Sociology of News

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"What makes news?" is the classic question at the heart of the sociology of news.

Since World War II, the field has progressed from the simple response that "news is what the 'newspaperman' says it is" to trying to account for a range of explanatory factors. These can be usefully thought of as a "hierarchy of influences," (Reese 2001) starting with an individual's personal attitudes and biases but adding other, more systemic layers that include professional routines, organizational structures and other institutional relationships, as well as the broader social and cultural environment.

This research regarding the influences *on* news, although growing, has attracted some of the attention traditionally paid to the more dominant questions concerning the influences *of* news.

Development of the Idea

A number of historical factors account for this imbalance of attention. The working-class background of most pre-WWII journalists made the newsroom seem like a less worthy object of serious scholarly attention when compared to other institutions. The notion that news simply holds up a mirror to society (now less defensible) also worked to make the sociology of news seem unnecessary.

Beginning in the 1950s Warren Breed (1955) and David Manning White (1950) were among the first scholars to break with the media effects tradition and examine the

influences on news, with their examinations, respectively, of social control in the newsroom and the story selections based on an editor's subjectivity, described as the news "gatekeeper." Their careful observations helped move beyond the anecdotal insider accounts, provided in prominent journalists' memoirs, to examine patterns of gatekeeping decisions.

But others did not follow their lead until much later, a peculiar omission considering the subversive insights that news is, in White's terms, "what the gatekeeper says it is" and Breed's finding that organizational policy was used to screen out certain happenings from getting into the newspaper—particularly if they ran afoul of the publisher's partisan leanings.

Jane Ballinger and I (Reese and Ballinger 2001) took a closer look at these forerunner studies to understand why they did not provoke greater attention. The reason lay in how the findings were interpreted within the field at that time: The gatekeepers were deemed to be representatives of the larger culture, and news policies were assumed to help identify as news those events of interest to the community.

Both views effectively rendered the production and control issues unthreatening to the public interest and, as a result, less interesting to researchers.

Eventually, however, these questions returned to the fore, particularly amid growing public skepticism about the performance of media and awareness of their corporate and technological constraints.

Ironically, this attention came from outside the communication field itself. In the 1970s, a cluster of newsroom studies emerged using the techniques of fieldwork sociology. Based on firsthand observation and interviews, these ethnographies of local

and national media are still the kinds of studies most identified with the sociology of news (Fishman 1980; Gans 1979; Gitlin 1980; Tuchman 1978). The close-hand observation of newswork helped determine what actually happens in the process of doing journalism, compared to what professionals *say* happens or what can be inferred simply from examining the final product.

Professional Practice and Identity

The focus on production not only opened up a location for research but also brought a way of thinking about the process that yields interesting questions. One of the often-cited early studies of television news by Bantz and his colleagues (Bantz, McCorkle and Baade 1981) likened the newsroom to a factory, a label unlikely to yield a positive professional self-image. The comparison is apt, however, to the extent that the work flow in traditional newsrooms is set up in assembly-line fashion, with each worker having limited control over the final product (and being easily replaced from a national talent pool).

Indeed, the notion of professional identity has been a recurring theme, with surveys of journalists providing important clues to changes over time. Weaver and his colleagues (Weaver et al. 2007) have ~~surveyed repeatedly a~~described this national group of 120,000 professionals with significant "editorial responsibility" over news, with repeated surveys asking how strongly they identify with the roles of "disseminator," "adversary" and "interpreter" (and more recently "populist mobilizer"). The interpretive role is on the rise since 1982, particularly among online journalists.

Of course, the characteristics of these professionals matter in explaining the work they produce, but the sociology of newswork reminds us not to overestimate it.

As a conceptual tool, the hierarchy of influences helps sort out criticisms of news from citizens and their associated media watchdog groups. Liberal critics find fault at the level of ownership, citing the cozy relationships they perceive journalists to have with powerful elites. Critics on the right are more likely to blame individual journalists for being too liberal and out of touch with the American public. Ironically, journalists themselves give this latter critique a significant amount of attention and respect, given that it grants them at least their professional autonomy.

In the public arena, where the journalistic process is skewered by both serious and comic analysts (for instance, on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*) and where ideology often dictates one's critique of news media performance, academic research in the sociology of news helps show how these levels play off against each other. Under which conditions are certain factors most influential? Which of these factors are gaining over time as the news media environment changes?

Insights

Unlike subfields such as media economics, with direct practical implications for news operations and products, the sociology of news offers more general insights for the professional and more possibilities for reform. A sociological approach reminds us how important routines are in structuring news, how rooted in local communities they are, and how invisible those routines often seem to news decision-makers.

For example, news relies on official voices, with public voices becoming visible mainly through deviant acts of protest and criminality. But connecting patterns of racial coverage to news routines shows evidence of "modern racism": Research indicates that when compared to similar white criminal defendants, blacks are more likely to be shown in the grasp of police, unidentified, not moving, and in prison garb—in short, dehumanized (Entman 1990).

Thinking about news as a product like any other brings important insights as well. Our cultural and professional ideas of news make many people resistant to regarding it as a predictable commodity. News, after all, is often unexpected, so how can it be routinized? The sociology of news assumes that it must, of course, if the organization is to function.

The news "net" and rhythms of daily journalism as it engages with other bureaucracies make for a certain predictability and, less positively, renders some events and voices largely invisible. Not surprisingly, journalists develop shortcuts, judgments and assumptions as they apply news values.

Studies in this area, however, help us understand when those assumptions are legitimately helpful in carrying out a complex task and when they simply serve as rationalizations for some other motivation. Tuchman (1972), for example, considers how newswriters include balancing sources and quotations as a "strategic ritual" to ward off criticism, rather than as a technique for revealing the truth.

Changes

The objects of study in this area have undergone profound changes in recent years, particularly as communication technology has made it harder to identify "the media," "the profession" and the site of "production." The media are converging, boundaries between professionals and citizen journalists are fading, and newsroom decisions are often made at a distance.

The sociology of news must now take into account more informal and *ad hoc* organizational news assemblages, such as those by independent citizen groups. And it must track the interrelationships of the "professional" media with the blogosphere, showing they stand in a complementary, interlocking—and not competitive—relationship (Reese et al. 2007).

Economic boundaries also have changed. One of Gans' (1979) early insights was that economic considerations did not determine the news but set general constraints within which news managers had to operate, giving little thought to how profitable a particular story would be. Now, of course, economic considerations are built into these decisions. Similarly, he found that journalists typically wrote not with an audience in mind but for their sources and other journalists. With sophisticated metrics of audience traffic, the news user is now never far from the editor's mind.

The academic study of news "production" faces a number of obstacles. There is the difficulty of fieldwork itself, which requires significant investment of time and energy. Researchers find it difficult to get access to media companies, which are increasingly sensitive to scrutiny and public criticism in general. That trend has been made worse by corporatization and consolidation of ownership, which leads to greater image discipline.

In the last several years, however, news professionals and university researchers have been able to approach each other in a greater spirit of collaborative discovery.

With the collapse of the newspaper industry, converging of online journalism, and resulting professional anxieties, a new wave of ethnographic research has come on the scene (Paterson and Domingo 2008). These organizations look quite different from the ones studied in the 1970s, but research shows they have not necessarily become more active in journalistic investigation or in taking advantage of the interactivity available online.

The outcomes of news convergence are not always easily predicted (Singer 2008). Online journalists are often regarded as counter-cultural or even second-class citizens within news companies, although no doubt this will change as the Internet becomes a dominant form of delivery. The sociology of online news production shows how the tension between the professional logic of control and the participatory logic of the new interactive media are being negotiated.

These projects on such vital questions, often conducted by former journalists, share close-up narratives and interviews from the frontlines of newsroom changes, making them useful and accessible to members of the public and the profession.

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