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# The sociology of news production

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Social scientists who study the news speak a language that journalists mistrust and misunderstand. They speak of 'constructing the news', of 'making news', of the 'social construction of reality'. 'News is what newspapermen make it' (Gieber, 1964: 173). 'News is the result of the methods newswriters employ' (Fishman, 1980: 14). News is 'manufactured by journalists' (Cohen and Young, 1973: 97). Even journalists who are critical of the daily practices of their colleagues and their own organizations find this talk offensive. I have been at several conferences of journalists and social scientists where such language promptly pushed the journalists into a fierce defence of their work, on the familiar ground that they just report the world as they see it, the facts, facts, and nothing but the facts, and yes, there's occasional bias, occasional sensationalism, occasional inaccuracy, but a responsible journalist never, never, never fakes the news.

That's not what we said, the hurt scholars respond. We didn't say journalists *fake* the news, we said journalists *make* the news:

To say that a news report is a story, no more, but no less, is not to demean the news, not to accuse it of being fictitious. Rather, it alerts us that news, like all public documents, is a constructed reality possessing its own internal validity. (Tuchman, 1976: 97)

In the most elementary way, this is obvious. Journalists write the words that turn up in the papers or on the screen as stories. Not government officials, not cultural forces, not 'reality' magically

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transforming itself into alphabetic signs, but flesh-and-blood journalists literally compose the stories we call news. Once this is granted, social scientists say, all the rest follows. (Would you say that of science? the journalist might respond. Would you say that scientists 'make' science rather than 'discover' it or report it? Yes, the conscientious scholar must answer, we would say precisely that, and sociologists of science do say precisely that.)

This is not a point of view likely to make much headway with professional journalists. 'News and news programmes could almost be called random reactions to random events', a reporter told sociologist Graham Murdock. 'Again and again, the main reason why they turn out as they do is accident — accident of a kind which recurs so haphazardly as to defeat statistical examination' (1973: 163). The study of the generation of news aims to find and make plausible an order behind this sense of accident (and to understand as ideology journalists' failure to recognize such an order).

The sociology of the generation of news goes back some years. Max Weber wrote of the social standing of the journalist as a political person; Robert Park, an ex-journalist himself, wrote about the generation of news and news itself as a form of knowledge; and Helen MacGill Hughes wrote an early study of human interest stories. But the formal study of how news organizations produce news products dates to the American studies in the early 1950s of 'gatekeepers'.

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin coined the term 'gatekeeper', and several social scientists (White, 1950; Gieber, 1964) applied it to journalism. David Manning White studied a middle-aged wire editor at a small mid-western newspaper. He decided which wire service stories would run in the paper and which would not. For one week, 'Mr Gates' (as White called him) made available to the researcher every piece of wire copy, both those he rejected and those he selected to print in the paper. He then wrote down a reason for rejection on every story he rejected. Some of these reasons were not very illuminating — 'not enough space'. Others were technical or professional — 'dull writing' or 'drags too much'. Still others were explicitly political — 'propaganda' or 'He's too Red'. These last greatly influenced White's interpretation of gatekeeping although, in fact, explicitly political, opinionated reasons for rejection amounted to just eighteen out of 423 cases. Mr Gates admitted that he did not like Truman's economic

policies, that he was anti-Catholic, and that his views on these subjects affected his news judgement. So there was reason for White to conclude that 'we see how highly subjective, how based on the "gatekeeper's" own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations the communication of "news" really is.'

Can Mr Gates's judgement be attributed to personal subjectivity? If so, we would expect some variation among wire editors if a larger sample were studied. Walter Gieber found otherwise in a 1956 study of sixteen wire editors in Wisconsin (Gieber, 1964). All selected news items in essentially the same way. Gieber found the telegraph editor to be

preoccupied with the mechanical pressures of his work rather than the social meanings and impact of the news. His personal evaluations rarely entered into his selection process; the values of his employer were an accepted part of the newsroom environment.

The telegraph editor, then, was not practising politics in selecting the news. He was doing a rote task. He was, as Gieber reported, 'concerned with goals of production, bureaucratic routine and interpersonal relations within the newsroom' (1964: 175).

The term 'gatekeeper' is still in use and provides a handy, if not altogether appropriate, metaphor for the relation of news organizations to news products. A problem with the metaphor is that it leaves 'information' sociologically untouched, a pristine material that comes to the gate already prepared; the journalist as 'gatekeeper' simply decides which pieces of prefabricated news will be allowed through the gate. The gatekeeper's job, then, is necessarily quantitative, reducing the amount of information available to a sum that fits the size of a paper or length of a news show. Moreover, the metaphor individualizes a bureaucratic phenomenon and implicitly transforms organizational bias into individual subjectivity, as Gieber's study points out. Gieber's analysis is actually a refutation of White's.

A 'gatekeeper' needs some criteria for selecting which items of information to let through the gate, which to hold back. But this underestimates the complexity of the situation; news items are not simply selected but constructed. The gatekeeper metaphor describes neither this nor the feedback loops in which generators of information for the press anticipate the criteria of the gatekeepers in their efforts to get through the gate, like teenagers trying to figure out how best to talk and look in order to get

admitted to X-rated movies or establishments that serve liquor. How do you 'pass' as an adult? How do you get a piece of information to 'pass' as news? The whole industry of public relations, which after the First World War emerged as a major intermediary between government and business on the one hand, and journalism on the other (Schudson, 1978), trades on its expertise in knowing how to construct items that 'pass'.

If the gatekeeper model is ultimately as confused as it is suggestive, what approaches might work better? Three perspectives on the topic are commonly employed. The first is the view of political economy that relates the outcome of the news process to the economic structure of the news organization. Everything in between is a black box that need not be examined in order to understand the fundamental consonance between profit-seeking industry and conservative, system-maintaining news. This view appears in its most theoretically sophisticated and self-critical form in British media studies (Murdock, 1982).

The second approach is that of mainstream sociology, the study of social organization and the sociology of occupations and occupational ideology that, unlike the standard political economy perspective, takes as the central problem the journalists' professed autonomy and decision-making power and tries to understand how journalists' efforts on the job are constrained by organizational and occupational routines.

Third, but rarely explicitly developed, there is a 'culturological' or anthropological approach, if you will, one that emphasizes the constraining force of broad cultural symbol systems regardless of the details of organizational and occupational routines. There are also semiotic analyses of journalism and journalistic ideologies that might well fit under this rubric but they often fail to make precise what their explanatory scheme actually is.

All three of these approaches have strengths and weaknesses I want to discuss here. All of them, even taken together, have thus far fallen short of a comparative and historical social science of news production.

### **The political economy of news**

This perspective is often characterized and caricatured as 'conspiracy theory' or as a rather simple-minded notion that there is a ruling directorate of the capitalist class that dictates to editors and

reporters what to run in the newspapers. (Note that sociologists of news have examined almost exclusively news in capitalist societies. This is obviously a limitation to any comprehensive understanding of news.) Since this ignores the observable fact that reporters often initiate stories of their own, that editors rarely meet with publishers, and that most working journalists have no idea who sits on the board of directors of the institutions they work for, in this form the political economy perspective is easily dismissed. However, its more sophisticated versions not only add to but are essential to an understanding of the generation of news.

Here, as elsewhere, a key issue is what aspect of 'news' one wants to explain or understand. Is it the conservative, system-maintaining character of news? This is more often than not the feature of news that political economy scholars focus on — but there are many other possibilities. One of them, of course, appears to be the exact opposite — the press has sometimes been characterized as adversarial or even nihilistic, system attacking or system denigrating, government toppling or crime promoting. In other cases, there are finer features of news that analysts want to understand. Why does news seem to focus on individuals rather than systems and structures? Why does news appear to be so heavily dependent on official sources? Or analysts may focus on features of the literary character of news — why is there a 'summary lead' rather than a chronological opening to a news story? Why is a television sound bite in American network news usually no more than ten or fifteen seconds long? Why do city hall reporters summarize the highlights of official meetings rather than report the whole, often disorganized and desultory proceedings — and what consequences are there to thereby 'rationalizing' the portrait of the political process? (Paletz, et al., 1971). Perhaps the most complex question of 'what to explain' concerns whether one should find distressing, and try to explain, the deviation of the media from 'fair' and 'objective' reporting or, instead, should find disturbing and try to understand how it is that 'fair', 'objective' reporting presents a portrait of the world in tune with the view of dominant groups in society. Thus critics have objected to the Glasgow Media Group's studies for its castigation of television news for bias when the more important point may be that broadcast news programmes 'achieve their ideological effectivity *precisely through* their observation of the *statutory* requirements of balance and impartiality' (Bennett, 1982: 306).

The 'political economy' approach generally does not attend to

fine-grained questions but looks at the big picture. This is both its strength and its weakness. The link between the larger political economy of society and day-to-day practices in journalism is, as Graham Murdock has observed, 'oblique'. Still, he concludes, and despite journalistic autonomy, 'the basic definition of the situation which underpins the news reporting of political events, very largely coincides with the definition provided by the legitimated power holders' (1973: 158).

For an American, that kind of conclusion was a lot easier to come to before Watergate than after. As Peter Dreier (1982) observes, much of the interest in institutional or organizational-level analysis of the news emerged in the late 1960s because 'instrumental' perspectives from political economy did not seem to describe current media activism. While one can still argue that the outcome of Watergate was just what legitimated power holders in some circles wanted, it stretches the concept of 'legitimated power holders' to the breaking point if a two-term president at the centre of political life in Washington for two decades, is not among the power holders. (It is also a problem, as Dreier [1982] observes, to understand why, if the large corporations and the media work hand-in-glove, the corporations in the early 1970s should have been aghast at the media coverage of politics, the environment and business.)

At the same time, there is normally little problem in demonstrating that, at least in broad terms, news 'coincides with' and 'reinforces' the 'definition of the political situation evolved by the political elite' (Murdock, 1973: 172). The behaviour of the American press in questioning the Vietnam war can be understood as happening only because the political elite was divided much more profoundly than it ordinarily is. Even then, the press seems largely to have gone about its normal business of citing official leaders; it just so happened that the officials were at odds with one another (Hallin, 1986).

For understanding the broad outlines of the news product, economic or political-economic explanations are often well suited. Curran et al. ask why elite and mass-oriented newspapers provide such different fare, when reader surveys find that different classes in fact prefer to read very similar materials. Their explanation centres on the value to advertisers of advertising in papers that attract a small, concentrated elite audience. The expense of having an ad reach what American advertisers now call an 'upscale'

audience is lower if a concentration of this audience can be found in one publication — without having to pay the cost of reaching thousands of extraneous readers.

It is true that American media corporations are interlocked with other major corporations (Dreier and Weinberg, 1979). It is equally true that fewer and fewer corporations control more and more of the American news media (Compaine, 1979; Bagdikian, 1983). In these circumstances it would be a shock to find the press a hotbed of radical thought. But, then, critical or radical thought in any society at any time is exceptional. That there could be a moment of critical upheaval in American society and in the American media in the late 1960s raises doubts about any political-economic perspective that attributes power of Orwellian proportion to the capitalist class. The abilities of a capitalist class to manipulate opinion and create a closed system of discourse are limited; ideology in contemporary capitalism is 'contested territory', as many analysts have observed.

The most recent and comprehensive statement of a political-economic perspective in the United States is Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). They offer what they call a 'propaganda model' of the mass media, the view that the media 'serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity' (1988: xi). For them, news serves established power and, although they recognize some variability in the American press, they do not locate any essential difference between the role of leading news institutions in the United States and *Pravda* in the Soviet Union (judging from half a dozen instances where they directly liken the American press to *Pravda*). For them, this follows necessarily from the fact that the news is produced by a relatively concentrated industry of several dozen profit-making corporations, that the industry is dependent on advertising for its profits, that it is dependent on government officials for its sources, that it is intimidated by right-wing pressure groups, and that it is imbued with anti-communist ideology. Their 'propaganda model' is a rather blunt instrument for examining a subtle system, a system with more heterogeneity and more capacity for change (however limited that capacity) than they give it credit for. Their documented examples of American foreign affairs reporting distorted by an anti-communist consensus remain quite powerful, although not so careful, it seems to me, as Daniel Hallin's evidence that news coverage of Central America (one of



the key cases Herman and Chomsky take up) has been less dominated by an anti-communist frame of reference than foreign affairs reporting a generation earlier (Hallin, 1983).

If there is serious ideological contestation (as Herman and Chomsky would deny), how does it take place? What institutional mechanisms or cultural traditions or contradictions of power provide room for debate and revision? The political economy perspective typically does not say. Intent on establishing connections among different key social institutions, political economy generally fails to describe formally what the disconnections are. In contrast, Daniel Hallin, borrowing from the work of Jurgen Habermas, has argued that the media are formally 'disconnected' from other ruling agencies because they must attend as much to their own legitimation as to furthering the legitimation of the capitalist system as a whole (Hallin, 1985). If they fail to attend to their own integrity and their own credibility with audiences they may in fact 'simply become ineffective ideological institutions'. This, I suspect, is exactly what has happened to official media in eastern Europe; readers there are famous for recognizing that the only reading worth doing is reading 'between the lines'. In any event, the weaknesses in the political economy perspective lead necessarily to greater scholarly attention to the social organization of the newswork and the actual practices of creating the news product.

### **The social organization of newswork**

In an influential essay (1974), Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester created a typology of news stories according to whether a news 'occurrence' is planned or unplanned, and whether the planners of the occurrence are or are not also the promoters of it as news. If an event is planned and then promoted as news by its planners, this is a 'routine' news item. If the event is planned but promoted by someone different from the agent of the occurrence, it is a 'scandal'. If the event is unplanned and then promoted as news by someone other than its hapless instigator, it is an 'accident'.

This typology defines news by the way it comes to the awareness of a news organization. In none of the three news types is the occurrence a spontaneous event in the world that the news media discover on their own by surveying the world scene. For Molotch

and Lester, it is a mistake to try to compare news accounts to 'reality' in the way journalism critics ordinarily do, labelling the discrepancy 'bias'. Instead, they seek out the purposes that create one reality instead of another. The news provides a 'reality' that is 'the political work by which events are constituted by those who happen to currently hold power' (1974: 111). Molotch and Lester reject what they call the 'objectivity assumption' in journalism — not that the media are objective but that there is a real world to be objective about. For Molotch and Lester, newspapers reflect not a world 'out there' but 'the practices of those who have the power to determine the experiences of others' (1974: 54).

In what might these practices consist?

Mark Fishman conducted a participant-observation study of newspaper work in a California newspaper with a daily circulation of 45,000 and a full-time editorial staff of thirty-seven (Fishman, 1980). He finds that journalists are highly attuned to bureaucratic organizations of government and that '*the world is bureaucratically oriented for journalists*' (1980: 51). That is, the organization of 'beats' is such that reporters get the largest share of their news from official government agencies. 'The journalist's view of the society as bureaucratically structured is the very basis upon which the journalist is able to detect events' (1980: 51). One of the greatest advantages of dealing with bureaucracies for the journalist is that the bureaucracies 'provide for the continuous detection of events' (1980: 52). The bureaucrat provides a reliable and steady source of news.

One study after another comes up with essentially the same observation, and it matters not whether the study is at the national, state, or local level — the story of journalism, on a day-to-day basis, is the story of the interaction of reporters and officials. Some claim officials generally have the upper hand (Gans, 1979: 116; Cohen, 1963: 267). Some media critics, including many government officials, say reporters do (Hess 1984:109). But there is little doubt that the centre of news generation is the link between reporter and official, the interaction of the representatives of the news bureaucracies and the government bureaucracies. This is clear especially when one examines the actual daily practices of journalists. 'The only important tool of the reporter is his news sources and how he uses them', a reporter covering state government told Delmer Dunne (1963: 41). Stephen Hess confirms this in his study of Washington

correspondents that found reporters had conducted 3967 interviews for 865 stories sampled and that Washington reporters 'use no documents in the preparation of nearly three-quarters of their stories' (Hess, 1981: 17–18). Hess does not count press releases as documents — these are, of course, another means of communication directly from official to reporter. Knowing sources, Gaye Tuchman observed, is a mark of professional status for a reporter. She cites one reporter as saying of another, 'He's the best political reporter in the city. He has more sources than anyone else' (1978: 68). It is clear that the reporter–official connection makes news an important tool of government and other established authorities. The corollary is that 'resource-poor organizations' have great difficulty in getting news coverage (Goldenberg, 1975). If they are to be covered, as Todd Gitlin's study of SDS indicated, they must adjust to modes of organizational interaction more like those of established organizations (Gitlin, 1980).

There has been much more attention to reporter–official relations than to reporter–editor relations, a second critical aspect of the social organization of newswork. Despite some suggestive early work on the ways in which reporters engage in self-censorship when they have an eye fixed on pleasing an editor (Breed, 1955: 80), systematic sociological research has not been especially successful in this domain. Certainly case studies of newswork regularly note the effects — usually baleful — of editorial intervention (Crouse, 1973: 186; Gitlin, 1980: 64–5; Hallin, 1986: 22). But studies rarely look at the social relations of newswork from an editor's view. Most research focuses on the gathering of news rather than on its writing, rewriting, and 'play' in the press.

This is particularly unfortunate when research suggests that it is in the *play* of a story that real influence comes. Hallin (1986), Herman and Chomsky (1988) and Lipstadt (1986) all argue that in the press of a liberal society like the United States lots of news, including dissenting or adversarial information and opinion, gets into the newspaper. The question is *where* that information appears and how it is inflected. Hallin interestingly suggests there was a 'reverse inverted pyramid' of news in much Vietnam reporting. The nearer the information was to the truth, the farther down in the story it appeared (1986: 78).

If one theoretical source for the sociology of news has been symbolic interactionism or social constructionist views of society (as in the work of Molotch and Lester, Tuchman and others), a

complementary source has been organizational or bureaucratic theory. If, on the one hand, the creation of news is seen as the social production of 'reality', on the other hand it is taken to be the social manufacture of an organizational product, one that can be studied like other manufactured goods. This latter point of view is evident, for instance, in Edward Jay Epstein's early study (1973) that grew out of a political science seminar at Harvard on organizational theory. That seminar took as its working assumption that members of the organization 'modified their own personal values in accordance with the requisites of the organization' (1973: xiv). One needed then to understand organizations, not individuals, to analyse the 'output' of organizations — in this case, news. Epstein's study, based on fieldwork at national network news programmes in 1968 and 1969, emphasized organizational, economic and technical requirements of television news production in explaining the news product. Epstein's study, like many others, finds the technical constraints of television news particularly notable. These, of course, have changed radically and rapidly in the past two decades — a serious historical account of this technological revolution remains to be written.

Who are the journalists who cover beats, interview sources, rewrite press releases from government bureaus and rarely (but occasionally) take the initiative in ferreting out hidden or complex stories? If the organizational theorists are generally correct, it does not matter who they are or where they come from; they will be socialized quickly into the values and routines in the daily rituals of journalism. Still, there is great interest among some scholars in determining what the social backgrounds of media personnel may be as clues to the kind of bias they will bring to their work. In the United States this has led to controversy over whether news workers are (too) 'liberal', in the peculiarly American sense of that term, or not. Studies by S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter, culminating in *The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers* (1986) make the case that news in the United States is 'biased' in a liberal direction because journalists at the elite news organizations are themselves liberal. Their survey of 240 elite journalists finds a pattern familiar from earlier work — that many of these journalists describe themselves as liberals and tend to vote Democratic. They argue that these national journalists are a 'homogeneous' liberal, cosmopolitan band with growing wealth and power. 'Homogeneous', however, does not describe a group

in which 54 percent describe themselves as liberal, 46 percent as moderate or conservative (Lichter et al., 1986: 28). The group is more socially liberal (53 percent say adultery is not wrong) than economically liberal (only 13 percent think government should own big corporations). The journalists are not the 'liberals' that the Lichters and Rothman sneeringly suggest. They fully accept the framework of capitalism although some of them wish it had a human face. They may be better termed, as Herbert Gans characterized them in his own participant-observation study of elite journalists, 'Progressive' (1985).

The real problem in Rothman and Lichters' approach is that it offers no convincing evidence that the news product reflects the personal views of journalists rather than the views of officials whose positions they are reporting (Gans, 1985). Journalists are avowedly and often passionately committed to their ideology of dispassion, their sense of professionalism, their allegiance to fairness or objectivity as it has been professionally defined. They have a professional commitment to shielding their work from their personal political leanings. Moreover, their political leanings may be weak. Several observers find leading American journalists not so much liberal or conservative as apolitical. Robinson and Sheehan (1983) interviewed CBS and UPI reporters and found that most seemed to be moderates or just not very political. Stephen Hess came to a similar conclusion in studying Washington reporters: 'Washington reporters are more apolitical than press critics contend. The slant of Washington news is more a product of the angle from which it is observed than from ideology' (1981: 115).

What is fundamental in organizational approaches, as opposed to the social-compositional approach of Rothman and the Lichters, is the emphasis on (a) constraints imposed by organizations despite the private intentions of the individual actors and (b) the inevitability of 'social construction' of reality in any system. The latter point is crucial. Many (though not all) analysts from a social-organizational perspective abandon any strong claim that there is a 'reality' out there that journalists or journalistic organizations distort. News is not a report on a factual world; news is 'a depletable consumer product that must be made fresh daily' (Tuchman, 1978: 179). It is not a gathering of facts that already exists; indeed, as Tuchman has argued, facts are defined organizationally — facts are 'pertinent information gathered by profession-

ally validated methods specifying the relationship between what is known and how it is known. In news, verification of facts is both a political and a professional accomplishment' (1978: 82–3).

### **Culturological approaches**

For Molotch and Lester and Tuchman, the fact that news is 'constructed' suggests that it is *socially* constructed, elaborated in the interaction of the news-making players with one another. But the emphasis on the human construction of news can be taken in another direction. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has written in a different context that 'an event is not just a happening in the world; it is a *relation* between a certain happening and a given symbolic system' (1985: 153). Molotch and Lester, Tuchman, and others who emphasize the 'production of culture' do not focus on the 'cultural givens' within which everyday interaction happens in the first place. These cultural givens, while they may be uncovered by detailed historical analysis, cannot be linked to features of social organization at the moment of study. They are a part of culture — a given symbolic system, within which and in relation to which reporters and officials go about their duties.

This 'cultural' perspective on the news has not been codified nor established as any sort of 'school'. Indeed, I think that most understandings of the generation of news merge a 'cultural' view (or submerge it) with the social organization view. It is, however, analytically distinct. Where the organizational view finds interactional determinants of news in the relations between people, the cultural view finds symbolic determinants of news in the relations between ideas and symbols. This does not mean that the culturologist must repair to universal categories — although this is one possibility. Frank Pearce, for instance, in examining media coverage of homosexuals in Britain (1973), takes as a theoretical starting point anthropologist Mary Douglas's view that societies like to keep their cultural concepts clean and neat and are troubled by 'anomalies' that do not fit the preconceived categories of the culture. Homosexuality is an anomaly in societies that take as fundamental the opposition and relationship of male and female; thus homosexuals provide a culturally charged topic for storytelling that seeks to preserve or reinforce the conventional moral order of society — and its conceptual or symbolic foundation.

News stories about homosexuals, Pearce says, may be moral tales, 'a negative reference point . . . an occasion to reinforce conventional moral values by telling a moral tale. Through these means tensions in the social system can be dealt with and "conventionalized"' (1973: 293).

If Mary Douglas is one theoretical reference point for Pearce, Sigmund Freud is another (though unstated). Pearce cites R.D. Laing's observation that people enjoy reading the kind of material to be found in the sensational press because it enables them vicariously to experience pleasurable feelings they are otherwise forbidden to discuss or imagine. 'These pleasurable sensations that we have denied but not annihilated', Pearce writes, 'may be lived through again by means of the sensational newspaper' (1973: 291).

Incidentally, this sort of observation brings into the analysis the news institutions' sense of their audience, something relatively rare in the sociology of news. Of course, there is a large literature in communication studies on the 'uses and gratifications' audiences get from the mass media. But these studies are rarely invoked by analysts to explain why we get the sort of news we do. Is this an important omission? Perhaps not, because journalists typically know very little about their audience. Herbert Gans found that the reporters and editors at news weeklies and network television programmes he studied

had little knowledge about the actual audience and rejected feedback from it. Although they had a vague image of the audience, they paid little attention to it; instead, they filmed and wrote for their superiors and for themselves, assuming . . . that what interested them would interest the audience. (1979: 230)

(But this may be an area where more research would help.)

Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband find it important for their analysis of mass media coverage of racial conflict to note that 'The British cultural tradition contains elements derogatory to foreigners, particularly blacks. The media operate within the culture and are obliged to use cultural symbols' (1973: 274). This is presumably true regardless of the ownership of the media or the social relations of reporters and officials. This is a cultural, rather than social, line of explanation.

A culturalist account of news would seem relevant when trying to understand journalists' vague renderings of how they know



'news' when they see it. Stuart Hall, in his essay on news photographs, tried to define the indefinable 'news values' or 'news sense' that journalists regularly talk about. He writes:

'News values' are one of the most opaque structures of meaning in modern society. All 'true journalists' are supposed to possess it: few can or are willing to identify and define it. Journalists speak of 'the news' as if events select themselves. Further, they speak as if which is the 'most significant' news story, and which 'news angles' are most salient are divinely inspired. Yet of the millions of events which occur every day in the world, only a tiny portion ever become visible as 'potential news stories'; and of this proportion, only a small fraction are actually produced as the day's news in the news media. We appear to be dealing, then, with a 'deep structure' whose function as a selective device is un-transparent even to those who professionally most know how to operate it. (1973: 181)

This seems to me exactly right. And Gaye Tuchman is equally correct when she writes that 'news judgment is the sacred knowledge, the secret ability of the newsman which differentiates him from other people' (1972: 672). The question is what to make of it. It seems to me too simple, though common now, to label this as 'ideology' or the 'common sense' of a hegemonic system. It makes of human beliefs and attitudes a more unified, intentional and functional system than they are. Many beliefs that ruling groups may use for their own ends are rooted much more deeply in human consciousness and are to be found much more widely in human societies than capitalism or socialism or industrialism or any other modern system of social organization and domination. Patriarchal and sexist outlooks, for instance, may well be turned to the service of capitalism, but this does not make them 'capitalist' in origin nor does it mean that they are perfectly or inherently homologous to capitalist structures or requirements for their preservation.

A specific example may illustrate the many dimensions of this problem. Why, Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge (1970) ask, are news stories so often 'personified'? Why do reporters write of persons and not structures, of individuals and not social forces? They cite a number of possible explanations, some of which are 'cultural'. There is cultural idealism — the western view that individuals are masters of their own destiny, responsible for their acts through the free will they exercise. There is the nature of storytelling itself, with the need in narrative to establish 'identification'. There is also what they call the 'frequency factor' — that



people act during a time span that fits the frequency of the news media (daily) better than do the actions of 'structures' that are much harder to connect with specific events in a 24-hour cycle.

This last point is particularly interesting. Is it a 'social structural' or a 'cultural' phenomenon? In some respects it is structural — if the media operated monthly or annually rather than daily, perhaps they would more customarily speak of social forces. Indeed, examining journalism's 'year-end reviews' would very likely turn up more attention to social trends and structural changes than the daily news. But, then, is the fact that so much of the press operates on a daily basis for the most part structural or cultural? Is there some basic primacy to the daily cycle of the press, of business, of government, of sleeping and waking, that makes the institutions of daily journalism essentially human and person-centred in scale and inescapably so?

Or might there be some more or less universal processes of human perception that leads to an emphasis on the individual? Does this have less to do with something peculiarly American or western or capitalist than it does with what psychologists refer to as the 'fundamental attribution error' in human causal thinking — attributing to individuals in the foreground responsibility or agency for causation that should be attributed to background situations or large-scale trends or structures?

One need not adopt assumptions about universal properties of human nature and human interest (although it would be foolish to dismiss them out of hand) to acknowledge aspects of news-generation that go far beyond what political, economic or sociological analysis of news organizations can handle. Richard Hoggart has written that the most important filter through which news is constructed is 'the cultural air we breathe, the whole ideological atmosphere of our society, which tells us that some things can be said and others had best not be said' (Bennett, 1982: 303). That 'cultural air' is one that in part ruling groups and institutions create but it is in part one in whose context their own establishment takes place.

The cultural air has both a form and content. The content — the substance of taken-for-granted values — has often been discussed. Gans (1979) arrived at a list for American journalism that includes ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, and moderation as core, unquestioned values of American news. They are the

unquestioned and generally unnoticed background assumptions through which the news is gathered and within which it is framed. If these elements of content fit rather well conventional notions of ideology or the common sense of a hegemonic system (Gans calls them 'para-ideology'), aspects of form operate at a level more remote from ideology as generally understood.

By 'form', I refer to assumptions about narrative, storytelling, human interest, and the conventions of photographic and linguistic presentation that shape the presentation of all of the news the media produce. Weaver (1975) has shown some systematic differences between the inverted-pyramid structure of print news and the 'thematic' structure of television news; Schudson (1982) has argued that the inverted-pyramid form is a peculiar development of late nineteenth-century American journalism and one that implicitly authorized the journalist as political expert and helped redefine politics itself as a subject appropriately discussed by experts rather than partisans; Hallin and Mancini (1984) demonstrate in a comparison of television news in Italy and the United States that formal conventions of news reporting often attributed to the technology of television by analysts or to 'the nature of things' by journalists in fact stem from peculiar features of the political culture of the country in question. At any rate, sociological work that recognizes news as a form of literature makes an important contribution, demonstrating that one key resource which journalists work with is the cultural tradition of storytelling and picture-making and sentence construction they inherit, with a number of vital assumptions about the world built in.

## Conclusions

The approaches to the study of news I have reviewed are often inclined to ignore the possibilities for change in the nature of newswork. When William Rivers studied Washington correspondents in 1960, a generation after Leo Rosten had studied them, asking some of the same questions Rosten had asked, he found significant differences. Most important, he found reporters more free from directives from their home offices than they had been in the 1930s. When Leon Sigal studied changes in the front pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* he found that from the 1950s to the early 1970s news stories were significantly more

likely to be based on more than one source and to include material gathered from (sometimes disaffected or dissident) bureaucrats lower down in the organizational hierarchy. My own research found that in the 1880s news stories of presidential addresses did not try to summarize the key points of a speech but that by 1910 a 'summary lead' was a standard form, an assertion, in a sense, of the authority of the press to *define* the key political reality of the day. Anthony Smith (1980) found major changes in the nature of newswork in British journalism in his review of changes in journalistic values and practices. In general, historical studies of the press reveal significantly different patterns of newsgathering and newswriting over time that are rarely referenced or accounted for in contemporary sociological studies of news.

All three approaches reviewed here tend to be indifferent to comparative as well as to historical studies. Even the Anglo-American interchange this journal has helped to foster is reluctant to engage in truly comparative work. Comparative research is cumbersome, of course, even in the age of word processors and computer networking. Moreover, media studies are genuinely linked to national political issues — they are an academic meta-discourse on the daily defining of political reality. The motive for research, then, is normally conceived in isolation from comparative concerns. If this strengthens the immediate political relevance of media studies, it weakens its longer-term value as social science.

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