

Managing the symbolic arena: The media sociology of Herbert Gans

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Given the importance of the news media in managing the symbolic arena of society, a sizeable body of research has accumulated that considers how that arena is constructed. Klaus Schönbach has touched on this area in his recent entry in the *Encyclopedia of Communication*, in which he questioned how news organizations were led to "synchronize" their news reports to conform to editorial policy, getting journalists to conform to their rules through a number of mechanisms (Schoenbach, 2008). Such questions have led to other Schönbach concerns with news quality and public service norms, and empirical work on characteristics of journalists, their self-concept, interactions with politicians, and the larger structure and social situation of the profession. Within this range of concerns, I focus here on a particular form of research into news media performance, the ethnographic study of journalistic organizations and news institutions, a kind of investigation for a time in decline in U.S. sociology but advocated anew by Klinenberg (2005). Indeed, the shift of news production online seems to have generated a new wave of this kind of research (Boczkowski, 2004; Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Singer, 2006). Thus, this is an opportune time to reflect on the received wisdom, and the particular strengths and weaknesses of the perspective.

Ironically, it took sociologists straying into the communication field to take the news media seriously enough to ask the basic questions of how news gets made, and the end of the 1970s marked a significant number of such works that considered how news is shaped as an organizational product. Viewing newsmaking from the standpoint of the organization focused attention on the objectives, bureaucratic structures, routines, and professional values of those engaged in the process of gathering news. These studies included Gaye Tuchman's *Making News* (Tuchman, 1978), Edward Epstein's *News from Nowhere* (Epstein, 1974), Bernard Roshko's *Newsmaking* (Roshko, 1975), Mark Fishman's *Manufacturing the News* (Fishman, 1980), and David Altheide's *Creating Reality* (Altheide, 1976). One of the most noteworthy and widely cited of such studies is *Deciding What's News* (DWN) by sociologist Herbert Gans, published in 1979 (Gans, 1979). Through his content analysis of news and participant observations over the course of several years, Gans provided many remarkable insights into the workings of the major national media: CBS and NBC network news and the two most prominent newsmagazines: *Time* and *Newsweek*.

In this chapter I consider this particular work as an exemplar of the "media sociology" approach to newsmaking. By closely examining its historical context and the biographical insights of the author, we can better understand this approach, how it fits

within the tradition of mass communication research, and how it has influenced further studies of the news process (see also Reese & Ballinger, 2001).¹ A thorough review of the author's published work and a close reading of *Deciding What's News* was carried out. On that basis, a number of questions were put to the author for response, regarding the biographical, historical, and disciplinary context influencing his work, the works most influencing his own and the influence he perceives himself as having. Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from this personal correspondence with the author. Where page numbers are used, they refer to *Deciding What's News*.

The work of Gans and similar field studies of the media combine two traditions within social science: the Chicago School of Robert Park and the Columbia functionalist tradition of Robert Merton. The Chicago influence is seen in the participant observation of communication within communities, with journalists studied from the point of view of the participants. The functionalist tradition leads to looking for practical "functional" responses by news organizations that help them reach their objectives, observing how journalists respond to these routines, norms, or "structures." Thus, media sociologists like Gans strike a balance between insights provided by in-depth analysis of a few cases and the need to generalize these findings to "journalism" more broadly.

Among the earliest attempts to go inside the news organization were studies by David Manning White (1950) of the news "gatekeeper" and by Warren Breed (1955) of how social control is exercised within news rooms, particularly through the publisher who could distort potentially objective accounts of reality. Yet in the mood of the time, both studies were interpreted within an "unproblematic media" perspective, underscoring how the norms and values of the community were translated into news, via the judgments of gatekeepers and media "policy" (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). Thus, neither study led to much wider critique of media construction of reality, a task that would wait some time for Gans and colleagues.

If Breed's view placed the control with the publisher, and White with the editor's subjective judgment, Gans placed it within the organization as a whole. He identifies sources of power within the organization, and the incentives journalists have to conform to group norms and follow practical considerations. This approach moves away from treating news as a question of bias and embeds it in the ongoing activities of organizations. Gans locates the construction of news not in the journalist, the publisher, or in the gatekeeping editor, but in the process by which all parts, routines and arrangements of the organization are engaged for the creation of news. Thus, this approach was a valuable corrective to the notion that news is what gatekeepers or publishers say it is. It also stands opposed to later critiques of media that faulted the individual subjective prejudices of the reporter, showing instead how their decisions are practical responses to their need to produce the news product.

¹ The author would like to thank Herbert Gans for his prompt and thoughtful responses about his work. Although he has included much background material in his books that provide valuable insights to the process of academic craftsmanship, his elaborations were helpful in adding further context for the present chapter. The correspondence took place in 1993, but his work and insights continue to be relevant to the current day.

1. Chicago School

An important center of social science, the University of Chicago in the early part of the century featured some of the earliest studies of mass communication by Robert Park, who could be called the original media sociologist. Gans attended the University of Chicago for two degrees, and his work is strongly shaped by the Chicago tradition in a number of ways. The Chicago School was characterized by the Pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey and William James, a theory of communication based on symbolic interactionism, an eclectic approach to research with an emphasis on naturalistic field work, and a Progressive ideology regarding the potential for human progress. The American Progressive movement was based on the belief that citizen knowledge of government would ensure democracy and grew out of the Populist crusade of the late 19th century. Believing in society's ability to improve through the democratic process, the Progressives attacked the concentrations of corporate power and the corruption of the political machines in the cities, including Chicago. The philosophy department at Chicago was a major center of Pragmatism, which argued that humans must be understood in their adaptation to the natural world, a view that rejected the simple determinism of stimulus-response psychology. Robert Park and others at Chicago stressed the value of first-hand knowledge and wanted students out observing the urban laboratory of Chicago in all its diversity. There were social "facts" waiting to be uncovered.

The Chicago School was not exclusively qualitative, treating this approach as complementary with a variety of quantitative indicators. Thus, the quantitative content analysis of news stories coupled with Gans' qualitative fieldwork of the media has parallels in the eclectic Chicago approach, which placed just as much stress on the analysis of human documents (in this case, news stories) as on participant observation. Gans himself acknowledges the eclectic nature of his research, and does not view his work as flowing from any one theoretical tradition.

My approach has always been to try to answer questions in which I have become interested, to answer them with empirical research in the case of DWN, or library research in the case of my other media book, *Popular Culture and High Culture*...I tell students sociology is the study of what people do with, to, against and for each other (in no set order) in the groups, formal and informal, in which they act and think, but I always add that money makes the society go around, which is to say one must begin with the economic constraints, budgets, incomes, etc., which people and groups have at hand.

The "case" approach was characteristic of Chicago, and community studies – of which Gans was a part – stemmed from that tradition. This approach leads to the choice of specific settings, or cases, for close study. Like the Italian-American community in the *Urban Villagers* and the suburban dwellers in *The Levittowners*, journalists do constitute their own community.

The only tradition I know myself to be coming out of is community studies which went along with the participant-observation approach at the University of Chicago - and I did see DWN

as in some respects another community study (see Gans, 1979, p. xiv). But that is a format tradition. I liked it because the community study gives the researcher the chance to look at many elements in social life at the same time, and thus to avoid the narrowness of much academic research.

The Chicago School emphasized the naturalistic method which “describes a description of processes of social interaction in their context” (Hammersley, 1989, p. 162). The flexible nature of the naturalistic method is more consistent with the symbolic interactionist approach of George Herbert Mead, which emphasized the fluid and non-mechanical nature of human interaction and viewed people as living in a world of meaningful objects. Aiming for a detailed description of social phenomena, the method avoids the abstraction of variable-analytic, generalizing (or nomo-thetic) techniques, preferring an individualizing (or idiographic) approach. Herbert Blumer of the Chicago faculty advocated the “enrichment of experience,” not relying only on standardizing methods like large-scale surveys. The researcher must have “rich and intimate familiarity with the kind of conduct being studied...” (Hammersley, 1989, p. 154).

In the media sociology of Gans, news people cannot be understood apart from their organizational context. Those sociologists pursuing the case approach became the minority by the 1950s, outnumbered by those pursuing variable analysis and statistical methods. According to Gans, if one rejects the participant method and relies only on interviews, the researcher “can get only reports of behavior, but not behavior itself” (Gans, 1962, p. 345). This is particularly important in the news media, given the lofty ideals that journalists often cite while engaged in their routine practices.

2. Functionalist Approach

In viewing communication from the point of view of the participants, sociologists like Gans have a kinship with the symbolic interactionist approach, although, as Hammersley (1989) notes, they often cannot resist moving beyond that perspective to consider enduring social systems. Functionalism emphasizes relations that maintain themselves over time, and it has been called the dominant approach to the emerging field of mass communication research (Kline, 1972). A structural functionalist approach, like that of Robert Merton (1949), views human behavior as a response to social structure. The test of an existing pattern of activity is whether it is beneficial or functional for those who engage in it. Gans credits Merton’s work as a major influence, showing that “cultural patterns disliked by one group can be functional for another” (Gans, 1990, p. 440).

I still remember virtually sneaking into the campus bookstore for my copy of Merton’s *Social theory and social structure* because the rivalry between the Columbia and Chicago sociology departments discouraged undue interest in Columbia authors (p. 449).

Gans looks for meanings people have but also the structure within which those meanings arise. Like many sociologists of the period (e.g., Roshko, 1975) Gans sees journalists responding to social structural determinants of behavior, in what Tuchman (1978) calls the traditional sociological view.

Perhaps this mixture can be traced to Everett Hughes at Chicago...but again, it almost automatically follows from my method, for if you are a sociologist (at least of my generation) you begin with structure, and if you do fieldwork without narrow hypotheses to test or defend, you cannot help but become aware of the fact that people act not on structures but on the meanings they give to events.

For Gans, forces are “impinging” on journalists (p. xiv), and “Rules contain values” (p. xiv). News is said to reflect the hierarchies of society and nation, just as journalists are thought to follow the rules of their organizational setting’s structure.

Also, much of the everyday conflict in communities and organizations is expressed via clashes of meanings among the people you study, even if the sociologist also looks for the structural influences on them.

Thus, Gans devotes much of DWN to describing the structures within which journalists operate and the rules of news work but doesn't examine specific news “texts,” other than to refer to reporting on Watergate, Vietnam, and other larger issues.

3. Personal Influences

Born in Cologne, Germany, in 1927, Gans emigrated to the United States in 1940. He received his Bachelor’s degree from the University of Chicago and a Master’s there in Sociology and Social Science. He attended the University of Pennsylvania for a doctorate in Planning and Sociology in 1957 and later held academic positions at Pennsylvania, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Columbia University. His research has included urban and community studies, popular culture, poverty, and ethnicity, but it is, of course, for his study of the news media that Gans is best known within communication research.

There are common themes to the questions I am most curious about. I have always been interested in the media audience, and how it gets its wishes and demands into the media...My curiosity about journalism was influenced in part by the fact that I had wanted to become a reporter when I finished high school (as editor of my high school paper). Thanks to the advice of a Chicago *Daily News* editor, Lloyd Lewis, I wound up pursuing a liberal arts degree at the University of Chicago rather than going to the Medill Journalism School at Northwestern, at which point I discovered that what I most wanted to write was called sociology. (There was no sociology in high school in those days.) My curiosity about journalism was reawakened when I was doing my research in Levittown, where I usually sat at meetings with the local reporters, and saw that the questions we were asking of the same events were different.

Gans is an intellectual descendant of Robert Park through one of his teachers, Everett Hughes, who had studied with Park at Chicago about the “ecology” of communities. Hughes attracted a wide ranging group of students and, although he founded no “school,” helped them link their life experience to topics for investigation (Riesman & Becker, 1984).

I took a communication course with Bernard Berelson in, of all places, Chicago’s Library school where he was Dean, but that was on content analysis. Although my ideas about the media and democracy differed drastically from Berelson, I may have learned about limited effects theory from him – although doing fieldwork in a Chicago suburb for my master’s thesis made me realize quickly enough how limited the effects of the news and other mass media were on people’s lives.

Gans says his analysis reflects a populism, characterized by a cultural relativism, equality, and an anti-expert stance (Gans, 1990). Historically, populist ideology has been based on individualism and egalitarianism, accepting the capitalist economic system, and insisting that its demands don’t require fundamental change. This approach, based on economic self-interest, differs from socialism, which struck more broadly at the established social and cultural, as well as economic, order (as have the radical critiques of news). Populism demanded a fairer share of the things the existing society had to offer. Thus, Gans advocates a redistribution of access to news, but largely within the existing news system.

Gans makes the empirical positivist distinction between facts and values, arguing that while neither journalism nor social science can operate without values or value implications, the actual empirical work can be value free, or “detached” (p. xiv).

But I make no attempt to hide my generally left-liberal approach to social issues, although I am a strong believer that ideology should not get into the empirical work. This was a major reason for my attack on the Rothman-Lichter approach to the media (Gans, 1985), which brings the ideology right into the data collecting, not to mention the analysis.

Regarding DWN, Gans says, “I also approached the study without prior explicit values, and when I started my work, I thought I would need to deal only with the value problems that had come up in earlier community studies” (p. xiii).

4. Deciding What’s News

The news ethnography spanned a period of social upheaval and crisis in the U.S. As with any study, the climate of the time must be taken into account in order to understand its approach and findings.

I was scared to death in 1961 or 2 that the US and the USSR would blow the world up over Cuba and could not understand, in my then-innocence, how the American mainstream news media were being narrowly nationalistic and egging the U.S. on – and so I wanted to know how this could be when we could all be radioactive as a result. That was the impetus, but that

danger was over long ago by the time I got to work on the study, and besides, my competence was in domestic issues. What gave the work shape was the domestic situation in the late 1960s, and particularly the news media's concern with social order during the anti-war demonstrations, the ghetto disorders, and the cultural upheavals of the late 1960s.

Gans says that because he traces “the commercial, political, and other forces that produce the rules and values, the book examines the source, audiences, and powerholders that impinge on journalists from outside their news organizations” (p. xiv). “I sought to study what this society tells itself about itself through the news and why...” (p. xi).

For the most part, Gans does not dwell on organizational differences but looks for professional commonalities across these media, noting that the book is “not really about the four news organizations but about national news, journalism, and journalists in general” (p. xii), and a “national profession” (p. xiv).

I was hoping to write a book that told people how journalists made decisions about the news and why the news programs and news magazines came out as they did – and to do it as well as I could. (Remember, there was no such book at the time I was doing the first stage of my fieldwork) other than Epstein's, and he was so hooked on the economic context that he left out the journalists. When I wrote, I wanted to do two things especially: (1) show the primary role of sources, and the important role of the audience, in the shaping of the news, perhaps because the notion that the news is what journalists choose to pick as and call news was beginning to come up, and (2) to develop a normative model of newsworthiness, etc. that would provide access to the news media from the left-out sources, the under-reported audiences, and the under-used points of view - which I called multiperspectivism.

When Gans began his study there were no readily available models for how to do media sociology.

...other than Warren Breed's since all the sociological studies of the news media, by Tuchman, Schudson, Gitlin, and me, came out about the same time, and we could not influence each other's work. (Ed Epstein's *News from Nowhere* came out earlier, but EE picked my brain unmercifully while he was working, and so I did not feel that he influenced me, although he surely reminded me how important the economic context was at a time when the news media were awash in money. I still think it was a good book, even if a bit too monocausal.) I had also seen Tuchman's articles in the early and mid 1970s, but I was doing national news – and she local – and had developed my own notions on the topics of her articles.

A review in a publication for journalists, *Quill*, predictably took a journalist-centered reaction, describing Gans' findings in terms of “conformity” of journalists and the conscious and unconscious pressures they feel. In addition, the reviewer noted how factors like nationalism “influence” news judgment (Gilmore, 1979), suggesting that journalists and their judgment could be understood apart from the organizational practices of which they are inextricably linked. An academic review in *Journalism Quarterly* called the book “an excellent, thoughtful and generally friendly criticism of American journalism, but one that may generalize too much” (Whitney, 1979). Another called it “penetrating,” “fascinating reading” about how the media help preserve the “political status quo that they have helped to create” (Graber, 1979). Predictably Gans'

proposal for government support for multi-perspectival news was the most controversial, considered “radical” by the *Quill* review.

Gans is credited in one major review with probing “below the manifest content of the news to the underlying imagery” (Gollin, 1980, p. 280), with a view from inside the newsmaking process, “unraveling the mystery of why journalists have little sense of their audiences” and why “audience considerations play so small a role in media news decisions...” (p. 281).

The book also got a long review in back of *New York Times Book Review*, six months after publication. The reviewer was Frank Mankiewicz and he told me years later that DWN had been scheduled for a front page review, but that the then executive editor of the *Times*, who didn't like either author or reviewer, banished the review from the front page and delayed its publication...The book came out the same week as David Halberstam's *The Powers that Be*, and often got reviewed with him in newspaper and magazine reviews which wouldn't normally have touched an academic analysis, even one free of jargon.

Gans examined national media content by analyzing a six-month sample of *Newsweek* stories, in alternate months, in 1967, 1971, and 1975. Most news, he found, is about the affluent, with the working class breaking in only via strikes and other disruption. More broadly, the “knowns” are already known or occupy well-known positions. The “unknowns” are given a fifth of the space, and include protestors, victims, violators, and other ordinary people. The activities in the news are correspondingly about the activities of government mostly, but also protests, crimes, scandals, investigations, disasters, innovation and ceremonies. Thus, the non-elites get into the news, but they must do so through disruption or violation of social order.

Participant observation fieldwork took place at NBC, from October 1965 to April 1966, at CBS from November 1966 to May 1967. At *Newsweek* Gans spent from May 1968 to August, and at *Time* from April 1969 to mid July (returning to NBC, *Newsweek* and *Time* in 1975).

Gathering data is fun, analyzing it – partly because there is so much – is hard work, one reason I wrote very slowly and the book took a long time. Organizing the files is half the analysis battle, because you have to be true to your data while also answering your questions, being clear, logical, linear when required, etc. So there is no craftsmanship here; just lots of hard work, for which you need persistence, concentration, and lots of the nervous energy needed for analysis.

As far as I can tell, the craftsmanship comes in letting the analysis brew in your head long enough until you can summon the courage to write a reasonably coherent first draft. Once that is done, one then has to keep rewriting – which I did endlessly even when I was doing it on my old Remington manual (typewrite) – till you feel you have it right. Since I enjoy rewriting that's the best part of the work.

Noting that sociologists, with the exception of Paul Lazarsfeld, were not particularly interested in mass media, Gans observes that the rigors of fieldwork also restrict the likelihood of pursuing his style of research.

Fieldwork is a sixteen-hour methodology, once you include writing up fieldnotes. In addition, fieldwork imposes a research routine because you must adapt yourself to the people you are studying. (I still remember staying up till 3 or 4 a.m. with the newsweekly journalists the night before the magazine went to press, even though some mornings I was half asleep.)

Gans makes a valuable empirical contribution in simply describing the nature of the internal workings of the newsmagazines and the networks, how the news process is laid out, and who holds the relevant decision-making positions. In identifying a number of specific routines of story selection, involving editors and reporters, Gans in essence finds that journalists are subject to the same bureaucratic factors of other workers, including seniority, striving for promotion, and routinization.

Because so little empirical work had been done before DWN, a major task was description and less of debunking any “conventional wisdom.”

Ideas come from living in the world, being challenged by one’s experiences, students, challenges, debates – and by the conventional wisdom. Sociology has often seen itself as a debunker of the conventional wisdom, which I learned from David Riesman (*The Urban Villagers*, *The Levittowners*, and *Popular Culture, High Culture* were debunking books). DWN was less concerned with debunking, partly because there wasn’t much conventional wisdom about journalists when I was doing my study, and much of today’s ideology about them did not yet exist. True, Marxists saw them as agents of the ruling class, and so did the 1960s radicals, and that comes up in the book, but the rightwing critique hadn’t developed yet, and so I didn’t do much debunking of that position. That I did in the critiques of the Rothman-Lichter work (Gans, 1985).

Gans concludes that while journalists have economic constraints placed on them, this gives little guidance in selecting specific content: “neither the journalists nor the business departments know how to enlarge the audience” (p. 217). For Gans the news process is the process of solving the problems involved in packaging the daily flow of events into a marketable product for audiences. For the solution journalists use “considerations” to aid in the decision making process. These considerations must be applicable without too much deliberation; they must help avoid excessive uncertainty, be flexible, easily rationalized or explainable to others, and efficient, guaranteeing the best results for the least effort. The news equation is based on efficiency and power, meaning that news workers must allocate scarce resources in producing their product, with due respect to the power structure within which they operate (p. 283).

Gans devotes a lengthy chapter to how journalists determine story “suitability,” which mirrors the criteria journalism students are taught for determining “news value.” Gans takes the same approach as many who have tried to measure news value, that it is additive: “Stories become important by satisfying one [consideration] and increase in importance with every additional one they satisfy” (p. 147). These include rank in the government and other hierarchies, impact on the country, impact on a lot of people, and significance for the past and future. He observes that reporters like to be novel, but not too novel. Editors favor news that has already been “certified” by its acceptance elsewhere. He says they steer clear of prediction, which is a risky activity, potentially damaging to their credibility. Thus, all of these considerations are logical

responses by journalists to the daily task of routines producing the news product. These are precisely the pressures toward conformity, however, that make the media so susceptible to outside influence.

The clearest demonstration of the fact that these considerations are not automatically applied, are the competitive factors. If considerations were automatic, news media would not need to look to each other for confirmation. One of Gans's most insightful observations is the way journalists depend on *The New York Times*. The networks and newsmagazines need an arbiter that is presumed to transcend medium considerations and act as the trend-setter. If it did not exist it would have to be invented. Although Gans' fieldwork approach gives the emphasis to the inner workings of the media, he provides a valuable insight into the power of sources, influences originating outside of the organizations. Gans emphasizes the relationships that play the most important roles in the newsmaking process – the “tug of war” between source and audience interests, with reporters being more source-oriented and editors more conscious of what will have audience appeal. In addition, Gans characterizes journalists as sellers who have something to pitch to their editor “buyers” in a constant series of negotiations and transactions.

Powerful sources, especially public officials, are seen as exerting their influence through their dominance of journalism. The president, for example, in functional terms is the most “economical” to cover for journalists – they know where he is, and he is invariably a provider of suitable news. Gans finds that journalists' closer proximity to each other and their sources means they have only a distant picture of their audiences. He finds them with little knowledge of their audience and somewhat leery of accepting its feedback (p. 230), especially in the form of systematic audience research. Journalists consider audience wants as possibly in conflict with the primacy of their news judgment. Journalists write for those close to them in their professional and social circles and consider themselves to be valid stand-ins for the average audience member.

The study's approach to values is inductive, inferring values from news content and observations of journalists. Gans singles out those embedded values that cannot be explicitly stated, showing that journalists – like any other community – have values, even though they profess an objective professional detachment. The paraideology of journalists, Gans notes, is embedded in the profession and the setting, not in the individual (p. 203). Thus, Gans does not single out any specific reporter or story as “biased,” finding these values rather in the entire fabric of his “community.” Taking a traditional political science view of ideology as a deliberate, integrated set of values, he ultimately locates “the news” as right-liberal or left-conservative, a view closely related to his discussion of the enduring values. More broadly, though, he argues that beyond the left-right scale, the news is closer to the Progressive tradition, to the extent that it values reform, meritocracy, anti-bureaucratic government, is suspicious of bigness, and supports craftsmanship over technology.

News organizations are continually subjected to outside pressure, and journalists, when they speak of censorship, refer to the overt conscious acts of outside pressure on story decisions. These, naturally, are viewed by them in practical organizational

terms as a threat to autonomy. Although Gans reported rarely seeing explicit censorship attempts, the control over content has already been built into the process by the nature of the organization, including its recruitment patterns and norms. Gans presents a number of recommendations for improving news, many of which flow from his populist, liberal orientation: more national news beyond just the federal government, more bottom up views about impacts of events on everyday citizens, and more representative news. His basic pluralist approach advocates greater balance among a broader variety of perspectives, which resembles the goal of equality in society. The diversification of sources and perspectives would signify a greater movement toward “multiperspectivism” (p. 321). Gans anticipated many of the media watchdog groups of today, encouraging such monitors of news, who he thinks should carry out regular, well-publicized studies of journalistic performance. He sees nothing wrong with ideologically motivated studies, as long as the values are placed up front (p. 325). He proposed an Endowment for News, a government-based fund that would help encourage a greater range of perspectives that do not presently have access to the mass media. Given the impossibility of synthesizing all such perspectives, the news should broaden the symbolic arena and allow more representation of society’s array of perspectives.

5. Critique and Impact of Deciding What’s News

The importance of DWN for this review lies not only in its reported findings, but in how it exemplifies a broad approach to the study of the news media, a perspective on the news as an organizational product that has influenced many subsequent studies. Gans and other “outsiders” to communication provided a valuable infusion of new ideas.

There is the fact that mass communication, like other research fields connected to professional schools, develop their boundaries in relation to these professions, and thus become unnecessarily narrow. They need an infusion of outsiders every so often, but these days the outsiders are scarce, and I am not even sure they are wanted in mass communication.

Choosing a subject long taken for granted, Gans showed that journalism can be usefully examined like any other community, neither more nor less privileged than other activities. The concerns of journalists become strikingly ordinary when treated with the community “lens,” which helps demystify the construction of the news product.

Unlike elite theorists who view the media as completely subservient to the powers that be (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), Gans’ view attributes considerable importance to the choices within the media. Indeed, if the news automatically reflected the values of the elites, there would be no point in his going further to examine the inner working of the organizations. Gans gives the news its own autonomy by observing that “the news is not simply a compliant supporter of elites or the Establishment or the ruling class; rather, it views nation and society through its own set of values and with its own conception of the good social order” (p. 62).

In referring to the work, others often seek to draw, as does Gans, generalizations about all journalists. Of course, as with any case study, the problem of external validity arises – to what extent can the generalizations based on observations of a few cases be applied to others? Although Gans acknowledges that his observations are tentative and impressionistic, the conclusions about national media take on a life of their own, and become applied beyond the immediate setting. In considering the findings of DWN, one must take into account the nature of the media studied, and the extent to which they have changed since the original fieldwork. Both television and newsmagazines have a special mission, to speak with a voice, to celebrate while reporting on national culture. They prefer drama and action more than newspapers. For example, “the news” constructs a unitary “nation,” conceiving of tests of the “national will” during Vietnam, of the nation “in mourning” after Kennedy’s assassination (p. 20). The nation celebrates events like the Bicentennial, elections are treated as reaffirming national ideals, and even Watergate is seen to reaffirm the ability of the “system” to cleanse itself. This manufacture of “nationhood” through journalistic rhetoric is given particular prominence by Gans decision to select for study the networks and news-magazine, whose role is to fashion just such a feeling.

Empirical field work, as Gans is the first to admit, “can reify the status quo” (p. 285), by seeking explanation based on the observed reality. The same criticism about functional analysis in general can be made of DWN, that it tends to privilege the status quo, making it difficult to envision alternative arrangements. This status quo often takes on a life of its own, and Gans admits to anthropomorphizing “the news,” which is often considered as a single entity. For example, his descriptive analysis generalizes news values as though they were immutable. But it is precisely in how journalists decide what is normal that others may find interest. Elsewhere, Gans says journalists avoid pressure from the powerful, especially public officials, by using them as sources. By excluding the less powerful, they avoid the pressure that would result from airing these sources that may evoke more dissent (p. 276). Here is the crux of the functional approach – every state of affairs can be interpreted as helping the organization function smoothly, working back from the structure to find its functional explanations.

Although clearly no study can tackle every factor affecting the production of news, what one thinks is based on where one stands. By starting from within media organizations and looking outward, it is easy to lose sight of how the entire institutional arrangements operate to produce certain patterns of news content. For example, Gans takes a far weaker view of the power of business over media than others, going so far as to say, “Journalists’ freedom from advertiser pressure actually extends to business in general, since the power that corporations have in America does not seem to permeate the newsroom” (p. 256). Although it gives them a prominent role, Gans’ organization-level view underestimates the influence of powerful sources. He argues that for status reasons they will contact the top executives of news organizations, who, restrained from implementing these suggestions by organizational division of labor, pass story ideas along as to allow them to be ignored (p. 120). The power of

these suggestions, however, is not always indicated by their frequency. Gans does have critical moments in which he clearly acknowledges that the decisions of news media act to reproduce societal hierarchies of power. Elsewhere, for example, in considering the power of top news executives to set “policy” by occasional veto power over stories and periodic suggestions, we are not given the basis upon which these interventions are triggered.

To say that the news produced is that which best allows the organization to be efficient does not explain the objectives on which that efficiency is based, nor what shape news necessarily takes as a result. If journalists seek stories that meet organizations’ needs, how did those needs get structured to begin with? These are questions that must be addressed at other levels, beyond the organization, so it is useful to consider the media sociology approach of Gans in contrast to more explicitly ideological analyses. Although sympathetic to the radical critique, Gans dismisses it as unrealistic to expect that journalists can “stand outside nation and society, free to report news, raise issues, and present ideas without limit” (p. 278). This is true by definition, but it still leaves open questions, not whether there are limits but where those limits are to be drawn. Whose nation and society? Who gets to decide? Thus, Gans correctly notes that news reproduces social hierarchies, but it is how these hierarchies are made to appear “natural” that intrigues other scholars.

Gans draws many valuable comparisons within the news: between disorder and order, deviance and normality, newsworthy groups and the unnewsworthy, capitalism and communism, poor and rich. He makes the social order carried in the news problematic, arguing that it is largely the order of the upper and upper middle class, of white males, and others in different sectors who hold power (he observes that the magazines tend to universalize the practices of these groups as though they were shared by all Americans). Many of the themes identified by Gans, have been taken up later in more explicitly ideological analysis. For example, the news shuns “ideology” itself as an inflexible set of doctrinaire values, more applicable to other countries than to this one, celebrating the moderate core between liberal and conservative, which – being flexible – is not considered ideological. Furthermore, the social order in the news is further maintained and strengthened by comparing it favorably against foreign countries (especially, when his book was written, Communist countries). Foreign news contains the same values as domestic news, although presented in a less objective format.

In concluding, Gans considers the many unintended or latent consequences, or functions, that news may serve for society. These include testing potential leaders, supplying political feedback, serving as moral guardians and agents of social control. But in the final function, managing the symbolic arena, he presents as an hypothesis the premise upon which many later studies would be based: “one of the journalists’ prime functions is to manage, with others, the symbolic arena, the public stage on which nation, societal, and other messages are made available to everyone who can become an audience member” (p. 298). Rendering the news as no longer an unproblematic “mirror on society,” this pivotal idea opens a wide array of questions based on

what forces act to construct the symbolic order. As media organizations and news institutions evolve to encompass new forms of professional and citizen journalism, and as they adapt to the online networked globalized society, the empirical investigation of “newwork” will be an even more important tool for understanding those changes.

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