the test pattern and the father holding a much too neat and rigid newspaper in impossibly cramped quarters. The family acts out the separation of the generations and their media with all the stiffness of amateur thespians.



Figure 2. Hilda Kassell, East 53rd Street, New York City. “Father reading newspaper, two children viewing television,” black and white photograph, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection, (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division LC-G613-57609), July 12, 1950.

In fact newspapers allow and even encourage interaction — reading aloud, recounting, or expressing shock at events — but their representation has moved away from that role. Images of newspapers as an isolating environment emerged in the nineteenth century. Besides the cartoons with a father sitting behind the paper while children play, others dating from the Civil War point to the ways that newspapers sequester the reader. In one example from a children's book (*Universal*, 1863, n.p.), a soldier reclines in a rocker, reading news of the battle of Gettysburg from the *New York Herald*. Copies of newspapers lie strewn about: the *New York Ledger*, *Harper's Weekly*, *New York Daily News*, and others. Through the window soldiers can be seen training (a joke that might have escaped young readers of the *Universal Picture Book*). The newspaper blocks off the reading soldier's view of the real world outside, insulating him in the secluded microsystem of newspaper experiences. Similar images typically show a white man, slouching in a chair and surrounded by newspapers, completely engulfed in the news environment (and balancing precariously on a chair, see Leonard, 1995, pp. 10–11).

The form of news defines a topological region, one that provides both a panoramic view of the ideological climate of the day (the macrosystem) and a big easy chair (the microsystem) where a reader can spend time in the company of witnesses to and purveyors of those events. The two systems fit neatly together, like nested Russian dolls, along with other microsystems such as the family and mesosystems from the institutional environment. Newspapers array content and form to create tension between the shock of new, foreign, bizarre events and the friendly comfort of the micro-environment. Through its extended history, the representation of newspaper reading has moved decidedly away from the macrosystem to emphasize the microsystem. Newspaper reading is now a private affair, and although the change does not necessarily point to the demise of the medium, it does coincide with its abandonment of much of

the public spirited mission that animated newspapers earlier in U.S. history.

Computers have contributed to the move from public to private reading. Not only does each reader read alone; with an electronic newspaper each reads a different medium in a different environment. Electronic forms of news alter all the media environment from macrosystem to microsystem, changing the possibilities for interacting, despite the fact that Web news does not necessarily provide new vistas on the world or allow different voices to report on it.

Conclusion

An environmental approach shows how newspaper readers act within and help to construct a newspaper environment that is simultaneously an intimate world and a remote, idealized spectacle. The form of news structures in advance the options that readers negotiate for creating comfortable or meaningful microsystems. Newspaper form and content also contribute to mesosystems that allow integration of microsystems. The mode of production of the newspaper further defines how the news environment will work as an exosystem. And the newspaper ideal, along with the many ways that the news environment names and evaluates its typical content, embody a macrosystem. Of course, as we move in our analysis from microsystem to macrosystem, the range of agency that a reader can experience constricts.

We hope that this approach can help make sense out of the ironies in the position of citizens in the age of the corporate media. Although ever more powerful and efficient as transmitters of information, news media seem less apt to provide opportunities for happy citizenship. Every survey reveals a new depth of despair about public life. The environmental approach helps explain this paradox. The microsystemic comforts that newspaper form provides do not translate into macrosystemic outcomes or opportunities. The very success of news media at making an imagined intimate microsystem for readers means that they must confront their inability to speak

back to the political leaders who visit them in their living rooms.

Not that things used to be better. Our belief that the form of news makes a difference goes beyond any simple nostalgia for the idea of the newspaper, although we readily confess our personal histories and proclivities. We see our own citizenship playing out on the backdrop of news forms. We remember not only events but the look of those events in the press. As our aging memories become less crisp and vivid, what remains is the pattern of how things looked: the environment that newspapers created in which we experienced the affairs of the day.

That is not to say that we do not harbor optimism. We have dedicated time and energy to the project of documenting the changing form of news and to analyzing the creation of a news environment to alert readers and journalists to the ways power gets played out, with the expectation that awareness can motivate change. Sensitivity to environmental implications is called for at every level. Design decisions are more than mere cake decorating that disguises the substance of news, but instead add to and limit its nutritional value. Likewise, grand changes in media technology, ownership patterns, and law and ideology have always been experienced in the most personal alcoves of constructed microsystems.

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