The American Journalism Handbook

Concepts, Issues, and Skills

Rodrigo Zamith

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To my parents, for their endless love and support.

Contents

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Introduction

Journalism is as important today as it has ever been. As societies grow and become both more complex and more interconnected, citizens need professionals who can chronicle developments, make sense of what is happening, and present information in a truthful and clear way. However, although the central needs addressed by journalism have not changed a great deal in centuries, the ways in which journalists have gone about addressing those needs have changed considerably as a result of different economic, political, social, technological, and professional shifts.

This book is designed to help us understand those changes and to imagine new futures for U.S. journalism—in which it can serve as an even more useful tool for promoting a well-functioning society. But, before we can imagine new futures, we must take a step back and examine the institution of U.S. journalism through a critical and in-depth lens. This book aims to offer just that. It provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the development, logic, and practice of journalism in the United States; describes some of the key challenges, tensions, and opportunities it has faced, is facing, and will likely face; and offers guidance to help individuals develop the skills needed to engage in impactful journalism.

Unit I establishes a conceptual foundation for understanding journalism. This requires defining terms like "news" and "journalism," and reckoning with implications of the fact that such terms mean different things to different people. For example, if a person considers something to be "journalism" (rather than just simple "news"), they may be more willing to accept its author's version of events. This unit also explores the broad constellation of entities involved in journalism, such as its social actors (e.g., journalists and software developers), technological actants (e.g., news recommendation algorithms), and audiences (e.g., news consumers and policymakers). Finally, the unit illustrates the rather large array of potential journalistic activities involved in the practice of journalism.

Unit II introduces multiple theoretical frameworks for understanding the potential impacts of journalism. It begins by discussing media dependency theory, which helps situate journalism within a broader system of information and identifies the conditions that make some people more dependent on journalism to make sense of the world. It then evaluates framing theory, agenda-setting theory, and priming theory. These three frameworks offer sociological and psychological explanations for how news content can impact individuals' evaluations of, and attitudes toward, a topic or issue. They are also useful in illustrating some of the limits of journalism's impacts on individuals and on society. The unit concludes with an examination of the phenomena of news avoidance and fatigue, helping to explain why some people choose to opt out of consuming journalism.

Unit III flips the script by introducing different theoretical frameworks that help explain why journalistic content looks the way it does. The unit begins by describing the Hierarchy of Influences Model, which is a useful framework for describing the many forces that affect the news content that audiences see, hear, and read. It then examines U.S. journalistic culture and American news values, which shape how journalists think, act, and legitimize themselves to their peers and to society. The unit then critically evaluates the notions of truth, bias, and neutrality by highlighting that facts are not 'natural' things that just 'exist' and underscoring the value of truth-seeking in journalism. The unit concludes by examining the gender, geographical, political, and racial biases that exist within the institution of U.S. journalism.

Unit IV explores the economic aspects of journalism. It begins by chronicling the commodification of news in the United States and discussing the role that advertising has played in subsidizing journalism over the past century –role that it is arguably no longer able to play as effectively. The unit then examines the impacts of audience measurement, highlighting how new technologies have enabled broader and more immediate quantification of audience wants. It then describes the influence of third-party platforms (e.g., Apple News) on journalism, highlighting the structural roles they now play as intermediaries in the information ecosystem. The unit concludes by describing two alternative economic models for supporting journalism: non-profit journalism and state-supported journalism.

Unit V centers on journalistic audiences, or the people who consume journalism (and occasionally participate in its production or distribution). The unit begins by examining the increasing fragmentation of a mass audience into many smaller audiences as a result of diverging media consumption habits. This, in turn, has resulted in the development of an attention economy, which involves increased competition from an ever-growing list of potential media options and promotes specialization. The unit then evaluates some of the active roles that audiences can play in journalism, such as by contributing user-generated content (e.g., uploading pictures of news events to social media). Then, active strategies for involving audiences are examined through the journalistic practices of crowdsourcing and ambient journalism, wherein journalists turn to the wisdom of the crowds to produce better journalism (which doesn't always work out that way). Finally, the unit examines the darker side of audience participation as well as the increasing violence being enacted against U.S. journalists.

Unit VI provides a whirlwind tour of three and a half centuries of U.S. journalism. It begins by describing colonial journalism, which was vastly different from today's journalism not only in format but in focus, manner of expression, and funding. Then, it describes journalism in the 19th century, identifying some of the social, economic, and technological factors that helped popularize the mass circulation of journalistic media. The unit's final chapters examine journalism in the 20th century, underscoring that the cultural emphasis on neutrality and objectivity in U.S. journalism is a historically recent phenomenon and that the industry's recent economic challenges are due in no small part to the exceptional pace of technological development in recent decades.

Unit VII offers a primer on the legal and ethical issues that commonly arise in the practice of journalism. The unit begins by tracing the roots of the First Amendment and describing its centrality to the freedoms that journalists have in the United States. The next three chapters focus on an array of judicial decisions that helped define the limits of those First Amendment protections. These include limits to access, anonymity, incitement, libel, and privacy intrusions. It also includes safeguards against government censorship of journalism, which are among the most protective in the world. The unit concludes by describing the most popular code of journalistic ethics in the United States and outlining some best practices for engaging in ethical journalism.

Unit VIII describes some of the considerations and skills involved in preparing news stories. It begins by providing a schema for categorizing different types of journalism, illustrating its many potential forms. The unit then shows how U.S. journalism has maintained a role for subjective opinion pieces, such as editorials, op-eds, and columns, and describes its historical separation from so-called "straight news." It then offers tips for identifying story ideas, such as by encouraging one's curiosity, developing a niche, and simply consuming a lot of journalism. The unit concludes with an explication of misinformation and disinformation, terms that help us better capture the range of inaccurate information that pollute information ecosystems.

Unit IX examines the practices of news sourcing and verification. It begins by conceptualizing news sources, examining the exchanges of power that are involved in the act of news sourcing, and describing common news sourcing biases. The next four chapters focus on tips for identifying appropriate sources and developing a well-rounded mix of sources; maximizing the likelihood that a source will agree to an interview; developing interview questions that are simple, clear, well-focused, and open-ended; and conducting interviews in a way that helps elicit useful information for a journalistic story. The unit concludes by assessing the value of verification in journalism and offering tips for verifying information efficiently.

Unit X describes the process of producing news stories, focusing on written journalism. It begins by describing the lead and nut graf of stories; these collectively serve as the entry point to a story, and they can be the difference between a story that gets read and one that is skipped. The unit then describes different narrative structures for journalistic stories, from the commonly used inverted pyramid to the accordion, and offers some tips for when to select a particular structure. It then provides guidance for when to directly or indirectly quote a source, and how to properly attribute the information according to U.S. journalistic conventions. The unit then offers some tips for how to effectively integrate quantitative information into journalistic stories that tend to privilege anecdotes and qualitative accounts. Finally, the unit describes the practice of solutions journalism, which aims to present potential responses to social problems through evidence-based reporting that examines the strengths and weaknesses of specific interventions.

Unit XI concludes the book by considering the future of U.S. journalism. The unit begins by examining the development of social media, which has transformed news distribution and created new possibilities for news production. Journalists today use social media to gauge public interest and sentiment, keep tabs on the competition, identify story ideas, find and verify sources, and promote and distribute their work. However, the rapid growth of social media, and the central role they play in today's digital infrastructure, has meant that journalistic outlets are becoming increasingly dependent on platforms that they do not control. The unit then examines the development of computational journalism, underscoring that it is not just a technological phenomenon but also an epistemological one, with the notion of computational thinking becoming more and more valuable. The book concludes with an assessment of artificial intelligence in journalism, describing how AI is already used in some fashion in every stage of news production, from coming up with a story idea to distributing news content. Although machines are becoming more intelligent and playing increasingly large roles in journalism, humans will likely remain at the center of news production for many years to come. The work they do, and the ways they go about it, will look different, though.

I hope this book proves useful to aspiring and experienced journalists alike, as well as to people who are simply curious about the institution of U.S. journalism. I also hope that it inspires you, the reader, to want to be a part of the solution to the social challenges we presently face in the U.S. (and those we will face in the years to come). I believe in a bright future for journalism, and I hope you will help imagine it with me.

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Unit I

Conceptual Foundations

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Chapter 1

News

News refers to *novel information about recent affairs*.

News has been a part of human societies for as long as we've been able to communicate complex ideas. Going back to our early times, you can think of travelers, priests, and soldiers as individuals who would learn something about a recent affair – such as the outcome of a battle or the emergence of a plague nearby – and would share that news with others. Perhaps you have even heard about the 'town criers' who would learn some news – perhaps an official decree from the king – and share it with a public audience.

News is the lifeblood of journalism. And, in the context of journalism, news usually entails novel information about recent affairs *that is in the public interest*. This emphasis on 'public interest' is influenced by Enlightenment principles, which emphasize objectivity and rationality in order to engage with social problems in a fruitful way. Moreover, this view considers *newsgathering* to be an important activity within a democratic society. That activity involves having individuals (news gatherers) *systematically collect* novel information about recent affairs and convey that information in a way that allows citizens to engage productively in debates about matters that impact the public.

That interpretation of newsgathering is similar to what we tend to call *reporting* today. However, if we were to require news gatherers to be hired and dedicated reporters – basically, limit them to people who get paid to report the news – then we would find that there was fairly little newsgathering until the 1800s, and only in a few places around the world. Put another way, our current imagining of newsgathering (or reporting) as a distinct, semi-professionalized activity is a historically recent development.

News and The News

While we can define "news" in these more-academic terms, it's important to keep in mind that it also has a colloquial meaning, and also to distinguish between "news" and "*the* news." It is not uncommon to hear "news" be used colloquially in reference to *a particular way of conveying* novel information about recent affairs, and "*the* news" as some monolithic aggregation of it. For example, the phrase, "What's 'the news' today?" implies that there is one relatively small group of news stories, drawn from a much-larger pool of possible news stories, that a large group of people would accept as being particularly important at that moment in time.

It is thus important to recognize that "news" and "*the* news" are modern cultural constructs that reflect particular understandings of what is news and what is *newsworthy*. Those understandings, in turn, are shaped by the histories and cultures of particular places and peoples. Put another way, "news" and "*the* news" are *not* natural things but rather things a group of people collectively agree to accept as "news" and "*the* news."

For example, a news story is rarely understood to mean a simple chronological listing of observations. You wouldn't expect the lead news story in *The New York Times* to read that Dr. Zamith woke up, went to his office, ate lunch, stubbed his toe, and found the cure for dementia. Instead, most people expect "news" to resemble a particular format. In the United States, you would likely expect a journalistic account of that news to start with the fact that Dr. Zamith found the cure to dementia – and probably not even mention the fact that he ate lunch that day. Moreover, given the prevalence of dementia in the United States and the significance of the discovery, such a story would likely be considered a part of "*the* news" for that day.

The News and Newsworthiness

What is understood as "*the* news" varies considerably across and within places because it reflects not only different ways of thinking about what "news" should look or sound like but also who has the authority to define what "news" is, as well as what is *newsworthy*. Some stories tend to have more universal appeal – for example, dementia is a serious concern in much of the world, and not just the U.S. – but other stories (e.g., stories about violence against transgender people) may be treated as more newsworthy in some societies.

Returning to that earlier question, "What's *the* news today?" we must therefore recognize that there is a finite space for "news" – because, after all, we only have so much *time* to consume news and newsgatherers can only follow up on so many stories — and that "*the* news" consequently requires someone (or, more accurately, some group of people) to define what matters, both in terms of what news is important as well as what is important about that news.

While "news" can be understood as simply being novel information about recent affairs, it can therefore also be understood more broadly as *a form of knowledge* about the world we live in. Consequently, those who are recognized as the primary definers of "*the* news" — be they journalists, some other group of people, or a mix thereof — are granted power in shaping how we understand the societies we live in as well as those we've never seen ourselves.

Key Takeaways

- Within the context of journalism, the term "news" usually refers to novel information about recent affairs that is in the public interest.
- While news has long been traded by different people, the notion of news-gathering as a distinct professional activity is a historically recent development.
- "News" is an evolving cultural object. It is rarely just a chronological listing of observations. Instead, it reflects local ways of thinking about things like presentation formats and ways of organizing information.
- There is also the notion of "the news," which suggests that there is a collection of particularly important news. Those who are recognized as the primary definers of "the news" have power in shaping societal priorities and what is particularly important about emerging developments.
- News can be understood as more than just a collection of information. It is also a form of knowledge.

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Chapter 2

Journalism

The term "journalism" can mean very different things to different people. As such, you will often get a wide range of responses when you ask a group of people to define "journalism."

For example, you can define "journalism" as a *product*. Under this view, an investigative news story about the mayor taking bribes might be treated as "journalism" because the product (an online article) contains certain things thought to be journalistic, like a clear headline and quotes from multiple interviewees. Similarly, that story might be treated as "journalism" because it appears on a television show that looks a certain way — maybe it has someone dressed professionally sitting behind a long table describing the incident — or follows certain linguistic patterns.

"Journalism" can also be defined in terms of the *people* who are involved in the creation of a news product. If something is produced by a certain kind of person, perhaps someone with a college degree in Journalism or some related form of professional training, then some people might treat their work as "journalism." In some countries, people have to be recognized (or certified) by the government in order to legally produce "journalism" or receive certain legal protections.

Similarly, "journalism" can be defined in terms of the *institutions* that create such products. If something is produced by a particular kind of organization, such as *The New York Times* or BBC News, then some people will treat that product as a form of "journalism."

More broadly, "journalism" can be thought about as a *set of activities* through which news is collected, organized, presented, and circulated. For example, someone might believe something to be "journalism" only if it involved first-hand observation by the would-be journalist, or interviews with multiple witnesses. That person may also require all accounts to be subjected to verification practices by the would-be journalist.

Even more broadly yet, “journalism” can be understood as a *service* that is guided by certain goals and values, such as identifying issues that are important to a community and holding elected officials to account, or connecting citizens with opportunities for civic engagement. From this perspective, “journalism” is less about what the product looks like, who made it, or how they made it, but rather about what one hoped to accomplish through their endeavor.

Finally, “journalism” can also be understood as an *occupation* that is bound together by a particular ideology spanning different elements of product, people, practice, and service. For example, in the United States, this might entail values like seeking to provide a public service to citizens; striving to be objective, fair, and trustworthy; working independently from governmental officials; being committed to an approach that emphasizes gathering first-hand accounts of events in a timely fashion; and deferring to a shared, professional sense of ethics. In other contexts, that ideology might be different. For example, the ideology may instead seek to promote societal stability by having journalists be more deferential to government authorities and less critical of the status quo. Those who act in line with the dominant occupational values of journalism within a society – whatever that may look like – may thus be seen as practicing “journalism.”

Why Definitions Matter

As we can see, there are many ways to define “journalism.” Not only do different places and different groups of people within those places often understand the term differently, but those same places and groups have also understood it differently through history.

What this tells us is that *journalism is a fluid and contested thing*. Changing social, cultural, economic, political, and technological conditions change how people understand journalism. For example, technological advances have made it possible for a kindergarten teacher to regularly blog about their city’s public Board of Health meetings to a large online audience – in effect, arguably allowing that teacher to perform *acts of journalism* in ways that were not previously possible.

This matters because the way journalism is broadly understood within a society impacts how *symbolic resources* are translated into *material rewards*. For example, think about a press conference or a trial that has limited seating. Some of those seats may be reserved for those who practice journalism. To determine who is eligible for those seats, someone has to first define what “journalism” is.

Definitions and Expectations

In many societies, journalism also receives a special social status as being the *authority* on "news." You can see evidence of this in the way journalism is enshrined in foundational documents and legal protections of some countries. For example, in the United States, the First Amendment protects a "free press" because of its presumed importance to a well-informed democracy.

With such status comes expectation, and perhaps even deference, from individual citizens and the broader public. For example, if someone considers *The New York Times* to engage in journalism but does not consider Fox News to do so, then they will typically hold *The New York Times* to a higher standard when the *Times* makes a mistake. At the same time, they will be more likely to give the *Times* the benefit of the doubt when that someone can't independently verify some reported information themselves. Put another way, that someone is effectively granting *The New York Times* a degree of legitimacy that they are not granting Fox News because of how that someone understands journalism.

The consequence of this is that it grants the individuals and organizations that are perceived to be legitimate brokers of journalism considerable power as they are deemed to be authoritative by some group of people. That, in turn, allows those organizations to become the primary definers of "news" for that group. This is why different news organizations, commentators, and public figures expend so much energy casting some things as journalism and other things as not-journalism (sometimes with disparaging labels like "fake news").

Journalism as Plural

Although we have talked about "journalism" in the singular form, it is important to recognize that journalism is not some monolithic thing. Thus, one could very easily talk about *journalisms* – that is, journalism in a pluralized sense.

For example, we often hear about "sports journalism," "data journalism," and "advocacy journalism." These prefixes refer to more than just genres or technologies. They recognize that there is something substantively different about that particular rendition of "journalism," whether in its purpose, people, processes, or products. Those differences, in turn, result in distinct symbolic associations, material rewards, and social expectations within that area of journalism. Put another way, what is considered to be desirable practice within one area of journalism – like adopting a neutral tone or using an inverted pyramid story structure – may be considered undesirable in another.

As such, there is no one "right way" to do journalism, but certain ways are privileged over others in particular contexts.

These definitional challenges and considerations thus help us to appreciate that "journalism" is actually a very dynamic and multifaceted thing.

Key Takeaways

- Journalism can be defined in many ways, which means that "journalism" is a contested term that means different things to different people.
- In the U.S. and many liberal democracies, journalism is associated with certain occupational values that stress a public service orientation, objectivity, independence, immediacy, and professional ethics.
- How journalism is generally understood within a society matters because it affects how symbolic resources are translated into material rewards and expectations.
- There is a plurality of journalisms (e.g., "data journalism" and "advocacy journalism"), each with distinct norms, values, and processes. This points to a recognition that journalism is not a single, monolithic entity.

Chapter 3

Social Actors

Human beings play a central role in journalism, and we can refer to *the individuals* who help shape the renditions of news we come across (and the organizations those individuals work for) as *social actors* within the space of "journalism."

The most obvious social actor in journalism is the journalist. But what constitutes a "journalist" is often debated both within and across societies, and it changes over time. For example, 50 years ago, it may have been enough to say that anyone who was employed to do editorial work for an organization that primarily produced news was effectively a "journalist." However, news organizations and the journalism ecosystem are simply too complex today for that to be a good definition.

Scholars have traditionally found two particularly helpful approaches for defining who a "journalist" is.

From a *sociological approach*, one could say that journalists are individuals with *particular skills and knowledge* who both *adhere to the shared ideals of what is recognized as journalism* within a given context and *believe they are participating in shaping the profession's standards of proper practice*. Put another way, the sociological approach looks at a combination of what the individual does, how they do it, and the role they play in shaping the profession.

From a *normative approach*, one could say that a journalist is simply someone who reports news *while holding certain values associated with journalism* in a given society. For example, in the United States, such values might include seeking to report honestly and independently from commercial and social pressures, committing to verifying information before disseminating it, and being responsible, methodical, and transparent in their work. Put another way, the normative approach focuses less on what a person does and more on the values they adopt and *try* to apply in their work. Those norms, in turn, serve as identity markers for the individual, helping them define who they are as professionals (or semi-professionals). Those norms also serve as boundary markers separating journalists from non-journalists, helping those individuals define who they are *not*, as well as who is *not* one of us.

While this distinction may seem strictly academic at first, it has two broad practical implications. First, individuals viewed as journalists by one group of people may not be viewed as journalists by another group because they apply different definitional criteria. Second, journalists often try to present themselves as journalists (or not-journalists) in relation to norms and/or professional standards – which underscores the 'soft' power of those cultural constructions.

Editorial Actors

News organizations have a range of social actors who are typically associated with the label of "journalist" – whom we may call *editorial actors*. These include reporters and correspondents, who collect and analyze information, and then produce news reports about newsworthy events; photojournalists, who try to capture those events through still and moving images; and anchors and presenters, who serve as the faces and primary interpreters in broadcast news programs.

In addition to those more front-facing social actors, you also have individuals who work behind the scenes but are nevertheless also grouped under the "journalist" umbrella. These include editors, who assign stories to reporters, review their work, and have the ability to make substantial changes to the news reports that reporters produce; copy editors, who review news reports for accuracy, grammar, adherence to the organization's journalistic style, and often write the headlines; community engagement editors, who help tailor content for social media and build community around stories; and news designers, who employ different aesthetics like fonts and visual hierarchy in order to call attention to certain aspects of a story.

There are also some content producers whose work is regularly featured alongside that of journalists but whose practices, norms, or styles result in their being considered "journalists" only some of the time (if at all). These include columnists, who write regular analyses of news that typically convey an explicit point of view or personal experience; cartoonists, who often seek to convey an explicit point of view on an issue through creative illustration; and a news organization's editorial board, which may write anonymous editorials that convey the organization's view on some issue. The work from these individuals is often – but not always – explicitly separated from that of the aforementioned actors, such as by being included in an "Opinion" section.

Economic and Technical Actors

In addition to those social actors, there are also individuals who are crucial to the operation of a news organization but are less likely to be labeled a "journalist." Two important groups of such individuals are *economic actors* and *technical actors*.

Some of the key economic actors within news organizations are managers and proprietors. Management covers a broad category of social actors who play a role in defining and implementing the organization's business strategy, including its revenue model, economic targets, budgets and resource allocations, and hiring choices. Proprietors, in turn, refer to the actors who own news organizations. These actors may be hands-off and allow the organization to operate with considerable independence – provided they reach specified economic targets – but they may also actively engage in the day-to-day decision-making by assigning stories of interest to them, shutting down stories that hurt their interests, and serving as the 'final word' in different newsroom affairs.

News organizations also require a range of technical actors in order to operate successfully. These include camera operators, who set up and work the cameras for news broadcasts; sound mixers, who record, synchronize, and edit audio for news segments; and web and app developers, who design and operate content management systems and user-facing applications. Simply put, these individuals help design and operate the tools needed to create the news products that an organization wants to put out – and without whom there likely would not be a polished product.

Interlopers

These are just a small sampling of the many social actors involved in journalism, all of whom could easily fall under a single news organization's umbrella, provided the organization is large enough. However, it is imperative to note that not only are there many different social actors involved in journalism but that these (and related) actors can work either inside or outside of a newsroom.

For example, consider a news organization's content management system. Such systems are commonplace in modern news organizations. They allow a reporter to easily write their story on a digital platform, pass it on to an editor who reviews it, and then quickly publishes it on the organization's website. Although commonplace, the software supporting a system like this is often developed by a different organization – and one that likely produces software for businesses in different industries. That software development organization thus *generally* operates outside the space of journalism. As such, the coders who create that content management system may rarely ever interact with journalists, and they may even produce the software with a different user base in mind, such as food bloggers. Nevertheless, the coder's decisions partly shape what the reporter can and cannot do. For example, the editor may not be able to use a 'track changes' function while editing a story because the coders never considered that need, and thus did not program the system to allow that functionality.

We could call such a software development organization (and the coders who worked on the content management system) an *interloper* because they would likely be seen as a non-journalistic actor that operates outside of typical journalistic spaces, even though that organization contributes meaningfully to journalism (despite that contribution perhaps being unintentional). While some interlopers stumble onto journalism – perhaps as a result of a job or a passion project – others do *intentionally* seek to contribute to journalism, even as they may not seek recognition as journalistic actors. An example of this might be an open-data advocate who digitizes records of complaints against police officers so that data journalists can write stories about that issue.

Interlopers are important because they often challenge the orthodoxies of journalism. They may do this by explicitly critiquing those orthodoxies or by implicitly introducing new practices and ways of thinking as a result of their non-journalistic background and training. Those challenges, over time, have the potential to structurally reshape aspects of journalism, allowing it to develop in unforeseen ways.

It is important to note, however, that some outsiders may seek to interlope and gain recognition as journalistic actors – if not as outright "journalists." An example of this may be a comedian who claims to be a "journalist" because they regularly feature news material in their performances and provide news analysis through the lens of comedy. Another example may be YouTube personalities who claim to be both an "outsider" and a "journalist," and therefore not subject to the media problems they critique. Such efforts are sometimes successful. However, they are more often *unsuccessful* because the interloper's interventions may be deemed too extreme, and instead serve as an example against which a boundary for what does constitute "journalism" is set. Over time, such boundaries do change, though.

Networks of Actors

Given that there are so many kinds of actors within journalism, it can be helpful to think about journalism through a network lens, wherein different actors are connected to one another. Such an exercise not only helps to make sense of the many different actors involved in journalism but, crucially, helps illustrate that *producing news is rarely a solitary endeavor*. Instead, it involves interactions, interrelations, and tensions among a range of actors. That, in turn, leads to frequent reshapings of the ideas, norms, and practices that define who is (and is not) a "journalist" and what "journalism" is (and is not).

For example, as web developers became more central to creating interactive data visualizations in some newsrooms, they were physically moved to desks that were closer to the data journalists in that newsroom. That, in turn, gave those coders reputational credit within journalistic spaces – they began being seen less as support staff and more as journalists in their own right – and gave them a greater ability to reshape the journalistic culture within those newsrooms.

Finally, although some actors may be thought of as being central to or on the periphery of that network encompassing "journalism," it is important to recognize that their positions within the network are often fluid. This means that they can move from the periphery to a more central position over time – or, the network may become re-centered toward certain kinds of actors. Those fluid linkages within the social network can thus grant different actors different forms and amounts of power over time. For example, as U.S. journalism progressed in its digital transformations, actors who were technically proficient with the so-called 'new media' began to have a stronger voice within newsrooms. Similarly, individuals whose informal writing styles may have relegated them to the periphery of journalism in the past – they may not have been considered 'serious' journalists because of how they wrote – may now find a place closer to the center as a result of the large and engaged online followings they can attract. Journalistic networks thus adapt as the institution of journalism evolves.

Key Takeaways

» The term "social actors" refers to the human individuals (and the organizations they work for) that operate within a given space, like journalism.

» There is a wide range of editorial, economic, and technical actors in journalism, and those actors may operate within and outside the newsroom. Examples of these actors include reporters, proprietors, and web developers.

» In addition to traditional actors, there are also interlopers, or actors who are not typically recognized as journalistic actors and may operate outside of typical journalistic spaces but nevertheless exert substantial influence on journalism.

- Journalistic spaces are shaped in large part through the interactions, interrelations, and tensions within the assemblage of actors in that space.
- Over time, actors can move between central and peripheral positions within the network encompassing the space of "journalism" (or some subset of it). Alternatively, the network can also become re-centered in favor of certain kinds of actors.

Chapter 4

Technological Actants

Although journalism is often associated with human beings, non-human entities also play an important role in shaping journalism – especially today. We can refer to *the material, non-human technologies* that make a difference to how news is produced and disseminated as *technological actants* within the space of journalism. Examples of technological actants in journalism include word processing applications (used to produce news stories), search engine algorithms (used to find news), and smartphones (used to consume news).

While that definition may seem quite abstract, at its heart is a simple truth: Nearly all of today's journalistic work is shaped in some part by technology. This isn't a recent development, though. Technological actants have played a major role in the historical development of journalism. For example, the development of the printing press made the mass distribution of journalism theoretically possible, even as it restricted the formats that journalistic products could take on due to the technology's limitations. Another technological actant, the telegraph, enabled newswire services like *The Associated Press* to develop and allowed reporters to transmit their reports relatively quickly from afar. Conversely, the proliferation of the telephone allowed more reporting to be done from within the newsroom since reporters could just call their sources instead of having to meet them in person.

Technological actants are important because they both enable, restrict, and shape different forms of journalism in both visible and invisible ways, and they very much impact the social actors (human beings) who interact with technology. Moreover, although technological actants are often described as neutral entities – after all, they're machines presumably acting in predictable ways – technological actants are very much shaped by the social actors who create them.

Technology Shaping Human Behaviors

In the aforementioned examples of the printing press, the telegraph, and the telephone, *technological actants shaped the behaviors of human actors* by creating new possibilities and restricting others.

For a more detailed example, consider the following scenario: A news organization uses a content management system to facilitate its workflow, and all reporters at that organization must submit their stories through that system. When a reporter sees that a star athlete announced, via a video on Instagram, that they're signing a new contract, the reporter quickly writes a news brief for the website and plans to embed the Instagram post so readers may see the athlete's excitement with their own eyes. However, it turns out that the particular content management system used by the news organization does not have the technical capacity to embed social media posts in a story – perhaps the person who created the system just never thought to add the functionality. Thus, the reporter must either describe the video through the text in the story or send the reader away from the story through a link to the post.

In that example, the technological actant (the content management system) shaped a particular human choice by making it impossible for the reporter to pursue their preferred course of action, which was to embed the post with the video. Instead, it provided the reporter with a limited set of alternative courses of action that the system could accommodate: linking out to Instagram or presenting a written description of the video. Over time, that system may end up discouraging the use of social media in reporting – such as embedding posts that illustrate a point made by the reporter or that include reactions by other people – and thus impact the way the reporters working for that organization relate with their sources and audiences.

It is crucial to note, though, that just because a technological actant is designed to promote a particular way of doing things does not mean that its users will use them in that way – or use that actant at all. Many innovations in journalism are not actually adopted by journalists. And, when they are, those actants are often adopted in ways that allow journalists to continue doing the things they are used to doing, and in the ways they are used to doing them. In that sense, technological actants can take on the values, operational logics, and biases of their users when they are put to particular uses. For example, when mainstream journalistic outlets began adopting the then-novel blogging format in new sections of their websites, its journalists tended to use the new functionalities in very traditional ways – such as by linking primarily to mainstream organizations, limiting audience participation, and using the same journalistic writing style they were already used to.

Humans Shaping Technology

The relationship between technological actants and human actors is not a one-way street, though. That is, *human actors also shape technological actants*.

It is easy to think of technological actants as neutral tools due to their mechanical nature. However, they are created and refined by human actors, and thus take on certain cultural norms, politics, and ideological values. These may be intentionally inserted into the technological actant by those humans in order to advance certain commercial, technical, or journalistic objectives. They may also be added unintentionally as a result of the human creator's biases and ways of thinking.

To illustrate this, consider a scenario wherein a freelance coder is contracted to create a web tool that helps journalists at a news organization quickly produce interactive data visualizations. The coder intuits that most journalists at that organization are not tech-savvy, and thus chooses to limit the range of customization options so as to not overwhelm the journalists. The coder similarly intuits that many of the journalists lack a design background, and thus implements a feature that will quickly inspect the dataset and recommend the chart form that best illustrates the data. Finally, the coder is told to optimize the tool for "a mobile-first experience," and the coder thus further restricts the customization options to ensure that the journalist can only create visualizations that look good on a smartphone.

In that scenario, the coder – a social actor – has shaped the tool – a technological actant – in different ways. First, their biases and perceptions lead them to promote a restrictive logic of simplicity within the tool. Second, the coder's background shapes the tool's suggestion for which kind of chart to use for a given dataset, and those suggestions may be more oriented to scientific visualizations than journalistic ones if the coder's background lies outside of journalism. Third, the economic logic of the news organization instructs the coder to optimize the tool's outputs for smartphones; the coder, in turn, programs the tool accordingly.

As these examples show, not only do technological actants take on the biases and logics of their users when they are put to use but they are also infused with the logics and biases of their creators as they are built.

Mutual Shaping

By acting upon one another, technological actants are constantly shaping human actors and human actors are constantly shaping technological actants. This is called *mutual shaping* and it operates in an iterative manner.

Returning to our data visualization tool scenario, the coder's choice to have the software recommend pie charts when presented with data about proportions may result in that visual format becoming a popular form in data visualizations created by that organization. However, one of the journalists may find that they want the doughnut chart form (an alternative to pie charts) to be an option, and eventually convince the coder to include that functionality. Over time, the journalist's peers may try that option and come to prefer it. They thus convince the coder to set the doughnut chart to become the default recommendation, which in turn socializes future hires in the organization to consider the doughnut chart first – even as they continue to stay within that general visual aesthetic initially proposed by the non-journalist coder.

As the scenario now shows, a human actor shaped a technological actant, which shaped the behaviors of other human actors, who in turn used the actant in particular ways and had the coder reshape the actant, which had subsequent impacts on yet more human actors. As such, they were influencing one another over time, with the technological actant taking on the ideas, biases, and logics of different people – even as it influenced those very same people in important ways. While this is a fairly simple example, you can imagine similar mutual shaping processes for more complex technologies (e.g., search algorithms, communication platforms, virtual assistants).

Given that technological actants act and are acted upon human actors (as well as other technological actants), it is unsurprising that those dynamics introduce fluid power relationships. Those relationships are oftentimes asymmetric, meaning that a technological actant may ultimately have more power over the human actor – and vice versa.

For example, Google's search algorithms may play a major role in determining how many clicks a reporter's story gets, and the reporter may thus try to optimize the language in their story to get more attention from Google. (This is called search engine optimization, or SEO.) However, Google's algorithms are hardly influenced by that individual journalist, or perhaps even the journalism industry as a whole. Thus, that algorithm has more power over the reporter than the reporter has over the algorithm, as the reporter must adapt to remain relevant but not the other way around.

Such power relationships are particularly important to examine as particular technologies become more and less central to the profession and to everyday life, and as certain kinds of human actors become more and less central to journalism.

Key Takeaways

- Technological actants refer to material, non-human technologies that make a difference to how journalism is produced and disseminated.
- Technological actants shape human actors by structuring their behaviors, both in terms of making it easier to do some things and impossible to do others.
- Technological actants are not neutral. They are developed by humans and take on those humans' values, biases, and preferred ways of accomplishing tasks. Moreover, they are sometimes intentionally employed within organizations (including newsrooms) to address different commercial, technical, and/or journalistic imperatives.
- The mutual shaping of human actors and technological actants creates power relationships that are fluid and dynamic, and are of consequence to the development of journalism.

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Chapter 5

Audiences

The term *audience* refers to the individuals and groups to whom products and services, like journalism, are produced for or in the service of. Within the space of journalism, this would typically be the readers, listeners, viewers, and so on that a journalistic outlet seeks to serve.

News audiences in particular are sometimes interchangeably called “the public” or *citizens*. Those designations typically imply a civic objective: they are individuals that journalists should seek to inform *so that they may participate intelligently in democratic processes*. However, audiences may also be referred to as news *consumers*, which sometimes implies a more commercial logic – after all, the consumption of a product is what is highlighted – and thus emphasizes the organization’s economic objectives over its social ones. More recently, the term “news *users*” has received attention because it moves away from the passive connotation of consumption and instead offers audiences more *agency* by suggesting that they can actively participate in media use.

Although these terms differ, they all orient themselves toward something we can call “news audiences.”

News Audiences Over Time

Although journalistic outlets often depend on their audiences for their financial success – whether directly through subscriptions or indirectly through advertisements – the newsrooms within those organizations have historically wanted little to do with their audiences.

News audiences have historically been treated in a fairly passive sense, as recipients of media or commodities. Put another way, they were often thought about as just people who consumed the work of journalists, and with whom the journalists rarely ever interacted – save for the occasional letter or phone call that a journalist might receive.

Going back to the 1930s, much of the thinking about mass media (which includes journalism) was oriented around a hypodermic needle model wherein 'the audience' was seen as a passive, monolithic group that simply accepted media messages as intended by the sender – in this case, the journalist. This view became progressively less influential throughout the 1950s.

Today, audiences are typically seen as having more agency in how they encounter and interpret media messages. Put another way, they are seen as being more able to determine how they find news, being more able to participate in how news is produced and distributed, and having greater ability to interpret news through their own filters, which in turn are shaped by their individual background and beliefs. This has profoundly changed how news audiences are thought about, both professionally and academically.

Additionally, there are now greater commercial pressures on journalists and journalistic outlets to think about their audiences as potential active participants in news production and distribution, and to enlist their help in order to lower news production costs and increase the organization's reach. As advertising revenue declined for many traditional media sectors and in many parts of the world, commercial journalistic outlets have begun relying more on audience subscription revenue, which generally increase when audiences feel more engaged (and thus see greater value in a subscription). Even among state-supported and non-profit journalistic outlets, audience engagement is becoming an increasingly important marker for legitimizing those outlets' requests for funding.

News Audiences and Participation

However, just because audiences *can* participate does *not* mean that news producers will seek or even want their participation.

It has been argued that part of what gives a journalist a professional sense of identity is that they have a 'sixth-sense' for news, and the training needed to produce it well. Journalists have thus historically rejected high degrees of audience participation in news production because they perceived such participation to be an affront to their independence and expertise, and thus to the quality of the news content they produced.

In recent years, however, there has been a cultural shift within the industry toward welcoming participation – and doing so in ways that are not simply optimized toward economic benefits. Journalists today are generally more open to the idea of co-production with audiences since they have seen first-hand the quality of the work that citizen journalists have been able to produce. They also now have access to technological actants that make it easier to enlist the help of audiences to engage in certain tasks, like reviewing large troves of public documents released by whistleblowers and activists. Furthermore, there is greater acceptance of the idea that audiences have more to offer journalism – whether through story ideas or their own social networks – than they have been able to contribute in the past.

However, just because audience participation is welcomed does *not* mean that audiences will themselves want to participate. This is especially true if there is no incentive for participation, or if they're treated as an appendix of sorts in the broad scheme of things. Put differently, audiences are attune to *exploitation* – such as being asked to simply do grunt work for free – and participatory forms of journalism are therefore most successful when the relationships are perceived as being reciprocal, with both journalists and audiences feeling like they have gained something as a result. As such, discussions about "participatory journalism" now also include terms like "reciprocal journalism."

Fragmentation of News Audiences

Today's media ecology has also complicated ideas about audiences and the experiences they have. For one, the rapid growth of media choices people have and the ease with which they may access those choices has resulted in the *fragmentation of news audiences*. No longer do tens of millions of people in the U.S. tune in to see a single news broadcast at the same time, as was the case for CBS Evening News in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, news audiences are no longer bound to the handful of channels their TV or radio antennas might pick up, to the delivery zones of their local newspapers, or even to the cultural tastes of the owners of local stores that distribute magazines.

Instead, news audiences today can easily navigate their way to the *New York Times*' website for national news, the *Boston Globe*'s website for regional news, ESPN's website for sports news, and SCOTUSblog for news about the Supreme Court. If they want to stream local news from the National Public Radio member station in Minneapolis in the morning, and then download a recorded broadcast from its Miami affiliate in the evening, they can do that, too. If they want to see how the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, covered a particular issue, they can likely find that on YouTube or the BBC's website.

In short, news audiences have access to far more news content, and far more sources, than ever before – and the cost of switching between journalistic outlets, in terms of both money and convenience, is also lower than ever before in many regards. This makes it difficult for a single journalistic outlet to gain a near-monopoly on audiences. However, it has resulted in a media ecosystem wherein a few large organizations are able to capture fairly large audiences due to brand recognition, followed by a steep drop-off to a long tail made up of tens of thousands of journalistic outlets that can only capture niche audiences and are, in many cases, deemed to be interchangeable by users.

Furthermore, not only do audiences now have access to more options for *news* but they also have more options for *other media*. This includes entertainment media, such as a popular show on Netflix or a streamer on Twitch. Such media compete with news for a finite amount of audience time and attention. That, in turn, can further fragment audiences as they turn to many different organizations to satisfy particular media desires instead of relying on a single source, like CBS or NBC, to single-handedly satisfy their want for news, culture, and entertainment.

Technological Actants and Audiences

Although news audiences now have more agency, it is also important to be aware that technological actants play an important role in *mediating the interactions* between news audiences and journalistic actors, including journalistic outlets. For example, when an individual searches for news about a recent event on YouTube, algorithms developed by engineers at YouTube decide how to order the presentation of the search results. Crucially, those algorithms are optimized to promote certain kinds of content, including provocative or controversial content that will keep users on the platform longer. Thus, news audiences are sometimes given a false sense of control, as the search algorithms work invisibly to promote certain kinds of content while deliberately obfuscating alternatives.

Similarly, the experiences that news audiences have may be personalized in small but important ways. Consider the following example: Dr. Zamith goes to the *New York Times*' website and finds that the first opinion piece listed is about climate change, an issue he cares deeply about. Other users might be shown a different opinion piece, but Dr. Zamith is shown one about climate change because a technological actant's analysis of his past browsing behavior estimated that he's interested in that particular topic. When Dr. Zamith clicks on that opinion piece, he finds that the third paragraph of the story is tailored to describe the average highs and lows over the past few decades in Amherst. That's because a different technological actant guessed Dr. Zamith's location based on his IP address, and yet another actant looked up the climate information in that area and generated a paragraph of text describing it. Then, as Dr. Zamith scrolls to the middle of the article, he encounters an image of a map-based data visualization that is automatically zoomed into Amherst. That's because yet another technological actant determined that Dr. Zamith is using his phone to access the story. Had he used a device with a larger screen, like a laptop, Dr. Zamith would have been shown an interactive map of the entire United States, which casts a broader lens on the issue.

Throughout that example, a series of technological actants intervened in Dr. Zamith's news experience in fairly invisible ways. These interventions may be seen as positive. By personalizing the news experience, the story may feel more engaging to Dr. Zamith and get him to care more about the issue. However, such personalization can be highly problematic if the technological actants are used to mediate experiences by offering audiences highly different stories based on characteristics like political ideology, race and ethnicity, or economic status. In the extreme, such interventions would make it harder for a *public* to have a shared sense of reality – something that scholars have argued is important for democratic deliberation.

Technological actants have also altered the way news audiences and journalistic actors communicate with one another, and thus the kinds of relationships they tend to develop. For example, audience members are now more likely to give feedback on a story through brief, immediate, public exchanges directed at the journalist using a platform like Twitter, as opposed to longer, slower, private exchanges like a letter or e-mail. This can result in more meaningful and direct audience participation. However, it can likewise promote negative forms of participation, such as 'brigading' and strategic harassment of journalists.

Key Takeaways

- Audiences are the individuals and groups to whom products and services, like journalism, are produced for or in the service of.
- Historically, journalistic audiences have generally been thought about as passive recipients of media or commodities. In more recent times, journalistic audiences have gained greater ability (and recognition) as active participants in media production and distribution.

- Just because audiences can participate does not mean that producers will want or seek their participation, or that audiences will themselves want to participate.
- Today's diffuse media ecology permits greater news audience fragmentation, as audiences not only have more choices but also tend to consume different kinds of news from different journalistic outlets. Additionally, journalistic media are competing with even more (non-journalistic) media than ever before for a finite amount of time and attention.
- The relationships between journalistic actors and audiences are mediated to a great extent today by technological actants.

Chapter 6

Journalistic Activities

Journalistic activities refer to the *routinized practices* that help shape both news media messages and the ways they are distributed and consumed.

The phrase "routinized practices" underscores that journalistic activities tend to follow certain routines, or ways of doing things. They're often deeply influenced by long-standing institutional logics, processes, and cultural values that make it possible for different kinds of social actors and technological actants to not only *work together* but also *work efficiently* across the multi-stage process of producing journalism.

Although journalistic activities are influenced by their past, they are not static or unchangeable. In fact, they frequently iterate as new configurations of social actors, technological actants, and audiences emerge as a result of social, political, economic, and technological changes within media industries and society at large.

For example, journalism was historically a more insular practice, with journalists often writing for an audience they knew relatively little about and received relatively little input from. Put another way, after the journalist identified a story *they* perhaps thought was important, the journalist would report it and write it in a way that would help answer questions they thought their audiences probably had. After the editors and production staff processed the journalist's story, it would appear on somebody's doorstep. That was often the end of that story's lifecycle.

In contrast, that same journalist is today more likely to be looking at social media trends to identify story ideas, put out open calls to solicit help in running down a tip, and even receive frequent audience feedback about their story after it has been published. Moreover, that journalist may go on to respond to questions about the story on social media and later tweet small updates to the story based on audience interest. Journalistic activities today are thus more social and less insular.

From Production to Consumption

We can broadly place many of the most consequential journalistic activities into five distinct stages: *access and observation*, *selection and filtering*, *processing and editing*, *distribution*, and *interpretation*.

Access and Observation

Access and observation pertains to the information gathering stage of news production. This involves gathering source material, like attending a press conference, being present at a protest, or gaining access to confidential government reports. It also involves identifying patterns in those source materials, like the members of Congress who routinely receive more political donations from certain industries. Regular citizens are now far more likely to participate in this stage than in times past because they can easily serve as observers by streaming events or capturing incidents that professional journalists may not be able to observe first-hand themselves. For example, a Minneapolis teenager received a special citation by the Pulitzer Board in 2021 for filming the murder of George Floyd. That video was crucial to journalistic coverage of that incident, and it helped generate a great deal of media attention to the issue of police violence against people of color in the summer of 2020.

Selection and Filtering

Selection and filtering pertains to the stage wherein gathered information is winnowed down to its most interesting and/or important parts. This involves looking at all potential stories that might emerge from an event, like a protest, and deciding what to include in a news product and where to include it. For example, a journalist may choose to focus the story on the size of the turnout at a protest, on the police response to the protesters, on the history of the issue that is being protested against, on the potential solutions to the issue, and so on. Even if the journalist has the time or space to cover every one of those angles – and they often do not – they still need to decide which aspect of the issue to the lead the news story with.

Processing and Editing

Processing and editing pertains to the stage wherein the gathered and filtered information is turned into a news product, often by following certain stylistic guidelines. For example, the journalist may be expected to organize the information using the inverted pyramid schema, wherein the most timely and important information is placed near the very top of the story, followed by decreasingly important details until you get to the non-essential background information at the end. The journalist may also be expected to generally use non-emotive language, like claiming a policy proposal was “dismissed” instead of “lambasted” in order to signal their neutrality. Within this stage, there may be multiple individuals (from the supervising editor to a copy editor to the layout or web editor) modifying the news product as it moves through the news production chain.

Distribution

Distribution pertains to the stage wherein news products are disseminated to audiences, such as by broadcasting a news story on a television show or trying to place it on a user’s social media feed. Historically, newsroom personnel had a limited role to play in this stage as organizations had a dedicated group of people to handle these activities. For example, dedicated print workers would set up the printing press, print thousands of copies, and stash them in bunches at a delivery dock. Delivery workers would then pick up and drop off individual copies at subscribers’ homes. Today, however, newsroom personnel often participate directly in the distribution process by linking to their own stories on social media and sometimes even trying to draw attention to the stories by engaging in online communities where would-be audiences might congregate. Additionally, audiences themselves now play a crucial role in distribution: They’re often the ones driving attention to a story by sharing it, helping some news products go viral.

Interpretation

Interpretation pertains to the discussion around the distributed news product, and more broadly about how it becomes widely understood and accepted by the general population. Journalists can certainly influence the interpretation of a news product based on the specific words and story angles they use in describing an issue or event, and editors can similarly play a major role based on the headline they write for the story and the pictures they choose to accompany it. However, audiences also play a crucial role in this process based on how they talk about the product in associated ‘comments’ sections, the contexts within which they share the stories on social media, and the rebuttals they may choose to issue themselves via blogging platforms and the like.

Changing Nature of Activities

At the heart of these examples are human actors. This is because journalistic activities have historically been human-led, with technological actants acting largely in a support role to help enact the human-led objectives more efficiently. For example, content management systems made it possible for journalists to quickly write their stories – perhaps with some automated spell- and grammar-checking help – and easily move it up the chain to a human editor. However, human beings were still doing much of the core labor.

This is changing, however. In some instances, the roles are now outright inverted, with the human social actor playing the support role and the technological actant taking the primary journalistic role, and sometimes acting with a remarkable degree of *independence*. For example, newswriting algorithms are already able to take in large numbers of electronic financial reports, identify the most interesting changes from the previous financial quarter, and write thousands of news stories that look very similar to what a human journalist might have produced. Another algorithm may then take those stories and post them to an organization's website – with a clever headline and all – and automatically promote it on social media. All of this can be done with limited human intervention, beyond the work that goes into setting up the algorithm.

While algorithmically led user-facing activities are still the exception within the *general* space of journalism, they have become central in some sectors. For example, *The Associated Press* publishes tens of thousands of algorithmically written news stories about finance and sports each year, and a major journalistic media chain in Sweden employs algorithms to automatically organize news stories on their homepages using a mixture of personalization and algorithmic editorial judgment.

Thus, while journalistic activities are often organized around predictable routines shaped by history, they're also continually iterating before our eyes.

Key Takeaways

» Journalistic activities refer to the routinized practices that help shape news messages as well as their distribution and consumption.

» Journalistic activities are often governed by long-standing principles, values, and ways of doing things. However, they also evolve to accommodate new arrangements of social actors, technological actants, and audiences.

» When it comes to journalism, we can broadly place the most consequential activities within five stages: access and observation, selection and filtering, processing and editing, distribution, and interpretation.

» While technological actants have historically been used to support human actors, in some cases they are now able to work fairly independently from them.

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Unit II

Media Effects

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Chapter 7

Media Dependency Theory

Media dependency theory offers a helpful way to think about *the relationship between media and the fulfillment of different audience needs and goals*.

At the heart of the theory is the proposition that in industrialized and information-based societies, such as the one we presently live in, individuals come to rely on media to satisfy a range of different needs and goals. These include learning about where those individuals should go to vote as well as staying up-to-date about the latest fashion trends.

Before diving into this theory, it is helpful to be mindful of the fact that journalistic outlets are just *one group of social actors within a broader system of information*. This broader system includes other mass media actors, like movies and books. It includes other institutional actors, like politicians and non-media corporations. It includes personal contacts, like your friends and family members. It even includes your personal experiences, like your attendance at an event or a study abroad experience that exposed you to a different culture. There are many other potential actors in that system, but this helps illustrate the notion that journalistic outlets operate within an environment made up of many different entities, each of which can offer at least some information that might be of interest to a particular audience member.

This perspective is helpful because it underscores the importance of understanding the *context* around people's interaction with information, which is crucial to understanding journalistic media's role in informing people. That, in turn, is an explicit rejection of earlier, more simplistic theories about the effects of mass media. For example, in the 1930s, scholars and popular intellectuals argued that mass media were incredibly powerful and that people generally accepted the information disseminated by mass media as-is. (This is called the *hypodermic needle* perspective.) At the same time, this systems perspective rejects the view that mass media have little to no effect – the *limited effects* perspective began to take hold as the hypodermic needle perspective lost popularity in the 1940s and 50s – as the magnitude of the effect is dependent on the context.

Journalistic Media and Relationships

Returning to media dependency theory, it posits that the impacts of journalistic media on people (and of people on journalistic media) depend on the context and the nature of the relationships within a network of social actors, technological actants, and audiences *that are relevant to that context*.

The theory further posits that *an individual's characteristics and goals* (e.g., how interested they are in some topic), *their personal environment and interpersonal network* (e.g., whether they know people with first-hand experience with that topic), and *the dominant media and social systems they live within* (e.g., how free they are to access news media they believe would be informative about that topic) all impact the extent to which they may depend on media for information about that topic.

For example, let's consider the topic of foreign election interference in the 2020 election. Perhaps, as someone passionate about politics, you were very interested in that topic – and thus have a personal goal of learning more about it. However, because you were (most likely) not an intelligence officer and lacked the security clearance needed to review intelligence reports yourself, you probably didn't have the ability to gain first-hand knowledge about that issue. Moreover, you might not have had any such intelligence officers in your friend or familial networks, so you didn't personally know someone with first-hand knowledge, either. You thus had to depend on people other than yourself (*third parties*) and those close to you for information. One such third party might have been a journalist who has been covering the topic of election interference for months as the National Security Correspondent for *The Washington Post*. As such, you might have come to depend on that journalist for what you believed to be trustworthy information about the topic. (Or, perhaps, you depended on other journalistic outlets who themselves depended on the *Post*'s reporting for key details.)

However, that could change over time. Perhaps a reputable whistleblower leaked a series of private intelligence reports online. Now, you may find yourself dependent on the whistleblower for access to the information, as they controlled which of the intelligence reports were made available to the public. As you review the leaked documents, you may become less dependent on others' interpretation of the issue – including *The Washington Post*'s reporting. Put another way, as your information network changes, the kinds and degrees of dependence also change.

Importance of Journalistic Media

Although journalistic outlets are just one of many sets of constituents within information systems, they are often important. That's because people generally need journalistic media to function in modern societies, which are more co-dependent than ever before due to increased specialization and globalization. Put another way, personal contacts and experience are no longer enough to satisfy all (or even most) of the things a person needs to know in order to fully participate in modern social life.

Crucially, media dependency theory contends that *the degree of ambiguity about news information impacts the degree of media dependency*. Put another way, as news information becomes more ambiguous (less clear to you), audiences are presumed to become more dependent on journalistic outlets for understanding that news.

Ambiguity can come from many different sources. It might involve lack of knowledge about some phenomenon, such as whether a new technology developed by a rival nation poses a threat to your nation's security. It might involve rapid change associated with a phenomenon, such as whether an emerging coup d'état in a friendly nation might impact the diplomatic relationship between them and your nation. It might also involve simple disagreement among institutional elites about some phenomenon, such as which political group is more likely to be correct about the costs and benefits to a proposed renewable energy plan.

That proposition from media dependency theory can further be extended into an argument that *journalism can be especially influential on people's understanding of emerging international affairs*. That is, people typically have less certainty (and thus more ambiguity) when it comes to the world beyond their immediate geographical sphere because they might not have recent (or any) personal experience in those contexts – perhaps they have never been to Cambodia – and they might not have any personal contacts who have expert knowledge or experience in those contexts. Because of this, people become more dependent on media depictions of those places, peoples, and issues, and on journalistic outlets when new developments are emerging about those places, peoples, and issues.

Exclusivity and Dependence

According to media dependency theory, *when a media organization has exclusive information, it tends to have more power within its relationship with an audience member* (and the broader ecosystem) because it increases the degree of information asymmetry. This is particularly true if the information is in demand to satisfy that individual's valued goals, and doubly so if access to such information is tightly controlled.

Exclusive information does not have to mean classified information, as with the earlier example. It might simply mean that they are the only source for that information at a given time, such as in the early hours following a chemical explosion at a local manufacturing plant. While local officials may eventually put out their account of the event via a televised press conference, people are likely to first hear about it from the breaking news coverage provided by journalists.

However, journalistic media do not inherently get to have exclusive information about breaking news (or confidential affairs). Indeed, some institutional actors, such as governments or private companies, can restrict both media access to important resources and individuals' access to certain journalistic outlets. In doing so, those institutional actors can try to reorient dependency away from journalistic media and toward their own version of events. For example, a private company may prevent news media from accessing that manufacturing plant or speaking to its employees. Similarly, government officials in some countries may even prevent journalistic media from broadcasting information about the incident until those officials give their approval. Such intervention happens quite often in practice, to varying degrees.

It is important to note that media dependency theory was first proposed during a time of high media concentration, when there were relatively few major broadcast networks in places like the United States. Today's media ecology is far more complex, though. In particular, mobile devices (e.g., smartphones) and networked media (e.g., social media and messaging apps) have become important elements in today's media ecology. They allow individuals to serve as *intermediaries* between mass media and other people. That is, individuals and aggregators with large online followings can become key brokers of news information during an event and thus gain power – even if only temporarily – by virtue of others' dependence on them. Additionally, people can now more easily find videos and accounts of an event posted by a range of other people who observed it first-hand, thus reducing the exclusivity that any one actor might otherwise have.

Key Takeaways

» Media dependency theory is a systems-level theory that views journalistic outlets as just one group of actors within a broader system of information.

» Media dependency theory focuses on understanding relationships within a system, with the strength of the relationships impacting the degree of dependency.

- » Media dependency theory contends that the degree of ambiguity impacts the degree of media dependency. Journalism can be especially influential on people's understanding of things that they have limited personal experience with, such as international affairs.
- » When a journalistic outlet has exclusive information, it has more power in a relationship as the relationship becomes asymmetric. However, different institutional actors, like governments and private companies, can restrict access to important media resources.

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Chapter 8

Framing Theory

Framing theory provides us with a helpful lens for understanding *how people develop their perception of reality,* and the role that journalistic outlets play in shaping those perceptions.

Framing is deeply indebted to another theoretical perspective – the *Social Construction of Reality* – which was formalized in 1966 by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. At its core, this perspective argues that a person's perception of reality is not entirely, or even mainly, objective. Instead, what we perceive to be reality is actually a human and social construction that is deeply shaped by our previous lived experiences and the ways in which we are socialized via everyday interactions. As such, the theory contends, reality becomes socially constructed as we experience it and learn about it, and we each therefore develop differing perceptions of reality. Those differences may be fairly minor: Perhaps two witnesses agree that a police officer acted with the needed force in response to a threat but one of them thinks the officer could have toned things down a little. However, they might also be significant: Perhaps those two witnesses disagree over who the aggressor was, and whether any force was needed on the officer's part.

This perspective is important because it presumes that *individuals act based on their unique perceptions of reality*. For example, if someone perceives the officer to have acted with unnecessary force, they may be more likely to protest against police brutality than someone else who perceives that exact same situation to have involved an appropriate response. As this example suggests, the theory posits that different people experience different constructed realities – even when they inhabit the same spaces under the same present circumstances.

A World With Multiple Realities

It follows from this theoretical perspective that *the world consists of multiple perceived realities*. Those perceived realities are shaped by a range of factors, operating from an individual level (e.g., one's preconceptions, perhaps resulting from their particular upbringing) to a social systems level (e.g., the dominant systems of thought within their culture). In short, while there may indeed be a singular 'true' reality out there, made up of material things and governed by the laws of physics, an individual's perception of that reality is just an *approximation* of it. And, sometimes, it's not a very accurate one.

A crucial implication of this perspective is that *it is simply impossible for journalism to mirror reality*. That is, if a journalist cannot fully capture a 'true' reality because of their human shortcomings, then they cannot possibly replicate it in their work. Instead, journalism is, at best, a good approximation of reality, with the journalist's job being to approximate that reality as best they can.

Even if one rejects the proposition that individuals inherently cannot mirror reality, there is also a practical issue at play that makes framing theory useful: Even if journalists could accurately replicate reality, they simply do not have the time or space to show *everything* about that reality. Instead, they can only show a small portion of it.

For example, consider a televised broadcast of a protest against police brutality. One may think that setting up a camera and pointing it at the crowd offers a mirror of reality – after all, it is a simple, mechanical recording of what's happening. However, the camera can only show one angle of what is happening. Depending on where it is placed, it may be too close and miss the entire scope of the crowd – or, it may be too far and make the crowd appear small or miss important details about the interactions. As such, the journalist must make a choice to place the camera in the place that they believe offers the best representation (approximation) of the 'reality' of that event.

But journalists rarely ever just point a camera at something and call it a day. A large part of their job is *to make sense* of what is happening. Put another way, even if they just report 'facts' – and facts are themselves contentious things – they must still connect those facts. The process of making sense of reality is inherently an interpretive (and thus constructive) act.

Media Framing and Frames

One way to conceptualize that process of sense-making is through framing theory and, specifically, *media framing*. Sociologist Robert Entman refers to media framing as the process by which an individual "*selects some aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a communicating text*, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." That's a lot to take in, so let's break it down.

First, this conceptualization of the framing process – and there are other ways of conceptualizing it – involves two key sub-processes. The first is *selection*, or the choices about what to include or exclude about that perceived reality. The second is *salience*, or the choices about what to emphasize about that perceived reality and what to downplay. These choices, again, are often driven by the necessity of communicating something within a finite amount of time or space – like a handful of live tweets or a 30-second broadcast segment.

Second, this conceptualization describes four main acts of framing. The first is *diagnosing problems*, or defining the issues associated with a topic. For example, the aforementioned broadcast segment on a protest may choose to diagnose the problem as police using excessive force against detainees *or* as the vilification of police. The second is *diagnosing causes*, or identifying what or who are the main forces driving the problem. For example, that segment may choose to focus on a hurtful culture within policing *or* an inadequate amount of police training. The third is *making moral evaluations*, which may include asserting whether the causal agents or the consequences of an issue are good or bad. For example, that segment may assert that these protests are good because they may serve as catalysts for change, *or* bad because the protests are divisive within society. The fourth is *recommending treatments*, which describe potential 'solutions' to the identified problems. For example, that segment may assert that systemic reform is necessary *or* that police should receive more support from other actors and institutions.

The result of that process is the *media frame*, which refers to the *written, spoken, graphical, or visual message that a communicator uses to contextualize a topic*, such as a person, event, episode, or issue, within a text transmitted to receivers by means of mediation.

Again, there's a lot to unpack there, but the key takeaway is that media frames are the tools that communicators – including journalists – use to simplify and contextualize an issue or event. A single frame (or media text, like a news story) does not need to include all four of those acts of media framing. In fact, news stories rarely do, especially when they aim to be as neutral as possible.

Moreover, media framing and frames involve both conscious and subconscious processes of selection and salience. Put another way, a journalist may consciously adopt a particular frame because it addresses questions they believe their audiences will want answers to, even as they subconsciously reject alternative frames because they recall seeing those frames in recent coverage by a competitor.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that news stories often include information from different sources, which in turn shapes the frame. For example, a journalist may only diagnose the problems associated with the aforementioned protest with their words but add elements of moral evaluation to the story's frame by including quotes from a source that asserts the police acted in a brutal and unprofessional way.

Impacts of Journalistic Frames

Journalistic frames *often impact audiences' understandings of and attitudes toward a topic or issue*. In this way, they influence the realities that those audience members construct. This may include interpretations not only of basic elements, like what happened, but broader (and no less impactful) notions about what is most important or problematic about a topic or issue, who are the good and bad people involved, and what are or aren't sensible solutions to a given problem.

To illustrate this, consider the two following news briefs about two emerging treatments for a group of 600 people who have been infected by a dangerous virus.

The first news brief notes that if Treatment A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. However, if Treatment B is adopted, there is a 1/3 chance that all 600 people will be saved and a 2/3 chance that nobody will be saved.

The second news brief notes that if Treatment A is adopted, 400 people will die. However, if Treatment B is adopted, there is a 1/3 chance that nobody will die and a 2/3 chance that all 600 people will die.

The depictions in those two news briefs are functionally equivalent, with Treatment A being the risk-averse option and Treatment B being the risk-seeking option. However, if a random set of 50 readers were shown the first brief and another 50 random readers were shown the second, the theoretical expectation is that the people shown the first brief – which is more positive – would be more likely to select the risk-averse option (Treatment A). In contrast, the readers who were shown the second depiction – which is more negative – would be more likely to select the risk-seeking option (Treatment B). This is an example of what we call gain/loss framing, one of the many different approaches to framing in psychology.

However, the extent of those impacts is neither uniform nor universal. Modern theories of message processing reject the view that audiences are passive and just accept journalistic frames. Instead, audiences process those messages in light of their existing knowledge and attitudes, which is in turn shaped by their lived experiences and non-media messages (e.g., discussions with friends and family). For example, a person who has had a negative encounter with the police is generally more likely to accept a frame that centers them as the aggressor – or, conversely, to reject such a frame if their experiences have been exclusively positive.

Repeated exposure to particular frames can develop associations over time. For example, seeing repeated images of police brutality may link the concepts of police and brutality over time, such that when the concept of police is triggered – even in other contexts – the individual will also think about brutal actions. Alternatively, that repeated exposure may make it so that when the concept of brutality comes up, the individual may think of the police as an example. Such connections can be both strengthened and weakened by frames. For example, if that same individual is repeatedly exposed to media examples of police engaging in good deeds, the existing negative connections are challenged and may thus become weaker.

Journalistic frames tend to be most impactful in situations where individuals are highly dependent on journalistic media for their understanding of an issue, and especially when there is greater ambiguity around an issue. That is because there are fewer preexisting associations, allowing the media associations to serve as the primary driver. Thus, journalistic frames are especially impactful when they involve contexts, people, and ideas that are new or foreign to an individual.

Finally, it's also important to keep in mind that journalistic actors are themselves audiences. They therefore not only have their own lived experiences to draw upon but also regularly consume media messages crafted by other actors. As such, they are also impacted by repeated exposure to certain frames and associations. They may consequently go on to subconsciously repeat elements of dominant frames and associations within their work, which in turn reifies those frames and makes those associations even more salient within society. Conversely, those journalistic actors may seek to use their awareness of the dominant frames to challenge them by including counter-frames that weaken problematic associations.

Key Takeaways

» According to the Social Construction of Reality perspective, an individual's view of reality is not entirely (or even mainly) objective. Instead, it becomes socially constructed as that individual filters things through their own existing knowledge and experiences.

- The framing process involves both conscious and subconscious processes of selection (what to include or exclude) and salience (what to emphasize or downplay). Journalistic outlets can thus depict the same topic in different ways.
- Media frames may impact individuals' understandings of and attitudes toward a topic or issue, but those impacts are not uniform or universal. That's because media frames interact with existing knowledge and attitudes.
- Journalistic actors are themselves influenced by frames, and may therefore reinforce (or challenge) dominant associations through the framing choices in their work.

Chapter 9

Agenda Setting Theory

Bernard Cohen famously wrote in his 1963 book, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, that journalistic media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."

Although that statement came before the formalization of agenda-setting theory, it aptly captures its essence: Even if journalistic outlets have a limited ability to shape their audiences' attitudes toward an issue, they nevertheless exert influence over how important the issue is *perceived* to be by those audiences. (That perceived importance may be very different from the actual importance of that issue according to other measures.)

While agenda-setting theory and framing theory both address the potential impact of journalistic media coverage, they are very different. Agenda-setting theory focuses on the relationship between media coverage and the perceived importance of an issue, while framing theory connects media coverage to the formation of attitudes toward those issues.

Agenda-Setting Theory

In a nutshell, agenda setting refers to the process by which mass media – including journalistic media – present certain issues (e.g., gun violence) frequently and prominently, with the result being that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as being more important than others.

The central causal mechanism is a very simple one: *The more media attention an issue receives (issue salience), the more important it is perceived to be (by audiences).* For example, if there is sustained journalistic coverage of immigration over the course of a few months, then news consumers will think that immigration is an important issue at that point in time – even if they don't have strong opinions about it.

Although the term 'agenda-setting theory' may be seen to imply a conspiratorial effort to manipulate public opinion, this is far from the case. It simply reflects twin processes: First, journalistic media are bound by time and space. For example, an evening news broadcast often has just 22 minutes to transmit information about the day's most important issues and events. This forces journalists to focus on specific issues and simplify them, and thus make decisions about what they believe matters most to the audiences they serve. Even with a news website, where space and time to cover a topic are less restricted and an online editor could theoretically cram 500 stories on the homepage, journalists must still make decisions about how to organize the information they publish. Indeed, the decision about which story to place at the top of a website's homepage offers a salience cue – it is placed first because it is presumed to be the most important story.

The second process occurs on the audience side: Audiences turn to journalistic media because they have a need for orientation, or a desire to understand new or emerging situations. That need for orientation, in turn, is impacted by two elements: *relevance* and *uncertainty*. Relevance pertains to the question, "Do I think this issue is personally or socially important to me?" Uncertainty pertains to the question, "Do I feel I lack the information I need about this topic?" When both relevance and uncertainty are high, audience members pay greater attention to journalistic outlets' cues about salience, and thus the resulting agenda-setting effect is stronger.

Similarly, when the issue at question is *unobtrusive* – that is, it is an issue people have little to no personal experience with, such as international affairs – then they are more likely to rely on media cues for assessing the importance of that issue. This may be countered by certain contextual factors, though. For example, scholars have found that agenda-setting effects are weaker in closed media systems (those tightly controlled by governments) with the idea being that people trust those journalistic media less. They thus actively seek out other sources of information and draw even more upon personal assessments.

Agenda-setting effects are therefore not uniform or universal. They are instead dependent on the context. Indeed, as Cohen wrote about the relationship between journalistic media and foreign affairs, "the world will look different to different people depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read."

Intermedia Agenda Setting

Journalistic outlets do not just influence ordinary citizens, politicians, and the like. They also influence one another. Within the context of agenda-setting, we refer to the process by which journalistic media influence one another as *intermedia agenda-setting*.

The core argument for this hypothesis is that just as regular citizens turn to trusted journalistic outlets for cues about what is important, journalistic outlets themselves turn to other journalistic media that they perceive to be leaders within a given context. For example, *The New York Times* may cover a story about U.S. troops withdrawing from Syria, which leads a local newspaper to perceive that to be an important issue and thus devote resources to covering a local angle about the same topic (e.g., covering local families who might have a spouse or child returning home from deployment).

This has led to a broader argument that audiences have historically developed reasonably consistent perceptions of which issues are most important at a given point in time because journalistic outlets generally follow similar issue agendas. This does not mean that they all cover the exact same issues, and certainly not in the same way. Instead, it contends that dominant coverage patterns often emerge across media – such as a period of intense and widespread journalistic coverage of climate change, before that attention wanes and the issue later re-emerges as a priority – and that many people within similar contexts will often identify similar sets of issues as being "important" at a given point in time.

Intermedia agenda-setting has required some reconceptualization in recent years, though, because the news ecology has become more complex. The perspective was initially proposed during a time when traditional media dominated audience attention. This is no longer the case, as niche and alternative media have grown immensely – leading to more specialized information sources – and social media have transformed the ways people engage with news.

As such, while elite journalistic outlets like *The New York Times* may still shape the initial perception of issues and their import, active audiences will blend messages from a greater range of journalistic and non-journalistic media. This ostensibly weakens the *Times*' agenda-setting power. Additionally, the transformation of the distribution of news – which is also more social today – and the emergence of new ways for audiences to engage with journalistic actors has enabled those active audiences to increasingly shape media agendas themselves.

Key Takeaways

- Agenda-setting theory proposes that issues that receive relatively more media attention tend to be perceived by audiences as being relatively more important.
- Framing theory shares some conceptual similarities with agenda-setting theory, but they differ in that agenda-setting emphasizes the relationship between media coverage and the perceived importance of an issue, while framing theory connects coverage to attitude formation.
- The magnitude of an agenda-setting effect depends on the context. Agenda-setting effects are neither uniform nor universal.
- Journalistic outlets do not just influence ordinary citizens and politicians; they influence fellow journalistic actors. They can therefore create a feedback loop.

Chapter 10

Priming Theory

In order to more fully understand the underlying processes for key theories about the impacts of media coverage and depiction, it is helpful to learn about how human memory works. Priming theory is a particularly helpful tool in that regard.

It is worth noting that priming theory – and associated models theorizing about the workings of human memory – come from social psychology and cognition, and it is not the only explanation for how humans make sense of the world. However, such models of human memory have proven to be enduring and influential when it comes to understanding the processing of information disseminated by journalistic outlets.

Priming Theory

In a nutshell, priming theory contends that media depictions *stimulate related thoughts in the minds of audience members*. For example, talking about "climate change" with a person might activate their thinking about "extreme weather" because, for that person, those two concepts have become related. Media depictions can strengthen (or weaken) the association between those concepts.

In this associative network model of memory, the *direction* and *strength* of the ties between ideas and concepts matter. For example, thinking about "extreme weather" may trigger "bad" most of the time, but thinking about "bad" may not trigger "extreme weather" (or trigger it only some of the time). Additionally, stronger ties between two ideas or concepts will result in the faster recall of the association between them.

This model also differentiates between *explicit* and *implicit* memory. Explicit memory refers to things an individual actively tries to recall. This would include the answer to the question, "Who is the best professor you've ever had?" The key with this type of memory is that the individual can consciously recall the associations between "best" and "professor" and explain that information.

Implicit memory refers to things an individual does not try to *purposely* recall, such as how to ride a bicycle. The key with this type of memory is that it might take an individual a while to explain the related concepts (and they may not even be able to explain them well or at all), but they are able to subconsciously draw on all the requisite associations to not fall over when they start pedaling.

Priming theory contends that people do not make use of *all* of the associations they have developed. Instead, they take shortcuts to connect an information need – for example, how to make sense of a professor's quality – to the previously stored associations *that are most readily available*. Thus, there is a strong emphasis on *recent associations* – such as recent journalistic coverage of the relevant issue(s).

Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming

Agenda-setting theory connects to these understandings of how human memory works in two related ways. The first proposes that repeated journalistic coverage of an issue results in an individual associating that issue with more concepts. That, in turn, increases the likelihood that the issue will be triggered later (as there are more opportunities to trigger it). The second proposes that repeated journalistic coverage of an issue increases the availability of information related to that issue by bringing it to the top of an individual's mind. That, in turn, increases the likelihood that the issue will be triggered later (as the issue, and its related concepts, are relatively easy to access). Both of these ways influence perceptions about how important an issue is because of how easily it is recalled.

While framing theory draws upon many of the same core propositions about the causal mechanisms in human memory, it differs from agenda-setting theory in that it takes an extra step. Framing theory is not simply about the availability of information. Instead, it argues that media can also influence *attitudes toward those issues* by rewiring the associations between that issue and different concepts, such as by relating "climate change" to "bad" and "anthropogenic."

Framing theory and priming theory have been connected to examine issues of stereotypes in journalistic depictions. For example, scholars have used those frameworks to assess journalistic outlets' role in promoting associations between the concepts of "people of color" and "poverty," "crime," and "urban blight." Those associations may result from the over-representation of crime involving people of color in local television news coverage. Conversely, primes may be used strategically to counter stereotypes, such as by depicting people of color as being successful, serving as community leaders, and inhabiting pleasant neighborhoods. In some cases, however, primes can result in the rejection of *the message* being primed. For example, a news story about a police officer acting in self-defense may be rejected as being false to someone who has had multiple negative encounters with police, as the depiction of the officer's actions may appear off-base to that person.

Limitations of Priming Effects

The effects of priming are neither uniform nor universal, though. In isolation, priming effects are often short-lived. They can last as little as 90 seconds and weaken over time if they are not triggered. However, repetition strengthens associations, and that can lead to more lasting effects over time. Indeed, many of our strongest associations are those promoted during our youth and reinforced over the course of our lives as a result of the contexts within which we live.

For example, higher amounts of local television news viewing will often involve more exposure to stories about crime that feature people of color as perpetrators. That, in turn, can result in greater concerns about people of color – or, at minimum, the perception that crime by people of color is an important issue.

Such an effect is not predicated on the words and associations made by journalists themselves, though. Although journalists may use careful language and avoid stereotypes, they may choose to quote individuals who intentionally or unintentionally use language and frames that strengthen and weaken associations between concepts. Audiences often do not meaningfully differentiate between the journalists' words and those of their sources. This underscores the responsibility journalists have when selecting who and what to quote.

Additionally, media priming is most powerful when individuals have little existing knowledge about a target concept (e.g., "nuclear power") and are therefore more susceptible to media-driven associations. Put another way, media primes are especially impactful when they involve contexts, people, and ideas that are new or foreign to audiences – that is, when audiences are most dependent on journalistic outlets for their understanding of something.

Individuals do not develop associations between topics through journalistic media consumption alone, though. First, news is incredibly complex, and there are often many competing cues within a single journalistic message (e.g., an article), which in turn trigger multifaceted responses. Second, media environments are also complex, with journalistic outlets operating alongside entertainment, popular culture, politics, and so on. Third, individuals establish associations – and, often, the strongest associations – based on their personal experiences or those relayed by other trusted sources, like their family and friends.

Thus, in order to fully understand a priming effect, one must understand the environment and context around the prime.

Key Takeaways

- At its core, priming theory posits that media depictions develop relationships between concepts and stimulate related thoughts in the minds of audience members.
- Both agenda-setting theory and framing theory are premised on associative network models of human memory, which focus on the associations between concepts and the ease through which they may be recalled. However, they presume different pathways for the activation of concepts.
- Priming effects are often short-lived, but repetition strengthens associations and thereby allows effects to become more lasting.
- Priming effects are not uniform or universal. The magnitude of the effect of a prime depends on the context surrounding it.

Chapter 11

News Avoidance and Fatigue

News avoidance refers to a phenomenon where *audiences reduce their consumption of journalistic media over a continuous period of time* due to either an active dislike for news or a preference for other kinds of media content.

Although many theories about the impacts of journalistic media implicitly assume that large portions of the public regularly consume those media, it is important to recognize that large segments of the population don't actually do that. Indeed, although more journalism is produced today than ever before, the number of people who avoid journalism has also increased in recent decades.

Moreover, audiences' journalistic media use is usually characterized by a combination of genres, such as sports journalism, political journalism, and environmental journalism. News avoidance is typically linked to the exclusion of certain genres and issues (though it may be extended to all journalistic media use). Put another way, some people (in fact, many) may routinely take in sports journalism but intentionally seek to avoid political journalism.

This development can have profound impacts on democratic societies that presumably rely upon a well-informed citizenry to self-govern because higher levels of news exposure have historically been linked to greater amounts of political knowledge and engagement. Second, news avoidance has negative economic consequences for journalistic outlets as it reduces the potential size of its audience. That, in turn, can also have consequences for non-avoiders, as journalistic outlets have fewer resources with which to produce quality journalism.

Intentional and Unintentional Avoidance

There are many reasons why an audience member may engage in news avoidance, but they can usually be placed into one of two categories: *intentional avoidance* and *unintentional avoidance*.

Intentional avoidance is the consequence of individuals consciously tuning out news media. There are three main reasons why they engage in such behavior, all of which are linked to negative dispositions toward journalistic media.

The first reason is that they perceive news coverage to be too negative and pessimistic. While some audiences are drawn to particularly negative or pessimistic news (e.g., violent crime), such news has been linked to increases in negative emotions and decreases in an individual's well-being over time. The desire to seek positive emotions can thus result in intentional avoidance of news that is presumed to be too negative.

The second reason is that some audiences do not trust journalistic outlets. This may be due to a perception that certain groups of journalistic outlets – if not "the media" as a whole – are pushing their own political and economic interests by being selective about the topics they cover and the information they include in their coverage. The perception that such coverage will be biased against a person's viewpoints or perception of reality can thus encourage intentional avoidance.

The third reason is that there is always a massive amount of readily accessible journalistic products out there, which can create a feeling of information overload. Not only is there a seemingly endless pool of issues being covered at any given moment, but there is also a seemingly endless pool of stories about each issue – which is impossible for any single person to consume or process. That perceived overload can create stress, confusion, and anxiety, and thus result in intentional avoidance in order for a person to reclaim a positive emotional state.

There is also unintentional news avoidance, which is based on the audience member's relative preference for non-journalistic media. Put another way, the avoidance isn't because a person is actively seeking to avoid journalistic media but rather because their preference for another choice – perhaps a new movie featuring Ryan Gosling – is stronger. Indeed, scholars have argued that the large audiences drawn by television news broadcasts in the 1960s and 1970s were due in part to audiences watching the news while they waited for the evening entertainment programs to start (which followed the nightly newscasts).

News Fatigue

News avoidance does not have to reflect a permanent state wherein audience members *always* avoid certain kinds of journalistic products, or journalistic media altogether. Quite often, it is a temporary state, as when individuals feel overwhelmed and need to take a break from an issue.

For example, consider the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. After being exposed to several stories about the pandemic every day for months, a person may have felt the need to disconnect from their preferred news sources to keep their mental state from deteriorating. However, after taking a break, that person may have resumed taking in such stories – and perhaps needed another break later on.

We can call this phenomenon *news fatigue*, which connotes a temporary feeling of exhaustion that can be addressed through a period of disconnection (recharging). News fatigue can occur in relation to any kind of issue or genre, such as a royal wedding or political journalism. However, it is typically most pronounced when it comes to natural disasters, illnesses, poverty, and political issues that, by their very nature, already tend to engender negative emotional responses.

Compassion Fatigue

Similarly, there is a phenomenon called *compassion fatigue*, which refers to *the gradual lessening of compassion over time as a result of repeated exposure to traumatic phenomena*. For example, consider the refugee crisis resulting from the Syrian Civil War, wherein at least 13 million Syrians were estimated to have been displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance. As the war dragged on over years, audiences around the world moved from being shocked to becoming numbed in order to psychologically protect themselves from repeated exposure to the death and destruction featured in news reports about the war.

Compassion fatigue has been associated with increased feelings of hopelessness and negative attitudes. That, in turn, can lead to desensitization and even resistance to helping those suffering if the issue is perceived as being intractable, or impossible to manage or change. Consequently, individuals may seek to turn off certain emotions as best they can. Compassion fatigue can also impact political and economic support for initiatives to address that issue. For example, in the aforementioned example of the Syrian Civil War, well-informed but fatigued news consumers may be less likely to become involved in protests against the war than their less-informed but non-fatigued counterparts.

This phenomenon is not limited to news audiences or to journalism. It has been found to impact a range of professionals, including doctors, child welfare workers, and lawyers. However, it has been found to have profound impacts on journalists themselves – and especially foreign correspondents who are shuttled from one crisis to another. Those impacts involve not only their emotional and mental states but also the depictions (and tropes) they incorporate into their journalistic work.

Combating News Avoidance

Several strategies have been proposed to reduce the likelihood of news avoidance. The first is to engage in approaches to journalism like *constructive journalism* and *solutions journalism*.

Constructive journalism aims to rebalance journalism by accompanying a selection of predominantly negative news stories about an issue with more positive coverage that illustrates the bright spots – however few they may be – related to that issue. For example, this might involve stories about how some Syrian refugees were able to successfully relocate themselves and start new lives, or how a local non-profit helped provide needed aid to displaced refugees.

Solutions journalism aims to not only diagnose problems – like the reasons for the displacement of Syrians during the war – but also adopt a forward-looking perspective that identifies possible solutions. Solutions journalism also tends to offer concrete suggestions to audiences for how to become a part of possible solutions. This may include providing contact information for local nonprofits or identifying specific humanitarian aid legislation that is under consideration.

The second strategy is to look for ways to increase trust in news organizations, such as by being more transparent about how stories are reported and explaining the journalistic processes behind them. For example, this might entail appending an information box to a story that contains anonymous sources that explains the journalistic organization's policy on granting anonymity. It may also include an explanation that a product reviewer was not paid for the review, but that the outlet may receive money if audiences purchase the product from an affiliated online store.

A third strategy that has received more attention in recent years is to provide *slow journalism* alternatives. This approach moves away from providing many short and episodic breaking news products (e.g., breaking news stories or tweets). Instead, it promotes providing fewer, longer, and more holistic news products (e.g., a well-reported and in-depth story published a couple of days after the news first broke). The approach is not intended to replace traditional journalism but simply to offer a complement for those who feel stressed by information overload.

Key Takeaways

- » News avoidance refers to a phenomenon whereby audiences reduce their consumption of journalistic media over a continuous period of time.
- » News avoidance may be the result of intentional and unintentional efforts, such as an active dislike for news or a simple preference for other media content.
- » Intentional avoidance may be the byproduct of perceived over-negativity, lack of trust in news, and information overload.
- » Individuals may develop either or both news fatigue and compassion fatigue as a result of over-exposure to a particular issue.
- » There are different strategies that journalistic actors can employ to reduce the likelihood of avoidance, though some measure of avoidance is inevitable.

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Unit III

Influences on Journalistic Media

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Chapter 12

Hierarchy of Influences Model

The Hierarchy of Influences Model is a useful framework for describing many of the things that affect the news content that audiences see, hear, and read. The model was proposed by media scholars Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese in their 1996 book, *Mediating the Message*. The crucial intervention of this model is that it helped formalize the idea that *there are a number of different factors that influence news content*, and that those factors *operate across different levels*, from the micro (individual) to the macro (society).

Put another way, individuals operate within larger social, economic, political, and technical systems and structures. Those systems and structures in turn influence how journalistic actors think and how they go about their work. That, in turn, influences the journalistic products that those actors produce.

The Hierarchy of Influences Model wasn't designed to propose or explain causal relationships, such as if X happens then Y will happen. Instead, it is particularly useful in helping us appreciate that journalism isn't shaped just by journalists or the organizations they work for. It is also shaped by a number of other factors.

Levels of Analysis

The Hierarchy of Influences Model identifies five levels of influence: the *individual* level, the *routine* level, the *organizational* level, the *social-institutional* level, and the *social systems* level. These levels are ordered from the micro (smallest in scope) to the macro (broadest in scope), and the model presents them as a series of concentric circles.

Individual Level

The individual level refers to *the biographical, psychological, and sociological characteristics of an individual social actor*. For example, a journalist's age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and class status can all impact the news that person produces because previous life experiences associated with those attributes may color that person's interpretation of an issue or what they choose to prioritize when covering it. That journalist's personal values and beliefs (e.g., their religious beliefs or political attitudes) may similarly impact how they think about things. Even their role orientations, or what they think the purpose of journalism is and how journalism should be done, will impact how a journalist will seek to cover an issue.

These factors, like many others in the model, are not always conscious influences. For example, a journalist may not knowingly decide that they have to adopt a particular story angle because they lean toward liberalism or conservatism. Instead, their political preference may subconsciously orient them toward a particular story angle precisely because they believe certain philosophies – like personal choice or the social good – are especially important (which is probably what led them to hold that political preference to begin with).

Routine Level

The routine level refers to *the patterned, repeated practices, forms, and rules that journalistic actors use to do their jobs*. For example, this may include news values, or the set of criteria journalists apply to determine the newsworthiness of information. If they deem controversy to be an important news value, then they are generally more likely to cover issues and events that are controversial. This is especially true when there is disagreement among institutional elites, such as political party leaders, regarding an issue.

Another such factor may be an institutional preference to appear balanced by offering "both sides" of an issue an equal voice. That often results in coverage that positions both voices as equally legitimate, even when that is not the case. For example, anthropogenic climate change has long been considered a real phenomenon by leading scientists. However, for many years, journalistic coverage of climate change often gave voice to skeptics (who implied a lack of scientific consensus) to appear balanced.

Yet another such factor is a preference for certain styles of presenting information to audiences. One such style of writing is the inverted pyramid, which organizes information from most recent and important to least recent and important. This style is perceived as being efficient at quickly conveying important information, but it often comes at the expense of developing a compelling narrative. These factors operate at a higher level because they reflect what is seen as appropriate or normal among fellow journalistic actors.

Organizational Level

The organizational level refers to *the policies, unwritten rules, and economic imperatives within journalistic organizations* (or whatever other entity a journalistic actor works for). Journalistic outlets must balance commercial concerns with professional ones. This balancing act is often most difficult for for-profit organizations, as they are expected to generate profits even as important journalism is often *not* cost-effective. However, even non-profit media have to work within a set budget to remain viable and promote their work in a way that can attract funding from different benefactors (e.g., foundations). As such, media ownership is often an important influence. While some owners (or ownership groups) are fairly hands-off (as long as economic objectives are met), others are more active in dictating coverage priorities and may even become directly involved in shaping the reporting of specific issues.

Additionally, the primary medium associated with a journalistic outlet (e.g., whether they see print as their primary media vehicle or if they focus on an online-first strategy) may also impact how they present information. After all, you wouldn't expect an organization that focuses on print journalism to invest much in interactive data visualizations that only work online.

A third factor might be the geographic location where that organization is based, and whether they have news bureaus (satellite offices) elsewhere. For example, if a journalistic outlet is based in a major East Coast city, the social make-up of the journalists will be more likely to reflect the values and priorities of that place, even when they cover stories elsewhere in the country or abroad.

Social-Institutional Level

The social-institutional level refers to *the norms, individuals, and organizations that operate outside a given journalistic organization*. There is some overlap here with the aforementioned routines level, but this level includes information sources, other journalistic organizations, advertisers, and media policy, among other actors. For example, information sources (e.g., the witnesses a journalist may interview) can shape a news product by virtue of the words they choose to use and the information they choose to share – or, more simply, by being willing or unwilling to talk to the journalist in the first place. Some journalistic outlets can influence general news coverage themselves by serving as 'pack leaders' that other outlets seek to follow or imitate. They can also influence coverage by publishing stories that competing organizations may then choose to avoid (because those stories will be thought of as 'already having been done').

Advertisers can impact coverage by demanding that their ads only be shown alongside positive coverage. After all, they likely do not want their products to be associated with negative emotions or connotations. That, in turn, can result in important (but typically exhausting) stories receiving inadequate coverage, or having portions of a news product be reserved for more-positive feature stories. Conversely, advertisers can threaten to withdraw ads if they perceive that a journalistic outlet represents values that do not reflect their own.

Media policy can restrict what journalistic outlets can report on, or how they may report on those things. For example, some countries have strict state secrets laws that prevent journalistic outlets from publishing anything that the government deems to be threatening to national security. Similarly, some countries around the world have adopted "fake news" laws that enable government authorities to fine (or shut down) journalists and outlets that produce news the authorities do not agree with. In both of these examples, media policy can have a "chilling effect" on what journalists choose to write (or write about). Conversely, some countries can adopt media policies that protect journalists from frivolous lawsuits by implementing serious penalties for individuals who sue journalists in bad faith.

Social Systems Level

The social systems level refers to *the symbolic frameworks of norms, values, and beliefs that reside at the societal level*. This is the most macro level, and it simply reflects the sorts of ideas that are more generally accepted within a broad society. For example, in the United States, capitalism remains the dominant economic system. This results in different issues being more likely to be framed in terms of how they might affect private ownership, free markets, and the pursuit of profit. Similarly, democratic values remain dominant within U.S. politics. That, in turn, leads to beliefs that the role of journalistic media in the U.S. is to inform citizens so they may better participate in self-governance. In less-capitalistic social systems, those same issues may be more likely to be framed primarily in terms of the collective good. Similarly, in autocratic social systems, journalists will be more likely to believe that their job is to help the government maintain social order.

Importance of Levels and Factors

The Hierarchy of Influences Model does not presume that any of the levels discussed here is more important than another. It also makes no claims about the directionality of influences. (For example, the social systems level is not theorized to be the one that shapes individuals, nor the other way around.) Instead, it views those levels as frequently acting upon one another: Individuals collectively shape values and norms at the social systems level, even as those values and norms help enable and restrict the behaviors of individuals within that society.

Similarly, each factor can operate independently from the other factors or in conjunction with one or more. For example, the influence of advertisers on a particular organization may be entirely independent from the dominant presentation style of that organization. Regardless of who is advertising or how much advertising there is, the organization may continue to use the inverted pyramid style of writing. However, if an organization is for-profit and has aggressive profit targets, then the existing influence of advertisers may become even stronger.

We have only covered a few of the factors identified by the Hierarchy of Influences Model here. There are dozens more, and you can learn more about them in the most recent edition of *Mediating the Message*. While it is less important to know how to classify each potential influence into a particular level, it is very useful to simply recognize that a great many things can influence journalists and journalism, and that these influences can emanate from individuals to society as a whole.

It is important to note that journalism is rapidly changing as new social actors, technological actants, and journalistic activities emerge or become increasingly important. For example, companies like Facebook and Google have staked important positions within news production and distribution, even though they claim they are not media organizations themselves. Similarly, some new digital advertising technologies have made it harder for advertisers to know exactly where their ads will be placed online, and for online news organizations to know which ads will appear alongside their stories.

In short, as journalism (and the environments it operates within) changes, so do the factors that might influence it, as well as the nature and extent of the influence those factors exert. However, what remains unchanged is that journalism is regularly influenced in important ways by an array of different things.

Key Takeaways

- The Hierarchy of Influences Model describes the various factors that affect news content, organized on a continuum from a micro level to a macro level.
- The model identifies five levels: the individual level, the routine level, the organizational level, the social-institutional level, and the social systems level.
- The model does not presume that any one level is more important than another, or that influence runs in one direction. Instead, all of these forces are simultaneously acting upon the production of news content.
- Journalism is rapidly changing, and the nature and extent of each influence is changing with it.

Chapter 13

U.S. Journalistic Culture

According to media scholar Mark Deuze, journalism – namely, journalism in Western societies in the Global North – is generally comprised of five central values, which together make up what he calls the *occupational ideology of journalism*.

The first value is that journalists should provide a public service to the citizens of a given country. The second is that journalists should be impartial, fair, and objective. The third is that journalists must be independent in their work. The fourth is that journalists must have a sense of immediacy and the ability to quickly report emerging developments. The fifth is that journalists must have a strong sense of ethics that is consistent with a broader professional code of ethics.

Just because such a value system exists does not mean that the way journalism is practiced in those places actually reflects those values. Put another way, in some places, journalism is hardly impartial or independent in practice. However, those cultural values are important to how the majority journalists in those places develop their sense of identity, how they think about their work, and how they collectively try to legitimize themselves to society. Such values also often come up in popular media about journalism, such as American movies that portray journalists as independent truth-tellers.

Breaking Down Journalistic Cultures

What Deuze is effectively suggesting is that although journalism may be practiced differently in different places, there is a general journalism culture that spans many of those places. However, although useful as a starting point, Deuze's theorizing is a reflection of Western ideology. For example, those values implicitly assume a separation of powers accomplished through systems of checks and balances, with journalistic media informally serving as one such check. Additionally, they also assume that journalistic outlets have the ability to remain independent from government. This is obviously not the case in many places.

Scholars have thus sought to move away from trying to find some universal journalistic culture and instead toward demarcating different aspects of journalistic cultures that allow for comparison across contexts (e.g., countries or regions). One such model comes from the Worlds of Journalism project, which has examined dozens of countries across five dimensions: journalists' sense of *editorial autonomy*, their *perceived influences*, their *role orientations*, their *ethical considerations*, and their *trust in institutions*.

U.S. Journalistic Culture

Based on interviews conducted in 2013 by the Worlds of Journalism team, journalists in the U.S. tend to report a consistently high degree of editorial autonomy (independence), particularly in how they report news. For example, more than 90% of the U.S. journalists they interviewed said they had "complete" or a "great deal" of freedom in deciding what aspects of a story to emphasize, and almost 90% said they had freedom in selecting which news stories to report. This puts the U.S. on the high end of editorial autonomy globally, as journalists in other countries typically report having less independence in choosing what to cover and how to cover it.

Although journalists in the U.S. report high levels of autonomy, they also recognize a range of different things that influence their ability to do their work. For example, almost 70% of U.S. journalists said that time limits were "extremely" or "very influential" to their journalistic work, suggesting a pressure to publish quickly. Similarly, almost 70% reported that their editorial supervisors and the organization's editorial policy were highly influential to their work – although far fewer reported feeling very influenced by the managers or owners of their news organizations. Moreover, U.S. journalists generally do not perceive government censorship, advertising pressures, or pressure groups (such as industry trade associations and lobbyists) to have great influence on their work.

With regard to their role orientations, nearly all journalists in the U.S. said that it was "extremely" or "very important" to report things as they are – that is, to never fabricate information even if such fabrications would supposedly tell a 'broader truth.' The vast majority also believed it was important for them to educate their audiences and provide the information people need to make political decisions. Put another way, journalists in the U.S. generally believe that producing information that allows citizens to participate in civic and political processes is an important part of their (or their industry's) job. In fact, U.S. journalists perceive acts of monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders to be among the most important functions of their job.

Notably, journalists in the U.S. generally believe they should be detached observers of events and should focus on allowing people to express their views in stories. (In contrast, few report believing in advocating for social change or striving to influence public opinion.) Relative to journalists around the world, this makes U.S. journalists more likely to value (and prioritize) the values of neutrality and offering balanced reporting. Additionally, U.S. journalists almost never see supporting national development or supporting government policies as important roles – a stark contrast to countries like China, Ethiopia, and Thailand, where journalists are far more likely to show support for government officials and their policies in their reporting.

The idea that journalists should always adhere to professional codes of ethics, such as the one from the Society of Professional Journalists, received almost unanimous agreement among journalists in the U.S. (In contrast, the notion that ethics are a matter of personal judgment received support from only one in ten journalists.) Additionally, a situational approach to ethics was rejected by nearly two-thirds of the journalists, and an even larger majority said that even extraordinary circumstances were not enough to warrant setting moral standards aside. Put another way, journalists in the U.S. believe a strong professional sense of ethics is paramount to doing journalism, and they believe they should defer to the dominant set of ethical values promoted within the profession (rather than relying on their own personal ethics). Moreover, there are some practices that journalists widely reject. For example, most journalists in the U.S. considered publishing unverified content, altering photographs, claiming to be someone else, and paying people for confidential information to be unacceptable practices.

Finally, journalists in the U.S. have little trust in political and societal institutions. While they trust news media (their fellow journalists) more than any other institution measured, fewer than 40% of journalists said they had "complete" or "a great deal" of trust in news media. Other institutions that received *relatively* high levels of trust were the military, the judiciary, and police. However, just over 1% of U.S. journalists had a great deal of trust in politicians and political parties in general, with 4% trusting the institution of the U.S. Congress and 11% trusting the Executive Branch. In general, this makes journalists in the U.S. far more skeptical of political and societal institutions than journalists in other countries. (Skepticism is, after all, a cherished value among U.S. journalists.)

Why Journalistic Cultures Matter

Journalistic cultures *shape (and are shaped by) how journalists think and, consequently, impact how they act*. There is, again, often a disconnect between what journalists think and what they do. Nevertheless, what they do is often influenced – at least initially – by what they think. For example, a journalist may choose to not go undercover or lie about their identity because they believe that violates a professional code of ethics – and they may thus try to get the story another way.

Additionally, journalistic cultures impact *what is seen as legitimate work among fellow journalistic actors*. That, in turn, impacts who and what are symbolically celebrated – that is, who gets treated as a "good" journalist by their peers or what gets treated as "good" journalism. Those symbolic rewards have material implications, such as increased job offers, job security, promotions, awards, and so on for those individuals who are seen as "good" journalists by their fellow journalists, and for the journalistic products that journalistic actors perceive as being "good."

Finally, journalistic cultures impact *how journalistic actors legitimize their work to society*. This, in turn, affects how societies think about journalism and the kinds of access and protections that other institutional actors (e.g., governments or sports teams) are willing to grant those journalists. For example, in a society where journalists are believed to provide important checks and balances to governmental authorities – as is the case in the United States – then that society is likely to support limited government intervention in news production and distribution.

It is important to note that journalistic cultures are not static, however. They can and do change over time. For example, the journalistic culture in the United States only adopted the journalistic value of neutrality as a central tenet in the 20th century. More recently, there have been rumblings within that culture to shift away from the value of "balance" and toward a "weight-of-evidence" approach, especially when it comes to covering scientific issues like climate change.

Key Takeaways

» Different countries have distinct journalistic cultures. There is no single, universal way of doing journalism, though some values and norms are more common than others across contexts (e.g., countries and regions).

» Journalists in the U.S. express having a great deal of editorial autonomy, and say they can generally select what to cover and how to cover it.

» Journalists in the U.S. believe their primary role is to educate the public about civic affairs, and they believe professional codes of ethics should be closely adhered to.

» Journalists in the U.S. are very skeptical of the political and social institutions they cover.

» Journalistic cultures matter because they shape (and are shaped by) how journalists think, act, and legitimize themselves to their peers and to society.

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Chapter 14

News Values

News values are *the benchmarks of newsworthiness against which journalists measure potential stories*.

News is not a 'natural' thing that just 'exists.' In the context of journalism, news is something that is constructed by editorial actors (e.g., journalists) and even by some technological actants (e.g., newswriting algorithms). The use of the term "constructed" here is not intended to imply that news is arbitrarily invented or that it is "fake" information. Instead, it simply recognizes that news is the product of human and technological interventions, and it is shaped by the contexts within which it is identified, gathered, verified, structured, and presented as a product that is recognizable as "news" by audiences.

After all, only a tiny fraction of the developments and events happening in the world at any given moment ever get covered as news by editorial actors and actants. First, journalists are unlikely to be aware of most of those developments. Second, only a small portion of the things they are aware of are deemed to be worthy of being constructed as news stories. To help them decide which developments are worthy of their time and their audiences' attention, editorial actors apply the set of criteria we can call *news values*.

News Values

According to media scholars Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill, most published news stories tend to include *at least one* of the following 15 elements:

- *Exclusivity*: The development is available first (or only) to a particular news organization (e.g., an exclusive interview with Mark Zuckerberg).

- *Power elite*: The development involves powerful individuals and organizations (e.g., the president of the United States).
- *Magnitude*: The development potentially impacts a large number of people, or impacts a few people significantly (e.g., a court ruling affecting thousands of immigrants' citizenship rights).
- *Relevance*: The development involves issues or groups that are perceived to be relevant to the organization's audience (e.g., a major local employer relocating to another state).
- *Surprise*: The development deviates from the norm or shows stark contrasts (e.g., a man who bites dogs).
- *Conflict*: The development involves controversies, arguments, fights, or insurrections (e.g., a politician breaking away from their party).
- *Drama*: The development concerns an unfolding drama, such as battles or court cases (e.g., a major criminal trial).
- *Bad news*: The development has especially negative overtones, such as a death or tragedy (e.g., a plane crash).
- *Good news*: The development has especially positive overtones, including rescues or cures (e.g., development of a new vaccine).
- *Entertainment*: The development highlights human interest, unfolding drama, opportunities for humor (e.g., how to spend 36 hours in Bucharest).
- *Celebrity*: The development concerns people who are already famous (e.g., Ryan Gosling).
- *Audio-visuals*: The development has compelling photographs, video, audio, or can be illustrated with data visualizations (e.g., large protests).
- *Shareability*: The development is likely to generate sharing and comments on social media, e-mail, and messaging apps (e.g., content that is likely to 'go viral').
- *Follow-up*: The development advances a story already being covered by that journalistic outlet or other news organization (e.g., the result of a vote on legislation previously covered).
- *Journalistic outlet's agenda*: The development fits the organization's agenda and/or journalistic identity (e.g., it focuses on a particular issue, like foreign policy).

In addition to these values, *timeliness* is a crucial factor. After all, *news* is typically presumed to be *new*, and journalists are thus sensitive to how recent the information is. However, news may also be *evergreen*, or not connected to breaking developments but part of an ongoing issue or event. For example, a timely story about homelessness may be produced when the city council approves additional funding for homeless shelters. However, a general story about homelessness can also be evergreen because homelessness is a persistent issue in many places. In practice, evergreen stories are also useful because they provide content for slower news days.

The more news values a potential story contains, the more likely it is to be seen as *newsworthy* and therefore receive coverage. News can therefore be understood as *a highly selective version of events* (and, arguably, nonevents) that have been chosen and packaged to match a news organization's objectives, its output requirements, and the information needs or entertainment wants that its target audiences are believed to have. This, in turn, highlights that the material attributes of a development or event – that is, what actually happened – only has *some* bearing on whether it is covered, how it gets covered, what information is emphasized, and who receives a voice in that coverage. For example, an online rant about immigrants may be seen as newsworthy solely because it was tweeted by a sitting U.S. president, and the coverage may focus on the controversy around that rant (rather than the substance of its claims) because opposing party leaders subsequently traded barbs over it.

These news values also help us to appreciate why certain developments *do not* receive coverage. For example, an evening TV news broadcast may decide not to cover an event simply because it is unlikely to produce good visuals (e.g., a corruption investigation) or if the organization does not have access to those visuals (e.g., a governmental detention camp in a remote area of a foreign country). Instead, it may allot the limited time in its broadcast to an arguably less-important event that can produce more visually captivating images (e.g., an accidental house fire).

News Values as Ideology

News values are a reflection of the dominant ideologies within a journalistic culture. However, they have also been critiqued as examples of journalistic media straying from their stated missions. For example, in their influential Propaganda Model of news media, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argue that mainstream journalism tends to support the status quo in large part because, they argue, the selection of topics for news coverage ultimately privileges the perspectives of the most powerful while marginalizing the voices of less powerful sections of the population.

Crucially, Herman and Chomsky are not arguing that mainstream journalists do this intentionally or as part of a deliberate conspiracy to manipulate audiences. Instead, they argue that there are structural filters that impact what is selected as newsworthy, which in turn creates distortions that favor existing power brokers and marginalizes points of view regarded as being outside the mainstream. This is an example of critical theory, which seeks to interrogate power structures in media industries.

It is important to note that news values are relative. The aforementioned values identified by Harcup and O'Neill are most reflective of journalistic cultures in democratic Western societies in the Global North, since those are the cultures that scholars have most studied. News values in autocratic regimes are likely to be different, as there may be less emphasis on values like conflict or exclusivity. We still have much to learn about news values in other parts of the world.

Key Takeaways

- News values are the benchmarks of newsworthiness against which journalists measure potential stories.
- The more news values that a potential story is deemed to fulfill, the higher the likelihood that it will be seen as newsworthy and receive coverage by journalistic media. Conversely, stories are sometimes ignored precisely because they do not clearly adhere to these values.
- News values are, and serve as reflections of, ideologies within a journalistic culture.
- News values are relative. The values identified by Harcup and O'Neill are most representative of Western journalistic cultures in the Global North.

Chapter 15

Truth, Bias, and Neutrality

The concept of "truth" is central to journalism, and audiences expect journalists to provide truthful accounts and analyses of recent developments. And, yet, truth can be a very messy thing that is difficult to grasp.

According to the *realism perspective*, truth is a judgment that accurately describes, or corresponds with, the way the world actually is. That is, under this perspective, truth is a universal reality that is separate from subjective human perspectives. Most journalists in the United States subscribe to the realism perspective. They typically argue that "facts" exist, and that conveying these facts is an important aspect of doing journalism and of getting at the "truth."

However, "facts" can be tricky things themselves. For example, consider the unemployment rate in the United States right now. One might think that to be a pretty simple, measurable "fact." And, yet, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the primary body charged with measuring the unemployment rate in the United States, offers six different calculations of it. Its primary calculation refers to the percentage of the labor force that is without a job and *has actively looked for work within the past four weeks*. However, it also considers the percentage of the labor force that has *been unemployed for 15 weeks or longer* to be a valid measure, as well as a the percentage of the labor force that is unemployed *and is not actively looking for work because of discouragement* due to economic conditions.

In short, when audiences say they "just want the facts," the question becomes: Which facts?

Subscribing to this more critical view does not require a person to reject the idea of "facts," or to suggest that they are meaningless or entirely relative. But it does call attention to two things. First, *there are often multiple ways to measure complex facts*. (In contrast, it is typically easier to measure something simple like the number of students enrolled in a journalism course.) Second, *journalists have to work within the confines of time and space* — a story can only be so long — and this limitation naturally requires them to select some facts at the expense of others. Put another way, they rarely have the ability to list all the different permutations of the unemployment rate; they focus on the 'best' one.

Moreover, journalism involves more than just listing facts. It typically requires journalists to make sense of those facts, in order to help their audiences understand how certain information fits into a broader context and what the implications of those facts might be. Indeed, this is the very basis of framing theory and the sense-making function of journalism.

It is important to be cautious of arguments that "facts" do not exist, that "truth isn't truth," or that we should embrace "alternative facts," though. While the critical view described above promotes inquisition, simplistic rejections of factual knowledge are often made in bad faith, in order to make competing measures of truth (or interpretations of it) seem equal when they are not actually equally supported by the evidence. This is especially true when people in positions of power (or grifters looking to develop a following) urge people to dismiss unfavorable or inconvenient information. Instead, it is important that audiences (and journalists) think critically about how "facts" were arrived at, and to avoid reflexively accepting or rejecting them.

Bias

Journalists' inherent need to be selective often leads to allegations of journalistic bias, especially when audiences perceive news products to deviate from their worldviews and preconceptions. For example, in the United States, there is a widely held belief in public circles that journalistic media have a liberal bias. (To be clear, nonpartisan studies of media bias have historically found little evidence of this. While journalists in the U.S. generally hold more liberal values, the professional emphasis on neutrality, balance, and a systematic approach to newsgathering limits one-sided coverage.)

Journalistic bias can be defined as *prejudice toward certain ideas, issues, perspectives, or groups or individuals in the production and distribution of journalistic content*. Allegations of journalistic bias often fall into one or more of the following three categories. The first, *issue bias*, pertains to a proclivity toward certain kinds of issues, such as an overemphasis on crime or immigration. The second, *framing bias*, refers to the propensity to frame issues through particular prisms, such as the threat immigrants might pose (as opposed to the benefits they might offer), or to routinely use certain language, such as "illegal immigrants" instead of "undocumented immigrants." The third, *source bias*, refers to the differential treatment of a story depending on who the main actors are – as with offering more positive coverage to members of a certain political party. Source bias can also refer to a proclivity toward giving certain kinds of sources a larger (or any) voice within a news product, such as a journalist being more likely to quote government officials than activists or demonstrators.

Connecting all three of those categories is *visibility bias*, which involves the amount of attention or prominence given to certain kinds of issues, frames, or sources. For example, although a journalist may quote an equal number of sources from two opposing parties, they may routinely offer longer quotes in more prominent parts of a news story (e.g., near the top, which more people are likely to read) to one of the two parties. Similarly, visibility bias may become apparent when prime-time shows on cable news networks focus on stories about immigrant misdeeds, with more positive coverage of immigrants relegated to less-watched daytime shows.

Neutrality and Balance

In order to combat allegations of bias, journalists often claim to be neutral and to offer *"a view from nowhere"* – that is, to offer a perspective without a position or that takes no side. A common way to enact that claim is to try to occupy a middle ground by simply capturing and broadcasting opposing viewpoints, and trying to give equal weight to competing sides of an issue. Crucially, such attempts take care to not convey the journalist's own opinion on a matter.

This proclivity toward neutrality and balance is, itself, a form of bias, and it is especially prevalent among journalists in places like the United States. This is not to say that such an approach to doing journalism is bad but rather that it represents a predisposition toward a particular way of presenting news.

There are downsides to that approach, though. In trying to be neutral and balanced, a journalist may promote *false balance* by assigning equal blame or acclaim when one side is more culpable or deserving of it. For example, by taking the position that "all politicians lie" or that "both sides share blame" in order to appear neutral, a journalist may obfuscate the fact that some politicians make more verifiably false claims than others, or that one side is more responsible for an outcome (e.g., by being less willing to negotiate a compromise). Put another way, journalists distort reality when promoting a false balance and they thus do a disservice to truth – and to news audiences.

Bad-faith institutional actors, including some political candidates and public officials, have taken advantage of this "view from nowhere" approach through concerted efforts to "work the refs," especially in recent decades. If journalists are seen to be arbiters of truth – much as referees are the arbiters of rules within a game – then subjects of news coverage (e.g., a politician) can allege news media to be biased against them in order to intimidate journalists from scrutinizing their claims. (After all, critical evaluations by journalists can be pointed to as 'further evidence' of the alleged bias.) This is important because false or inaccurate claims carried by trusted journalistic outlets are granted legitimacy – that is, they may be seen as true (or be evaluated less skeptically) by audiences who presume journalists to have filtered out untruthful information.

Accuracy and Truth-Seeking

One element found in most definitions of "truth" is *accuracy*, or a focus on precision and the avoidance of errors. Accuracy is indeed central to journalism, and many aspiring journalists have failed a college assignment because they submitted a news story with a factual error in it.

However, accuracy is not, on its own, enough for satisfying truth. For example, it may be accurate to report that one person said that 75% of peer-reviewed studies about climate change say it is not a real phenomenon. After all, they may have said such a thing. However, it is not *true* that such a proportion of peer-reviewed studies say that. Similarly, it may be accurate to point a camera at a small crowd of people and zoom in so as to have them fill the frame, or to zoom out so as to make it look sparse. After all, neither picture was doctored or manipulated after the fact in any way. However, the resulting image's *connotation* that there was a large or small crowd may be an 'untrue' depiction of the event. Finally, it would be equally accurate to show a mug shot of a dejected person in a crime story or their happy, upstanding family photo. However, it can be difficult to ascertain which photo best represents the truth about what that individual is like.

In short, *accuracy must be supplemented by commitment to truth*. We can call that commitment "truth-seeking." This approach views truth as more of a process wherein the journalist aims to *approximate* truth as best as they can. Truth-seeking typically involves an objective approach to journalism, where journalists seek to systematically observe and record developments; interview sources with intimate knowledge about that development (like eye-witnesses); verify claims by seeking out generally accepted facts and official documents; and ultimately produce a story with the most truthful (plausible) representation of that development.

The process of truth-seeking recognizes that journalists are inherently biased. Put another way, it accepts the proposition that it is impossible for journalists to be unbiased because of their backgrounds and the structural constraints they work within. However, it recognizes that by systematically adopting what are regarded as best practices in journalism, journalists can *mitigate* some of those biases and not fall into traps like false balance, all the while striving toward the ambitious goal of reproducing truth.

It is important to note, however, that in some countries, journalistic outlets are openly biased and explicitly reject the values of neutrality and balance. For example, in countries like Pakistan and Indonesia, journalists typically believe that openly advocating for social change and staking clear positions regarding which side in a dispute has the superior argument – and sometimes substantiating those positions primarily through intuition or their agreement with ethical or religious principles – is a better way of serving truth. Put another way, different journalistic cultures approach truth-seeking in different ways.

Key Takeaways

- Facts are not 'natural' things that just 'exist.' Journalistic actors (and audiences) should therefore critically evaluate facts and approach them with a healthy dose of skepticism.
- There are multiple forms of journalistic bias, such as issue bias, framing bias, and source bias.
- In the United States, journalists typically strive to appear neutral and to offer balanced accounts. However, bad-faith actors have taken advantage of this approach in various ways. This has forced journalists to reconsider whether that approach still serves citizens well.
- Accuracy is, by itself, insufficient for getting at the truth. However, it is an essential component of truth.
- Journalists will typically strive for truth-seeking by systematically adopting best practices in journalism, such as interviewing multiple people, verifying their accounts, and offering the best approximation of truth.

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Chapter 16

Gender and Racial Gaps

For much of journalism's history in the U.S., women were seen largely as a market for news, rather than as a community that should be reflected in the news. Put another way, they were generally seen as consumers of news and not worthwhile subjects of it. Moreover, women's pathways into journalism were generally limited, with journalism being a *primarily* male profession for much of its history in the U.S. (and much of the world).

One of the ways in which women gained greater entrance and influence in U.S. journalism was through cultural journalism (coverage of lifestyle topics such as food, art, style, music, and other forms of entertainment) in the second half of the 20th century. In fact, what we currently understand to be cultural journalism can be traced directly back to the so-called "women's pages," which originally focused on the four Fs: family, fashion, food, and furnishings.

Those women's pages covered women's issues, which were seen as less important and were physically separated in publications from more 'serious' news topics. Moreover, the type of writing – which was less newsy and more personal – also distinguished such content from the 'serious' news. Consequently, the women's pages largely featured coverage of trends (e.g., the latest fashion) and profiles of people (e.g., celebrities). Over time, though, the women's pages influenced the creation of less gendered and more inclusive beats of coverage, such as *The Washington Post*'s style section.

However, this gendered gap between news and culture still appears in American newsrooms today. In the U.S., women journalists remain more likely to write about health and lifestyle topics. In contrast, they are less likely to write about economics, politics, or sports. They are also less likely to write for the opinion section.

More broadly, women are still less likely than men to be either journalists or subjects of journalism. According to a 2019 report from the American Society of

News Editors, women make up roughly 42 percent of newsroom employees in the U.S., despite making up more than half of the U.S. population. According to a 2019 report by the Women's Media Center, women journalists also only produce 37 percent of news stories. It is only in categories like entertainment (49% women), lifestyle and leisure (52% women), and health (58% women) that women have an equal (or greater) number of bylines than men. Men also dramatically outnumber women in news coverage in both text and images. That same report by the Women's Media Center found that 77% of people mentioned in articles, and 70% of faces pictured in news articles, were male. These discrepancies suggest that male perspectives continue to dominate American news coverage, with female voices being peripheral.

These findings are particularly problematic because women greatly *outnumber* men in journalism education programs. According to the Columbia Journalism Review, two-thirds of people who graduate with a degree in Journalism or Mass Communication in the United States are women. As such, there are a variety of systemic factors within journalism – from broader social expectations to professional cultural values – that make it harder for women to enter (and succeed in) the professional practice.

One example of this is that there are distinct gender-based gaps in pay and hierarchy in American journalism. (This is also true in many other professions.) Those gaps further intersect with other factors, such as race and ethnicity. For example, white male journalists at *The Associated Press* earn an average of $15,000 more than Black female journalists. Similarly, female employees of *The Washington Post* earn 86 cents for every dollar white male employees earn. In light of the already relatively low average salary in U.S. journalism, these obstacles can make it impossible for many women to enter or remain in journalism – especially if they come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Race and Ethnicity in American Newsrooms

Racial and ethnic disparity remains the largest and slowest-changing gap in American journalism, with white journalists greatly outnumbering journalists of color. According to a 2019 survey by the American Society of News Editors (ASNE), people of color make up just 21% of newsroom employees in print journalistic outlets in the U.S. (This includes newspapers with an online presence, like *The Boston Globe*.) That number is only slightly improved when it comes to online-only outlets (e.g., *Quartz* or *The Huffington Post*), where journalists of color comprise almost 31% of employees. Furthermore, according to a 2020 survey by the Radio Television Digital News Association, about one-fourth of employees in local TV news are people of color, and just 15% of local radio journalism jobs in the U.S. are held by people of color. These gaps are particularly striking when you consider that 39% of the U.S. population is *not* white.

This is also true at major, national news outlets. For example, the ASNE survey found that the staffs of *The Boston Globe* (85% white), *The Los Angeles Times* (64% white), *The Wall Street Journal* (79% white), and *The Washington Post* (71% white) were largely white. These figures are particularly discouraging when you consider that the large coastal cities where U.S. journalistic outlets are disproportionately located (including the aforementioned outlets) tend to have more diverse racial and ethnic populations than the average American city.

Notably, journalists of color are also less likely to hold management positions in newsrooms, with the ASNE survey finding that roughly 19% of managers at print *and* online-only outlets were people of color. Unsurprisingly, even within racial and ethnic categories, men are more likely to be either an employee or a manager. (The lone exception to this was among Asians, where women were more likely to hold both of those positions.)

These gaps are further exacerbated by a number of norms inherent to American journalism, such as the tendency for early-career journalists to take unpaid internships and the use of closed networks in hiring practices. Put another way, industry norms stack the deck against journalists from less-affluent backgrounds and those who are not well-connected. Researchers have also found a lack of diversity to exist in the faculties of journalism programs in higher education.

This demographic discrepancy is not new, and it is also not secret. American journalism organizations have called for change for a number of years, and individual journalistic outlets have begun in recent years to take accounting of their own gaps in representation (both within their newsrooms and within their coverage). For example, several journalistic outlets, such as NPR, document both their employment and coverage of women and people of color. And, in recent years, problematic issues in representation at some news outlets have led to public changes of leadership and pledges to shift hiring and coverage practices. This has been driven in part by an emerging culture of peer critique under which journalistic outlets identify and critique cultural violations in each other's coverage.

However, increased attention doesn't guarantee increased representation. Indeed, it is unclear if the recent changes are emblematic of a moment in time or a sustained trend toward greater inclusivity within journalism. Additionally, although younger U.S. newsroom employees are equally likely to be male and female – and they're less likely to be white than their older counterparts – they are still much more likely to identify as white than with a minority racial or ethnic group.

The American public also recognizes these issues. According to a 2020 Gallup study, more Americans say that news media are doing poorly in reflecting U.S. diversity than say they are doing well. Additionally, approximately 69% of Americans believe that reflecting this diversity is either a "critical" or "very important" role of the media. However, the respondents to that survey were far more divided when it came to identifying how journalistic outlets could better fulfill that role.

Impact of Gender and Racial Gaps

These demographic gaps limit the stories that are covered by American journalists by reducing the richness of the lived experiences found in the newsroom. As journalist Gabriel Arana wrote in a critique of journalism's failure to look like the communities it covers: "Ultimately, the value of diversity to journalism is not about skin color, gender, sexual orientation, or social class. It's about the stories people can tell." American journalism misses many important stories when it doesn't represent the population it serves.

In addition to creating gaps in coverage, this lack of representation can also lead to flawed or biased reporting practices, such as coverage that stereotypes specific communities and groups. According to *schema theory*, people organize knowledge into categories, or schemas, in their minds. People then retrieve these schemas when they are confronted with media messages that depict these categories. These schemas can become entangled with loaded cultural meanings that lend themselves to stereotypes. By creating and disseminating content, journalistic outlets also rely on pre-existing schemas, or mental shortcuts, to help quickly call up information within the minds of their audiences and to help them synthesize new information. (This psychological framework is similar to that of *priming theory* and associative network models of human memory.)

For example, crime coverage that features racial stereotypes can connect those stereotypes to particular groups. When presented with a news story about crime that features an unknown perpetrator, people are likely to draw upon existing stereotypes and assume things about that unknown (e.g., that it was a Black male). Indeed, according to *The Marshall Project*, mainstream American journalists are less likely to cover Black victims of homicide, and when they do, that coverage results in less complex, less humane portrayals. That results in lower levels of empathy for Black victims (and Black people as a whole).

The same system of stereotype reinforcement comes into play with coverage of other groups and identities, too. One recurring paradox that persists in news coverage of gender is that of "*double binds*." Double binds over-simplify complex and dynamic people, organizations, or groups into a one-dimensional, either-or narrative. For example, one common double bind used to depict powerful women is that of femininity vs. competence – essentially, the idea that competent women can't be feminine and feminine women can't be competent. This also appears in American journalistic coverage of female political candidates, which often plays up stereotypically feminine attributes (e.g., motherhood and attractiveness) while de-emphasizing stereotypically masculine attributes (e.g., leadership).

Journalists generally don't *intend* to stereotype populations, oversimplify their experiences, or miss out on highly relevant story angles. Instead, journalists (like the general population) are simply ignorant about important issues and ideas that are more salient to members of communities and groups outside their own. Thus, more representative newsrooms can be an asset precisely because they allow journalists to more readily and proactively identify and address problems with coverage – or the lack thereof. This can generate not only better journalism but also increase public trust in that journalism.

Key Takeaways

» Although women greatly outnumber men in American journalism higher education, men outnumber women in the profession itself. A variety of systemic factors within journalism – from broader social expectations to professional cultural values – make it harder for women to enter (and succeed in) the industry.

» The newsrooms at online-only journalistic outlets are more representative of the U.S. population than their traditional media counterparts when it comes to both gender and race, though such spaces are still far from being representative.

» Gaps in newsroom diversity are influenced by a variety of factors, including some American journalistic norms. These include the tendency for early-career journalists to take unpaid internships and the use of closed networks in hiring practices.

» American journalism misses many important stories when newsrooms don't represent the communities they serve. In addition to creating gaps in coverage, this lack of representation can also lead to flawed or biased reporting practices, such as coverage that stereotypes specific communities and groups.

Chapter 17

Partisan and Geographic Biases

It is not uncommon to see politicians, public intellectuals, and regular citizens blame journalistic outlets for contributing to increasing political polarization and partisanship. Indeed, journalistic media are often accused of "twisting the facts" and "taking things out of context" to either fit a political agenda or to "get more clicks" for their stories.

In fact, a 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 79% of Americans believed "news organizations" tend to favor one side when presenting the news on political and social issues. That belief was particularly salient among self-identified Republicans (91%), but it was also high among self-identified Democrats (69%). The 2020 survey data showed an increase in that perceived partisanship relative to Pew's earlier surveys, suggesting that those concerns about journalistic media are only getting worse.

Moreover, increased concerns about people living in partisan media bubbles are being borne out, at least in part, according to recent research. A separate survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2020 found that the attitudes and news consumption habits of Democrats and Republicans varied significantly along political lines. Self-identified Republicans distrusted two-thirds of the 30 news sources Pew asked about. Of the 10 remaining news sources, Republicans were more trusting of outlets that media analysts find to be politically slanted to the right, such as Fox News and conservative talk radio programs. Democrats, on the other hand, trusted 22 of the 30 (and distrusted eight of them). Notably, the eight sources Democrats *distrusted* overlapped with the 10 sources Republicans *trusted*. This is part of a seemingly growing gap in the news media use habits.

That same Pew survey found that Republicans also consume political news from mainstream outlets less frequently than Democrats. Of the 30 outlets examined, Fox News was the only news source that at least one-third of Republicans had consumed political news from in the week preceding the study. In contrast, Democrats reported consuming political news from CNN, NBC News, ABC News, CBS News, and/or MSNBC in the same week. CNN was the most frequently consumed and most trusted source of political news for Democratic news consumers, while Fox News was the most trusted and most frequently consumed outlet for Republicans.

What is perhaps even more alarming is that none of the 30 sources Pew Research studied in early 2020 was trusted by more than half of Americans. Sadly, this partisan gap in media use and perception is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. In fact, the gap has only deepened between 2014 and 2020. Research from Pew conducted over that time suggests that Democrats' trust in established media outlets has stood firm while Republicans have become more distanced from – and distrusting of – those news outlets. For example, at least 15 of the news outlets Pew studied were trusted less by Republicans in 2020 than they were in 2014. And their distrust of *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and CNN – outlets trusted by Democrats and generally well-regarded by media analysts – grew the most during that time.

Impact of Partisan Bias

These clear partisan divides in American news media consumption and trust are reflected – and influenced – by a variety of factors at national and local levels. It is important to note that politicians and powerful political actors have labeled U.S. journalists 'liberal elites' for decades, and talk radio has decried liberal bias in the 'mainstream media' since at least the 1980s. Put another way, the discrediting of journalistic actors as partisan agents is a phenomenon that goes back many years.

However, more recently, those attacks have become more common, targeted, and intense. Additionally, they have originated with actors at the highest levels of government. Most notable among these is former U.S. President Donald Trump, who frequently verbally attacked journalistic actors since he was elected. Three months after taking office, Trump called the news media "the enemy of the American People" and "fake news" in a tweet that derided the New York Times, NBC, ABC, CBS, and CNN by name. Throughout his time in the Oval Office, Trump and his administration also prevented some journalists who regularly covered the White House for many years from attending its press briefings, and instead granted press passes to self-described journalists working at highly partisan media who offered favorable coverage. Members of the Trump administration also called journalists "sick people" who didn't like the United States and wanted "to take away our history and our heritage."

These partisan attacks on journalistic outlets encourage Americans to question, doubt, and in the most extreme cases, attack news and information that don't align with a particular political viewpoint. When espoused by powerful political actors, these kinds of sentiments have proven to be contagious. Research shows that people who are exposed to allegations of "fake news" by elite actors (e.g., powerful politicians) both display less trust in journalistic media and are less likely to correctly identify what news is real.

Perceptions of political bias in journalism are also tied to perceptions of general bias. According to a 2018 Knight Foundation study, Americans consider 62% of news they consume on TV, in newspapers, and on the radio to be "biased," and 44% of it to be inaccurate. The same study revealed that Americans also do not distinguish between bias and inaccuracy, generally finding that the journalistic outlets they believe to be biased are also promulgators of inaccurate information, and vice versa. This lack of trust has negative implications for media literacy. For example, people with more trust in news media are more likely to be able to distinguish real news from opinion.

Over time, audiences have also become conditioned to seek out news from the outlets that align most with their own political views while avoiding those that challenge their beliefs. This behavior is called *partisan selective exposure*. It creates a pattern in which people consume media content that reinforces their opinions and choose to opt out of divergent perspectives (that could alter their political beliefs). Put another way, they increasingly seek out *echo chambers*. Additionally, technological actants increasingly make it easier for people to unintentionally find themselves in a *filter bubble*, with search and recommendation algorithms prodding them toward content that reinforces their existing beliefs. (Consider the YouTube algorithms that automatically queue up a 'suggested' video when you finish watching the one you initially searched for. Such recommendations are often toward like-minded content.)

Over time, the exposure to partisan news influences audiences' voting decisions and their political participation. For example, when audiences read only news that agrees with their political beliefs, they are more likely to simultaneously become radicalized and want to participate further in politics. This, in turn, can create problems for democratic decision-making as highly motivated individuals become convinced that *they* are right – based on information (i.e., an understanding of the reality) that diverges widely those who do not share their perspective. Such exposure also impacts support for particular policies. For example, a 2021 Pew Research Center study found that Republicans who selected only sources with right-leaning audiences (e.g., Fox News or talk radio) as their major sources of political news tended to be less open to international cooperation and had different foreign policy priorities than other Republicans. On the other hand, Democrats who selected only sources with left-leaning audiences (e.g., MSNBC or *The Washington Post*) tended to place a higher priority on multilateralism and addressing climate change, relative to other Democrats.

People who consume political news online or from non-mainstream sources are also more likely to believe that news information that reflects their own partisan beliefs is more credible than news that disagrees with their beliefs. Put another way, audiences who prefer online news media are particularly predisposed to seeking out news from *confirmatory* sources – that is, outlets that reinforce their worldviews. (This is not a function of technology but rather that online spaces offer easier access to a larger number of news sources, including highly partisan and pseudo-journalistic outlets.)

Moreover, through the psychological process of *motivated reasoning*, highly partisan news consumers are also likely to treat counter-factual information (e.g., news that goes against their preconceptions) as false information. After rejecting that news, those reasoning processes may actually result in the false information becoming more entrenched in their original preconceptions. This presents a significant challenge to correcting inaccurate information, not least by journalistic fact-checking outlets (e.g., Politifact) that have found themselves under increased attack in recent years.

Motivated reasoning has been used to help explain the rapid growth of increasingly partisan news outlets. For example, as people's worldviews become more radicalized, motivated reasoning pushes them to move toward even more partisan outlets. Indeed, a 2021 Pew Research Center study found that although Fox News remained a primary news source for self-identified Republicans and Moderates, the more conservative Newsmax and One America News continued to grow – and were especially appealing to more conservative Republicans and older, White Americans. (Newsmax and One America News have generally been regarded by media scholars as poor sources of information.)

Coastal Influence

Of direct relevance to this public perception that U.S. journalistic outlets are politically biased is yet another demographic reality separating U.S. journalists from average Americans: those journalists' geographical tie to large cities the East and West coasts. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center study, approximately 22% of newsroom employees in the U.S. live in Los Angeles or New York City. New York City alone is home to 12% of all U.S. newsroom staffers. Additionally, scholars have pointed toward an increased focus on national politics among political journalism in recent years (which is emblematic of similar changes in journalism writ large), resulting in much of that journalism originating from Washington D.C.

This coastal concentration is even stronger among online outlets. Forty percent of U.S. journalists working for online-only outlets live in the Northeast. Unsurprisingly, many of the most popular or established digital news sites are headquartered in major cities in that region of the country, such as New York City.

American journalism's strong ties to the coasts makes sense when you consider *cluster theory*, which points out the advantages industries gain and make use of when they establish themselves in specific regions. When businesses are clustered together in a specific geographic area, so are their actors, resources, and skills, which combined can promote innovation and give these clusters competitive advantages that make them more productive. However, such clustering also results in problems with representation. Indeed, the U.S. South is very much under-represented in terms of the number of journalists working there.

Coastal Impact

This tie to the coasts influences U.S. journalists and the work they publish. First, it undoubtedly contributes to the fact that journalists are indeed more politically liberal than the average American. While U.S. journalistic culture promotes the use of procedural tactics to mitigate the impact of that characteristic – such as by interviewing stakeholders on opposing sides and promoting balance – journalists themselves do tend to self-identify with traditionally liberal values.

Second, the realities of life in major cities and industrial hubs is undoubtedly different than the realities of life in smaller and more rural areas. Because of their concentration in the East and West Coasts of the country, journalists may be more likely to reflect a particular cultural experience. This can result in the stereotyping of those non-hub areas (and those within them) and the misrepresentation of their interests, attitudes, and beliefs.

Third, those areas are more expensive to live in than most of the country. Many would-be journalists thus cannot afford to live there – especially when they are starting off their careers and may be applying for unpaid internships. (They may also not *want* to live in such places.) This artificially limits the potential talent pool for journalists, and tends to systematically disadvantage journalists who do not come from wealthy and/or urban backgrounds.

Finally, this concentration of journalists and outlets on the edges of the country can be a disservice to local journalism. Not only can it result in important local and regional issues being under-covered (or poorly covered) but the perception that journalists in the United States do not reflect their communities can have downstream impacts on trust in local journalism, too, if it is attached to a generalized 'the media' umbrella (and it often is). This makes it harder yet for local outlets to attain resources and audiences in today's media attention economy.

Key Takeaways

- Republicans are less likely to trust (and more likely to actively distrust) U.S. journalistic outlets. In contrast, Democrats are more likely to trust those outlets. This gap has deepened over the past decade.
- Partisan selective exposure creates a pattern in which people consume media content that reinforces their opinions and opt out of divergent perspectives. Today, Americans' news diets differ considerably and are often associated with their political alignment.
- U.S. journalistic actors are more likely to live on the East and West Coasts than the average American, and less likely to live in the South. This has raised concerns about the representativeness of U.S. journalism.

Unit IV

Journalism Economics

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Chapter 18

Commodification of News

The phrase "commodification of news" refers to *the process through which news is translated into a commodity*, or a good or service designed to earn its producer a profit when it is sold in a market.

News has been treated as a commodity in much of the world in recent decades. However, it is different from most other commodities. Since the invention of the telegraph, news has been a weightless product that can be transported over vast distances nearly instantaneously. It also has limited exclusivity and a short individual lifespan, as news quickly loses value as it ages and can be quickly repackaged by competitors. Additionally, one person's consumption of news does not diminish its supply to the next person (unlike a pint of ice cream from Trader Joe's). As such, the economics of news is unique in many ways, especially in a digital environment.

Commodities are responsible only to the marketplace. They are indifferent to the quality of democracy or the values of a society so long as buying, selling, and private profit-making are permitted. Put another way, the more news is treated as a market commodity, the less certain it is to supply the kind of information a democratic society requires.

Audiences and Advertising

Within the context of commodities, commercial journalistic organizations typically operate in a *dual-product market*. They produce and market one product (*news*) so they can produce another product (*audience attention*) that can then be sold to advertisers, who covet audiences for their products.

This relationship is particularly important because the majority of revenue for most commercial journalistic organizations today comes from advertising, and not *directly* from audiences via things like subscriptions. Indeed, since the invention of mass advertising, news has generally been subsidized (e.g., newspapers) or outright paid for (e.g., broadcast TV newscasts) by someone other than the audience. This has allowed news content to be more affordable for – and thus accessed by – mass audiences, who receive the content for *far* less than it costs to produce it.

This dual-product market is further characterized by *mutual interdependence*: Journalistic organizations need advertising revenue to subsidize their journalistic activities, but the amount of advertising revenue is often related to the amount of audience attention that the organization can deliver. Put another way, in order to increase the revenue necessary to produce quality journalism, journalistic outlets must deliver larger numbers of readers, viewers, or listeners – even as, one would hope, quality journalism is what helps to bring in larger audiences.

The Newsroom 'Wall'

To combat the potentially negative influences of this interdependence on journalists' ability to serve as truth-seekers, professional journalistic organizations tended to implement throughout the 20th and 21st century *a metaphorical 'wall'* separating the business side of the organization from its newsroom operations. On one side of the wall, journalists and editors developed content for citizens, with limited regard for the business implications of their reporting. On the other side, managers and sales staff worked with advertisers to sell the audience attention.

The purpose of the 'wall' was to grant journalists greater autonomy, or independence from business concerns, which would allow the organization to produce *journalism*. The 'wall' itself was often implemented through different social rules (and even physical obstacles) that reduced interactions between members of each side. This might include placing business personnel on one floor of a building and newsroom personnel on another, and having them report to different sets of supervisors. This was possible in large part because journalism was already a *very* profitable enterprise for much of the past century. (Although it may seem comical now, major newspapers were regarded as cash cows three decades ago.)

Such a separation was reasonably effective for much of the past century. However, it was not always impervious. For example, the *news hole* (the amount of space available for news in a product like a newspaper) was often dependent on the amount of advertisements that were sold for that edition. If there were more advertisements, there would be more newspaper pages, and thus more space for news content. Additionally, workers on the business side would sometimes pressure editors, with varying success, to push for content that was advertising-friendly. This did not necessarily mean producing stories that were favorable to specific advertisers, like a happy story about

Trader Joe's. Instead, it meant ensuring the news product had *some* happy stories in it. That's because Trader Joe's would be happier if its advertisement appeared next to a story that already left the audience member in a positive emotional state, which in turn would make them more likely to transfer that feeling of happiness to the product being sold by Trader Joe's.

The industry's economic challenges have resulted in that line becoming even more blurred in recent years, though. For example, one source of revenue newsrooms now tap into is called *native advertising*. This involves a newsroom having a team of 'content creators' (sometimes comprised of former journalists) who work directly with potential advertisers to create semi-advertisements that look and feel like a typical journalistic story. Such stories are often distinguished by being labeled as 'sponsored content' or with some other aesthetic signifier to show that they are not journalistic stories produced by the journalists at that organization. However, readers and viewers do not often make that distinction – indeed, the very appeal to advertisers is that those distinctions will not be made and that audiences will mistake native ads for editorial content. Although profitable, the downside to such efforts is that they may erode audiences' trust in a journalistic organization.

Market Failure

The tension between treating news as a market commodity and practicing journalism as a public service has been a central dilemma in journalism for over a century. Notably, advertising was first welcomed rather than criticized because it promised to end, or at least ease, the dependency of journalism on the political parties that used to finance newspapers. In the Utopian vision of ad-supported journalism, advertising would enable market forces to empower audiences, resulting in the production of news information that was even more useful to them. Conversely, others worried that market sensitivities would seed market-driven journalism characterized not by "all the news that's fit to print" but rather "all the news that's fit to sell."

Scholars have argued that quality journalism provides multiple fundamental benefits to a democratic society that the market fails to adequately compensate. For example, all members of a society benefit when voters are well-informed and thus able to choose wise leaders and reward good governance. Similarly, all members of a society benefit from the deterrence of corruption and abuse that results from an actively monitorial journalistic environment, as bad-faith actors weigh the costs of getting caught against the benefit of doing a bad thing. Yet, in a market-oriented system, not everyone pays for news. In fact, only a very small proportion of people do. This creates a *free rider problem*, where people can experience many of the benefits of a product without having to pay for it. Consequently, what is civically valuable but goes unrewarded in the marketplace – such as expensive public-service journalistic investigations – ends up being under-produced, since there's no economic incentive for it.

Scholars have also found that the more responsive a newsroom is to market forces, the less it tends to serve the public interest through civic-minded efforts like 'watchdog' journalism. Again, this makes sense on multiple levels under *rational-choice theories* of economics. Rational managers and owners who seek to maximize their (or their investors') economic return should produce the least expensive content that can generate the largest audience of subscribers and/or consumers that are attractive to advertisers. Rational advertisers should seek the largest audience of potential customers at the lowest cost while favoring outlets that produce softer, simpler stories that leave potential consumers in a positive emotional state. And, audiences are not themselves paragons of rational self-interest. They do not always financially reward the content that benefits them the most in the long run.

The confluence of these factors results in what economists call *market failure*, where there is inefficient production and distribution of goods and services within a free market resulting from the fact that the individual incentives for rational behavior do not lead to the best outcomes for a group (or society). This has become especially apparent as the economic underpinnings for commercial journalism in many parts of the world, including the United States, have been significantly challenged by sociotechnical disruptions.

For example, the newspaper advertising market enjoyed robust growth from 1950 to 2000, and then declined to the 1950 levels in the next 12 years alone. Consequently, newsroom employment in the United States declined by 51% between 2008 and 2019. Additionally, hundreds of small community newspapers in the United States have been forced to close, creating a situation where in 2019, almost half of U.S. counties had a single local newspaper (that was often only published weekly). The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 only increased those economic pressures: A third of U.S. newspapers experienced layoffs that year, with large-circulation newspapers being most affected.

This has required commercial newsrooms to significantly rethink how to serve their civic objectives while remaining economically viable – efforts that have, at least recently, guided them toward further diversifying their revenue models in order to make up for drastic losses in advertising. Even among local and national television journalism outlets, which have been less affected by those trends, there are more intense economic (and political) pressures to move away from expensive public-service journalism. There have been many calls to address the market failures within journalism, but the challenge has persisted.

Key Takeaways

» News is a unique commodity in that it often has a short lifespan, it is easily copied, and its supply does not diminish as it is consumed.

» Commercial journalistic organizations often serve two markets at the same time: audiences and advertisers. Advertisers subsidize the content that audiences need and audiences give advertisers the attention they seek.

» Historically, professional, commercial journalistic organizations separated journalists from business-people by creating a metaphorical 'wall' in the newsroom that promoted newsroom independence and autonomy.

» In many countries, including the United States, commercial journalism operates within a context of market failure in terms of serving of the public good. A number of happy coincidences allowed that system to work reasonably well for many decades. However, those coincidences no longer hold true.

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Chapter 19

Audience Measurement and Bundling

The term "audience measurement" refers to *the goal-oriented process of collecting, analyzing, reporting, and interpreting data about the size, composition, behavior, characteristics, and preferences of individuals interacting with particular media brands or products*.

Historically, journalists and journalistic organizations had only very crude measures of what news audiences were interested in – and how (and to what extent) they were engaging with that content. For example, journalists would often turn to their friends and family, or perhaps to letters to the editor, for cues about what people were interested in and how their work was resonating with audiences. Journalistic organizations, in turn, would hire consultants to conduct focus groups, survey their readers, or ask broadcast audiences to keep a diary of the programs they watched.

Those methods came with significant limitations. First, they only provided partial data because they drew on small samples of people, who were often sampled in ways that made it hard to generalize findings to an entire audience. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the information was self-reported. This meant that people might say they wanted more information about international affairs because they thought that's what they *should* say – after all, most of us want to seem cultured, even to strangers – when in fact the news they craved was information about Ryan Gosling's latest film.

Audience Analytics and Metrics

The digitization of news has significantly changed how audience interests and consumption are measured. Specifically, digital systems enable *passive, mass tracking*. This means that when a person accesses a story, the infrastructure helping to serve that content – that is, the computer systems belonging to the journalistic organization and, often, other companies as well – will automatically record the fact that the content was accessed. These systems also often record additional information, including when that person accessed the content, where (roughly) they accessed it from, on what device, and how much time they spent with that content.

Those systems and information aggregation efforts are often called *audience analytics*, which is effectively a form of audience measurement that was not possible before the internet age. While it comes with its own limitations – for example, this system alone cannot give journalists a clear picture of how people *feel* about the content they access – it differs from past approaches in that it can gather information about *all* members of the audience, and that information is not limited to what audiences *want* to report. It is a more complete record, quantitatively speaking.

These systems can be used to automatically personalize content by linking it to past records of a news consumer's behavior. For example, if the journalistic organization's tracking systems know a specific audience member frequently accesses content about Ryan Gosling, it may choose to put that content in more prominent positions on its website (or suggest it as the next article for this user to read) because the system infers from past data that this individual wants to stay on top of news about Ryan Gosling.

Additionally, those systems produce what are often called *audience metrics*, or aggregate measures about the audience. These include the number of unique people who were exposed to a particular piece of content, where those individuals came from (not just geographically but also the website or platform that led them to that content), and how much time the average person spent with that content, or perhaps even how far the average person scrolled down the page. Thus, a journalist or journalistic organization can have a more quantified sense of how many people read their story and how they interacted with it, instead of just assuming a lot of people did because their group of friends, who likely share the same interests, found it interesting.

Journalists and newsrooms historically marginalized audience measurement data because they often viewed it as an intrusion on their journalistic autonomy and independence. Put another way, drawing on their role orientations and occupational ideology, they would often believe they had to give audiences certain kinds of news – regardless of how popular it might turn out to be – because it was a civic necessity to do so.

While there was always some tension over this, the high profitability of journalism made it easier for journalists to resist perceived intrusions in the past. The combination of these new technologies and the economic challenges faced by commercial media in recent years have resulted in even greater pressure to use audience analytics and metrics to *more efficiently* cater to audience desires – and made it riskier for journalists to resist such pressures.

Such systems and information do not exist to solely further economic objectives, though. Audience analytics and metrics *can* and arguably *should* be used to find ways to better understand what audiences want *in order to make civically important content more appealing to them* – whether in terms of its substance or simply how and where it is presented, as well as to encourage greater audience engagement and loyalty. Additionally, researchers have found little evidence that highly professionalized newsrooms like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* are blindly making news decisions based on audience metrics alone. Nevertheless, it has become apparent that these technologies and cultural artifacts have changed how journalists think about their work and the ways in which they perform it.

Bundling and Journalism

For much of its history, commercial news media has been a *bundled product*. What this means is that a person rarely bought a single piece of news, or even *just* news. Instead, they bought a single product that included local news, national news, sports news, and arts news – as well as comics, classifieds, and advertisements. This allowed journalism to be produced in an efficient way insofar as it allowed journalistic outlets to make money from two mutually dependent sources – audiences and advertisers – with a single media vehicle (e.g., a newspaper). Classifieds are emblematic of this: A local business would pay the journalistic outlet a fee to list a job opening in the newspaper while local citizens would pay the outlet for the cost of the newspaper to find a new job openings. A similar arrangement existed for engagement announcements and obituaries, which were also bundled in.

Content that was cheaper to produce (e.g., post-game reports from local high school football games) also helped subsidize more expensive content (e.g., an investigative series on local corruption). Put another way, citizens often bought the newspaper because they cared about their local sports teams and would perhaps stick around for, and benefit from, the investigative series. The journalistic organization, for its part, tended to see the investigative series as more central to its mission and as a potential status marker – such stories are usually the ones that receive major journalism awards – and viewed its cheaper and more popular content as a way to pay for it.

This dynamic has changed considerably in recent years. Audiences are now less likely to go directly to a journalistic outlet's homepage or app, and they are far less likely to seek out a single source to satisfy all of their information needs. Put differently, an individual may go to *The Boston Globe* for coverage of regional politics and policy, to BuzzFeed for entertainment news, to a local sports enthusiast's blog for analysis of high school football, and to the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, for coverage of international affairs. As such, news has become *unbundled* in many ways as journalistic outlets place all of their news online for free or under a 'soft' paywall knowing that individuals will only access *some* of the content. That, in turn, results in advertising revenue only being generated for those things that *are* accessed, putting pressure on commercial outlets to focus on narrower sets of content that can pay for itself.

Moreover, journalistic outlets have lost their monopolies on some of those key dual-channel revenue sources. For example, people now go to websites like Craigslist and Indeed for classifieds, and to Facebook to discover who is getting engaged (and perhaps who has died). There is also a plethora of free and paid entertainment alternatives that far exceed what journalistic outlets have ever been able to offer.

Because of this evolution in the news industry, the structural advantages and subsidies that enabled commercial journalism to operate as it did in the past no longer exist in such advantageous ways.

Key Takeaways

» Journalistic outlets have always tried to measure different aspects of their audiences and their audiences' wants, but audience analytics and metrics have enabled more quantifiable measurements of individual audience members and of audiences as a whole.

» There is now great economic pressure on journalistic outlets to make use of audience metrics in guiding editorial decisions. However, professionalized newsrooms still draw heavily upon their conceptions of newsworthiness when making those decisions.

» Journalistic products are no longer bundled in the ways they were before. This has both reduced their ability to subsidize expensive, civic-minded news through cheaper, more popular content and reduced the opportunities to generate revenue from non-news content.

Chapter 20

Third-Party Platforms

Today's journalism environment is deeply influenced by *third-party platforms*, or *technical systems that mediate exchanges between content producers and consumers*. Those platforms have significantly altered how news is monetized, distributed, and engaged with, and have consequently disrupted key financial support mechanisms for journalism in market-oriented media systems around the world.

Many journalistic organizations have experienced what may appear to be a paradox at first sight: They now have access to a far larger *potential* audience than ever before through their digital distribution channels – and, in fact, often have more readers, viewers, and listeners than ever before – yet they have seen a drastic reduction in advertising revenue.

The reason for this is two-fold. The first reason is that the cost for placing an advertisement on an organization's digital offerings is exponentially lower than the cost for placing an advertisement on that same organization's analogue offerings. Put another way, it is a lot cheaper to place an ad on the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*'s website than it is to place that same ad on its newspaper. This is due in part to the fact that online audiences have historically been seen as less valuable by producers and advertisers alike. However, it is also due to the increased supply of content online. If an advertiser wants to reach a particular kind of audience offline, they have a far more limited set of media vehicles – such as the lone newspaper for an entire county and the few broadcast channels that cover that area. Conversely, there is a seemingly limitless supply of media vehicles online, such as the billions of websites that exist.

The second reason is that much of today's advertising is managed through third-party platforms that not only govern pricing but also take a hefty cut. For example, if UMass wanted to promote its excellent Journalism Department to an international audience, it might work directly with *The Japan Times* to publish an advertisement in its newspaper. However, if UMass wanted to advertise on *The Japan Times*' website, it may need to work with an intermediary like Google's AdSense, which might handle all of the online advertising for *The Japan Times* (as well as for millions of other websites).

This is the case for many journalistic organizations today, and it comes with many implications. The most important of these is that there is downward pressure to keep ad rates low online. Specifically, UMass may reason that its goal is to reach people outside the U.S. who are interested in journalism – and it may not care if those people are found on *The Japan Times*'s website or elsewhere on the web. Thus, they will use an ad-tech intermediary (like Google's AdSense) to target their ad to a certain demographic and set a maximum price. Google's AdSense may then allow *any* website visited by *any* user matching that demographic – based on a profile that the ad-tech company has created from different data points – to show UMass' ad so long as a website accepts UMass' pricing limits. (Ad-tech systems do allow for black-listing, too. This means that some websites are not eligible to show an ad if they contain certain keywords. While this is usually restricted to offensive language, it can be extended to sensitive topics, like human rights abuses. That, in turn, may discourage the production of news stories about those topics.)

All of those decisions are made by automated systems in microseconds through what is called *programmatic advertising*, and it often results in lower ad prices because a rational advertiser will seek to advertise on the websites that require the least amount of money while delivering the desired audience. This pushes websites to accept lower rates in order to ensure they have advertisements to serve. On top of this, those intermediaries charge the websites a service fee for each ad shown. Thus, not only are journalistic outlets receiving less money for each ad but they also receive just a portion of that amount.

It is therefore unsurprising that while digital ad spending has grown immensely, much of those gains have been highly concentrated among a few companies. Specifically, Google and Facebook alone are estimated to receive more than half of *global* digital ad spending, with China-based Alibaba coming in a distant third.

In short, many of the gains in digital advertising are not being realized by journalistic outlets; the uptick in online ad revenue has not come close to replacing the losses in offline ad revenue for many journalistic outlets; and many journalistic outlets still rely on their offline products for the majority of their advertising revenue, even as they have much larger audiences online. This helps us understand why some traditional media companies still orient themselves, at least in part, around media vehicles that are widely seen as being phased out along generational lines (e.g., a newspaper): Such outlets generally have more control over, and can extract more value from, their legacy products.

Distributional Intermediaries

Third-party platforms are not limited to advertising, though. In the United States, much of Europe, and elsewhere in the world, a small group of Silicon Valley-based companies – namely Google, Facebook, Apple, and Twitter – largely control the social media, web search, and mobile application platforms that audiences use to find and access news.

Because of their positions as intermediaries, *those companies generally realize many of the economic benefits from news production while not suffering its costs*. For example, a platform like Facebook benefits from user-generated content like its users' posts (including any news they may break); from the fact that many people rely on Facebook to be their primary news source, via the links that are shared by their friends; and from the many journalistic outlets that use Facebook themselves in order to promote their content (often by offering portions of it for free on the platform). All of this participation comes at relatively negligible cost to Facebook, because it does not pay any of these people for the very content that makes its platform worthwhile.

At the same time, platform owners seek to avoid expensive legal and gatekeeping responsibilities by claiming to be distinct from media organizations. Put another way, they often claim to only offer neutral, technical infrastructures in order to avoid the public interest obligations that governments have historically placed on broadcasters and that society expects from traditional journalistic outlets. After all, such platforms tend to claim, they do not produce journalistic content of their own, and their platforms are governed by supposedly impartial algorithms, rather than humans, to determine what to show audiences and how to show it. Therefore, the argument is that such neutrality should shield platforms from journalistic responsibilities, or from legal risks like accusations of libel. (This is, of course, a weak argument. Their algorithms reflect the values and/or economic interests of platform owners, and the algorithms exercise a form of judgment when they promote content that is expected to elicit further engagement on the platform.)

Third-party platforms also create loyalty challenges for journalistic outlets. In the past, audiences tended to go directly to trusted outlets to find information. Put another way, they *actively* sought it out. Today, audiences increasingly go to news aggregators like Apple News, or they *wait for news to find them* on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. As users are shown an array of news from a lot of different news brands, they begin to disassociate the content from the brand itself. Put differently, researchers have found that, after reading a news story, less than half of people would remember the journalistic organization that published the story if the individual found the story on social media. (However, most people could remember which social media platform they used to find it.) In contrast, 80% of people who found that same story on a journalistic organization's website were able to remember who published it. In short, social media platforms end up receiving more of the credit for the content published by journalistic outlets than the journalistic outlets themselves. That, in turn, reduces the worth of the organization's brand and the incentive to produce high-quality content in order to help the brand stand out in a crowded marketplace.

The massive size of these third-party platforms – Facebook alone counts billions of users worldwide – and their structural positions as intermediaries make it difficult for journalistic outlets to ignore them. Moreover, they are difficult to displace. Such platforms are subject to *network effects* in which a product or service becomes more useful as more people use it, creating conditions for monopolies or outsize power. Consequently, many journalistic outlets believe they must not only have a presence on those platforms but that they must engage with audiences there, too, even as such participation further tethers them to these platforms. Put another way, journalistic outlets are forced to weigh the short-term benefits of tapping into new audiences and remaining relevant on popular platforms against long-term concerns about ceding further control over their content and processes. While more journalistic outlets have begun to distance themselves from *some* third-party platforms in recent years, such efforts often come at great risk.

Key Takeaways

» Third-party platforms refer to technical systems that mediate exchanges between content producers and consumers. This includes social media platforms like Facebook, search platforms like Google search, and ad-tech platforms like Google AdSense.

» Although digital advertising has grown immensely over the past decade, it has not come close to replacing the revenue lost from non-digital advertising for most journalistic outlets. This is due in part to different pricing regimes and the ad-tech intermediary platforms that pervade online spaces.

» Distributional intermediaries like Facebook and Apple News have benefited greatly from the economic benefits of news production yet bear little of its costs. They have also sought to reduce their media-related responsibilities by claiming to be neutral platforms rather than media companies.

» Although these platforms have introduced many challenges to a range of journalistic outlets – especially traditional organizations – those outlets have often found the cost of non-participation on platforms to exceed those of participation.

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Chapter 21

Non-Profit Journalism

Non-profit journalistic outlets *are not driven by commercial concerns but are instead dedicated to furthering a public-service mission, filling gaps resulting from market failures, or advancing a particular social cause*.

Non-profit outlets have long been a part of many media systems. For example, in the U.S., *The Associated Press* was founded as a non-profit cooperative in 1846 in order to lower newsgathering costs among its commercial and non-commercial members. Over time, it has helped ensure that audiences in different parts of the country have access to high-quality information from around the U.S. and abroad. Globally, journalism outlets like *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom and *Malaysiakini* in Malaysia operate in the spirit of promoting high-quality journalism and providing alternative voices, especially in tightly controlled media environments where commercial and state-sponsored media are afraid of challenging those in power.

Non-profit media have seen considerable growth over the past two decades as the economics of commercial journalism have been disrupted. Put another way, for much of the 20th and 21st centuries, a happy coincidence enabled the market, via advertising and subscription revenue, to support the existence of a robust, ad-supported journalistic sector. There is, however, no reason why that model *has* to work to adequately support journalism's public-service responsibilities. Indeed, the drastic drop of advertising revenues and the reluctance audiences have shown for paying for online content in high-choice environments has illustrated how vulnerable that model is.

Objectives, Norms, and Funding

Many of the non-profits established over the past two decades have been founded by journalists who used to work for commercial outlets and became concerned about the ability of commercial media to provide public-service journalism. This is especially the case in democratic societies that lack a strong, state-supported, public-service broadcasting system. Non-profit journalistic outlets often seek to produce the types of content that their founders are concerned is in short supply elsewhere – often because such content is perceived to go unrewarded by market forces. This includes expensive genres like investigative journalism and international journalism, as well as topics that are deemed to be intractable or less-captivating to mass audiences, such as homelessness and mass incarceration.

Many non-profit journalistic outlets share some of the dominant role orientations, norms, and news values associated with journalism in a particular context. For example, conceptions of newsworthiness at non-profits are not wholly different from those at their commercial counterparts. Instead, they are tweaked and, most importantly, less encumbered by economic concerns. Moreover, for these outlets' content to be considered journalism by audiences, it must still resemble to some extent the forms and formats recognized as journalism within that context – which the dominant, typically commercial or state-supported, outlets play a large role in shaping.

Non-profit outlets often raise funds from an array of sources. The two primary sources tend to be *audience-derived contributions* and *philanthropic grants*. Audience-derived contributions may include the subscription fees often found in commercial media, but it typically also includes voluntary donations and crowdfunding campaigns. Philanthropic grants often come from other non-profit organizations and foundations that are devoted to promoting the civic good. For example, the Knight Foundation is a major philanthropic organization in the United States, and it will sometimes provide upwards of $100 million in grants each year to help advance journalism in the U.S. For most other foundations, journalism constitutes a portion of their giving, which is often related to a focus on democracy, community, or education. Researchers have estimated that between 2009 and 2017, foundations provided more than $9 billion worldwide in order to advance journalism – though a significant portion of that was in the United States.

However, those two sources alone are rarely sufficient for non-profit journalistic organizations. Many also draw upon advertising and sponsorships as supplemental revenue sources, though their dependence on advertising is generally lower than that of their commercial counterparts. They also engage in a range of additional revenue-generating activities, like hosting conferences, social events, workshops, and webinars – though these activities usually only account for a small proportion of overall revenue. Additionally, non-profit journalistic outlets benefit from favorable tax status in some countries (including the United States), meaning that contributions to them are tax-deductible and they themselves have to pay fewer taxes.

Impact and Sustainability

The dependence on philanthropic funding does not come without entanglements. Such funders typically receive more requests for funding than they can fund, and they thus tend to require organizations to justify the merit of their requests by demonstrating their *impact* and *sustainability*.

Impact is immensely difficult to measure and demonstrate. Funders will often develop different ways of understanding impact, which may include measures of the reach of a project (i.e., how many readers, viewers, or listeners it attracted), the impact(s) it had on policy and governance (e.g., if it resulted in the passing of new legislation or ousting of a corrupt figure), and the coverage it helped generate from other news organizations (e.g., local investigations resulting from a national dataset compiled by the non-profit). However, such developments can be difficult to track and to tie directly to the non-profit's work, and they may not become apparent for a long time. Moreover, the measures of impact imposed by a funder can significantly shape the journalism produced by a non-profit journalistic outlet – in both positive and negative ways.

Many (though not all) funders also ask non-profit organizations to demonstrate a path toward self-sustainability. A substantial amount of the funding comes as so-called 'seed grants' that are intended to help an organization get off the ground, with the expectation that the organization will find sufficient revenue sources over time to no longer require assistance from that particular funder. Indeed, many non-profit journalistic outlets tend to face an inflection point around their fourth or fifth year of operation, and many that fail to establish themselves financially by then are forced to close. Philanthropic funding can thus be an unstable and temporary source of revenue.

Impact and sustainability often become linked in practice within the context of non-profit journalism. One way to demonstrate impact is to point to a growing, loyal audience, which can then be monetized through donations and subscriptions. Additionally, in order to reach a larger audience and increase the impact of a story, non-profit journalistic organizations will often partner with larger, commercial journalistic outlets to distribute the work. For example, the non-profit ProPublica launched its first investigation in 2008 in partnership with the popular CBS television program 60 Minutes, and it has since worked with *The New York Times*, BuzzFeed, and NPR to increase its reach. In some instances, the works are collaborations – both the non-profit outlet and the commercial outlet devote some resources to producing a story – but oftentimes, the non-profit provides the content for free simply to reach more people. This is because some non-profits tend to publish infrequently, and their own websites and distribution channels tend to have smaller audiences. Thus, even when funders are directly supporting a non-profit like ProPublica, they are also offering indirect subsidies to the commercial organizations that use the non-profit's work.

Finally, it should be noted that although we have focused on funding for *organizations*, there is also a robust sector of philanthropic funding for *freelance journalists* (journalists who work independently and are not attached to any one organization). Such journalists may then work with an established journalistic outlet, such as PBS, or even a non-traditional partner (e.g., Netflix) to ensure wider distribution of their work.

Key Takeaways

- Non-profit journalistic outlets are not driven by commercial concerns but are instead dedicated to furthering a public-service mission, filling gaps resulting from market failures, or advancing a particular social cause.
- Non-profit journalistic outlets typically get the majority of their funding from subscribers or donors and from philanthropic foundations that support issues and perspectives they believe are not adequately covered by other media.
- Non-profit journalistic outlets must often demonstrate their impact and pathway to sustainability in order to receive financial support from philanthropic foundations. They will also sometimes work in partnership with commercial outlets to increase their reach.

Chapter 22

State-Supported Journalism

State-supported journalism refers to *journalism that is directly supported by state governments*. This includes both public funding for independent, self-governed journalistic outlets and ventures as well as direct management of state-owned and state-supervised media apparatuses.

State-supported journalism is often promoted by governments that feel responsible for safeguarding and fostering sustainable, critical, and high-quality journalism options that serve the public instead of commercial media owners, shareholders, and advertisers. In these cases, state-supported journalism is argued to be a necessary response to the market failure paradigm wherein self-regulated markets prove to be inefficient or incapable of producing news that serves the public interest. Therefore, state support is needed as a correction, in order to support journalism that can monitor and hold accountable the institutions of government, commerce, and civic life.

However, state-supported journalism can also encompass what are commonly called *state-controlled media*, wherein the government funds media organizations to more efficiently reach large audiences with the government's messaging. Under that information regime, the media organization often works to advance the political interests of the state by serving as the state's mouthpiece. Those interests may be advanced both domestically and internationally.

Independent State-Supported Journalism

Many countries around the world, from Argentina to Afghanistan to Albania to Australia, have some kind of state-supported journalistic outlet. These outlets are typically rooted in radio and television broadcasting, though there are some instances of state-supported print media and digitally native media. This is due in large part to the natural scarcity of broadcasting frequencies: There are only so many airwaves that broadcasting devices can use, and those frequencies have historically been treated as public goods.

However, any form of government support for journalistic media raises questions about the independence of the media producers. Put another way, how can a government foot the bill for journalists without unduly influencing (if not outright intervening in) the editorial process?

One way to do this is to establish an *independent governance model*, as is the norm in many European countries. For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation, or the BBC, operates as a public service broadcaster that is funded directly by citizens through an annual license fee that is set and collected by the government. Those funds are then transferred to an independent company with a board of directors that oversees the general direction of the BBC and an executive committee charged with overseeing its day-to-day operations. By creating a managerial structure that is largely separate from the British government, the BBC is generally able to remain independent from it. Additionally, it operates under a royal charter that charges it to produce public-interest journalism that advances the interests of the citizens of the entirety of the United Kingdom. While it is not free from criticism (especially from public officials who feel scorned), its journalistic arm (BBC News) is not only well regarded internationally but is the largest broadcast newsgathering operation in the world.

Europe has been particularly successful in developing a public policy framework that grants state subsidies to journalists and journalistic outlets that serve the public interest, advance accountability and transparency, and contribute to critical thinking and well-informed debate among citizens. Such efforts may include direct cash payments to selected projects or general incentives (e.g., reduced rates for mailing news media) that play a vital role in creating favorable economic conditions for a public-interest culture in journalism.

Moreover, those frameworks often help support *public-service broadcasters* – organizations like the BBC in the United Kingdom, France24 in France, and NRK in Norway – that are designed to produce public-service journalism and are often among the biggest news producers in their countries. Researchers have found that countries with well-regarded public-service broadcasters tend to have better-informed citizens.

While the United States does offer some level of government support for journalism, its efforts pale in comparison to its European counterparts. For example, less than 1% of National Public Radio's (NPR) funding comes from the federally funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) or from federal agencies and departments. Most of NPR's funding comes from corporate sponsorships and dues paid by member stations across the country. Those member stations, in turn, receive just 12% of their funding from the CPB and other federal, state, and local government sources. In short, public media in the U.S. receives a relatively small amount of state support. Instead, most public and non-profit journalistic outlets in the U.S. rely on charitable contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations (e.g., crowdfunded journalism and philanthropic funding).

State-Controlled Media

In the absence of structures to protect the independence of journalists, state-supported media can become state-controlled media. Under this environment, organizations will seek to *appear* journalistic but functionally serve as propagandist organs of a government. This does not need to involve fabrication on the part of the organization, or the production of disinformation. Instead, it may simply involve the systematic exclusion of stories and perspectives that are critical of the state, and the systematic over-inclusion of stories and perspectives that are favorable to the state. (However, such outlets may, and some often do, produce false information that reflects positively on the government.)

For example, the Xinhua News Agency serves as the official state-run press agency of the People's Republic of China. It is by far the biggest and most influential media organization in China, and it is arguably the world's largest news organization in terms of personnel. In addition to operating within China, it also has more than 170 news bureaus – or satellite offices – worldwide, making it one of the most international news organizations in the world.

Xinhua has been routinely criticized for its deep connection to the Communist Party of China, and its governance structure places it under the direct supervision of party officials. As such, Reporters Without Borders has called it "the world's biggest propaganda machine." Nevertheless, it has served as a crucial instrument for communicating its citizens' needs to party officials, and for (favorably) conveying the party's policies and initiatives to citizens.

Xinhua has also served as an instrument for increasing China's foreign influence. It delivers its content through multiple mediums, including print, broadcast, and online, and in multiple languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, English, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian. In recent years, Xinhua has acquired commercial real estate in New York's Times Square, bolstered its English-language reporting staff, and started an English-language satellite news network. Such efforts are capable of producing strong journalism – especially about matters only loosely related to China – but they are generally driven by a desire to spread perspectives that are aligned with those of the Chinese state.

State-controlled journalism is not limited to China. It is present under many authoritarian regimes, including Eritrea, North Korea, and Turkmenistan. Additionally, even in semi-democratic societies, state-controlled media may exist and reflect the political positions of ruling parties. In some cases, the dominant perspectives conveyed by such outlets change drastically as political power transitions between parties, making state-controlled media a bellwether of power.

Key Takeaways

» State-supported journalism refers to journalism that is directly supported by state governments.

» Strong, independent public-service journalistic outlets can emerge in media systems that receive substantial state support. Many European countries have well-regarded public-service broadcasters that promote a well-informed citizenry.

» State subsidies can also support state-controlled media outlets that are designed to promote the viewpoints of ruling parties and serve as instruments for advancing foreign influence.

Unit V

Journalistic Audiences

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Chapter 23

Audience Fragmentation

The term audience fragmentation describes *a process whereby a mass audience (or few audiences) is broken up into many small audiences by virtue of divergent media consumption habits*. With the proliferation of online journalism and digital devices, audiences have become empowered to access more content from more publishers and on the audiences' terms. Consequently, individual news consumers have developed more specific tastes and consumption patterns.

Consider asking your friends where they get their political news from. There's a good chance they'll each list a different set of sources. (There will likely be some overlap, since people generally befriend individuals who share their interests, but it is unlikely to be a uniform set of outlets.) Then, consider asking your parents and their friends where they get their political news from. There's a good chance they will not only list an even more distinct set of sources but also a different set of media vehicles (e.g., television vs. online) and on a different schedule (e.g., live at a certain time vs. on-demand). If you were to swing by a retirement community a few towns away, you'll likely find an even more distinct media diet from your own.

In short, today's news audiences have fragmented from a few mass audiences to many small audiences. And while that fragmentation may immediately sound like a net positive – after all, more choices should be a good thing, right? – it has introduced important challenges not only to the journalism industry but to democratic institutions.

Civic Implications of Fragmentation

The explosion of media options is still a relatively new phenomenon. For example, back in the 1960s, the majority of Americans regularly turned to one of just three evening TV newscasts (from ABC, CBS, and NBC). Broadcast news was so pervasive that 96% of the American population watched TV news coverage of President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

That level of concentration and small number of options is hard to fathom today given the present array of broadcast news options (and even wider spectrum of media vehicles and journalistic outlets). Today's audiences can seek news from text-based, broadcast, radio, and digital outlets. They can watch the news through live video, social video, 360 video, and even virtual and augmented reality. They can turn to mainstream or independent outlets and partisan or non-partisan outlets. They can choose between international, national, local, and even hyper-local coverage of a topic. They can often consume those news products live or on-demand. The list goes on and on.

However, having access to so many options has a major downside. The *paradox of choice* can make it tough for news consumers to leave their comfort zones or even avoid news altogether. For example, how often do you sign on to Netflix to watch something, only to realize that you've spent 10 minutes browsing and are no longer in the mood to watch anything at all? A similar process of fatigue occurs in what can sometimes feel like an over-saturated news ecosystem.

Having so many options also allows people to more easily turn to slanted news sources that support their existing points of view. This phenomenon is called *selective exposure* and involves people *actively choosing* to pursue a fraction of the available information or information sources, typically along some lines of preference (e.g., political preferences). This can trap news consumers in echo chambers that limit their exposure to new and divergent perspectives. That, in turn, can also lead to increased polarization within societies, particularly when it comes to political affairs. Such polarization can make it difficult for citizens to engage with one another because not only do they approach opposing viewpoints with greater antipathy but they also tend to draw on very different bodies of information about the world. This makes dialogue, debate, and compromise – the cornerstones of democratic society – difficult.

Professional Implications of Fragmentation

Audience fragmentation also poses economic and professional challenges for journalists and the organizations that employ them. It provides incentives for journalistic actors to specialize. Generalist outlets that provide overviews of many different topics are less desirable to audiences that know what they want and want in-depth or exclusive information about that topic. By specializing in niche areas, journalistic outlets can capture smaller but loyal audiences. While generalist outlets will still continue to exist, there are likely to be fewer of them in the future than in the past.

The fragmentation of audiences and increased availability of options also place even more pressures on journalistic outlets to stand out within an *attention economy*. Outlets must compete furiously with one another because there is a greater supply of news content than there is attention to take it in. This competition is magnified exponentially when you also factor in non-news media competitors, such as beauty vlogs, video game streams, and history podcasts. (Consider that in 2019, 500 *hours* of video were being uploaded to YouTube alone every *minute*.) Consequently, journalistic outlets are not only competing against one another to produce good journalism, they are also competing with one another (and other media organizations) to have their content capture the attention of a sufficiently large number of increasingly fragmented audiences.

It is unlikely that the processes underlying the fragmentation of audiences in recent decades will be reversed in the coming years. In fact, the opposite is more likely: Audiences will probably become even more fragmented as new technologies give audiences more agency and as technological actants further personalize audiences' news experiences. This will require journalistic outlets and society at large to continue to adapt to the existence of niche audiences that frequently draw upon divergent bodies of knowledge about current affairs and the broader world.

Key Takeaways

- The term audience fragmentation refers to a process whereby a mass audience (or few audiences) is broken up into many small audiences by virtue of divergent media consumption habits.
- The paradox of choice can make it tough for news consumers to leave their comfort zones. More choices also make it easier for people to turn to news that supports their existing points of view through selective exposure.
- Audience fragmentation has required journalistic outlets to adapt to an attention economy, which involves increased competition from many media options and promotes professional specialization.

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Chapter 24

User-Generated Content

User-generated content, also known as UGC, refers to *content that is created and shared by users of platforms and products*, including social media and news websites. UGC may come in an array of forms and formats, such as text, photos, videos, audio, and memes.

The proliferation of networked devices and interactive platforms has led to an explosion of user-generated content. Many of today's most popular service-oriented websites are based in whole or in part on user-generated content. For example, TikTok's content base is largely comprised of user-submitted videos; Yelp revolves around citizen reviews of businesses; and Rotten Tomatoes features movie ratings from regular people alongside reviews by professional film critics. Even major platforms like Facebook and Twitter could not exist without user-generated content.

The explosion of user-generated content has led some scholars to argue for an in-between category of individuals called *produsers*, who readily interchange from being the users of a product to producers of product-related content. For example, highly motivated fans of the TV show My Little Pony can create a wiki-based community around the show that details each pony's backstory and offers original analyses of the show's main themes. As such, scholars have argued, the distinction between producers and audiences has been further blurred in recent decades.

UGC in Journalism

Although user-generated content is common across all digital domains, it plays a unique role in the context of online journalism. Journalists utilize user-generated content to complement, augment, inform, and even provide the basis for their own journalism. Meanwhile, audiences use it to make their own voices heard and to engage in the process of reporting and sharing information.

To illustrate the evolution of user-generated content within the context of journalism, consider the letter to the editor. Before the internet, such letters were the most common means for audiences to get in touch with news producers. People wrote letters to the editor reflecting on the news, sharing their own stories, complaining about specific types or topics of coverage, asking questions for clarification, and sharing news tips with journalists. Some of those letters would then go on to appear in the newspaper – typically in a designated area within the Opinion section – making them an early form of user-generated content. However, those letters were limited to text as a medium, depended on the publisher's schedule for publishing letters (and willingness to publish a letter), were generally subject to an editor's alterations (they would often abridge the letters), and were frequently in competition with other letters about the same topic. In short, space constraints meant that only a tiny fraction of letters were ever published and rarely on the letter-writer's terms.

In contrast, today's news websites, apps, and social media pages regularly solicit and share user-generated content alongside journalist-produced news. Journalistic slideshows of sporting events (e.g., a local high school football game) frequently feature fan-taken photos. Comments sections at the bottom of articles invite readers to share their thoughts about (or responses to) news. Journalistic outlets' Facebook accounts ask readers for their worst weather-related disaster stories. Hashtags allow Twitter and Instagram users to connect their own stories and images to coverage of a topic appearing on news websites through different widgets on the page. Some news websites even allow community members to upload events to be included in the outlet's online calendar page. And, some news aggregation websites focus largely on user-generated content, as with sports news portals that source from popular fan blogs.

As such, some journalistic outlets have turned to user-generated content as a way to advance their objective of providing the public a forum for engaging with civic information and to make journalism more participatory. Others have turned to UGC primarily as a cheap source of content or to increase the time users spend on the website. In short, the extent of the use of user-generated content, and the ways in which UGC are incorporated into news products, does vary widely across outlets, but the industry as a whole makes use of *a lot* more user-generated content today than in prior decades.

Benefits and Complications

There are many reasons why user-generated content is valuable for journalistic outlets. At an ideological level, it can be a way to give news audiences a voice in the coverage and dissemination of information, and engage them with the news and the process of reporting it. For example, CNN's iReport was an early attempt by a journalistic outlet to create a digital platform designed to help audiences easily share their own video-based citizen journalism.

At an economic level, research suggests that creators of user-generated content tend to become more active and loyal members of the spaces they contribute to (e.g., an online community or news website). That engagement and loyalty can help generate positive financial outcomes as well, since such users may visit more frequently and feel even more motivated to pay a subscription fee or make a donation. Moreover, user-generated content can be a free alternative to professionally produced content (e.g., fan photos from a game that replace a photojournalist's work) or inexpensive filler (e.g., free opinion columns or a replacement for person-on-the-street interviews).

However, user-generated content also presents journalistic outlets with some challenges. It has the potential to blur the traditional boundaries of journalism by elevating the work of non-professional actors who aren't trained in the professional norms and ethical standards of journalism. For example, user-generated photos or embedded social media posts are usually clearly distinguished as such by credit lines and other signals that make clear that the author of the work is not a journalist. However, research has shown that audiences often do not meaningfully distinguish messages produced by different authors (who may employ different standards). That is, while audiences can accurately identify that a news story and a tweet embedded within it were produced by different people, they often muddle the messages together.

This can become especially problematic when it comes to forum-style user-generated content appearing alongside news products (e.g., comments under an online news story). Such content may feature personal opinions and stories, many of which are much more overtly biased than journalistic standards allow. They may also include misinformation and disinformation, as well as deeply unprofessional elements, such as insults or curse words. Journalistic outlets therefore have an ethical duty to engage in some form of content policing. This can be both morally problematic (e.g., determining what kind and amount of moderation is appropriate) and economically challenging (e.g., having to hire a team of moderators). It can also be legally problematic if a journalist excerpts user-generated content that is defamatory without engaging in basic fact-checking measures.

Finally, journalistic outlets must increasingly cope with the fact that user-generated content and online discussions about news are increasingly being produced or taking place on platforms outside their own. Put another way, while letters to the editor were previously sent to the journalistic outlet (giving them control over if and how to use that content) more of today's engagement is occurring on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (not only resulting in less journalistic control over the content but increasing their dependency on third-party platforms). Thus, in a way, professional journalistic work is becoming a content subsidy of its own for discourses that largely take place on forums outside the outlet's own.

Key Takeaways

- User-generated content refers to content that is created and shared by users of platforms and products. It can include text, photos, videos, audio files, memes, and other types of content.
- Journalistic outlets are not just destinations for consuming news. They have become platforms for user engagement and interaction with news. However, that engagement is increasingly occurring on other platforms.
- Creators of user-generated content tend to become more active members of the online communities they contribute to and become more engaged with those sites. There is thus an economic incentive for creating opportunities for users to engage and produce content.
- User-generated content has blurred some of the boundaries of journalism and creates challenges for professional journalistic outlets.

Chapter 25

Crowdsourcing and Ambient Journalism

While journalists have historically worked in a more solitary fashion, this is becoming less so the case today. Journalists are now more likely to work within teams in their organization, participate in collaborations across organizations, and involve their audiences in different aspects of news production.

This latter development – the incorporation of active audiences – is largely the result of new communication technologies and platforms that make it easier for audiences to engage with each other and with journalists. However, it is also the product of cultural changes and economic imperatives that have made audience participation appear more beneficial to – and in some cases necessary for – the production of 'good' journalism. Moreover, in addition to inviting contributions from audiences, new kinds of journalists have emerged whose job it is to tap into, and synthesize, the collective wisdom of the general public by monitoring their exchanges.

Journalistic Crowdsourcing

Within the context of journalism, the term crowdsourcing refers to *a practice by which the cultural (i.e., knowledge), social (i.e., networks), or economic (i.e., money) capital of some public is harnessed for a specific task in the news production process*.

Here, 'crowd' refers not only to the audiences of a given journalistic outlet but to the broader public they can reach via multiple communication channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, or even their own media products. 'Sourcing,' in turn, refers to the practice of collecting the resources (such as knowledge, material, or money) needed to advance an organizational or news production task. Journalistic crowdsourcing can thus involve the participation of non-journalists in identifying news, gathering news information, verifying and making sense of the gathered information, and distributing the produced form of that information. In the case of its sister act, crowdfunding, it can involve soliciting ad-hoc contributions to support a particular news production task, story, or project.

There are many reasons why a journalistic outlet might want to engage in crowdsourcing. For example, they may have access to more material than their reporting team can process, as is the case with large leaks of private documents or when governments aim to hide embarrassing information by overloading journalists with materials following a public information request. In this sense, crowdsourcing can be a free form of labor. Alternatively, journalistic outlets may believe that having more eyes will reduce mistakes and perhaps help their reporters identify important things that they missed. In this sense, crowdsourcing can be a way to improve traditional journalism. Or, journalistic outlets may find that they can build a following and increase brand loyalty by making audiences feel like they're part of a team. In this sense, crowdsourcing can be a way to make journalism more sustainable.

For participants, the reward is often non-monetary since journalistic outlets rarely ever pay or reimburse participants for their labor. Instead, the reward is usually symbolic, such as by receiving some form of recognition for the work. This might be something as small as an icon or 'badge' next to their username on the website. It may also be more intrinsic, such as a feeling of satisfaction from having contributed to a social good or addressed a social problem. Sometimes, participants simply believe they've gained a skill or knowledge as a result of their participation.

Crowdsourcing can go very wrong, however. For example, shortly after the Boston Marathon bombing, online crowds on Reddit pored through pictures of the event to identify the perpetrators. They eventually zeroed in on two men and published photos of them that supposedly offered proof that they were the bombers. The *New York Post* famously took one of those pictures, enlarged it to cover its entire front page, and suggested that those two men were responsible for the bombing. It soon became evident that those men were not the bombers. However, by that point, their names had become public, their reputation had been tarnished, and they began receiving online and offline abuse. That abuse did not go away even after the actual perpetrators of the bombing were charged and convicted.

Kinds of Participation

The majority of crowdsourcing efforts to date have sought to incorporate audiences into the formative stages of news production, such as when stories are being identified, basic information is collected, and collected information is verified. Sometimes, journalists will solicit audience help for disseminating stories, in order to increase its reach. However, audiences rarely ever have a chance to participate in the editing stages – though it is theoretically possible for them to do so.

Scholars have identified five kinds of crowdsourcing activities that are designed to help non-journalists share their individual knowledge to create a form of collective knowledge. The first kind is voting, wherein the crowd helps prioritize the stories that reporters should tackle or flags phenomena of interest. The second is witnessing, or the sharing of first-person accounts of what happened during a breaking event. The third is sharing personal experiences, or the conveyance of experiential knowledge to reporters. The fourth is offering specialized expertise, wherein members of the crowd are able to contribute expert knowledge drawn from their professional experience or hobby. The fifth is completing a task, where the support comes by way of volunteering time to engage in semi-structured (and sometimes menial) efforts, such as sorting documents, cleaning datasets, or flagging information that may be of journalistic interest.

One of the first major examples of news organizations engaging in large-scale crowdsourcing occurred when *The Guardian*, a newspaper based in the United Kingdom, published 700,000 pages of information related to an information request about the expenses paid by members of the British Parliament. They asked members of the public to read through those pages and flag information of interest, such as overly expensive dinners or the use of government funds to pay for seemingly personal expenses (e.g., a mortgage). *The Guardian* created a website that would randomly assign a document in their trove to a visitor. That visitor could then flag particular pages from the document and note why they thought it was interesting. Each document would be reviewed by multiple people, and the system would average out the scores to surface the most flagged documents and pages to the professional journalists. *The Guardian* got more than 20,000 people to look through the expenses, and they were able to cover 170,000 pages within the first four days alone. Participants received no reward beyond feeling like they were part of something bigger. If they were particularly involved, they also received some symbolic resources by having their username appear on a leader board appearing on *The Guardian*'s website. (*The Guardian* thus gamified the experience to increase participation.)

Ambient Journalism

The ability, and willingness, of crowds to participate in journalism has also helped spawn new kinds of journalism. An example of this is *ambient journalism*, or *journalism* *that is produced, distributed, and received continuously via new communications technology, such as social media and microblogging, and within which the journalist serves as the clearinghouse for crowdsourced information*.

Ambient journalism is different from traditional forms of journalism because it is both more fragmented in nature and it *requires* audience participation. It is fragmented in that news is typically – though not necessarily – presented in small bites, as with tweets. It requires audience participation because ambient journalism focuses on gathering news information from the streams of collective intelligence made available through social media platforms. The journalist's primary functions within this form of journalism are to actively monitor networked media (e.g., Twitter) for newsworthy information, triangulate and verify that information with the help of other actors using those media (e.g., other Twitter users), and serve as an authoritative source of information within that platform. It is thus a particular approach to crowdsourcing journalism.

To illustrate the value of ambient journalism, consider the case of Andy Carvin's coverage of the revolutions in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt in 2011. Few Western journalistic outlets had people on the ground in those countries during the initial stages of their revolutions. Moreover, it quickly became difficult to report from those places as governments cracked down on reporters and restricted outside communication. Some of the foreign correspondents who were able to report on-site also did not fully understand the many facets underlying the anti-government movements.

Andy Carvin, who was then a digital media strategist at National Public Radio – so not even a foreign correspondent himself – quickly noticed that there were *a lot* of people in those countries who were tweeting about their experiences and capturing video of what was going on. Instead of hoping that NPR could dispatch journalists to those countries (and hoping that those journalists could find their way to the right places at the right times to capture breaking news), Carvin opted to tap into the collective intelligence of the citizens of those places.

Carvin recognized that the majority of the people tweeting information about those revolutions were either anti-government activists or pro-government activists. Put another way, the would-be sources had a stake in the issue and evident biases. However, what Carvin realized is that there were so many people in the network that he could work with them to triangulate the information he was seeing. If he saw video about government forces attacking protesters in a particular city block, he could ask others to share videos from different angles or even ask people to visit that block and capture additional video of the aftermath. If he did not understand what was being said by a source – or whether it was coded speech – he could ask the Libyans, Tunisians, and Egyptians on the network to translate or contextualize that speech. As sources demonstrated their reliability, Carvin would return to them.

Carvin's work earned him a huge online following during those revolutions. He was seen as a reliable and trustworthy clearinghouse for information during a tumultuous and confusing event. Amid a constant stream of information, audiences could have confidence that the material he was putting out there was either verified or reliable, or clearly qualified as unvetted information. Moreover, journalists working for other outlets also kept a close eye on Carvin's Twitter feed, following his lead as he helped break information.

Carvin later left NPR and started his own journalistic outlet that existed primarily on social media. Similar efforts have followed. Some of these are comprised of larger teams covering international affairs, such as Bellingcat. Others are led by individuals who cover smaller communities and local issues. As such, ambient journalism and crowdsourced journalism have become distinct forms of journalism that help unite contributions by journalists and their publics.

Key Takeaways

- Journalistic crowdsourcing refers to a practice by which the cultural, social, or economic capital of some public is harnessed for a specific task in the news production process. It often comes as a direct benefit to journalistic outlets, with participants typically receiving only symbolic rewards.
- Journalistic crowdsourcing can involve the participation of non-journalists in identifying news, gathering news information, verifying and making sense of the gathered information, and distributing the produced form of that information.
- Ambient journalism refers to journalism that is produced, distributed, and received continuously via new communications technology, such as social media and microblogging, and within which the journalist serves as the clearinghouse for crowdsourced information. It has been used by journalists to cover developments from local protests to international affairs.

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Chapter 26

Violence Against Journalists

To be a journalist is to doggedly pursue important information intended to inform and serve the public. Sometimes, that information might place an individual or organization in a negative light, threaten their reputation or livelihood, or otherwise create conflict as a result of its publication. Pursuing and exposing the truth therefore comes with risks.

Journalists across the world face threats and intimidation while doing their jobs. Sometimes, this comes as general public disdain or name-calling by members of an audience or a person implicated in a story. But, in some cases, journalists face physical, mental, and emotional violence both online and offline in the course of reporting. A global trend toward violence against journalists is especially acute in countries where the freedom of the press is not well protected (e.g., Egypt and the Philippines). However, it is growing as a problem in the United States as well.

Attacks Against the U.S. Press

Although the United States has historically been seen as a beacon for the free press, its ranking on press freedom indices in recent years suggests that is no longer the case. For example, the 2021 World Press Freedom Index ranks the United States as the 44th most free country for journalists (out of 180). This places the U.S. below countries like Taiwan, Botswana, and Trinidad and Tobago. Furthermore, the 2021 ranking is not an aberration: the U.S. has not been ranked better than 40th since 2013.

The World Press Freedom Index takes multiple factors into account, one of which is violence against journalists. According to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, nearly 400 journalists were assaulted and more than 130 were detained during 2020 alone. This was a significant increase from even just five years earlier, and it points to changing attitudes – and, namely, increased animosity – toward journalists by different segments of society.

Some of these attacks are encouraged (if not driven) by popular figures and media personalities who decry journalists as "enemies of the people." Indeed, former President Donald Trump's use of such language and frequent public attacks on specific journalists, specific outlets, and the institution of journalism have been credited with influencing the exceptional amount of violence against journalists during his time as president. During Trump's rallies, it was not uncommon to hear supporters yelling at the journalists tasked with covering those political events. Similarly, photojournalists captured striking photos of supporters wearing t-shirts with slogans like: "Rope. Tree. Journalist. No assembly required."

However, the violence against U.S. journalists was not strictly enacted by partisan supporters. Scores of journalists were detained, arrested, and sometimes attacked by police officers and security services when covering protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. In one exceptional case, a foam bullet left one photojournalist blind in the left eye. More frequently, journalists were shoved to the ground and prevented from doing their jobs despite being clearly credentialed. (In Minneapolis, police officers arrested a credentialed CNN reporter live on air while he was reporting.)

What was perhaps most striking to media observers about these incidents is that the journalists' behaviors (e.g., encroaching upon the locus of action while respecting authorities' commands) were not too different from times past. What seemed to have changed was the response they faced from the authorities – and the fact that such attacks were not publicly elected by some social and political elites, or even large segments of U.S. society.

While only some of those assaults were captured on video (often by protesters engaging in acts of journalism), their frequency and violence resulted in government officials in a number of European countries calling on American officials to better protect journalists and respect the freedom of the press. Put another way, the U.S. was no longer being seen as a beacon of press freedoms; it was seen as a place where journalists needed support in order to carry out their duties. These sentiments were echoed in editorials by multiple journalistic outlets, as well as watchdog organizations (e.g., Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists).

Online and Offline Violence

Research shows that violence against journalists is correlated with rhetorical attacks against journalists in elite discourse. Put another way, as rhetorical attacks against journalists have risen, so have different forms of violence against them. This is of particular concern as partisan rhetorical attacks against journalists have become more frequent and sustained in recent decades. This is not just a recent phenomenon, though. Right-wing radio has consistently assailed "the mainstream media" since at least the 1970s.

However, mainstream politicians, especially among the Republican party, have become increasingly bold with their attacks on news media over the past two decades. For example, in 2019 alone, former president Donald Trump used the insult "fake news" on Twitter 273 times and called the press "the enemy of the people" 16 times. Trump's administration also barred well-regarded journalists from covering certain events and canceled the historically traditional daily White House press briefing, all under the guise of fighting unscrupulous journalists. Indeed, that same year, an edited montage video depicting then-President Trump shooting and stabbing journalists was played publicly at an event for his political supporters.

Scholars and advocates of press freedom worry that actions from the upper echelons of major political party, and those of some of their political supporters, serve to vilify journalists and incite public attacks against them. A study from Pew Research backs up this perception: People who supported Trump while he was president perceived journalists to be less ethical. Moreover, mainstream journalists who covered Trump's administration were frequently subject to an array of online name-calling every time they posted a new story.

The violence is not just rhetorical, though. For example, in May 2017, a Republican candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, Greg Gianforte, body-slammed a journalist covering his campaign. The attack was fierce enough to send the journalist to a hospital. Although Gianforte was later convicted of assault, his actions were publicly praised by then-President Donald Trump and celebrated in some corners of society. Moreover, Gianforte would go on to win two terms to the U.S. House of Representatives and become governor of Montana.

Violence Against Journalists Abroad

Violence against journalists is even more prevalent and pernicious in some places outside of the United States, though. The Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Asia have proven to be especially dangerous for journalists. It is estimated that more than 800 journalists around the world have been *killed* on the job during the past decade alone. (Such numbers likely underestimate the reality.) There are many more global incidents of violence against journalists that include kidnapping, detention, and torture.

The disappearance of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi has become a terrible symbol of the need to increase protections for journalists worldwide. *The Washington Post* writer reported critically about political corruption in the Middle East. In October 2018, he was assassinated in gruesome fashion by Saudi government actors who wished to silence his voice. Despite the evidence linking Khashoggi's murder to the Saudi crown prince, few concrete sanctions were placed on Saudi Arabia by countries that advocate for press freedom.

In another high-profile case, Maria Ressa, a Filipino-American journalist who founded a journalistic outlet called Rappler, was convicted of cyberlibel in the Philippines in 2020 after years of reporting critically on Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Press freedom advocates allege that the Duterte government was behind the lawsuit – which was advanced by a businessman who was the subject of one of Rappler's stories – and pressured the courts to interpret a 2012 law intended to combat child pornography, identity theft, and libel in a "Kafkaesque" way that could criminalize critical journalistic conduct. The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines, as well as international watchdog groups, have decried the ruling as an example of authorities using legal mechanisms to restrict critical journalism.

While a range of journalists face violence, there is one group that is particularly vulnerable: freelance journalists who cover conflict zones. Declining news budgets have resulted in more conflict journalism being performed by freelance reporters. Such reporters receive limited institutional assistance relative to staff reporters at mainstream international journalistic outlets, such as limited legal support, little access to on-the-ground resources like a security detail, and lack of access to services like emergency extractions. However, freelancers often need to take greater risks in order to gather information (e.g., photographs) from the front lines of conflict in order to have their stories get picked up by major journalistic outlets (and, in turn, get paid). Consequently, freelancers are disproportionately more likely to get killed when reporting abroad, and especially in war zones.

Female and Minority Journalists

Some research has found that women in journalism are more susceptible to violence than their male counterparts, particularly online. A study by the International Center for Journalists published in 2020 documented the variety of physical and psychological threats female journalists face online, which fall under the category of "gendered online violence."

Gendered online violence includes acts like cyber-bullying and online harassment, targeted toxic attacks, threatened sexual violence, and violations of digital security and online privacy (e.g., 'doxxing'). Such acts can further complicate the already difficult online environments that many journalists must operate within, and make female journalists especially vulnerable. These gendered online attacks occur on a variety of sites and platforms, from online news comment streams on a journalistic outlet's website to social media interactions on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

Similarly, journalists belonging to minority ethnic groups are more likely to face online harassment than their majority counterparts. These attacks often come by way of ethnic slurs and coordinated action, and they tend to be more personal in nature. Newsrooms, in coordination with law enforcement, continue to develop best practices for preventing and reacting to this type of harassment, including creating clear standards for interactions allowed on their news websites.

All of this serves as a reminder that the practice of journalism is not only difficult but also dangerous.

Key Takeaways

- Journalists across the world face physical, mental, and emotional violence – both online and offline – as a result of doing their jobs.
- Violence against journalists is especially acute in countries where freedom of the press is less protected than in the United States, but it remains a problem in the U.S. as well.
- Offline violence against journalists is correlated with rhetorical attacks against journalists in elite discourse. Because the United States has long been viewed internationally as a bastion of press freedom, the anti-journalist behavior and rhetoric of recent years has set a dangerous example for other countries.
- Women in journalism are even more susceptible to violence than their male counterparts, particularly online.

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Unit VI

History of U.S. Journalism

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Chapter 27

Early U.S. Journalism

In order to understand contemporary journalism and how it may continue to develop, it is important to understand its past.

Journalism did not begin in the United States. Early examples of news texts can be traced back to the 1470s, and what is generally recognized as the first newspaper – the *Relation* – was published in France in 1605. However, although the early development of U.S. journalism took many cues from its European counterpart, it would soon begin to chart its own path and would later go on to be a key exporter of journalistic technologies and values to the rest of the world.

The Early Colonial Press

Early U.S. journalism was very different from what we see in today's newspapers. First, there were no headlines or images, meaning that journalists had to depict events with nothing more than their words. Second, the early press generally focused on international news. Domestic affairs were often left alone because publishers did not want to upset local leaders, who could draw upon their governmental authority to shut down the newspaper. Additionally, this emphasis on international affairs led to a very different understanding of 'news,' as information was often weeks if not months old by the time it was printed. Third, a single person would often serve as the publisher, editor, and reporter, and they often filled news pages with the things they heard from other people as they arrived from abroad (or with things they read in other texts brought by the travelers). Fourth, the news was written for the political and mercantile classes, meaning that the issues were tailored to economic and political interests and used a language suited to the well-educated. Finally, much of the early press was subsidized directly either by the government or by wealthy patrons, which again created risks for journalists who wrote things that upset local officials or benefactors.

We can see these features, and key developments in the early U.S. press, play out in the newspapers of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The first multi-page newspaper published in the United States is believed to be *Publick Occurrences*, which was published in Boston in 1690. It was just four pages long and focused on international topics, including criticisms of the British military's treatment of French prisoners and rumors of incest within the French royal family. Although it was intended to be published regularly, it only lasted one issue because the colonial government shut it down for not having a license to publish.

In 1704, the *Boston News-Letter* became the first *licensed* newspaper, proudly proclaiming that it was "published by authority" (of the governor). It was heavily subsidized by the British government and primarily contained transcripts of political speeches and details about European politics and wars.

Growing Independence

By 1721, however, the U.S. press had begun to assert more independence, as evidenced by *The New-England Courant*. That newspaper was published by James Franklin, and his little brother, Benjamin, wrote scathing critiques of the local government under a pen name. In fact, James Franklin was ultimately imprisoned after refusing to reveal who was behind those critiques. However, the paper's critical tone helped make it popular, especially among more independence-minded citizens. That popularity encouraged other newspapers to take a more critical tone, and for new, even more critical publications to emerge.

This period was pivotal in that it helped to loosen the early governmental restrictions on speech and publication – which were the norm not only in the colonial United States but in many parts of Europe. Censorship made governments appear fearful and could actually intensify curiosity, speculation, and rumors. Moreover, publishers were sometimes able to evade orders by relocating their operations or simply changing the name of the newspaper.

More importantly, however, during this period, *journalism became a vehicle for capturing and consolidating public opinion*, and for conveying citizens' concerns to public officials. The expanding reach of journalism meant that public officials could no longer easily pretend to be unaware of the concerns raised in the growing publications. Unsurprisingly, however, those officials soon began to realize that establishing friendly ties with news organizations (by supplying editors with favorable 'news stories,' and sometimes even direct income) could serve their interests better than outright censorship. Additionally, new political party-sponsored newspapers also emerged during this time.

This period also saw the expansion of press freedoms. Proponents of the liberty of the press argued that unfettered expression was a matter of human dignity, personal self-fulfillment, and representative governance. A key example of this occurred in 1734, during the prosecution of John Peter Zenger. Zenger published articles in *The New York Weekly Journal* that were critical of the royal governor of New York, William Cosby, and Zenger was subsequently charged with making claims that were harmful to Cosby's reputation. At that time, in England and its colonies, defendants were more likely to face a severe penalty if their claims were truthful. (The logic was that a more truthful claim was even more harmful to a person's reputation than a false one because the allegations were, well, true.) However, Zenger's attorney was the first to successfully argue that the press has "a liberty both of exposing and opposing tyrannical power by speaking and writing truth." This was a fairly novel argument at the time, and it captured the growing public support for independent and critical journalism. The argument's success led to *truth becoming a legally recognized defense against libel and defamation* while further bolstering public support for freedom of the press.

A later example also captures the growing independence and power of the colonial press. To generate more revenue and maintain control of the press, the British government passed the Stamp Act of 1765. The Act imposed a tax on colonial publishers and required that many printed materials in the colonies be produced on stamped paper produced in London. The law was violently resisted in the colonies – it spurred cries of "no taxation without representation" – and the British government soon had to rescind it.

By 1775, there were roughly 37 weekly newspapers in the colonies. Those newspapers played a major role in defining the grievances of the colonists against the British government. Many of those newspapers, which were generally supported by different political factions, wrote in a highly interpretive, subjective manner. Moreover, they often wrote in support of independence. Put another way, during this period, *the colonial press was hardly neutral*. Additionally, it was loyalist newspapers that were being increasingly forced to shut down during this time, due to pressure – sometimes violent – from the colonists.

The Press in a New Nation

Shortly after its declaration of independence, the United States became a world leader in terms of its official guarantees for the freedom of expression. Citizens sought to secure the right to free expression, and nine of the 11 revolutionary-era state constitutions expressed that liberty of the press ought to be "inviolably" preserved or "never" restrained. Indeed, this sentiment is reflected in the very first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states that *Congress shall make "no law" abridging freedom of the press*.

Such absolute guarantees did not manifest in practice, however. Historically, deviance from that principle has been especially pronounced during times of hysteria and partisan animosity. For example, the Federalist majority in Congress responded to international and domestic tensions by passing the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. The Sedition Act in particular criminalized making false statements that were critical of the federal government, and it was used in the prosecution and conviction of many Jeffersonian newspaper owners who disagreed with the government. Shortly after the Federalists lost control of the government in 1800, the Sedition Act expired.

Nevertheless, truth continued to be recognized as a defense against important legal threats – in this case, against charges of sedition. However, some journalists were still convicted when their expressed opinions were not *provably* true. Despite these unfortunate incidents, the newly formed United States still generally promoted press freedoms by engaging in acts like opening legislative branches to the press (galleries were established to allow journalists and citizens to observe both branches of Congress) and continuing a tradition of open courtrooms.

Key Takeaways

- » Journalism during the colonial period was vastly different from journalism today, not only in format but also in its focus, manner of expression, and funding.
- » It was not until the 1730s that truth became a successful defense against charges of libel and defamation. Prior to that, truthful claims were seen as being even more injurious to a person's reputation, and thus were subjected to higher penalties.
- » The colonial press was crucial in helping to consolidate colonial grievances and mobilize public opinion toward independence from the British government.
- » The freedom of the press is codified in the founding documents of the United States, though there is also a long history of U.S. government restrictions of the press.

Chapter 28

Journalism in the 19th Century

Change was a constant feature of journalism in the 19th century, driven in large part by the rapid economic, social, and technological development of the United States. By the start of the 19th century, there were already more than 200 newspapers in the United States, and they had become far more diversified than before.

The owners of newspapers – and newspapers remained the primary source of news during this period – were often printers who received income from subscribers, advertisers, merchandise sales, and other printing work for individuals and governments. The development of the U.S. Postal Service and a growing naval sector allowed news distribution to extend far beyond the major cities. Additionally, early forms of user-generated content became more frequent as newspapers published more letters, literary materials, and political essays. Daily newspapers grew even more common, and news reporting started becoming more systematic. By the end of the 19th century, the press had completed a significant shift away from being sites of political debate and toward being commercially driven enterprises.

The Penny Press

Throughout the early 1800s, newspapers continued to be highly partisan, and they derived considerable income from political parties and government subsidies.

However, by the 1830s a combination of factors had significantly altered the news industry by making news products cheaper and more accessible. Socially, literacy rates rose, resulting in larger potential audiences for news products. Economically, disposable income began to rise as the standard of living increased for some of the nation's residents. Technologically, high-speed steam presses made it possible for newspapers to be printed faster than ever.

The confluence of these factors led to the birth of the so-called *Penny Press* period, during which newspapers became cheaper and gained even wider circulation. While newspapers continued to be partisan tools, especially in rural areas where the owner/editor of a small press would often be involved in local politics, additional commercial options also emerged, and news was further commodified within a capitalist framework.

During the early 1830s, French intellectual Alexis de Tocqueville traveled throughout the United States and produced influential writings about American culture. Within his classic book, Democracy in America, Tocqueville remarked that almost every community he visited had its own periodical, which he saw as evidence of the power of the people and American sovereignty. The American ideals of free expression were propelled to the global stage by Tocqueville (and other intellectuals), and they became instruments of social transformation in other parts of the world. The writings also elevated the U.S.'s growing international stature in matters pertaining to freedom of the press.

Such accounts did overlook important issues within the press during this time, though. For decades before and after the American Civil War, journalists and editors in different parts of the country struggled to write about inequality and discrimination in the United States, and the white press often refused to cover issues affecting the country's Black communities. It was not until 1827 that the country's first Black-owned newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, was founded in New York – and largely in response to the many pro-slavery newspapers in that city. Even the abolitionist papers of the time often characterized Blacks as powerless or ignorant, and rarely gave a voice to people of color. However, *Freedom's Journal* operated for just two years, illustrating the challenges that alternative and minority-owned media would continue to face in the years to come.

The Telegraph and News

The 1830s also saw the development and proliferation of a technological actant that has had a lasting effect on journalism: the telegraph. The first commercial telegraph in the United States was developed by Samuel Morse (of Morse code fame). The device allowed messages to be quickly transmitted across large distances via electrical wires.

The development of the telegraph redefined time and space, in the context of journalism. It made it possible for 'news' coming from afar to actually be *new*. For example, events happening in Virginia could now appear in the next day's edition of a New York-based newspaper. This created a new class of reporter – the correspondent – who would travel to different parts of the country and send dispatches via telegraph to an editor, who would tidy up and publish a story. That, in turn, coincided with the American Civil War, which led to the creation of the war correspondent, who could offer frequent updates on battles as they were fought at the front lines. Moreover, the deployment of submarine cables linking the United States to Europe and other countries made it easier to bring 'the world' to local audiences in a timely fashion.

The cost and unreliability of the telegraph also promoted a more terse style of writing, which would become very influential in U.S. journalism. Since transmissions sometimes failed partway through, correspondents not only produced shorter stories but also organized them using the *inverted pyramid* style of writing. That style prioritizes information such that a news story begins with the most newsworthy information on top, followed by important contextual details, and concluding with relevant background information. Oftentimes, the correspondent would only transmit the most important information, leaving editors to fill in the background at the bottom of a news article. The inverted pyramid remains the most commonly used writing style at many U.S. journalistic outlets.

More Commercialized Press

Although technology acted as a key enabler for new forms of journalism, popular demand and the growing commercialization of the U.S. press also led to important changes in content and ownership. There was now growing demand for entertainment, crime stories, and business news – and especially financial news from London, which was then the financial capital of the world. Increased competition also sparked increased pressure for journalists to produce news quickly, accurately, and reliably.

Newspaper magnates also began to emerge during this period. For example, Edward W. Scripps built a large portfolio of newspapers by lending money to launch publications and acquiring control of the most successful ones. Scripps, in particular, tended to take a more hands-off approach, granting his local editors considerable autonomy so long as they met revenue objectives via advertisements and subscriptions.

Other magnates were far more hands-on, though. Recognizing news media's power to influence change in society, William Randolph Hearst – on whom Orson Welle's classic film Citizen Kane is based – purchased a number of newspapers in the 1890s and routinely intervened in their editorial decision-making and used them to publish his personal views. He would go on to use one of his newspapers, the *New York Morning Journal*, to provoke American outrage against Spain through sensationalist and often false articles. Such coverage contributed to the Spanish-American War in 1898, and helped fire off a circulation rivalry between Hearst's *Morning Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's (of Pulitzer Prize fame) *New York World*.

The *Morning Journal*'s coverage was emblematic of the so-called *yellow journalism* that became prevalent at the time. Yellow journalism sought to draw larger audiences by using misleading, eye-catching headlines that were displayed in huge print (even for minor news). Those headlines were accompanied by sensationalized and highly suspect articles that contained fake interviews, pseudo-science, scandal-mongering, and dramatic emotional language. Those articles often appeared alongside lavish illustrations, many of which bore little resemblance to reality and simply dramatized events. Yellow journalism thus offers an example of commercialism run amok within the context of journalism, and it is representative of an era of powerful proprietors exploiting newspapers to advance their personal whims.

Not all journalism during that time was poor or sensationalized, though. This period also offered examples of pioneering investigative journalism. An example of this was Ida B. Wells, who documented lynching in the United States throughout the 1890s. Wells investigated claims that lynchings were reserved for Black *criminals* only, and brought to light not only the barbarism of lynchings but also how they were being used to intimidate Blacks who created economic and political competition for whites. Wells' publishing office and press was destroyed by a white mob, forcing her to relocate from Memphis to New York in order to continue her reporting, which was then carried nationally by the growing Black press.

Ultimately, what is perhaps most remarkable about the 19th century is that journalism shifted from being an information good available to a relatively limited number of people in the early 1800s to a widely available commodity oriented toward giving mass audiences consumer choice about by the end of the century. It was no longer gathered and distributed primarily for political communication, trade, and pleasure. Rather, it was commodified with an eye toward the creation of mass media markets. As such, the 19th century is crucial to journalism history because it represents the victory of commercialism in the U.S. press – and also illustrates some of its worst excesses.

Key Takeaways

- By the 1830s, higher literacy rates, lower product costs, and more efficient printing presses helped popularize mass circulation newspapers. Mass media was thus the product of social, economic, and technological developments.
- The telegraph changed the temporal and spatial nature of journalism, allowing journalism to be quickly transmitted from far-away places. It also created new jobs in journalism and helped shape the inverted pyramid style of writing that is still commonly used today.
- The mid- to late-1800s saw the development of an even more commercialized news industry, with powerful newspaper magnates and highly sensationalized 'yellow journalism' emerging toward the latter part of the century.

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Chapter 29

Journalism in the Early 20th Century

Journalism in the early 20th century was marked by continuities from the 19th century, such as the expansion of corporate power, increasing literacy rates, and the further professionalization of journalism. However, this period also saw the emergence of new forms of journalism, including muckraking, as well as the development of public relations as a distinct industry. It was a busy period for an industry quickly growing in size.

Between 1880 and the start of the 20th century, the number of English-language daily newspapers grew from 850 to 1,970. The number of weekly newspapers also tripled. New magazines were published and thrived, often by developing new niches (i.e., meeting different specialized information needs and audience wants) and especially by providing longer feature stories about daily life. Print journalism was thus a major industry within the broader U.S. economy, and consumers had more (and more niche) options than ever before.

Print Media and Muckraking

The turn of the century also helped produce a new form of journalism, called *muckraker journalism*. This form was characterized by the use of journalism to critically interrogate and expose social ills and corruption. Muckraker journalism was therefore often driven by an agenda (e.g., an *expressed intent* to show the shortcomings of capitalism or even democracy) but this agenda was supplemented with meticulous reporting. At the forefront of muckraker journalism was the magazine *McClure's*, which by 1898 already had a circulation of 400,000.

One example of muckraker journalism was a 1903 story by Lincoln Steffens titled, "The Shame of Minneapolis," which was part of a series of stories examining corruption in major U.S. cities. Steffens, a relentless and tenacious reporter, set out to Minneapolis and discovered that its recently elected mayor was working with a complicit police force to ignore illegal gambling and prostitution in exchange for bribes. His exposé drew great scrutiny to the mayor's misdeeds, and the mayor fled the state shortly thereafter, throwing the entire city government into disarray. A new mayor was then installed, who replaced many of the officials appointed by the previous mayor and fired many of the officers in the city's police force.

Another example can be found in the work of Ida Tarbell, and her reporting on Standard Oil in particular. Standard Oil was not only the largest oil refiner in the world at the turn of the century, but also one of its biggest and most ruthless companies. During her investigation, Tarbell acquired and dug through hundreds of thousands of pages of documents that were physically scattered around the country. Tarbell also interviewed oil executives, industry competitors, government regulators, and academic experts. Her work was serialized into 19 articles that appeared in *McClure's* and demonstrated Standard Oil's strong-arm tactics, manipulation of competitors, and abuse of workers in order to advance its corporate goals. The story's success played a major role in the U.S. government's decision to break up Standard Oil into 34 different companies under antitrust laws.

The term "muckraker" itself became associated with two distinct meanings. While it has been attached to investigative journalism that "digs deep for the facts," like that of Tarbell, it is also sometimes used pejoratively to refer to work that sensationalizes an agenda-driven form of journalism. The latter meaning became popularized due to President Theodore Roosevelt's criticism of the progressive-minded journalism of the time, and in particular when he remarked that, "the men with the muck rakes are often indispensable to the well being of society; but only if they know when to stop raking the muck."

The Professionalization of Journalism

The early 20th century also saw more directed efforts to professionalize journalism in the United States. The very first journalism schools (housed at the University of Missouri and Columbia University in New York) were only established in 1908. These universities were important because they launched the process of formally training journalists (via a shared education). That, in turn, would go on to promote more widespread adoption of best practices in journalism and eventually the creation of professional codes of ethics within the industry. It is important to note that relatively few journalists were university-educated at that time, though. (That would remain the case until the 1960s.) Moreover, many journalism schools began within English or

Literature departments, creating a strong connection between journalism and literary non-fiction.

It was also not until the 1920s that "objectivity" and "neutrality" became norms within U.S. journalism. Much of the journalism before that time was incredibly pointed and took clear positions on issues. This was evidenced clearly by the predominantly progressive ideals of the aforementioned muckraking era, but also by the clear political affiliations of many news organizations in the prior centuries.

Scholars have argued that the shift toward objectivity was not primarily driven by changing journalistic ideals. It was largely a business decision. As the potential audiences for journalism grew and the number of competitors increased, newspaper owners found that they could differentiate themselves from competitors and have *broader* appeal by simply acting as observers (and thus not offending as many readers). As such, *the contemporary cultural emphasis on neutrality and objectivity in U.S. journalism is a historically recent phenomenon*.

Journalism and Public Relations

Journalism was not the only communication discipline to grow and become more professionalized during this period. Public relations also originated as a distinct practice at the turn of the 20th century. This was an outgrowth of advertising, which had long been established by that point. However, in contrast to advertising, which sought to sell products and services directly to people, *public relations focused on influencing intermediaries* (like journalists) in order to promote more favorable representations of companies and their products or services. This involved a new skill-set, which was sharpened over decades, to make positive coverage of clients (e.g., companies or celebrities) appear natural.

The first news-oriented public relations agency, the Publicity Bureau, was established by George Michaelis in Boston in 1900. Two years later, William Wolf Smith, a former reporter at *The New York Sun* would establish the first Washington D.C.-based PR agency, cementing the linkages between public relations, journalism, and public affairs. These companies were hired by clients ranging from Harvard University to railroad syndicates to generate support for legislation that was favorable to those organizations, and especially to fight industry reform legislation being pushed by the Roosevelt administration.

The United States government quickly took note of public relations. By 1910, the U.S. government began employing press agents of its own. These agents were tasked with sending handouts to Washington-based newspapers. The first governmental *press* *conferences* were also held later that decade, under the Woodrow Wilson administration. Over time, presidential administrations would increasingly try to cultivate favorable perceptions of their work in a highly organized fashion. Although the word “spin” would not be commonly used until the 1980s, the federal government and many large companies had either established press relations offices or hired public relations agencies by the 1930s.

The press agents who worked in public relations departments were tasked with promoting truthful accounts of their organization’s or client’s good deeds. However, they also would – and still do – engage in dishonest behaviors like selectively releasing information, issuing ‘non-denial’ denials, burying toxic information within long press releases filled with less-consequential positive information, and delaying the release of information to minimize its impact. Journalists have thus had to become very attuned to their sources’ motivations and approach information with a critical eye.

Key Takeaways

» Muckraking was an early form of investigative journalism that sought to call attention to social ills and corruption. It is also sometimes used pejoratively to refer to sensationalized, agenda-driven journalism.

» The contemporary cultural emphasis on neutrality and objectivity in U.S. journalism is a historically recent phenomenon, as those values only started to become prevalent in the 1920s.

» Public relations, in which communicators attempt to persuade intermediaries (e.g., journalists) to report favorably on the communicator’s clients, became a distinct industry at the start of the 20th century. It is commonly used by companies and governments alike today.

Chapter 30

Journalism After the Early 20th Century

U.S. journalism after the early 20th century was marked by remarkable and fast-paced technological developments, which fostered the conditions for significant industrial change. However, although change remained a constant during this time, there was also remarkable continuity. For example, many of the transformative new technologies that were introduced in the mid to late 20th century resulted in journalism that, at least initially, looked an awful lot like what was already available: Radio news initially had presenters reading newspapers; television news initially sounded just like radio news, but with images of the presenter before a desk and microphone; and news websites tried to mimic the newspaper format.

Nevertheless, these technologies would intersect with broader social, cultural, political, and economic shifts in the United States to produce different ways of not only thinking about journalism but also practicing it. Put another way, technology played a major role in spurring change, but it was its intersection with broader phenomena that shaped the journalism we see today.

Radio

Regular evening radio broadcasts in the United States began in 1919, and they were mostly operated by small organizations at first. Radio content at the time primarily consisted of broadcasts of lectures, political speeches, and music. However, in 1926, the first major U.S. company dedicated to running a broadcast network was founded. It was called the National Broadcasting Company, or NBC.

By 1930, NBC was operating its first regular news program, a 15-minute weekday segment led by Lowell Thomas. At first, much of radio news consisted of presenters simply reading the major stories from the day's newspapers. This resulted in a press-radio 'war' in which newspapers and news associations sued radio broadcasters to limit their ability to distribute news on the radio.

Those attempts were largely unsuccessful, and by 1935, wire services – organizations that focused on gathering news and licensing it to other organizations to publish – were becoming major content providers to radio programs. Increasingly, radio operators also began to develop their own news operations to differentiate themselves, and thus became competitors in their own right with newspapers.

As small newsrooms grew within radio stations, they also began to cultivate a distinct news communication style. Radio copy (news) was written with a distinct fluidity and tailored for the ear, unlike the newspaper copy that stations had previously relied upon. At first, radio news bulletins were usually just five minutes long and consisted of seven to 10 stories, each of which was rarely longer than 75 words, with the exception of the top story of the day.

News and commentary programs greatly expanded at the beginning of World War II. Technological advancements allowed radio reporters to bring the sound of war to listeners, and radio began to flourish as a news information source. Entertainment programs were frequently interrupted to bring news reports from various cities around the country and the globe. Some radio journalists and news presenters, such as Edward Murrow and William Shirer, became household names around the nation.

While radio created many new opportunities for journalists, *it also allowed news-makers to bypass journalists* in ways that were not previously possible. Radio provided a means for elected leaders and other powerful actors to communicate directly with citizens, rather than to have their words *interpreted* and/or *partially re-broadcasted* by journalists. This was aptly illustrated by the so-called "fireside chats," or radio addresses, that President Franklin Roosevelt held throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. Roosevelt used the radio to communicate directly with Americans in order to calm national fears and promote support for his policies. The addresses, which would reach up to 58% of U.S. households, were credited with bolstering his popularity during that time.

By 1948, the invention of the transistor and its subsequent development for use in radio sets allowed radios to become even smaller and no longer dependent on a fixed electrical connection. This increased radio listening away from home, which became especially important with the proliferation of automobiles in the Post-War period. The development of FM radio technology would lead to a growing body of radio stations, including all-news radio stations and new formats for radio news. By the 1960s, National Public Radio, or NPR, would also be established as a network of noncommercial radio stations that were funded in part by listener donations and government subsidies.

Television

Another major technological advancement was the television. One of the world's first television stations (W2XB) began broadcasting in New York in 1928. However, regular TV newscasts would not begin in the United States until 1941, when CBS started airing 15-minute daily news programs. At the local level, stations initially hired employees who would simply be filmed as they read wire news copy – much like the early days of radio. However, stations would later go on to hire teams of reporters and videographers who would produce original content for broadcasters, and thereby make television news its own form.

NBC's Camel News Caravan with John Cameron Swayze is often considered to be the first *major* national TV newscast, and it began in 1949. (Camel, a cigarette company, was the sponsor of the program and thus had considerable influence on the show.) However, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that television journalism exploded in popularity. This was due in part to the extraordinarily fast adoption of televisions in post-war America. In 1950, just 9% of households had a television set. By 1960, that number had grown to 87%. This was a truly remarkable pace for technological adoption, and television news capitalized on it.

Throughout the 1950s, the 16-millimeter camera gained widespread adoption and made TV news production more mobile. This not only magnified the value of immediacy in television news, but it also *increased the need for television news to have compelling visuals*. Put another way, stories that lacked compelling visuals became less likely to be featured in television broadcasts. Additionally, the 1950s saw the invention of the teleprompter, which allowed news presenters to look straight into the camera while reporting the news. This made viewers feel like they had a more personal connection with television journalists, especially in relation to the comparatively anonymous radio and newspaper reporters.

By the early 1960s, television was establishing itself as the primary source of news information for Americans. Televised newscasts were becoming immensely profitable, and both local and network newscasts were adopting longer formats between 30 minutes and one hour. Moreover, several critical events throughout that decade glued Americans to their televisions. One key event was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. An estimated 96% of American households tuned in for news coverage of that incident, which completely captivated many Americans for more than four days. That decade was also marked by vivid images of civil rights protests, the Vietnam War, and the Apollo moon landing. CBS' Walter Cronkite had, by the 1960s, become one of the most trusted people in America, and his evening broadcasts would command extraordinarily large audiences for nearly two decades.

Starting in the late 1960s, television news outlets turned to news consultants to increase their viewership and commercial success. This led to the development of the eyewitness news style of reporting that is more action-oriented and visually appealing (e.g., by placing reporters outside of crime scenes or in the middle of a weather event). Moreover, television news transformed during this period to include more entertainment news, shorter sound bites, and reduced coverage of government and public affairs – things that news consultants believed would increase the appeal or profitability of news programs. In important ways, the commodification of news during the late 20th century was most acute in mainstream TV journalism.

Cable and Satellite

Starting in the 1970s, nationally distributed television channels expanded in the United States via cable technology. The first 24-hour television news network was CNN (Cable News Network), which launched in 1980. Although CNN was commercially successful throughout the 1980s, it was not until the early 1990s that it distinguished itself and became a major player in the news industry.

CNN made war coverage an international viewing experience by broadcasting directly from Baghdad in 1991 as U.S. troops invaded the city during the Gulf War. CNN was not only able to provide live, around-the-clock coverage of the war, but it was also able to leverage satellite technology to reach audiences around the globe. CNN also helped pioneer portable satellite newsgathering equipment that allowed small reporting teams to report live under distressed conditions from many parts of the world.

CNN's success was so great that it led to the coining of the term *CNN effect* to denote a phenomenon wherein 24-hour news networks had become so powerful that they could influence the political and economic climate. Scholars have since found that 24-hour news networks are particularly influential among policymakers and so-called political junkies that consume disproportionate amounts of political news. Critics have argued that 24-hour news networks promoted the needless dramatization of less-important news in order to make even the mundane seem riveting (and worthy of attention at all times of the day), and hyper-activated a culture of chasing episodic, breaking news. Such developments have been lamented in light of its disproportionate influence on the political class. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, the phrase "wag the dog" gained popularity, in part due to the episodic and increasingly pack-driven nature of mainstream TV news coverage. The phrase is intended to capture the phenomenon wherein individuals (mainly politicians) create a diversion from a politically damaging issue – as with a president launching a military strike, which will inevitably receive ample news coverage, in order to distract from allegations of impropriety.

CNN's success also spawned more 24-hour news networks, including Fox News and MSNBC. Fox News, in particular, branded itself as a moderate (and later conservative) alternative to what it called "the liberal mainstream media." Within a decade, Fox News would have the nation's largest viewership of any cable network as it established itself as the centerpiece of conservative journalism. Fox News also helped popularize opinion news show formats that are more akin to entertainment than journalism. (Fox News has repeatedly defended itself in legal cases by arguing that key figures on such shows are entertainers providing opinions, and not journalists making factual claims.) Seeing Fox News' success, MSNBC subsequently attempted to establish itself as a liberal alternative to Fox News, but with far less commercial success.

While the proliferation of satellite technology helped spread U.S. news channels to Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and other parts of the world, it also made it easier for international outlets to distribute its journalism to global audiences. Among these are Japan-based NHK World, Qatar-based Al Jazeera English, and Turkey-based TRT World. As a result, non-Western perspectives on world issues have gained a wider audience in recent years.

The Internet

Although it was initially developed in the 1960s, the Internet did not gain widespread adoption until the early 1990s. Internet access was at first quite slow, which largely limited websites to showing text and some images. Moreover, traditional journalistic outlets generally failed to see the internet as a transformative technology and were very slow to react. Newspaper websites were made to look very similar to the newspaper themselves, with the content placed online for free (even as that same content was charged for in print). Industry analysts attribute some of newspapers' current financial challenges to their slow response to the development of the Internet – though other missteps and societal shifts also played a part.

However, the Internet has challenged the foundations of journalism in ways few previous technologies had. First, it arguably democratized news production and distribution, enabling any person to create a micro news outlet without investing the vast sums of money required to start a newspaper or broadcast station. That, in turn, drastically increased competition and created a seemingly endless menu of consumer choices. Second, it upended the advertising market, giving advertisers more non-news options where they could reach audiences. It also allowed advertisers to reach audiences directly through the advertiser's own websites and social media channels, thereby bypassing traditional media. Third, it made journalism interactive and even more instantaneous, altering audience expectations for when and how often news is published (including expectations for personalized, on-demand content). It also enabled shorter, incremental forms of news productions, such as live tweeting. Finally, it increased the distribution range for journalistic outlets, enabling local U.S. publications in Massachusetts to reach expats in Asia while enabling Asian publications to reach immigrants in Massachusetts.

In understanding the recent developments of journalism – and its major challenges – it is thus helpful to understand its historical trajectory. It took about two hundred years for the technology that facilitated the development of the modern newspaper to emerge. This allowed journalism to adapt more progressively to the country's changing social and cultural character, and the resulting economic opportunities and challenges. In contrast, the past century has been marked by a much faster technological revolution that has significantly disrupted journalism's economic underpinnings. As such, U.S. journalism is likely to reinvent itself again in the coming years, as it has in the past. What is certain, however, is that journalism's future will be shaped in part by its long history, and may yet come to resemble aspects of its past.

Key Takeaways

» Radio journalism began developing its unique traditions in the 1930s and became a major source of news for Americans during World War II. It was also one of the first technologies that allowed elected officials to bypass journalists when speaking to mass audiences.

» Television journalism began developing its unique traditions in the 1940s, but it was not until the 1950s that it became a major news source for Americans. Today, most people in the U.S. get their news from local and national television broadcasts.

» Twenty-four hour cable news networks were only established in the 1980s, but quickly entrenched themselves as major news sources in the 1990s. Today, Fox News is the most widely watched 24-hour cable news channel and is a major player within the conservative news ecosystem.

» Journalistic outlets – and newspapers in particular – responded very slowly to the development of the Internet, which has since played a major role in disrupting the economics of commercial journalism in the U.S.

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Unit VII

Journalism Law and Ethics

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Chapter 31

The First Amendment

The First Amendment is the cornerstone of journalistic freedom in the United States. It states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or *abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press*; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Initially, the First Amendment applied only to laws enacted by Congress. However, over time, the courts have interpreted its provisions more broadly to encompass any form of *government* interference. The First Amendment is relatively distinctive in that few countries offer such unequivocal statements of support for journalistic work within their legal frameworks.

Roots of the First Amendment

Shortly after the U.S. gained independence from Britain, Thomas Jefferson, who was then an ambassador to France, and James Madison corresponded about the need for a Bill of Rights. Madison, in particular, championed the document because he believed it would enable independent courts of justice to protect individual rights and would educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities within the newly formed democratic republic.

It is not an accident that the First Amendment, and its protection of speech and the press, leads the Bill of Rights. Jefferson himself wrote: "Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost." Alongside Jefferson, Madison played a significant role in getting the state of Virginia to adopt its Statute for Religious Freedom, and Madison consistently championed religious and political liberty throughout his life. Notably, Madison pushed to change words like "should" or "ought," which were used in earlier state declarations of rights, with less equivocal language like "shall."

While Madison strongly pushed to have the First Amendment apply to both the federal government and the states, legislators could only agree on a federal application. Thus, it was not until the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 – by which time the American Civil War had taken place and the country's views on federalism had shifted – that the First Amendment would be consistently applied at the state level as well. As such, for much of the first century of the United States' existence, the legal protections offered to journalists on key aspects of libel, prior restraint, and other First Amendment issues varied from state to state.

The First Amendment and the Supreme Court

Despite the First Amendment's unequivocal language, Congress (and state legislatures) have passed a number of laws that abridge the freedom of speech and of the press. Put another way, in trying to promote other ideals, such as national unity and contemporary notions of decency, legislative bodies have adopted many laws that infringe on speech and press freedoms. (Cynics would add that politicians have advanced of those laws for less admirable reasons, such as to protect corrupt public officials from the searching eyes of journalists.)

In instances where the First Amendment clashes with other interests, the U.S. Supreme Court is often the final arbiter over what constitutes an acceptable infringement on speech or the press. Since 1804, there have been nearly 900 major rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court and other courts that directly involve First Amendment freedoms. The 20th century was a particularly busy period for the Supreme Court, and a number of its decisions have expanded speech and press rights.

Some of the First Amendment issues most closely related to journalism that have been tested in court include access to information and places, anonymous speech, protection of sources, copyright, free association, incitement, prior restraint, privacy, and the publication of confidential information. Put another way, much of the guidance about which journalistic activities are legally permissible come not only from laws passed by the United States' legislative branch but also from the interpretations of the First Amendment by its judicial branch.

Protections for Political Expression

A central theme in judicial decisions about the protections and limitations of the First Amendment is that *political expression receives greater legal protection than commercial expression*. Put another way, the courts have long recognized the importance of a so-called 'marketplace of ideas' in the political realm, wherein ideas should be allowed to freely compete with one another. Under the marketplace perspective, the best ideas should emerge victorious from robust competition, which in turn should result in a better-functioning democracy. In order to permit robust competition, the thinking goes, restrictions on communication – and political communication in particular – should be limited.

While there are significant limitations to that marketplace metaphor – for example, some people effectively have a louder voice than others because of their position in society, and people are not fully rational beings – it has nevertheless resulted in the courts holding public affairs journalism and political opinion pieces in high regard because they see such work as being central to promoting the founding ideals of sovereignty and self-governance. Moreover, U.S. courts have on many occasions explicitly referenced the value and importance of promoting a vibrant journalism ecosystem that can serve as a 'fourth branch' of government and as a watchdog against corruption and public misdeeds. For example, former Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black famously wrote in 1971 that "only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government ... and ... prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people."

The courts will therefore often weigh the public benefit of a journalistic product (e.g., news article or broadcast segment) against the harms it could cause to an individual (e.g., their privacy) or the country as a whole (e.g., its national security). The First Amendment does not at all grant journalists or journalistic outlets a blanket immunity against legal liability. However, it does tend to offer them greater protection than might be afforded to other forms of communication, such as advertising and entertainment (provided such advertisement or entertainment is not itself political in nature). For example, restrictions on fraudulent advertising are less likely to be seen as violating the First Amendment than restrictions on political editorials that contain false information.

In short, although the First Amendment does *not* forbid legislators from regulating journalists and journalism, it is the cornerstone for most legal defenses of U.S. journalists and their activities. It also grants journalists in the U.S. stronger protections against both government intervention and civil charges from the subjects of their stories than journalists in most other countries. Its placement at the top of the U.S. Bill of Rights also signals that journalism and free expression lie at the heart of the so-called American Experiment.

Key Takeaways

- » The ideals behind the First Amendment stand at the core of the founding documents of both the United States of America and its member states.
- » The First Amendment is the cornerstone for most legal defenses by journalists against a range of different charges.
- » The Supreme Court is often the final arbiter of disputes between the freedom of expression and other national interests.
- » The Supreme Court has repeatedly considered expressions about political and public affairs to be particularly worthy of First Amendment protections.

Chapter 32

Access, Anonymity, and Privacy

In order to effectively perform their journalistic activities, journalists must be aware of the laws that govern basic practices, such as attending public proceedings and protecting sources. Journalists in the U.S. generally benefit from laws that promote and presume transparency in government as well as from Supreme Court decisions recognizing that journalists have the ability to broadcast documents that are in the public interest even if a third party obtained them illegally.

However, journalists in the U.S. by and large do not receive special protections from the government by virtue of their job. They are generally treated like any other citizen, and laws therefore tend to apply equally to journalists and non-journalists. (There are some laws, including so-called "shield laws," that provide special protections to journalists. However, such laws only apply at the state level, and only in some states, and with several restrictions.) Moreover, journalists must navigate complex legal questions about an individual's reasonable expectation of privacy and must be aware of laws pertaining to the recording of exchanges, such as interviews, that vary from state to state.

Access to Information and Places

The Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that journalists and journalistic outlets *do not have special access or rights* to government files or to public property. Put another way, journalists often receive the same access to information or places as any other member of society.

However, the Court has generally promoted permissive (open) access to information produced by the government and to public spaces. This means that journalists have a right to gather news on property that is open to the general public, such as public parks and outside public buildings. It also means that journalists are presumed to have access to public proceedings, such as city council meetings and the meeting minutes that result from them. Additionally, journalists are generally presumed to have access to government data and reports, unless such documents are determined to be protected by narrow exemptions (e.g., privacy or national security). However, the Courts have been unsympathetic to those who try to gather news on private property, including homes and places of business, without the proprietors' consent. In those cases, journalists can be arrested for trespassing, even if their work involves a story that is in the public interest.

At the federal level, journalists' access to *documents produced by the federal government* is largely governed by the *Freedom of Information Act* and journalists' access to *official federal government proceedings and meetings* is largely governed by the *Government in the Sunshine Act*. States also have their own individual open records and open meetings laws, which govern the same things but within the jurisdiction of the state (e.g., local courthouses). Some states, like Florida, have permissive transparency laws that make it easier for journalists to be watchdogs. Other states, like Massachusetts, have more restrictive laws, which make journalists' jobs more difficult.

It is important to note that such laws only apply to government agencies (and, in some instances, private companies acting on behalf of the government). In general, private companies and corporations do *not* have to comply with records requests. Notably, any government rejection of a public records request must be accompanied by a written explanation that includes the statutory reason for why the request was denied. Government employees sometimes do not have a good understanding of the laws themselves, and falls to the journalist to educate them. As such, it is very important that aspiring journalists familiarize themselves with regulations about access to information so that they may trigger the relevant legal requirements when asking government agencies for information (and push back when their request is improperly rejected).

The Supreme Court has also repeatedly ruled in favor of allowing journalists and journalistic outlets to publish confidential information and leaked information *about matters that are in the public interest*. In the case *Bartnicki v. Vopper* (2001), a teacher union's chief negotiator, Gloria Bartnicki, was illegally recorded speaking with the union president about a contentious collective bargaining negotiation with the regional School Board. That intercepted recording was shared by the president of a local taxpayers' association with Fredrick Vopper, a talk radio host, who then played the tape on his show. Bartnicki contended that Vopper broke the law by broadcasting an illegally recorded conversation. In a 6-3 decision, the Court ruled that as long as someone did not violate a law in obtaining information – in this case, Vopper simply received and published the recording and did not illegally record the conversation himself – then that someone may generally publish the information so long as *it involves a "matter of public concern."*

While the Vopper decision was more recently affirmed in the case *United States v. Stevens* (2010), other recent national security and anti-espionage laws have tested the Court's resolve in this regard. As such, journalists still run a legal risk when publishing leaks and information obtained through illicit means – especially if such information intersects with national security concerns.

Anonymity and Sourcing

The Supreme Court has generally protected anonymity under the First Amendment. However, such rights have been balanced against competing interests in areas of political activity, national security, and campaign finance.

Of particular note is that journalists *can be legally compelled to reveal their anonymous sources*. For example, journalists may be held in contempt of court or face obstruction of justice charges for failing to reveal who a source is during a civil or criminal proceeding against that unnamed source.

A landmark ruling in this area came in the Supreme Court's decision in the case *Branzburg v. Hayes* (1972). Paul Branzburg, a reporter for *The Louisville Courier-Journal*, observed (in the course of his regular reporting duties) people manufacturing and using hashish. He then wrote two stories about drug use in Kentucky. Two of the individuals pictured and featured in the article were granted anonymity by Branzburg because they feared prosecution. However, when the article came to the attention of law-enforcement personnel, Branzburg was subpoenaed before a grand jury for the articles and ordered to name his sources (so they could be prosecuted). Branzburg refused to name the sources, citing First Amendment protections. Branzburg's argument was rejected and he was punished for being in contempt of court. In a 5-4 ruling, the Supreme Court asserted that the First Amendment's protection of press freedom does not give journalists special privileges in court, and that Branzburg was correctly held for being in contempt of court.

The consequence of this is that journalists in the U.S. can be legally forced to reveal their sources. Journalists who decide not to comply can be imprisoned for obstruction of justice or contempt of court. This is not a hypothetical, either: Multiple journalists in the U.S. have spent time in jail because they believed they had a duty to protect their sources and live up to their promises when granting anonymity. Thus, journalists must be very careful and judicious when promising anonymity, and they must be prepared to face the potential consequences of such promises.

Privacy and Recordings

The Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that journalists are free to photograph, film, or record audio in public spaces, as long as they are not getting in the way of the proceedings. This includes recording public officials and law enforcement officials as they carry out their duties in public – regardless of whether they consent to being recorded. For example, it is perfectly legal to record police officers as they marshal a protest on a city street, so long as the journalist is not obstructing the officers and adhering to their safety directives.

What constitutes a 'public space' can get tricky, though. For example, a public state university like the University of Massachusetts Amherst has some spaces that can be considered public forums, such as Haigis Mall and the campus pond, both of which can be accessed by the general public via public pathways. People (including visitors, students, administrators) can be freely recorded in such spaces. In contrast, UMass classroom buildings may be restricted to student use only, and students are likely to have an expectation of privacy within those spaces. As such, recordings in those spaces are only possible with the permission of the students, and in some cases, the university itself. This becomes even trickier when there is an invited speaker giving a lecture in an auditorium: Although that speaker may be speaking at a public institution, UMass officials have the legal authority to restrict any recordings of an event that takes place in UMass space. Conversely, they may choose to make the event completely public, in which case recordings of the speakers *and* attendees may be unrestricted.

At the heart of the Court's interpretations of such incidents is the recorded individual's *expectation of privacy*. In settings where a 'reasonable person' would not expect to be recorded, they may be able to make an *intrusion on seclusion* claim. For example, if a photojournalist positions themselves on a public sidewalk and uses a telephoto lens or a drone to record a person engaging in a private act at home, then the journalist is likely to have intruded on that person's seclusion. Similarly, journalists may run afoul of the law by publishing private information about someone – such as details about a health condition – especially if that information is not deemed to be in the public interest.

Recording laws are especially relevant to journalists when it comes to interviewing sources. In some jurisdictions, journalists may record private exchanges (e.g., a phone interview) *only if all people being recorded consent to the recording*. Massachusetts is one such state, where so-called 'two-party consent' is required for any recording of private conversations. Put another way, *it is a crime to secretly record people in Massachusetts when there is an expectation of privacy*, as with a phone interview.

Many jurisdictions only require one party to consent to a recording, but it is nevertheless good ethical practice for journalists to request permission from their interviewees before recording the interview. When interviewing people across state lines – as with a long-distance phone call or video chat – it is safest to assume that consent from all parties is required because circumstance-specific legal questions may arise about which state's consent law is most applicable.

Key Takeaways

- » Journalists do not have special access to government documents or to public spaces. Laws that apply to regular people also apply to journalists.
- » The Freedom of Information Act and the Government in the Sunshine Act govern journalists' access to public records and meetings at the federal level. States have their own separate laws for state records and meetings. Government records and meetings are typically presumed to be open, unless they fit into specific exemptions.
- » Journalists can be forced by the courts to reveal their sources under penalty of imprisonment. U.S. journalists have been imprisoned for not revealing anonymous sources.
- » In some states, including Massachusetts, interviewees must consent to having an interview recorded. Even when consent is not legally required, it is still good practice to ask for it.

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Chapter 33

Censorship, Copyright, and Incitement

Journalists in the United States benefit from strong protections against government censorship that are rooted in the Free Press clause of the First Amendment. As such, journalists generally cannot be stopped from publishing even highly problematic information, from falsehoods to highly sensitive government documents. However, although journalists may be free to publish something, they can still face legal risks *after* publishing it.

In a similar vein, the First Amendment allows journalists (and other citizens) to advocate for a range of opinions, ideas, and actions – even those that run afoul of the law. And, the United States legal code permits journalists to make 'fair use' of copyrighted materials in their reporting, allowing them to both show and tell audiences about newsworthy affairs. However, such protections are not unconditional, and journalists must be aware of the legal framework in the U.S. in order to minimize their legal risks before and after publication.

Censorship and Prior Restraint

The Supreme Court has historically demonstrated a very strong *aversion to government censorship of journalism*, and has only permitted it in very limited circumstances. What we typically think of as censorship falls under the legal definition of *prior restraint*, which refers to an official government restriction of speech before it is published.

A landmark decision in this area was the case *Near v. Minnesota* (1931). Jay Near, who was the editor of *The Saturday Press*, had published a series of articles attacking several Minneapolis city officials for dereliction of duty. One of those officials sued *The Saturday Press* for engaging in "malicious, scandalous and defamatory" speech. The

Minnesota state court agreed. It decided to ban any further publication of *The Saturday Press* under the Minnesota Public Nuisance Law – thereby effectively shutting down the publication. In a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that Minnesota's law was "the essence of censorship," and further held that the government did not have the power to bar the publication of Jay Near's writings *in advance* because it would constitute an impermissible prior restraint on expression. Such restraints, the court ruled, were only permissible in extreme cases, such as when publishing information would reveal crucial military information that would place troops at risk, when a publication contains obscenity, or when a publication may *directly* incite "acts of violence."

Although such prior restraint wasn't allowed, the court's decision was clear in that it would not stop any individual from suing Jay Near or *The Saturday Press* after publication. Put another way, protection against prior restraint does not extend to protections against other legal risks that may arise from publication. In fact, some charges, such as libel, require a demonstration of harm – which may only be established after publication.

The Near decision was reinforced in another crucial case, *New York Times Co. v. United States* (1971), which is also known as the "Pentagon Papers" case. In that case, Daniel Ellsberg secretly made copies of a large, classified government study of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War and provided the documents to *The New York Times*. After several months of review, the *Times* began publishing a series of stories that included portions of the classified documents. President Richard Nixon's administration, citing national security concerns, obtained a restraining order barring further publication of the Pentagon Papers. Following an emergency hearing, the Supreme Court, in a 6-3 decision, dissolved the restraining order, observing that "any system of prior restraints comes to this Court bearing a heavy presumption against its constitutional validity" and that "the Government thus carries a heavy burden of showing justification for the imposition of such a restraint."

Put another way, the Court ruled that it was up to the Nixon Administration to successfully prove that publication would result in *inevitable, direct, and immediate peril* to the United States – a high standard that it failed to meet when suing the *Times*. While the Pentagon Papers case does not offer journalists blanket permission to publish confidential documents, it did reinforce the high bar that the government must clear in order to stop something from being published in the first place.

It is important to note that these court decisions, and the First Amendment itself, only guard against *government* censorship. The owner of a journalistic outlet, or an editor within it, is well within their rights to refuse to publish a particular story. Similarly, a third-party platform (e.g., Facebook) or moderators within its groups are generally free to ban particular stories from being shared on their platform. Additionally, these decisions offer no obstacle to *self-censorship*, whereby journalists *choose* to not publish certain material for fear of reprisal. Self-censorship is not uncommon, especially when journalists fear alienating certain sources, and losing access to them, by publishing damaging information about those sources.

Copyright

The Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that copyright and free speech are compatible. In particular, it has ruled that while 'facts' cannot be copyrighted, *the ways in which those facts are expressed can be copyrighted*. For example, it is not possible to copyright the fact that Dr. Zamith gave a lecture about media law on a particular date. However, the exact expression, "Dr. Zamith spoke eloquently in a riveting lecture about media law that was met with great acclaim" may be copyrighted by the author. A practical consequence of this is that journalistic outlets cannot just use someone else's original work without their permission – for example, by copying and pasting a competitor's news story – even if they offer attribution to the original work by stating who produced it, or by linking to the original piece.

However, the Supreme Court has long been open to different 'fair use' doctrines – one of which became codified as law by the Copyright Act of 1976. The current doctrine allows *portions* of copyrighted products (e.g., an exclusive interview published by a competitor) to be published without their consent by someone else (e.g., in a competitor's news article) if it 'passes' a four-part test. The four components of the test are: (1) the purpose and character of the use, including if it is for educational purposes; (2) the nature of the copyrighted work; (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole; and (4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for, or value of, the copyrighted work. There is no codified point system for this test. Instead, courts interpret the facts of a specific case according to this general guidance and issue a determination of whether the use 'passed' the test (and is therefore not in violation of copyright protections).

Copyright therefore provides journalists and journalistic outlets with a legal remedy when their work is republished without authorization, and fair use protections can be leveraged to allow journalists to include portions of copyrighted work, such as segments from an explosive book or citizen-recorded videos, in their reporting.

Incitement and Inflammatory Speech

The Supreme Court has ruled that speech or publication that advocates for illegal conduct, such as attacking an elected official or activist, is legally protected, unless that advocacy is *likely* to incite *imminent* lawless action. This means that abstract advocacy (e.g., writing that a particular politician 'should be shot') is protected, though specific calls to action (e.g., writing that people should gather at a particular time and place to shoot the politician) are less likely to receive protection.

A crucial Supreme Court decision in this area is *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969). In that case, Clarence Brandenburg, a Ku Klux Klan leader in rural Ohio, contacted a reporter at a Cincinnati television station and invited him to cover a KKK rally. Portions of the rally were filmed and showed men in robes and hoods, some of whom were carrying firearms and engaging in cross-burning. One of the speeches made reference to the possibility of "revengeance" against two specific racial and religious groups, as well as their supporters. Another speech advocated for those groups' forced expulsion from the United States. Brandenburg was charged with advocating violence under Ohio's criminal syndicalism statute, and he argued that his speech was protected by the First Amendment.

In a per curiam decision, meaning a decision that was not signed by individual justices but spoke for the Court as a whole, the Supreme Court ruled that such speech is protected because the "mere advocacy" of violence does not rise to the standard of "incitement to imminent lawless action," which the Court has ruled is *not* protected by the U.S. Constitution. In particular, the decision helped establish the two-prong "Brandenburg test," under which the government may only restrict speech if (1) the speech is "directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action" *and* (2) the speech is "likely to incite or produce such action."

Put another way, individuals – from opinion columnists to sources quoted by journalists – can speak, publish, and advocate freely unless it can be shown that they are putting others at clear risk. (Whether a journalist should quote certain individuals or give oxygen to problematic assertions is thus more often an ethical question.)

Key Takeaways

- The Supreme Court has historically had a strong aversion to government censorship of journalists, and the bar for preventing something from being published is very high. However, just because something can be published does not mean that journalists are free from other legal risks after publication.
- Facts cannot be copyrighted, but the ways in which journalists (and others) express those facts can be copyrighted. It is not enough to offer attribution. Unless a journalist is making 'fair use' of some copyrighted material, permission from the copyright holder is necessary.
- Speech and publication may advocate for lawless behavior, so long as that advocacy is abstract or unlikely to produce imminent lawlessness. This covers both opinion columnists and advocacy-minded journalists, as well as the sources they quote.

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Chapter 34

Libel

The U.S. Supreme Court has generally granted leeway for journalists and journalistic outlets to publish or say inaccurate things, as long as the errors are made in good faith.

Much of the relevant case law within the context of journalism falls under the umbrella of libel, which refers to the *publication of a false statement of fact that seriously harms someone's reputation*. (Regular oral speech that is not published – with publication being anything from a printed news article to a broadcast story that airs to a tweet that appears online – falls under the umbrella of *slander*.) Libel is one of the main legal threats thrust upon journalists when they publish critical information. It is therefore important for journalists to be well-versed on the legal requirements for advancing a libel suit, as well as the classes of defenses that a journalist can offer.

Proving Libel

Libel charges require the plaintiff (the injured party) to prove a few different things. First, they must prove that the defendant published the defamatory statement, meaning that they distributed it to someone besides themselves and the plaintiff. There is no requirement that the statement be distributed broadly or to the general public; simply posting it on a small, private Signal group may be enough.

Second, the plaintiff must prove that a 'reasonable person' will infer that the statement is about the plaintiff. The statement does not need to explicitly name a person. As long as there is enough identifying information in the statement for a person *who knows the plaintiff* to be reasonably likely to recognize the statement as being about the plaintiff, the requirement may be satisfied.

Third, the plaintiff must prove that the statement harmed their reputation, as opposed to being merely insulting or offensive. Generally speaking, it must be a *false* *statement of fact* that exposes a person to hatred, ridicule, or contempt; lowers them in the esteem of their peers; causes them to be shunned; or injures them in their business or trade. This could be satisfied, for example, if a statement alleges that the plaintiff is gay and the plaintiff can show that someone began treating them differently as a result of that information.

Fourth, the plaintiff must show that the statement was published with some level of *fault*. Fault requires that the defendant either did something they should not have done *or* failed to do something they should have.

Finally, the plaintiff must show that the statement was published without any *applicable privilege*. A number of privileges may be available depending on what was published by the defendant and the source they relied upon for the information.

Within journalism, *the most common defense against the charge of libel is truth*. If a statement is truthful, then it does not matter if the plaintiff is harmed. For example, an article claiming that Dr. Zamith clubs baby seals for fun would not be libelous if I had repeatedly clubbed baby seals for personal enjoyment, even if the publication resulted in fewer students taking my classes. (For the record, I do not club baby seals, for fun or professional reasons.) Notably, the burden of proof is generally on the plaintiff to show that a statement is false. Thus, in that example, I would have to show that there's no evidence that I engage in such behavior – and any video showing me engaging in the act should be enough to summarily dismiss the libel suit. (In limited circumstances, the burden of proof may fall to the defendant.)

Statements of pure opinion, which cannot be proven true or false, cannot form the basis of a defamation (or libel) claim. For example, the assertion that "Dr. Zamith is a jerk" is clearly a statement of opinion and cannot serve as the basis of a libel claim. (However, the assertion that "Dr. Zamith is a jerk because he clubs baby seals" involves a statement of fact.) Additionally, the standards for harm and fault do vary depending on the plaintiff's position in society.

Public and Private Figures

Two particular Supreme Court decisions have clarified the libel protections and responsibilities for journalists. In *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* (1964), the *Times* was alleged to have committed libel by publishing a full-page advertisement by supporters of Martin Luther King Jr. that criticized the police in Montgomery, Alabama, for their mistreatment of civil rights protesters. The ad had a number of factual inaccuracies, such as the number of times King had been arrested during the protests, and the *Times* subsequently published a retraction of the advertisement. Nevertheless, Montgomery

Public Safety commissioner, L. B. Sullivan, sued the *Times*. Although he was not named in the ad, Sullivan argued that the inaccurate criticism of actions by the police in the ad was defamatory to him because it was his duty to supervise the police department. In an unanimous decision, the Court ruled that "the First Amendment protects the publication of all statements, even false ones, about the conduct of public officials except when statements are made with actual malice (with knowledge that they are false) or in reckless disregard of their truth or falsity."

Put another way, when it comes to *public officials*, in the context of carrying out their public duties, *the plaintiff must show that the journalistic error was due to an intent to harm the official or as a result of recklessness* – meaning a journalist plainly disregarded information that should have been evident to them. This is a high bar, as it can be immensely difficult to prove a journalist's *intent* to harm. Later cases extended the "actual malice" standard to encompass *public figures*, which include not only public officials but anyone who has gained a significant degree of fame or notoriety in general or in the context of a particular issue or controversy. This may include celebrities, elite athletes, or regular citizens who become embroiled in highly public debates.

Later, in the case *Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.* (1974), the Supreme Court established a separate standard for *private figures*, such as a teacher or local business owner. In this instance, a series of articles appearing in the magazine *American Opinion* claimed that Elmer Gertz, a lawyer who represented an individual shot and killed by a police officer, had orchestrated the officer's conviction; that Gertz was a member of various communist front organizations; and that he had a lengthy criminal record of his own. Gertz sued over those false statements.

Although the editor of the publication conceded the errors and stated that he had made no independent efforts to verify the claims, he countered that the publication did not involve actual malice and was protected under the *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* standard. In a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court ruled in Gertz's favor, noting that public figures had access to more resources and ways to defend themselves than private figures, and therefore public figures should be held to higher standards in libel cases. The Court further held that states could formulate their own, lower standards of libel for statements made about private figures. In practice, this has resulted in a lower standard for private figures across the U.S., with private figures having only to show that a journalist was *negligent*, or that they failed to engage in basic journalistic practices like trying to verify basic information prior to publication.

Although journalists who follow best practices receive robust protections against libel, they must nevertheless sometimes weigh the *threat* of a libel suit. Even if a journalist is well-positioned to defend themselves, the legal process can be very expensive – especially if the journalist lacks the support of an organization with a legal team on retainer, as is the case for most freelancers. In fact, several powerful figures have wielded libel lawsuits as a weapon against critical journalism, knowing that even an unsuccessful lawsuit is likely to make other journalists think twice about writing critical stories about them in the future. While some states have enacted laws penalizing frivolous lawsuits in recent years, they nevertheless continue to serve as powerful weapons for silencing journalists.

Key Takeaways

» Libel refers to the publication of a false statement of fact that seriously harms someone's reputation.

» In the United States, libel claims usually must be proven by the plaintiff, and they must prove multiple things. In contrast, a defendant needs to only show that the statement was true or based on some form of privileged communication. Statements of pure opinion are not eligible for libel claims.

» In the United States, public figures must clear a very high bar to succeed in a libel suit. The standards are considerably lower for private figures, though it remains a high bar.

Chapter 35

Professional Codes of Ethics

Ethics refer to *the moral principles or values held or shown by an individual person*.

The term comes from the Greek "ethos," which in turn refers to a person's character. Ethics are intended to help resolve questions dealing with what is right and what is wrong. Ethics ultimately reside at the individual level – that is, they reflect what an individual considers to be acceptable behavior. However, such moral principles are shaped by one's societal and cultural norms, religion, and even familial environments. In the case of journalism, there are also specific professional codes of ethics that journalists must abide by.

Laws vs. Ethics

Ethics are very different from laws. Philosophically, the law is typically concerned with what is legal or illegal, while ethics are concerned with what is right and what is wrong. These differ substantially, as something may be legal yet arguably unethical (e.g., enacting a death penalty) and illegal yet arguably ethical (e.g., stealing a loaf of bread to feed a hungry child). Additionally, laws are usually determined by institutions (e.g., a state government) and enforced through institutions (e.g., the police), whereas ethics are typically self-legislated (e.g., within groups or individuals) and self-enforced (e.g., through social pressure or exclusion). Finally, legality is based on statutory boundaries that are supposed to apply equally to all members of a jurisdiction. In contrast, ethics are more ambiguous and may vary considerably according to members of a group.

A simpler way to think about this, however, is that laws set a minimal standard, whereas ethics set a benchmark or ideal behavior to strive toward. Put another way, *laws are about what you can do, and ethics are about what you should do*.

Journalistic ethics are especially important in the United States because there is no licensing system for U.S. journalists. Anyone can claim to be a journalist, which is very different from professions like doctors and lawyers that require formal credentialing. This is not the case everywhere, either. Some countries require journalists (or the organizations that employ them) to be licensed by the government in order to officially publish journalism.

In lieu of licensing, self-regulation becomes important for promoting good journalism – both in terms of products and behaviors. The perception that journalism is both good and intends to do good is important for its recognition as a pillar of democratic society. Put another way, a strong sense of professional ethics is important for gaining the public's trust.

A Spectrum for Ethics

There are several philosophical approaches for determining what is ethical and what is not. Placed on a spectrum, we'd likely find *deontological* approaches on one end and *teleological* approaches on the other.

Deontological approaches focus on *the principles that drive the action*. Put another way, even if the consequence of an action is bad, it would be moral if it was driven by good motives and followed best practices. An example of this approach is Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative approach, wherein the ethical duty is the same all of the time, in every circumstance, and with little regard for the consequences. Under a deontological approach, a reporter would be expected to refuse to go undercover and lie about their profession because lying is unethical, even if it means missing out on an important story about water contamination.

Teleological approaches focus on *the result of the action*. Put another way, if the outcome (or goal) is "good," then the action is moral, with little weight placed on how one reached that goal. An example of this approach would be Utilitarianism, which asserts that the most ethical act is the one that brings the greatest good to the greatest number of people. Under a teleological approach, a reporter would be expected to agree to go undercover and lie about their profession because a larger group of people – presumably, most members of a city – would benefit from the story about water contamination than would be harmed by the lying.

There is a vast middle ground between these approaches, but deontology and teleology are illustrative of the distinct approaches to processes for determining the most ethical choice in a given context. Other approaches include situational ethics, multiple duties, and virtue ethics.

SPJ Code of Ethics

In a 2013 survey of U.S. journalists, researchers found that 93% of them reported at least some agreement with the statement, "journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context." Put another way, although ethics are ultimately determined by the individual, journalists in the United States strongly believe in adhering to shared professional codes of ethics.

There isn't a single code of ethics for journalists in the United States. For example, photojournalists have their own professional code of ethics through the National Press Photographers Association, and even individual news organizations like *The New York Times* have their own codes of ethics.

However, the most influential code of ethics in the U.S. is the Society of Professional Journalists' (SPJ) Code of Ethics, from which other professional and organizational journalistic codes often borrow. The SPJ code is divided into four main ethical principles: *seek truth and report it*, *minimize harm*, *act independently*, and *be accountable and transparent*. These principles sometimes clash with one another, requiring journalists to balance which principles are most important under their personal ethical philosophies. SPJ's Code of Ethics includes a series of detailed statements for each principle, which is intended to guide action for specific kinds of dilemmas.

Seek Truth and Report It

SPJ's Code of Ethics stresses that ethical journalism should be accurate and fair, and that journalists should therefore be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information.

This involves ensuring that all information is verified before it is released, and that original sources – people, publications, historical documents, or other records that document events first-hand – should be used whenever possible. Journalists must also take care not to misrepresent or oversimplify things when promoting, previewing or summarizing a story. The deliberate distortion of information must be avoided, and such distortions are patently unethical. Opinion and commentary should be clearly labeled as such, so that audiences do not confuse them with news.

Sources must be clearly identified when possible, with the public given as much information as is appropriate for ascertaining the source's position, reliability, and potential motivations. Journalists should therefore be judicious with their offers of anonymity, and should explain transparently in their work why a source was granted anonymity. Journalists also have a moral responsibility to seek sources whose voices the public seldom hears, and to avoid stereotyping.

Journalists should diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing. Journalists should avoid undercover or surreptitious methods of gathering information unless more traditional, open methods will not yield information that is of *substantial* public interest. Put another way, the SPJ Code recognizes that there are instances where journalists have good reason to mask their identity and purpose – but such tactics should be used sparingly and only as a last resort. Plagiarism and fabrication are strictly forbidden.

Minimize Harm

SPJ's code also stresses that ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues, and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

This involves balancing the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. The pursuit of the news is not a license for undue intrusiveness or needless invasion of privacy. Journalists must therefore show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage, and must be especially sensitive when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources who are inexperienced or unable to give consent. For example, a journalist may opt to omit an undocumented immigrant's full name and place of work from a story because it might put them in danger. It is important for journalists to recognize and respect cultural differences.

Crucially, journalists should avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do. Put another way, individuals' privacy must be weighed against the public's need for information – and some details are simply not needed for a story to make the necessary impact. Journalists should recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures and others who seek power, influence, or attention. In conjunction with this, journalists must consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication.

Act Independently

According to the SPJ code, the highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

As such, journalists must avoid conflicts of interest, *real or perceived*. Often, a journalist may feel that they can disassociate their interests from their journalistic work. For example, they may believe that they can compartmentalize their romantic relationship with a City Council member and continue to effectively report on the City Council. This is rarely possible, and even if it were, the public would still likely have concerns about that arrangement – and thus become less trusting of the journalist, their journalism, and their journalistic outlet. Conflicts like these should be avoided altogether by having journalists excuse themselves from reporting on stories about topics or subjects that introduce a *potential* conflict of interest. When a conflict of interest is unavoidable (e.g., the reporter happened to be around when news broke involving their partner), the unavoidable conflict must be disclosed to the audience. This disclosure is a form of journalistic transparency.

Acting independently also means rejecting gifts, favors, money, or any special treatment from sources or the subjects of reporting. For example, journalists should not keep a phone that was given to them for the purpose of a product review. Similarly, it is unethical to pay sources for access or directly for information. Although there are examples of journalists paying sources for exclusive interviews, it is an uncommon and highly problematic practice in the U.S.

The SPJ code also stresses avoiding political and other outside activities that could jeopardize a reporter's impartiality or credibility. This point has become more contentious in recent years, but most journalists in the U.S. currently believe that public advocacy or visible support for causes is problematic, and should therefore be avoided.

Be Accountable and Transparent

Finally, the SPJ also emphasizes that ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining journalistic decisions to the public.

This involves explaining ethical choices and processes to audiences. This might include publishing a companion piece that describes the decision-making process through which an organization felt it was necessary to engage in undercover reporting for a feature story. It also means acknowledging mistakes and correcting them promptly. When corrections are necessary, they should appear in prominent areas so that people who were exposed to the misinformation can become aware of the correct information. These actions, too, make the journalistic process more transparent to news audiences.

Being accountable also involves exposing unethical conduct in journalism, including within one's own organization. Put another way, even if a journalist does not engage in unethical behavior themselves, it is important for the profession of journalism for all journalists to call out bad behavior by their peers. Protecting one's peers is often a selfish and unethical act, and it does not lead to better journalism.

Key Takeaways

- Ethics refer to the moral principles or values held or shown by an individual. They represent a higher standard than what the law encompasses.
- There are different philosophies for ethical decision-making. They typically range from a sole focus on actions to a sole focus on outcomes, with many philosophies existing in between those two extremes.
- The SPJ Code of Ethics is the most prominent and influential code of ethics in U.S. journalism. It is guided by four main principles: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent.

Unit VIII

Preparing a News Story

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Chapter 36

Types of Journalism

Although "journalism" is a singular term, which may imply a homogeneous entity, it is helpful to think of it as an umbrella term for a number of distinct forms, practices, and genres. Put another way, journalism has many looks, can be produced in many ways, and can be about many things.

There are many ways to categorize different types of journalism. One helpful schema involves three dimensions: *media vehicle*, *beat*, and *method*. A single story is likely to be shaped by its categorization within each dimension. For example, you may have a television (media vehicle) segment about politics (beat) reported through a breaking news approach (method). That story would be tailored to meet the expectations (and advantages) of each of those dimensions, from its storytelling structure to the depth of the report.

Media Vehicle

There are a number of different media vehicles that can be used for conveying journalism. These include text-oriented (e.g., newspapers or online articles), audio-oriented (e.g., radio or podcasts), and visual-oriented (e.g., television or photography).

The media vehicle matters because it offers certain technical affordances (possibilities and limitations). For example, photojournalism relies primarily on still photographs to convey the essence of a development or issue. A photojournalist may need to capture multiple facets of a complex issue through a single, representative photograph — perhaps a melting glacier with a skeletal polar bear in the foreground. Put another way, the photojournalist may need to aim to convey a thousand words with just one shot. (They also write accompanying photo captions, but those rarely exceed a couple of sentences.) Alternatively, the photojournalist may be tasked with producing a photo essay, wherein they piece together multiple photographs that capture different dimensions of an issue in a manner that conveys a narrative. Photojournalism shoots can involve candid, heat-of-the-moment reporting (e.g., documenting a battle in a conflict zone) as well as documenting daily life for a particular group of people (e.g., homeless veterans).

Similarly, news produced for a television newscast is likely to differ in important ways from news produced for an online news article. For example, a story about local opioid addiction rates may need to be condensed into a three-minute TV segment. That might involve just 200 words of voice-over narration on the journalist's part. In contrast, an average article on the BBC's website is roughly 750 words in length. (If they're writing for *The New York Times*, that's closer to 1,000 words.) The shorter length for the newscast requires the journalist to hone in on a narrower aspect of the issue, or perhaps offer a more superficial account of its many aspects. Moreover, the style of writing differs: Writing for the ear is distinctly different from writing for the eyes.

Beat

Reporting jobs are often oriented around either *beat reporting* or *general assignment reporting*.

Beats are niche categories of journalistic coverage in which individual journalists may specialize. A beat can be a topic, a person, or an institution, though they are most commonly niche topics. For example, a political journalist might cover the politics beat, the election beat, or the Kamala Harris beat – or all three. Beat reporters immerse themselves in their beats and gain specialized insights and knowledge of the key stakeholders, actors, trends, and influences within those beats over time. As they do so, they become experts in those beats, and that expertise appears in the stories they identify and cover. Moreover, by virtue of repeatedly covering the same topics or people, beat reporters tend to develop deep and specialized sourcing networks, often resulting in elevated access to some sources and exclusive information.

Beats are not just genres. They may require distinct approaches to newsgathering and involve different audience expectations for storytelling structures. Consider the film beat: It may involve a mixture of reported and objective pieces (e.g., news about the latest film Ryan Gosling has signed on to), short lifestyle features (e.g., a non-combative and abridged interview with Gosling about his morning workout routine), and subjective opinion pieces (e.g., a review of Gosling's latest movie). By contrast, the courts beat is more likely to have inverted pyramid-style stories detailing incidents and events derived from reviews of court documents, or reports about arguments in an on-going case. (Audiences are unlikely to expect short interviews with judges about their morning case review routine.)

Common beats include business, courts and crime, education, film, food, health, international affairs, music, politics, science, sports, style, and technology. Some outlets (especially niche publications) have even more specialized beats, like Big Tech, Medicare, or Green Energy. Many journalistic outlets organize their staffs and their editorial content based on distinctions between specialized beats, meaning that they will have a reporter (or group of reporters) who occupy a particular physical space in the newsroom and publish primarily on a dedicated portion of the news product (e.g., a "Science" section) based on their beat. While many journalists focus on a single beat, some journalists may be tasked with covering multiple beats – especially during times of newsroom cutbacks.

Not all journalists are assigned to a beat, though. Some journalists' expertise lies in their ability to quickly learn new topics and make sense of them for non-specialized audiences. These journalists are often called general assignment reporters because they may be tasked with covering an entertainment story one day and a court story the next. The need to cover such a wide array of topics often comes at a cost, though: General assignment reporters are typically more likely to get facts wrong (especially with an unfamiliar topic), may struggle to offer deep coverage, and their sourcing network for a topic may be sparse or superficial. Nevertheless, many journalistic outlets will complement their beat reporters with at least one general assignment reporter in order to have a frequent and predictable stream of news stories and to help round off the outlet's news coverage as needed.

Method

Journalism may also be distinguished based on the approach to reporting that is used. Examples of common approaches are *breaking news reporting*, *straight news reporting*, *feature reporting*, *enterprise reporting*, *investigative reporting*, and *advocacy reporting*.

Breaking news reporting involves covering a development with a particular emphasis on timeliness. Breaking news stories depict current events, recent developments, and information that is generally just coming to light. For example, this might include a shooting outside a bar. Breaking news stories are often updated regularly as news develops and as journalists uncover new information about the sometimes ongoing event. Put another way, breaking news reporting doesn't aim to deeply report multiple aspects of a development and package it as a single, stand-alone news product.

Instead, it concedes its incompleteness and focuses on unearthing and describing the most recent developments.

Straight news reporting aims to synthesize recent developments and contextualize them into a stand-alone news product. It is similar to breaking news reporting in that it emphasizes the timely presentation of information in a clear, quick, and straight-to-the-point manner – often by using a story structure like the inverted pyramid. However, compared to breaking news reporting, there is more of an emphasis on sense-making and contextualizing information, with the expectation that a story will be more complete and not require constant updating (even if the event is still developing).

Feature reporting allows journalists to take a more creative approach to the information they present. While the newsgathering methods may be similar to those of traditional reporting, the newswriting approach is quite different. First, they are typically written with a more open-ended and less-strict story structure. Feature stories often apply creative storytelling techniques, such as playful or poetic language, narrative structures, detailed anecdotes, and multi-part vignettes. Second, because of their more open-ended writing styles and less strict relationship to timeliness, feature stories are often long-form and *evergreen*. Evergreen stories are not tied to a specific time peg, or timely event. They are designed to maintain their relevance to audiences for a longer period of time.

Enterprise reporting relies heavily on original reporting driven by a journalist. It is called enterprise reporting because it requires an enterprising journalist who is able to develop their own story ideas, sources, and means of gaining access to information. (The opposite of enterprise reporting would be reporting that relies primarily on press releases, press conferences, or news that is given in some way to a journalist rather than uncovered by that journalist.) Enterprise reporting often involves creative and advanced reporting methods, such as public records requests, data collection and analysis, and access to historical documents. The result is often, though not always, a longer-form and in-depth news product.

Investigative reporting is a particularly rigorous form of reporting and one of the most powerful types of journalism for advancing the public's knowledge. Investigative reporters dedicate themselves to the sleuth-like pursuit, through a wide variety of investigative techniques, of information about a niche topic that is often difficult to access. The subjects of investigative reporting are frequently topics of deep conflict and vast public importance, such as political or corporate corruption, violence, crime, financial malfeasance, or other cases of wrongdoing and injustice. Investigative journalists dedicate weeks, months, and even years to the dogged pursuit of a specific person, entity, or topic in order to bring their subject to public light. This type of journalism is strongly associated with *watchdog journalism* because of the role it plays in holding powerful actors accountable. In this case, investigative journalists are the metaphorical watchdogs who seek to make the actions of the powerful transparent to their audiences. (However, watchdog journalism is a broader form of journalism that also includes traditional, day-to-day reporting on the mundane matters of governance, such as attending School Board meetings.) Investigative stories often take the shape of long-form stories (or a series of shorter stories) because of the amount of reporting and information they comprise.

Advocacy reporting is a form of reporting that distinguishes itself by formulating a clear opinion, or substantiating an existing one, with timely, factual information. This approach outwardly rejects the norm of neutrality, and instead aims to promote a cause or intervention. For example, advocacy reporting may focus on illustrating the plight of young undocumented immigrants by including anecdotes about the challenges they face, statistics about the prevalence of the issue, and offering the journalist's evaluation of a key policy presently being considered by lawmakers. Such reporting is typically labeled as a "news analysis" or presented as an author's column in an Opinion section. However, it may also be the approach to reporting that defines the identity of a journalistic outlet (and is therefore not segregated from the other reporting done by that outlet). Not all opinion pieces warrant the label of advocacy reporting, though. Many are better categorized as "opinion writing" if they do not follow at least some of the staple practices of journalism, like verifying information.

Hard vs. Soft News

Another way of categorizing journalism is through the distinction of "hard" and "soft" news.

Hard news journalism refers to breaking news and reports about serious or hard-hitting topics that are both timely and of civic interest. They are usually based on factual information and rigorous research. Political journalism, business journalism, and watchdog journalism are all typically recognized forms of hard news.

Soft news journalism refers to reports about predominantly lifestyle and entertainment affairs, or other topics of human interest. While such journalism may involve rigorous research, it is also more open to interpretive and literary accounts. Sports journalism, entertainment journalism, and celebrity coverage are all typically recognized forms of soft news.

Although this categorization schema is quite popular – it is not uncommon to hear those terms in the newsroom – it is also arguably over-simplistic and does a disservice to certain genres. Specifically, hard news is often used to connote a superior form of journalism, and is often talked about within the industry as being more important (and pure) than soft news. However, consider the case of a rigorously reported investigative piece unearthing corruption in a multi-billion dollar sports league, resulting in criminal prosecution of league executives. It would be a disservice to label that as soft news – with its implied inferiority – simply because it is "a sports story." Conversely, a puff piece on a politician designed to help a journalist gain access hardly warrants the label of hard journalism.

Instead, it is more fruitful to view journalism through a more nuanced typology that takes into account dimensions like the media vehicle, beat, and reporting method associated with that piece of journalism. This focuses less on a shortsighted heuristic for determining a story's import based on its genre and instead allows us to think more about the norms and expectations associated with a journalistic form.

Key Takeaways

- One way to categorize different types of journalism is to focus on three dimensions: media vehicle, beat, and method.
- The media vehicle matters because it offers certain technical opportunities and limitations, and will have some associated norms. Most media vehicles can be sub-categorized under text-oriented, audio-oriented, and visual-oriented, but hybrid forms also exist.
- Reporting jobs are often oriented around either beat reporting or general assignment reporting. Beats refer to niche categories of coverage that journalists may specialize in.
- Journalism may also be distinguished based on the journalist's approach to reporting. Common approaches include breaking news reporting, feature reporting, and investigative reporting.
- Journalism is also sometimes categorized under labels of "hard" news and "soft" news, with the former encompassing genres like crime and politics, and the latter genres like entertainment and sports. Although

popular within the industry, this typology is arguably overly simplistic and problematic.

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Chapter 37

Opinion-Based Journalism

Opinion-based journalism has deep roots in U.S. journalism. Early U.S. newspapers regularly featured opinionated political coverage that reflected the ideals and perspectives of the papers' owners or the parties who subsidized their production. The resulting newspaper coverage was frequently partisan and subjective in a way that would seem foreign even today.

However, the relationship between journalism and objectivity grew closer over time. This was most notable in the early 20th century, when newspapers began to move toward a more neutral presentation of information in order to attract larger audiences. (By sticking to a middle ground and giving voice to multiple perspectives, journalists could more easily appeal to audiences supporting different sides of an issue. That, in turn, increased subscriptions and newspaper circulation.) Today, both objectivity and neutrality – and the image of an independent journalist providing "just the facts" – are idealized norms of U.S. journalism. Indeed, the most common complaint about journalism in the U.S. is that it is "too biased."

This goal of gathering information objectively and presenting it neutrally has not led to the disappearance of opinion in U.S. journalism. Today, the two cohabitate, sometimes uncomfortably, across organizations and the industry at large. At more traditional journalistic outlets, they are sometimes physically separated, with clearly labeled "News" and "Editorial" or "Opinion" sections. Some outlets, especially newer, digitally native ones, pool opinion and objective reporting together into a single stream. (This is not simply an old-media versus new-media distinction, though. Some newer outlets do maintain a clear separation in order to appear more professional by adhering to the traditional norms.) Additionally, some U.S. outlets reject the objectivity and neutrality norms altogether, believing that the best journalism is subjective.

Even as U.S. journalism moved toward the norm of objectivity, editors and publishers still saw an important role for subjective opinion pieces. They were vehicles through which opinion journalists, experts, and members of the community could weigh in on public issues and offer social commentary. Indeed, opinion-based journalism and editorial content have long been seen as central to the journalistic role conception of providing a public forum for vigorous debate. This remains the case today.

Types of Opinion-Based Journalism

There are several types of opinion-based forms of journalism. The most common ones are *editorials*, *op-eds*, and *columns*. Another type of journalism that is sometimes associated with opinion-journalism is the *news analysis*.

Editorials

An editorial is an opinion piece written to persuade audiences to adopt a specific perspective or take a specific action in response to an issue. For example, an editorial about a U.S. Presidential election might encourage audiences to vote for a particular candidate, or even just simply to vote. Editorials present a series of key points intended to advance an overarching argument. Although editorials are intentionally subjective, they often include reported and verified facts that make a case for their argument, such as polling data and other statistics that indicate the favorability of the position the editorial writer is arguing for. This factual basis is sometimes drawn from the editorial writer's original reporting, but it is more often drawn from information first unearthed through the outlet's objective news coverage.

Although editorials are often written by a single author, the decision about which side of an issue an outlet will favor in its editorial coverage is a group decision. Outlets that publish editorials usually feature an editorial board comprised mostly of different section editors and managers, who vote on an issue before the editorial is assigned to a board member for writing. When the editorial is published, it comes to represent the collective perspective of a outlet's editorial board – and through them, of the outlet itself. Editorials are usually published anonymously (without a byline) to maintain the perception that they represent the views of the editorial branch of the outlet rather than an individual journalist or editor. In the case of a newspaper or online news site, editorials usually appear on the Editorial Page or in the Opinion section of the publication. This separation is intended to make clear to readers that this content is opinion-based and should not be confused with the reported, fact-based content that appears elsewhere in the news product.

Op-Eds

The term “op-ed” is short for “opposite of the editorial page.” Like an editorial, an op-ed is a subjective opinion piece produced for the purpose of persuading its audiences to adopt a point of view or action in response to a topic for which there are multiple sides. Unlike an editorial, an op-ed generally represents the opposite side of an issue than what the editorial already took. For example, an op-ed may contend that a climate change bill supported by an outlet in an editorial is too costly and burdensome to businesses. Additionally, opposing op-eds may be featured in instances where the organization has not published an editorial.

Op-eds are generally written by a freelance or guest writer who is not employed by or associated with the outlet. This includes elected officials, political candidates, academics, and public intellectuals. They are distinguished as such through their bylines, which clearly identify the author and their affiliation.

Columns

Columns are opinion-based pieces that are broader in nature than either editorials or op-eds. While they are written from the author’s point of view, and often include first-person language, they are not limited to advocating for a particular action or point of view. Columns can tackle any number of subjects through a variety of different lenses, as long as they present a personal experience or perspective related to the topic they cover. A columnist could, for example, share their experience as a soldier abroad, advocate for the adoption of gender-inclusive bathrooms, tell a story about adopting their first dog, or relate any number of first-person experiences or opinions.

Journalistic outlets sometimes employ recurring columnists dedicated to specific beats, such as film criticism, sports, fashion, and domestic advice. They may also employ a columnist who opines or reflects on a different topic each week. For example, such a columnist might relay their thoughts on legalizing a drug one week and their experience helping their eldest child move in to a college the next.

Additionally, outlets may feature editorial cartoons by a professional cartoonist (or license cartoons from different cartoonists). Editorial cartoons have proven to be particularly influential at different points in U.S. history, often by lampooning powerful individuals and capturing public sentiment in a humorous but striking manner. Several journalistic outlets also regularly reserve space for user-generated opinion content, such as letters to the editor (or, more recently, tweets and posts from audience members).

News Analyses

News analyses are pieces of journalism that aim to place news events or developments (e.g., the proposal of major legislation by a political party) within a broader context. Rather than focusing on the latest details about the event or development, the primary objective of these pieces is to situate the event or development within a broader history or trend. Put another way, news analyses aim to combat information overload by synthesizing the existing coverage and describing how it fits into a bigger puzzle. This involves describing relevant background, historical details, and both supporting and contradicting factual information.

News analyses are typically written by journalists (especially beat reporters), and *not* traditional opinion writers. While these pieces are *not* intended to convey the author's explicit opinions, the act of synthesizing and contextualizing the information involves a higher degree of interpretation than so-called 'straight' news stories. As such, news analyses are often clearly labeled as analyses, though they may appear alongside typical news stories (and not on dedicated opinion sections).

Key Takeaways

- Despite its modern relationship with objectivity and neutrality, U.S. journalism has maintained a role for subjective opinion pieces. Namely, they're vehicles through which opinion journalists, experts, and members of the community can weigh in on a public issue.
- Opinion journalism includes editorials, op-eds, and columns, as well as editorial cartoons and user-generated opinion pieces like letters to the editor. Such journalism usually aims to persuade readers (though they must still draw upon a factual foundation to be opinion *journalism*). Additionally, journalists may produce news analyses that aim to contextualize more episodic news stories.
- Opinion pieces usually appear in the Editorial Page or Opinion section of a news product. This separation is intended to make clear to readers that this content is opinion-based and should not be confused with the reported, fact-based content that appears elsewhere in the product.

Chapter 38

Story Ideas

One of the most important – and consistently underrated – skills a journalist must have is the ability to find and pitch compelling story ideas. This is an advanced journalistic skill that takes time and instincts to develop. Journalists who have good story ideas quickly distinguish themselves from newsroom peers who do not. While editors might suggest or assign story ideas to a reporter when the reporter is beginning their journalistic career, that reporter will be expected to eventually find and develop their own story ideas.

When it comes to finding story ideas, journalists benefit from the fact that they are human beings with their own lives and interests and often exist within the same cultures and places as their sources and audiences. By sharing some of the same experiences and reality as the people who consume their work, journalists develop instincts over time about the communities they cover and serve. They come to understand what those people value, what interests them, and what their information needs are. And, the more they understand their audience, the better their story ideas will be.

Identifying Story Ideas

It is not uncommon for aspiring journalists to wonder: Where do story ideas come from?

The answer is, for good and bad, that story ideas come from absolutely everywhere. Journalists develop story ideas through a huge variety of means and sources. However, most of these methods are a result of following one's curiosity and establishing relationships with key people and topics. Journalists also use their professional instincts and their shared understanding of journalistic news values to decide when a story idea is a good one that will serve the needs and wants of the communities they cover.

Indeed, part of what defines many journalists' sense of professional identity is the 'sixth sense' they develop about knowing how to find (and then report) a good news story.

Such a sixth sense takes time to develop, though. Here are a few tips for helping aspiring journalists find good journalistic story ideas.

Encourage Your Curiosity

Ask questions. Ask more questions. And then when you're done, ask a few more questions.

Don't be afraid to unleash your curiosity, even when you're in social situations outside of your professional life. If you see an interesting flyer on a wall outside your favorite coffee shop, check it out. If you notice a hole in a story your friend just told you, ask about it. If you don't understand how a process works, find out.

Some of the best story ideas arise organically from reporters noticing holes, gaps, or problems in the world around them and then following up on those gaps. If you have questions, there's a good chance other people out there do, too. Don't be afraid to ask questions and doggedly pursue answers. Your future audiences will be glad you did.

Keep Your Ears Open

Always listen to the people around you: in real life, on social media, and through your own news consumption. By keeping your ears open, engaging with the people and world around you and learning new things, you will become exposed to new ideas and information that could help you find story ideas (in addition to becoming a more well-rounded person). A potential story idea could come from a stranger's post in a Facebook group you belong to, from an overheard conversation at the grocery store, or from an anecdote a friend shares at a party. Over time, you will hone your instincts and become more quick and comfortable recognizing story ideas in even the most unexpected places.

Develop a Niche

Another good way to develop story ideas over time is to dedicate yourself, in part, to a specific topic or community. If you like music, do you have a favorite genre? If you follow local politics, is there a specific movement or topic you find to be under-served? If you like sports, is there a specific team or fandom that you follow?

Going deep on a particular person, topic, or beat can help you familiarize yourself with (and develop relationships with) the key stakeholders pertaining to that beat. Once you have identified a niche, continue to follow it and learn more about it. For example, you might follow a hashtag related to that topic, join a Facebook group about that topic, go to a lecture or reading about that topic, read books about that topic, or go to a performance about that topic. By becoming an expert on that beat, you can ensure that you are able to stay on top of the latest trends and questions, and that you are sufficiently informed to write something insightful about it.

Consume Journalism

This cannot be overstated: consume journalism! (This is doubly true if you cover a beat. See what other journalists are covering, and how they are covering it.) Consuming journalism will not only help you become more knowledgeable of current events but it will also help you become a more versatile news producer. For example, it can help you learn about different journalistic story structures and stylistic norms.

You can also get great story ideas from consuming journalism. For example, you may come across an interesting story that focuses on the national level, leaving the local angle wide open for you to report on. You may also find that you have some questions after consuming a news piece. Focus your reporting on answering those questions or addressing gaps in the story. (Again, chances are other people will have similar questions.) Oftentimes, an existing news story offers the needed spark for a follow-up that extends or builds upon existing coverage of a topic or issue.

Trust your instincts. Chances are that if you are interested by an idea, your audience (whom you'll come to know over time as a journalist) will be interested as well. Once you have identified a story idea, think about the news values your idea might fulfill and how the idea might inform and interest audiences. Use that information to form the basis for the next step in the life cycle of a story idea: pitching it to your editor.

Key Takeaways

» While editors may assign story ideas to a journalist during the early stages of the journalist's career, that journalist will be expected to find and develop their own story ideas over time.

- Ideas can come from many places. You are surrounded by them. Some helpful strategies are to encourage your curiosity, keep your ears open, develop a niche, and consume lots of journalism.
- Trust your instincts. If you are interested by an idea, there is a good chance that there is an audience out there for it.

Chapter 39

Misinformation and Disinformation

In 2017, the Collins Dictionary selected "fake news" as its word of the year. This was a nod to the popularization of the term in the United States during that time, and to broader concerns that the U.S. was entering a "post-truth" or "post-fact" era where inaccurate information was overloading the system, disrupting everything from journalism to business to politics.

However, *the term "fake news" is highly problematic*. First, its common use is highly imprecise: It covers a spectrum from simple and accidental mistakes to negligent behavior to planned and strategic manipulation. Second, the term carries a particular cultural meaning that was intentionally crafted to discredit journalistic outlets – regardless of how broadly (and imprecisely) the term is applied.

Scholars and linguists alike have thus cautioned against using the term "fake news," and to instead draw upon more-specific terms to cover the associated issues. Chief among these are "misinformation" and "disinformation," which similarly comment on the (in)accuracy of information while being cognizant of the *intent* (or underlying motivations) of the communicator. While intent can be difficult to ascertain, the distinction is nevertheless useful in separating sloppy and accidental work from bad-faith efforts designed to confuse audiences, all the while carrying less of the cultural baggage connected to the term "fake news."

Misinformation

Misinformation refers to *information whose inaccuracy is unintentional*. As media scholar Caroline Jack notes, journalists (and people in general) often make mistakes in the course of reporting new information. This may result from the journalist's lack of understanding of a topic to their misinterpretation of a source's claim (or failure to independently verify it) to their inability to disentangle conflicting information.

In all of these cases, the journalist may have made a simple error or been naive. At worst, they were negligent in not double-checking some information they opted to publish. However, the key for categorizing something as misinformation is that the journalist did not intend to deceive but simply made an error. Ideally, and under most journalistic codes of ethics, such errors will be quickly and clearly corrected.

An illustrative example of this was when the *Chicago Daily Tribune* famously misreported in an early edition that Governor Thomas Dewey had beat incumbent President Harry Truman in the 1948 U.S. presidential election. The deadline for the early edition forced the newspaper to be printed before many states had reported results from their polling places. The *Tribune* therefore relied on the conventional wisdom of the day – many polls indicated Dewey would win by a wide margin – and the assessment of one of its veteran political analysts, and boldly proclaimed Dewey's victory. When the *Tribune* realized that the race was far closer than anticipated, it changed the headline of the late evening edition to reflect the closeness of the race. (By that point, however, more than 150,000 copies of the paper had already been printed with the erroneous headline.) Truman eventually won with a narrow margin, leading to much embarrassment for the *Tribune*.

More recently, major journalistic outlets have erroneously misidentified the perpetrators of attacks. For example, the *New York Post* famously featured, on a large cover photo and story, two individuals that were said to be the duo behind the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. The assertion, which came out of a crowdsourced investigation led by online sleuths on Reddit, turned out to be false. The *Post* also played a role in unintentionally promoting false rumors by retweeting claims that the New York Stock Exchange trading floor had been flooded during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. While these examples should not be simply excused as inconsequential mistakes – they can and do cause real-world harm to both the subjects of a story and to audiences – it is crucial to distinguish that they are not malicious errors designed to sow confusion. They were instances of sloppy journalism.

As these examples also show, misinformation is most often produced during periods of unfolding crisis or fast-moving developments. Journalistic outlets have a duty to keep people informed, especially when their safety or well-being may be placed at risk (e.g., as news about a bombing begins to break). They thus face pressure to report and publish quickly, which increases the likelihood of making errors. This is doubly true when they compete for audience attention during those news-breaking stages, and are thus incentivized to "scoop" competing outlets by being the first to report a story.

Disinformation

Disinformation refers to *information that is deliberately false or misleading*. In these cases, the would-be journalist (and, more often, communicators operating outside of the journalism industry) are not simply making errors in the heat of the moment. Instead, they are seeking to sow confusion or promote a particular narrative that *they know* to be untrue (or, at best, only partly true).

For example, in the aforementioned case of news organizations misinforming the public about the New York Stock Exchange trading floor being flooded, the false information was deliberately seeded by individuals doing it "for the lulz." Put another way, those individuals had the intent to sow confusion – the confusion was their source of amusement – and they thus sought to disinform others by leveraging the naivete of some journalists (who were then retweeted by other journalists who trusted them, creating a cascade).

There are far more malicious examples of disinformation, however. For example, in September 2014, a number of sock puppet (fake) Twitter accounts began systematically spreading false reports about an explosion and toxic fume hazard at a chemical manufacturing plant in Louisiana. The coordinated effort also included stories appearing in spoofed (fake) versions of local news websites, fabricated YouTube videos, and even text messages that were sent to some local residents. No explosions had actually taken place, though. Researchers later traced those efforts to a state actor: a Russia-backed organization called the Internet Research Agency. Many intelligence services have identified the Internet Research Agency as being behind a number of efforts to destabilize U.S. politics by flooding social media with disinformation.

Disinformation is not limited to complete fabrications that lack any factual basis, though. It also includes the notion of *enrichment*, wherein information is selectively (and, again, intentionally) added or omitted in order to alter the meaning of a message. This may include intentionally decontextualizing information – which is a separate matter from failing to offer full context due to space constraints – as well as intentionally casting information in a misleading (or unfair) light. Enrichment is more commonly found in disinformation produced by pseudo-journalistic outlets (especially highly partisan ones) than complete fabrications because it is easier for those would-be journalists to deny intent.

Discrediting Journalism

The term "fake news" is thus designed to lump together both intentional and unintentional errors in order to discredit the institution of journalism. Put another way, it is designed to blur lines in order to more easily ascribe malicious intent to journalists – and especially those who publish information that is critical of the accuser.

While the term may seem new to popular communication (or at least newly rediscovered in it), the denouncing of media and journalism through derogatory language is part of a long-standing strategy observed both within and beyond the United States. Allegations that the press are liars have been used as a political device by numerous leaders (especially in autocratic regimes) to silence oppositional and independent voices. Indeed, the very inception of the press was marked by allegations from political and religious leaders that 'the public' should not be allowed to publish unfiltered information and opinion, and that 'the public' would only be harmed by lower barriers to publication. Newspapers in particular were often charged as being full of lies, bias, and distortion – or, more simply, as being vehicles for "fake news."

However, the resurgence of the term is of particular concern to free press advocates who have observed important social consequences. Legally, the popularization of the term is credited with facilitating the passing of so-called "fake news" laws that give autocratic and pseudo-democratic states more power in regulating news media. Politically, the term is credited with increasing polarization and the fragmentation of audiences, which may now gather in echo chambers to avoid what it considers "fake news." Socially, it has resulted in more acts of violence against journalists by regular citizens. This last change has been so pronounced even in the United States that global organizations like Reporters Without Borders have begun tracking domestic attacks against U.S. journalists.

Additionally, the term "fake news" is today applied in a wide array of contexts – many of which do not involve journalism at all. For example, it is not uncommon to see the term used to marginalize dissenting opinions, as with a political candidate who might charge their opponent with promoting "fake news" when they simply assert that their health care policy is better. It is even sometimes used in day-to-day disagreements between friends, like when one asserts that their preferred team is better. ("That's fake news!") Scholars have argued that the term has been deliberately seeded in such a wide array of contexts in order to equate any form of inconvenient information with journalism and, in turn, make it easier to discredit journalism via the rhetorical device of "fake news."

Seeding Mass Confusion

The strong resurgence of the term in recent years has been led largely (but not exclusively) by conservative commentators. It has been used most vociferously (and effectively) by former U.S. President Donald Trump who, in 2018, awarded what he called the “fake news award” to traditional U.S. media outlets.

Trump’s repeated claims that major news outlets lied about numerous aspects of his political and personal lives even as he made a range of demonstrably false claims at an unprecedented rate (for a high-ranking elected leader) has been linked to the notion of *gaslighting*. As media scholar Caroline Jack argues, this rhetorical and psychological strategy relies on the intentional orchestration of deceptions and biased narrations to not only confuse individuals but further distort audiences’ trust in their own perceptions and memories. The term “gaslighting” is also not new – it has been traced to a 1938 theatrical play – but it is useful in conceptualizing attempts by political actors to use misdirection, denial, and disinformation to help sow confusion and undermine trust in institutions.

More broadly, the use of systematic campaigns to confuse the public and undermine trust in institutions has occurred multiple times throughout history and across different international contexts. (These are different from *propaganda*, which is a more common effort to strategically use information to *increase* trust in institutions or build support for (or against) a cause.) For example, the former Soviet Union used the term *dezinformatsiya* to conceptualize coordinated state efforts to disseminate false or misleading information to journalistic media (among other forms of media) in targeted countries or regions. This was just one of their *activnye meropriyatiya*, or ‘active measures,’ employed by the state to strategically undermine and disrupt governance by opposing nation-states while strengthening the positions of allies. These measures included spreading disinformation through multiple channels (e.g., through fake grassroots campaigns, a practice also known as astroturfing) to widen existing domestic rifts, stoke existing tensions, and complicate international relations.

More recently, scholars have used the term *xuanchuan* (a nod to an existing Chinese term) to describe the use of coordinated posts on social media to flood conversational spaces with a mix of positive messages, negative messages, and attempts to change the subject as part of a broader misdirection strategy. Under this approach, the goal is not to simply promote false information but rather to overwhelm the system with information, making it harder for individuals to come across certain kinds of information. For example, analysts have pointed to China’s so-called “50 Cent Army” (or “50 Cent Party”) – groups of online commentators thought to number in the millions who are regularly employed by Chinese authorities – as an example of the mobilization of large groups to systematically promote echo chambers, hijack hashtags, and steer public discourse away from sensitive topics.

It is important to note that although they can be useful in capturing specific approaches to seeding mass confusion, terms like 'dezinformatsiya' and 'xuanchuan' can also promote negative stereotypes and limit conversation. For example, there are also related non-state efforts to disrupt specific social campaigns, as when K-Pop fans banded together to hijack hashtags used to coordinate white supremacist activity. These terms should thus be used with care due to the cultural associations they elicit. Easier and cheaper access to powerful computers and high-speed internet connections have made it easier for individuals and small teams around the world to automate the production and amplification of disinformation in digital environments.

The resurgence of the term "fake news" and high-profile, coordinated disinformation campaigns have helped promote a rise in civic and governmental attempts to counter online misinformation and disinformation. In particular, several fact-checking organizations have emerged in recent years. These organizations aim to authenticate statements made by institutional sources (e.g., elected leaders), debunk social media hoaxes, and assess the legitimacy of particular information sources. However, several scholars have found that such interventions have made little headway in combating large-scale disinformation campaigns or restoring trust in journalistic institutions. Thus, journalistic outlets are still seeking effective solutions to countering disinformation, all the while struggling to adapt to a fast-paced environment that makes it easier for them to produce misinformation themselves.

Key Takeaways

» "Fake news" is a highly problematic term that was crafted with the intention of discrediting journalism and blurring the lines between professional news products and general information. Its popularization has been credited with reducing trust in journalism and increasing violence against journalists.

» The terms "misinformation" and "disinformation" help to capture the range of inaccurate information in an accessible way. Misinformation refers to information whose inaccuracy is unintentional (e.g., getting some information wrong during a breaking news event). Disinformation refers to information that is deliberately false or misleading (e.g., an individual fabricating a statement or altering the meaning of a statement by intentionally omitting information in a selective way).

- Coordinated campaigns to disinform audiences have been credited with promoting polarization, stoking domestic tensions, and undermining trust in a range of democratic processes. Such campaigns have been enacted by both state and non-state actors.

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Unit IX

Sourcing and Verifying Information

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Chapter 40

News Sources

The term 'news source' refers to *any person, organization, document, or object that provides information to journalists*. This may include the spokesperson for an international aid group, an academic, or a regular citizen who witnessed an event. It may also include press releases, court filings, reports published by interest groups, or datasets produced by government agencies.

Sources are crucial to journalism for several reasons. First, journalists cannot observe everything first-hand. For example, they may be asked to write a story about an individual killed by an on-duty police officer, even though the journalist did not witness the shooting. As such, the journalist must seek out individuals who may have seen the shooting and triangulate their accounts to approximate the truth about what happened. Second, journalists lack expertise in certain matters, and they must therefore speak with an expert source (e.g., a climate scientist) in order to better inform news audiences. Third, sources are sometimes the center of a story, as with the head of a government agency who is alleged to have engaged in corrupt acts and should be given a chance to respond to the allegations.

However, the relationship is not unidirectional. Sources also need journalists. First, sources often depend on journalists to spread their views. Without the support of international media, for example, a climatologist's research findings may not receive a great deal of attention or impact policymakers around the globe. Second, sources gain legitimacy by being featured in respected news media. For example, a rebel leader in Kyrgyzstan may be seen as important (and possibly legitimate) if they're deemed worthy of being profiled by *The New York Times*. And, third, sources often have agendas of their own and seek to promote them by gaining media attention. For example, the head of an agency may play up international tensions for a news story in order to secure more funding for their agency.

Sourcing is particularly important because some scholars have argued that what a source is quoted as saying can be even more important than what the journalist writes. That is, news audiences may view the source as being more knowledgeable than the journalist, and thus view the quote as more authoritative than the surrounding context offered by the journalist. (Conversely, audiences may also view the source as more self-interested, especially if they already have low trust in that kind of source.) Moreover, even when they are not quoted, sources often influence how journalists think about a development and consequently produce news about it.

Sourcing, Power, and Authority

Given that both journalists and sources often have something to gain and lose in their exchanges, *the practice of sourcing can also be thought about as an exchange of power*. The journalist-source relationship can be adversarial as well as mutually beneficial. For example, a journalist may benefit from having frequent access to a high-ranking official, who in turn benefits from having a sympathetic ear during times of distress. Conversely, a journalist may receive public acclaim for producing a story that details a previous source's dishonesty.

This negotiation of power is further implicated by notions of *reputation* and *authority*. Journalists are more likely to receive access to sources and cooperation from them if the journalist (or the organization they work for) is perceived to be prestigious, or if they have access to an audience of interest to the source. For example, a highly partisan commentator on YouTube may get an exclusive interview with a high-profile politician because the politician is trying to increase their outreach with younger members of their base. There is considerable inequity in who is able to draw on specific information sources, and often in ways that favor high-profile, mainstream journalistic outlets or news media with desirable niche audiences.

In a similar vein, *sources are themselves more likely to be selected by journalists if they are located prominently within a power structure*. Put another way, the closer a source is to the locus of power, the more likely it is that a journalist will believe that they are worthy of being interviewed. This is because cultures of journalism often treat those with power as being particularly worthy of attention (given their ability to influence society or some development), and because their position of power is often seen as an indicator of some measure of 'legitimacy' (at minimum to some group of people).

Scholars have found that *individuals who occupy positions of authority are more likely to have their versions of 'truth' be more readily accepted* both by journalists and news audiences. Conversely, those who are seen or treated as 'outsiders' or 'underdogs' are typically not taken as seriously. For example, journalists have historically been more deferential to a police officer's account of an officer-involved shooting than the victim's.

Growing polarization has challenged this, however, especially when it comes to political actors. In such cases, powerful individuals are simultaneously more likely to have their version of 'truth' readily accepted by one group and readily rejected by another. Nevertheless, the apparent existence of a hierarchy of credibility points to a journalistic bias to be more deferential to institutional sources like police officers, military commanders, and other government officials – even in cases where journalists do not fully trust them.

While deference to sources in positions of power (or produced by people or organizations in positions of power) is a common finding across countries, scholars have also found that journalistic trust in institutional structures can vary considerably across countries. For example, journalists in some countries (e.g., Estonia and the United Arab Emirates) express a relatively high degree of trust in the police, while those in others (e.g., Argentina and Tanzania) express low trust. Journalists in the U.S. tend to have relatively low levels of trust in the institutions they cover. Put another way, most U.S. journalists approach claims with a healthy skepticism, even if they're coming from powerful institutions like the U.S. government or the military.

Congruence and Availability

Sourcing practices aren't defined solely by power structures, though. Journalists and their sources are human beings, and they are thus subject to a range of human biases.

One particularly important bias is homophily, or *the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with people who are similar to them*. In the context of journalist-source relations, it produces a phenomenon wherein journalists are *more likely* to interview people who share their characteristics. Put another way, male journalists are more likely to interview male sources while female journalists are more likely to interview female sources. Similarly, journalists of color are more likely to interview sources of color, and so on.

There is less and less-clear evidence about how this phenomenon impacts how sources respond to journalists – that is, if it impacts their willingness to speak to a journalist who does not share their characteristics. However, there is enough evidence from psychology and sociology to presume that sources would be less willing to open up to someone who appears to be a stranger. This, in turn, raises important concerns about the historic over-representation of white, male journalists both domestically (in the case of the U.S.) and internationally (as foreign correspondents reporting on developments around the globe).

Another important consideration has to do with the simple availability of sources. Reporters typically operate on deadlines, be it a fixed deadline in the case of traditional media or a continuous, ASAP deadline in the case of many online media. Because of this deadline pressure, journalists are drawn to sources who are predictable and responsive.

Put another way, *journalists will often turn to sources who respond often and quickly*. They maintain address books with recurring sources, which in turn increases the likelihood of the same sources being interviewed. This is especially the case for public information officers or press agents, or public relations professionals whose job it is to respond to media requests and whose training allows them to promote perspectives favorable to their employer.

The growing resource constraints and inequities within journalism has thus resulted in an even greater reliance on sources who are readily available, since journalists continue to be pressed to do more work with fewer resources (and the same, if not quicker, time restrictions). That, in turn, benefits official and privileged sources who have the resources to respond often, quickly, and with a well-managed message. Indeed, empirical studies of news coverage – both domestic and international – routinely find an over-representation of government sources and spokespeople.

Key Takeaways

- News sources refer to people, organizations, documents, or objects that provide information to journalists. This may include a spokesperson or a report produced by an agency.
- News sourcing involves exchanges of power, with both journalists and sources having something at stake. Additionally, both journalists and sources are more likely to be interacted with if they are located in high places within their respective power structures.
- Journalists are more likely to interview sources who share important visible characteristics with them. Additionally, sources who are more readily accessible are usually more likely to be interviewed by journalists.

Chapter 41

Identifying Appropriate Sources

Every journalistic story includes information from a variety of different sources. It is thus important to consider how a source will contribute to particular elements of a story, and how that source might fit within a mix of multiple sources to make that story well-rounded. This requires the journalist to ask themselves: How can this source's experience or knowledge be used to improve the story or the storytelling? What will one source bring to the table that another cannot? What perspectives are missing from the story?

In order to address these questions, the journalist must have a general sense of the objective of their news story. For example, the journalist may have a story in mind that addresses a new initiative proposed by a mayor to reduce carbon emissions. The journalist may thus surmise that they need to interview: (1) the mayor, who is leading the initiative; (2) a scientist who studies carbon emissions and can comment on whether the initiative is likely to have a meaningful impact on the city's emissions; and (3) stakeholders from impacted groups, such as local businesses that may be impacted by new regulations or advocacy groups that are pushing for emissions reductions.

Once the journalist has identified the right kinds of sources and source mix, they will need to do some research to find the right individuals. This requires actively searching the internet, calling experts and asking for recommendations, and tapping into social media. It is important to recall that journalists must avoid *potential* conflicts of interest, whether real or perceived. Put another way, a journalist should not interview someone with whom they have a personal relationship (e.g., a friend or even their lawyer) or with whom there are intersecting interests (e.g., a company in which they own substantial stock). Sources should be able to offer independent insight and not feel any pressure due to their relationship with the journalist.

News Sources and Expertise

Sources are often featured in news stories because they have some form of *expertise* that is of relevance to the story. Expertise simply refers to *skill or knowledge in a particular area*.

Although "expertise" is sometimes thought about as a special form of knowledge – something that only exceptional individuals can possess – it turns out that most people are actually experts of some kind. For example, I am an expert on the intersection of journalism and technology as a result of my extensive academic study in that area. However, I am also an expert on what it is like to watch the Arsenal football team over the past decade, seeing as I've rarely missed a game. I'm also an expert on what my neighborhood sounds like at night, seeing as I've regularly slept there for the past few years.

While I may be an expert on those three things, I am certainly *not* an expert on many other things. For example, my fashion sense is limited at best, and I would certainly have little to offer a journalist producing a story about the latest fashion trends. Similarly, while I am certainly knowledgeable about what it is like to *watch* soccer, my expertise on how to *dribble effectively in a game* is lacking (by many accounts).

This way of thinking helps journalists recognize that expertise is *neither* universal nor something only held by a certain kind of person (i.e., someone with a specific background or education). Rather, *expertise is contingent on the subject matter at hand* and *may be possessed by a range of different potential sources*.

Thinking About the Source Mix

News stories tend to have multiple sources, and they typically draw upon *multiple forms of expertise* as well as *expertise in different areas*. Thus, it is helpful to think about the main purpose of the story and the *mix of sources* necessary to flesh out that purpose.

For example, in 2019, the *Chicago Tribune* and ProPublica Illinois collaborated on an investigative story titled "The Quiet Rooms" that examined the disciplinary practice of secluding (and isolating) unruly students in public schools around Illinois. The story was rooted in a comprehensive analysis of a database of reports about incidents that resulted in a child being sent into an isolation room. However, in order to answer the questions of 'why' (does this happen?), 'how' (does this get overlooked?), and 'what' (is the impact of these practices?), the story also drew upon sources with expertise that the database cannot offer. It sourced information from scientific experts who study educational practices and could assess the effectiveness of tactics like social seclusion.

It included information from advocates who have expertise on the prevalence of the issue and the challenges to addressing it. It sourced information from school district officials, who have expertise in the day-to-day activities of running a school system and dealing with an array of disciplinary issues. And, it included quotes from schoolchildren who experienced seclusion, and thus have expertise in what it feels like to be isolated.

In short, that story was able to paint a very comprehensive picture of the practice of seclusion in Illinois because it drew on multiple sources, each of whom could contribute something different to a story. While the number of sources for that story was exceptional (ProPublica and the *Chicago Tribune* spoke with more than 120 sources), the emphasis on seeking out a diversified mix of sources is common to both in-depth investigative journalism and day-to-day general assignment reporting.

When writing a story, journalists must thus think about the central question(s) they are aiming to address with their story. Then, they should seek out the sources that have the expertise necessary to address each of those questions from different vantage points.

Throughout this process, the journalist should frequently ask themselves: *Why is this person qualified to answer this question?* Perhaps, it is because they have extensively studied that phenomenon. Perhaps, it is because they hold a position that makes them the ultimate decision-making authority. Perhaps, it is because they have lived experience with that issue.

Additionally, journalists often strive to offer contrasting opinions in their stories in order to introduce competing ideas (and reduce the impacts of the journalist's own biases on the story). Thus, journalists rarely settle for a single source in any one area. Instead, they typically talk to many. (Oftentimes, sources are interviewed but never included in the story because a different source can articulate a point better.) Put another way, good journalists challenge themselves to actively seek out a diversity of voices, perspectives, and identities. They seek out individuals with different backgrounds, life experiences, and areas of expertise.

Following a strategy of interviewing people who can offer different perspectives can help produce a more well-rounded story. However, journalists should take care to avoid false balance – or the portrayal of opposing viewpoints as equally legitimate, even when one is more grounded in evidence or better corroborated by other trustworthy sources. (For example, journalists should not seek out a climate change denier simply to offer an alternative – and discredited – perspective.) Indeed, journalists sometimes end up promoting misinformation in the search for balance, which effectively goes against their purpose as journalists.

Sourcing is ultimately a highly consequential act, but by focusing on the expertise of individual sources and incorporating a diverse mix of sources, journalists can produce better, more informative stories.

Key Takeaways

» Journalistic stories tend to incorporate the expertise and perspectives of multiple sources. It is important to consider what each source contributes to different aspects of the story, and how that source fits into a broader source mix.

» Expertise simply refers to skill or knowledge in a particular area. Expertise comes from many things, such as extensive schooling and practice as well as lived experience within a context. However, expertise is contingent on the subject matter at hand; an individual may be an expert on one thing but not many others.

» Journalists should strive to draw on multiple forms of expertise as well as expertise in different areas when writing their stories. In particular, they should seek out contrasting opinions – while being careful to not fall into the trap of false balance – and a diversity of voices.

Chapter 42

Contacting Sources and Arranging Interviews

When a journalist has identified a few potential sources for the story they are reporting, the next step is to reach out to those sources to request an interview. When journalists request an interview from a source, they are requesting the source's time: time away from their work, their families, and their hobbies or responsibilities. Thus, it is important that journalists approach sources thoughtfully and with a clear objective. The former increases the likelihood that the source will agree to give you their time; the latter helps ensure that you use their time thoughtfully.

Here is some advice for effectively contacting sources and securing a contribution to your story.

The Initial Contact

You can request an interview with a potential source in a variety of different ways. The primary ways are in person, over the phone, and via email.

Regardless of how you reach out, always be polite and professional and include all of the essential information that a source would need to know about you and your story. In a friendly and polite phone call or email, *briefly* introduce yourself, the topic of your story, and the angle of your interview. Give the interview source your name and title, and tell them about the outlet you are reporting for. If you are writing for a publication or for a class project, make that clear. Explain whether the eventual story will be published, and if so, where. (It is good to assume that all stories will eventually be published. Even if you are just doing a class project, you might stumble into a great story that interests local, regional, and national media. You might be surprised by how often that happens.)

Then, give the source an overview of your story and the topic of the interview you hope to conduct with them. Provide them with your best *estimate* of the amount of their time that you are asking for. (This should be based on the amount of information you are hoping to get from this interview, as well as how many questions you plan to ask this source. Some interviews are much longer, or shorter, than others.) Be sure to let your source know how you intend to conduct the interview: in person, over the phone, over video chat, and so on. It is helpful to give them options instead of dictating the medium.

It is usually best to interview sources in person because doing so helps you get to know the source a bit better, pick up on body language and other non-verbal cues, and foster a stronger relationship with the source. When an in-person interview is not possible, perhaps because you and the source live thousands of miles apart, a video or phone interview is an appropriate substitution. Email interviews are almost never a good method for interviewing a source, in large part because communicating via email makes follow-up questions difficult and allows interview sources to practice or prepare canned responses. Put another way, *use email as a last resort for conducting the interview*.

Once you have made all of this information clear, try to schedule the interview. Provide a time frame by which you hope to speak to this source, and suggest a few potential dates and times for your interview. Be flexible with timing, though. Because you are asking for your source's time, it is always best to be open-ended with your own schedule to accommodate theirs. Finally, politely thank the source for their time and provide multiple ways for them to contact you with a response, such as your phone number and email address.

If you are contacting a source via email, the tone of your entire email should be respectful and professional. Call your source by their name or title, depending on their profession. Use professional language, and avoid slang. Do not be overly personal. If you send an email request, *it is crucial that you offer a clear and concise subject line*, such as "Media Request: Interview for a story about climate change." Remember that you are asking this person for the favor of their time, and you must craft an email that makes clear how their time will be used and why they should give you that time. With emails in particular, try to keep them as short as possible while including all of these crucial details. A long email may seem intimidating (especially on a busy day) and is thus more likely to be ignored.

Finally, your interview request is just that: a request. Sources might respond to your request to ask for more information or detail about the interview. If they do so, share that with them. But an interview request is not an interview itself. If a source asks you to provide them with a list of the interview questions that you plan to ask, or if they ask you for a draft of the story you are planning to write, *always say no*. It is poor practice to allow sources prior review of your journalism. It also complicates your reporting process, as sources may seek to tweak or edit aspects of your draft, or adjust their own answers based on what you have written. Allowing your source to review a list of interview questions before the interview provides the source an opportunity to practice their responses, create memorized answers, or prepare a way to avoid answering your questions. If your source requests these things, it is best to just say no and move on to someone else.

The Value of Persistence

Ideally, your interview sources will be happy to speak with you, but this isn't always the case. Some sources may be nervous about being interviewed and reluctant to accept an interview request. Your sources may also be busy or difficult to get in touch with in the first place. Just because they did not immediately respond to your request for an interview does not mean that you should give up on interviewing them.

To be a strong journalist is to be a persistent one. You might have to reach out to a potential source multiple times in order to get a response to your interview request, and you should do so politely and creatively. Instead of simply sending the same request over and over (and potentially annoy your source and make them even less likely to participate), try contacting that source through different mediums (e.g., voicemail, email, text message, and in person). Use all of the contact methods you have available, such as both their work email address and a personal email address. Explain to this source why it is important that you speak with them, and why you selected *them* as a key interview source. If this explanation doesn't motivate the source to say yes, try again with a different angle. Remember that you chose this source because they can provide important information or perspective to your story. Keep in mind that you are doing this to serve your audience, so don't be afraid to be politely persistent.

At the same time, don't rely too heavily on a single source. Always have back-up sources in mind, such as a second expert whose research, while perhaps not as closely tied to the story as your first-choice expert, is still relevant to a story you intend to write. If your first-choice sources don't respond in a timely fashion, start reaching out to your back-up sources *even as you continue to reach out to the first-choice sources*. Waiting too long for your ideal response can cause you to miss your deadline.

A Note About Respect

Before you reach out to a potential source, do your research on that person, their experience, and their expertise. Get to know everything you can about them and what makes that person relevant to your story. Apply that knowledge to your interview request, and be respectful to your source throughout the entire interview process. Sources can tell when you have done your homework, and they invariably respond in a more positive and helpful way when you know a bit about them.

The way you arrange and conduct an interview has an impact on the results of that interview. If you are rude or unprofessional, or if you clearly did not do your research, your sources may become uncomfortable with you, limit the amount of information they share with you, abruptly end an interview, or refuse to speak to you again. Additionally, it is helpful to think about each interview source as a potentially recurring source of information that you might return to throughout your journalistic career. Treat them in a way that fosters a long-term professional relationship.

Key Takeaways

- When requesting an interview, briefly introduce yourself, your outlet, your story, and the medium and time estimate for your interview. Be clear, direct, succinct, and professional.
- Sometimes, sources are busy, tough to contact, or averse to doing interviews. Be persistent, and follow up creatively and politely to explain why a source is key to your reporting.
- Do your homework. Before you ever reach out to a potential source, learn what you can about that person and what makes them relevant to your story.

Chapter 43

Generating Good Interview Questions

When a journalist has identified an appropriate interview source and scheduled the interview, the next step is to prepare their interview questions.

The best interview questions are often simple, clear, and well-informed. Think of your interview as a two-way street: Although the journalist should be in control of the interview, its content, and its aims, the journalist and their source will need to get to know about each other, and perhaps even to trust each other, over the course of the interview process. A journalistic interview should feature a well-structured but flexible series of questions in which both the journalist and their source play equally important roles.

Here are some tips to help you craft strong interview questions that can elicit useful information for a news story.

Do Your Homework

Before you interview a source, you should always research them, their experience, and their expertise.

Start with a simple Google search, and then continue with a more strategic search based on the information you need for your story. For example, if you were interviewing me, a professor of journalism, you might begin by reading my faculty biography on the UMass website and skimming my course descriptions and published research on my personal website. If I have conducted a study that is relevant to the story, you might even read through its Abstract, or summary. You may even want to look through my public social media accounts and search for recent interviews I have given.

If I'm the centerpiece of your story, you might even talk to other people who know me before speaking to me.

There are several reasons why it's useful to research someone before talking to them. First, you want to make sure this potential source is the right person to interview for your story. Second, you want to prepare yourself for interviewing them. Researching a source will help you develop interview questions that are well-informed and specific – and much stronger than the vague, general questions that you could ask anyone. This research will also help you to use your interview time more strategically by avoiding questions that are easily answered through cursory research, as well as questions that your source may have been asked many times already. Finally, your source will notice, based on your questions, that you did your homework. Sources always appreciate that and are consequently more likely offer you both more of their time and better responses.

Ask Clear Questions

As you begin to write interview questions, ask yourself: Is this question easy to understand? Could I answer it?

Chances are that if you have to re-read a question to understand it, your source won't have an easy time with that question either. The strongest interview questions have a clear focus on one specific topic, and they are phrased with simple, easy-to-understand wording. Interview questions should also be short and direct. They should be something this particular source can answer based on their own expertise, experience, and/or position.

Avoid asking your source to speak for an entire group or population, rather than answering for themselves. For example, it would not be fruitful to ask me, a single journalism professor, a question like: "Are all journalism professors socially awkward?" (In addition to being rude, that question asks me to make a generalized statement about a big group of people that I am not qualified to answer.)

Don't ask your sources compound, or double-barreled, questions, either. These are confusing and long questions that usually pack two or more questions into one, such as: "Do you support building a new elementary school and increasing teachers' salaries?" Compound questions can be tricky for sources, who will usually only remember to answer one branch of the question. Instead, break these questions out into multiple, simplified and focused questions, such as: "Do you support building a new elementary school?" and "Do you support increasing teachers' salaries?"

Ask Open-Ended Questions

There are two main types of questions that you'll ask your sources: *open-ended questions* and *close-ended questions*.

Open-ended questions are those that invite a source to elaborate on their response. For example, you might ask your source: "Why do you support the Minnesota Vikings?" In order to respond to that question, a source will usually feel the need to construct full sentences that establish and explain their perspective. Open-ended questions thus tend to generate more complete and more thoughtful responses.

On the other hand are close-ended questions, such as yes-or-no questions. Close-ended questions compel sources to respond with short, undetailed responses (such as a simple "yes" or "no"). For example, a yes-or-no question might simply ask, "Do you support the Minnesota Vikings?" A source could answer that by just saying, "yes," which is neither very informative nor a good quote. That question might be okay to set up an open-ended follow-up, such as the aforementioned "Why do you support them?" question. However, they're usually insufficient on their own.

Similarly, you will often want to avoid leading questions, or questions that lead a source toward a specific response. Leading questions can cue sources to answer in the specific way that they believe the interviewer wants them to. This thus influences them to mirror your thinking instead of contributing their own. An example of a leading question might be: "Do you agree that the Minnesota Vikings are the best team in the NFL?" If you are a Green Bay Packers fan, you might no longer feel comfortable being interviewed because you may start to worry about how you might be depicted in the story. There are times, though, when a leading question can be used as a signal to your source. For example, to illustrate that you understand their pain after they've described a harrowing incident, you may ask: "That must have felt awful. What was running through your mind when you received such terrible news?" However, those instances where a leading question is appropriate are relatively uncommon.

Order Your Questions

Although you might write your list of interview questions down in the order in which you think of them, take some time after brainstorming those questions to put them in the best order in which to ask them.

It is generally helpful to start with some simple, introductory questions that help to ease the source into the interview and make them comfortable with both you and the process. After that, group all questions that pertain to a specific topic or aspect of the story together, and complete an entire topic before transitioning to the next set of questions. Structure your interview in a way that guarantees you will get all the information you need while, ideally, sticking to the time estimate you provided for the interview.

If you have a particularly difficult or uncomfortable question, put it further down on your list – even if it breaches your topical organization. You don't want that difficult question to be so low that you may run out of time before getting to it, but you also don't want to risk the source abruptly ending an interview before you have gotten at least some useful information from them.

Be Flexible

Although you did your research and wrote a list of informed, clear, and well-organized questions, you may find that, during the interview, unanticipated questions start popping into your head.

Do not panic! These follow-up questions are natural, and they often provide some of the best information and quotes. Good follow-up questions usually request additional context or explanation and begin with "why" or "how." It is important to *listen carefully when your source is talking* so that you can catch and write down potential follow-up questions. You also need to be flexible enough to know when to introduce those follow-up questions. Often, it is best to do so immediately. However, sometimes, it makes sense to return to them a little later in the interview. It is thus useful to both record an interview and take notes while the source is responding. This way, you can write down follow-up questions and other key information without worrying about missing the exact phrasing for a quote.

If a source's response does not fully answer the question you asked, don't hesitate to ask that same question in a new way. Sometimes, the non-response is due to a misunderstanding of the question. Other times, it is because the initial question gave them room to wiggle out of a full response. Be persistent, and keep asking until you get a satisfactory answer.

Additionally, a source's response might create a better opportunity to follow up with a question you intended to ask later in the interview. Thus, although you might have planned to ask a source about the Green Bay Packers with your fifth question, they may bring up the Packers in their answer to your second question. If that is the case, reorder your questions on the spot to keep a good flow for your interview. If they have fully addressed a question you intended to ask them later on, do not ask the question again. That tells the source you weren't listening.

Ask for Clarity

One of the best parts of being a journalist is that you get to learn and produce stories about many different subjects. Journalists do this by researching new topics and interviewing expert sources about those topics. However, at the end of the day, it is the sources who are the foremost experts – not you.

If you find yourself confused or unsure about a key fact or piece of information during the course of your interview, always, always clarify that information with your source. Ask for an explanation or a simplification. One good way to do this is by summarizing a key point and asking your source if you got the information correct. For example, you might ask: "So, you are saying that if I need to clarify information during an interview, I should take some time to do that with the source. Is that correct?"

Nobody likes feeling dumb or revealing that they don't fully understand something. But not fully understanding something is normal for journalists, especially when they are tackling new topics or digging deep into a particular topic. Sources will often appreciate your honesty and feel more confident that you will accurately portray their perspective if you ask for clarifications. Moreover, even in a pessimistic scenario, it is far better to look 'dumb' to one person than to the potentially large audiences who will come across your work (and who you would be misinforming as a result).

Ask the Concluding Question

Once you have asked all the questions you brainstormed – and all the follow-up and clarifying questions that arose during the course of the interview – try to end with a final open-ended question that allows your source to share anything else they think you ought to know about the topic. This gives the source a chance to bring up something you or they may have forgotten, or simply to contribute information that may be outside of the scope of your questions.

A couple of examples of this type of question are: "Is there anything you'd like to add?" and "Is there anything else I didn't ask you about that is important for me to know?" Oftentimes, the source will say "no" but will nevertheless feel empowered (and thus end the interview on a good note). However, some of the best scoops and story ideas have come from giving sources a chance to tell the journalist information that the journalist didn't even think to ask the source about.

Thank Your Source

By the end of your interview, the source will have shared something precious with you: their time. Thank them for it! This wraps up your exchange in a polite way and lets your sources know you appreciate their time, information, and perspective. This is also a good moment to ask the source for additional contact information, such as an email address or phone number at which you can reach the source should you need to ask a last-minute question or follow up in some manner.

If they were a central source in your story, or if they are the sort of person who does not often get interviewed, you may even opt to send them a copy of your story after it is published. This might make them feel even better about choosing to speak with you, and the extra attention might even make them more likely to respond to you in the future. There's a decent chance another story will come around that requires you to speak to that source, so it is good to treat every source as a potentially recurring one.

Key Takeaways

- The best interview questions are simple, clear, and focused on one specific topic. Use open-ended questions to encourage your source to respond completely to your questions and perhaps to even go beyond your preconceptions.
- Follow-up and clarifying questions will arise during the course of your interview. Good follow-up questions usually request additional context or explanation and begin with "why" or "how." Be flexible in order to catch and write down potential follow-up questions as you listen to your source's responses.
- Be polite yet persistent. If a source is not fully answering your question, ask that question again in a different way. Sometimes, they simply didn't get the gist of the question the first time around.
- End your interview with an open-ended concluding question and thank the source. This gives your source an opportunity to share information about the topic that you might not have cued with your interview questions.

Chapter 44

Conducting Interviews

Asking good questions is the most important part of a journalistic interview, but there's much more to the art of the interview. Successful interviews often require a good amount of preparation and etiquette behind the scenes. Journalists who take the time to select a good interview setting, remember to check their equipment, and know how to use silence to their advantage tend to elicit better interviews.

Here are some things to consider as you prepare for and conduct your journalistic interviews.

Select a Good Interview Setting

A good interview setting can make a big difference to your source's comfort level and the quality of your interview. If you are conducting an in-person interview, select a comfortable, quiet interview setting that is private enough for your source to feel comfortable talking openly. Avoid background noises, such as coffee machines brewing or cars honking, and steer clear high-foot-traffic places such as playgrounds or malls. Your setting should also be a place accessible to both you and your source and in which you can use whatever equipment you need to conduct your interview. (For example, if you need to plug in a device to a power source during the interview, don't meet at a public park.)

Consider asking your source to suggest an interview location where they feel comfortable. They may suggest their office because it is convenient for them, but they may also prefer to go elsewhere where they can speak more privately. Don't be afraid to politely request small changes, such as turning off background music or moving a pet to another room. That will reduce distractions and increase the quality of your recording, should you choose to make one.

Check Your Equipment

As a journalist, you are in charge of making sure your interview goes smoothly. This starts by ensuring you look the part – so dress for the occasion. Often, it also means making sure your technology is your friend. Before you begin (or leave for) an interview, make sure that you have everything you need – your notepad, pen, recording device, interview questions, and so on – and that everything is in good working order. Are your devices fully charged? Did you pack the charging cable for your phone or recorder? Is your recorder or phone app set up with your preferred settings? Do you have a back-up battery? If you are video recording the interview, are the camera settings set to the right defaults?

Don't start an interview until you are ready. Many journalists have lost important details because they forgot to toggle a setting on their recorder, or had to fumble their way through an interview because they forgot their notes in the office. Taking the time to prepare and double-check your equipment will thus keep you from embarrassing yourself or losing access to information during an interview. (In fact, some junior journalists will keep a pre-interview checklist to make sure they don't forget anything.)

Make Your Sources Comfortable

Sources may get nervous when they are being interviewed – especially when that interview is being recorded. (Many journalists don't like being interviewed themselves!)

Take a minute or two at the start of an interview to make your sources more comfortable with the interview process. Re-introduce yourself and the topic of the interview. Walk them through the trajectory of your interview questions, briefly mentioning the different topics you plan to touch on over the course of the interview. Explain how your recording equipment works. Start with simpler questions that are easy for your source to answer. If it's helpful, consider starting with a creative practice question such as, "What did you eat for breakfast?" to set the source at ease. Or, if you had a funny or interesting thing happen to you that morning, you can share that anecdote to humanize yourself and make the source feel more at ease.

Establish the Attribution Parameters

Journalists and their sources should negotiate a clear understanding of what may be quoted and how the source may be identified in a story. This is called *attribution*, or the descriptor the journalist uses to identify the source of a quote or piece of information featured in a story. There are four main levels of attribution for journalistic interviews: *on-the-record*, *on background*, *on deep background*, and *off-the-record*.

On-the-record means that you can freely quote or reference anything the source says and attribute it directly to them by name and title. You should try to keep as much of the interview on-the-record as you can because it allows audiences to see or hear the source's exact words. Complete identification also allows audiences to have a better sense of where a source get their expertise from, as well as the potential biases they're likely to have.

On background (also called 'not for attribution') means that you may quote the source directly but you may not attribute the statements to the source by name. Usually, journalists will provide a general description that gives audiences a sense of the source's position but makes it difficult to positively identify them. An example of such a description is: "according to a senior military officer with direct knowledge of the program." This level also includes quoted statements that have no attribution, such as: "according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity."

On deep background means that you may not quote a source directly or identify them in any way. An example of such a description is: "The *Times* has learned that … ." This is a seldom-used level of attribution, and is usually reserved for sensitive affairs.

Finally, off-the-record is a fuzzy term that often means a different thing to different sources. Usually, it is used to refer to an on-background arrangement, where the information can be used but not be attributed (i.e., an anonymous quote). However, the term is also often used to describe information that journalists cannot use in their story or directly reference in conversations with other sources. For example, a source may tell you, off-the-record, that a state actor hacked the servers handling the e-mails for a political party. While you cannot publish that information right away, you can start chasing other leads. For example, you might want to ping an Information Technology administrator who works with that political party and see if you can get them to bring up the hack. Additionally, even if you can't publish the off-the-record information, the information may prove useful for understanding a different story (e.g., why party officials suddenly proposed new legislation pertaining to cyber security).

Once an interview has begun, your source is speaking on-the-record *unless you and they have agreed in advance that the interview should be carried under a different level of attribution*. Put another way, the 'default' mode is on-the-record. However, it is good practice to be clear about the level of attribution you intend to abide by.

Sources may ask to change the level of attribution at different points of the interview. It is often okay to give the source the opportunity to go on-background or off-the-record at any point. However, if the source says something particularly interesting, try to come back to it in an on-the-record exchange. It is often helpful to explain to the source why it is important for your audiences to know that information, and who shared it. (Moreover, it is possible that the source will start to trust you more as you demonstrate your aptitude as an interviewer.)

Ask for Permission to Record

Recording an interview is generally regarded as a best practice because it allows journalists to accurately transcribe full quotes and to return to the interview to check some details after the fact. (For example, was a key phrase expressed in a sarcastic tone? Or, what was the context around a particular quote again?) It also helps provide corroborating evidence for the journalist's account, especially for stories in which conflict is a key news value.

However, in many states, such as Massachusetts, you are legally required to gain the source's consent before you can start recording the exchange. (Asking for permission is a good, ethical practice in every state.) So, before you begin an interview, ask your source for permission to record it – either through audio or video, depending on the medium through which you plan to tell your story. Sources will typically agree to be recorded, especially if you explain to them that the purpose of the recording is to make sure you're quoting them accurately.

If you can, try to take interview notes even if there is a recording. Recordings sometimes fail and the notes prove essential. Additionally, you often don't have time to listen to an entire recording again before publishing a story. Notes help highlight the key points from an interview, and can be essential to keeping your head straight when you're conducting multiple interviews in a short span of time. When your source says something that you anticipate you'll quote, note the rough timestamp of the recording so you can quickly return to it when it's time to write.

Pay Attention to Your Source

Strong interviews involve a good deal of preparation, and it can be tempting to look over your questions and interview notes during the interview itself. Try not to get too distracted.

Stay focused on your interview subject throughout the interview process, and engage with them and their answers. Make direct eye contact, and provide clear non-verbal cues to show your source that you are paying attention. For example, when they make a key point, you might nod or even give a thumbs-up if the situation warrants it. If they share a humorous story, you might smile. If they're describing a difficult time in their life, you might frown. By using your facial expressions and body language to indicate that you are following and understanding what your source is saying, you are showing them that you are engaged and encouraging them to keep going.

Avoid using verbal cues, such as, "mmm-hmmm" or "gotcha," though. Speaking out loud might accidentally interrupt your source's train of thought or create an interference in your audio recording that will make it harder for you to understand it later on. (This is especially true if you intend to publish a portion of that recording.)

Also, remember: You are here to get the source's expertise and perspective, not to share your own. Avoid interrupting your source unless it is absolutely necessary. And, don't interject your own opinions or editorialize with your own thoughts. Doing so uses time you could be dedicating to gathering new information. It may also influence the source to agree with you or provide a response they believe you would like. Again, the interview should not be about you.

Stay in Control

As the journalist, you should be in control of the focus, content, and direction of an interview.

Don't allow your source to take control of an interview, either accidentally on purpose, by changing the subject, going off topic, asking you questions, or dedicating too much time to a particular topic. As needed, politely redirect the interview to the next key topic or return to a skipped-over topic. Although you want to avoid interrupting your sources, you may occasionally need to do so in order to regain control of an interview. Key phrases that might help you redirect an interview include: "I'd like to return to X," "I want to make sure we fully discuss Y," and "Your response has me thinking about Z." (Remember, sources often have their own agendas and reasons for speaking with you, and they may thus try to take control of the interview to maximize their interests. Don't let them succeed.)

Use Silence

One of the most valuable tools a journalistic interviewer has is silence.

When a conversation lapses and the speakers are silent, people generally feel nervous and are compelled to start talking again in order to break the silence. Use that habit to your advantage. If a source doesn't answer your question, or if they answer a question too briefly, don't immediately continue on to the next question. Stay silent for a bit to encourage your source to continue speaking or elaborate on an answer. (If silence makes you feel uncomfortable, start counting to eight in your head when the feeling of discomfort sets in.)

Check, Check, and Double-Check

When you reach the end of your interview, double-check your questions and notes to make sure asked everything you needed to. It is okay to politely ask for a moment to do that. Before you leave the premises, check your recording itself. Did the recording capture the entire interview? Is the audio quality good?

It is important to do double-check everything because you may not be able to interview that source again before your deadline. Thus, you might be saving yourself a headache by just taking an extra couple of minutes to make sure everything is as you expect them to be.

Finally, never leave an interview without asking your source to provide critical attribution information. This includes the spelling and pronunciation of their name, their full professional title (or other descriptive information about their credentials, in the context of the story), and any contact information you need to get in touch with that person again. At the end of the interview, consider asking your source to recommend additional sources that might provide additional information for this story or topic, such as another knowledgeable person or a relevant document.

Key Takeaways

» Before starting an interview, make sure you are looking professional and that you are prepared. Check to make sure you have everything you need, such as notepad and back-up batteries, and verify that all of your equipment is working properly.

» Select a quiet interview location that makes both you and your source comfortable. Avoid background noises and highly trafficked areas where other people and sounds could interrupt your interview or distract the source.

- Pay attention to your source throughout the entire interview process. To show that you are engaged and on the same page as your subject, use non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions.
- Stay in control of the interview, and focus on the source. Avoid editorializing or sharing your own perspective and opinions, which could influence an interview subject to share thoughts that simply mirror your own.

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Chapter 45

Verifying Information

According to former journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, "the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification." As such, verification is absolutely central to journalism – or, at the very least, 'good' journalism.

Verification refers to *the act of establishing or testing the truth or correctness of a fact, theory, statement, etc., by means of special investigation or comparison of data*. Put another way, it is the act of seeking out corroborating evidence that would give us greater confidence that *something* is in fact true.

The Value of Verification

Verification is necessary to ensure that journalists get what happened down correctly. Truth ultimately demands accuracy, and the process of verification can serve as a means for sorting through different perceived realities by identifying inaccuracies and approximating truth through corroboration.

Within newsrooms, it is not uncommon to hear the cliché, "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." This isn't just because journalists have a great degree of self-loathing and significant trust issues. It's because skepticism lies at the heart of the journalistic cultures in many places, including the U.S. Journalists understand that sources often have agendas, and thus a purpose for speaking to a journalist (i.e., to get favorable coverage for something they care about). Even if the source is not acting in a self-interested way, the source might simply misremember a piece of information or recall seeing something that never actually happened. Even documents might have mistakes in them that a journalist will not want to repeat in their reporting.

In a selfish way, verification is also important because journalists trade on their social currency. Put another way, journalists who are seen as being credible are more likely to have their work taken seriously, and sources will be more likely to divulge information to credible journalists. A big part of establishing that credibility is demonstrating the ability to consistently and rigorously vet information.

There is no single way to verify information, but here are some helpful strategies and tools that you can master to quickly evaluate the quality and veracity of different information.

Interrogate Your 'Facts'

One strategy is to commit to interrogating all of your 'facts' as you would a suspect. Those 'facts' may have come from your own research or from something a source said.

Start by jotting down all of the assertions and factual information you might include in your story. Then, ask yourself: How do we know this fact? Why is this assertion true? What are the assumptions underlying this statement? At the heart of your interrogation should be the question: *Why should the reader, viewer, or listener believe this*?

The goal of your interrogation should be to *triangulate* information, or find multiple sources that say or show the same thing (or at least highly similar things). This might involve asking multiple people questions about the same thing and seeing if the information they give you is consistent. For example, if three people describe an incident in the same way, you can have greater confidence that the description captures the truth of what happened.

Your interrogation should focus on getting as close as possible to the primary (original) sources of information. For example, if a spokesperson for the police department says that crime dropped by five percent, ask them for a copy of the data. If a source tells you the bar across the street is owned by an anti-alcohol advocate, pull the property record for the bar and research the owner. In general, presume that any single source is wrong and make it your job to check if they might actually be right.

Use Websites and Tools

The single most useful general tool for verifying information is a search engine. Modern journalists must become masters at knowing which search terms to use and how to make effective use of the 'advanced search' functionality of most search engines. For example, if a journalist was trying to determine if I still work at UMass, they could use the advanced search functionality in Google (or DuckDuckGo, if you like your privacy!) to limit results to the "umass.edu" domain. Alternatively, if they're looking for any results about a journalism professor with my name, they could wrap my name in quotation marks ("Rodrigo Zamith") to denote that the terms "Rodrigo" and "Zamith" should appear alongside each other (and in that order), and then add "journalism" as the end (i.e., search for '"Rodrigo Zamith" journalism').

For verifying identities, the websites AnyWho and Spokeo are useful tools that allow you to look up a person's name, age, and address based on public records. They also offer additional information through their paid features.

For verifying pictures that you might have come across on social media, the websites TinEye and Google Image Search are very helpful. They allow you to upload an image and the sites then show the many web pages where that image has appeared. This is especially helpful when a picture is alleged to represent a recent event – an assertion that can be easily debunked if it appeared online prior to the event. Moreover, the website FotoForensics and the program JPEGSnoop can help you use computer algorithms to detect whether an image has been altered by tools like Photoshop.

For verifying whether something actually happened at a particular location, it can be useful to double-check details from the photo with satellite imagery or a simple Google Maps search. For example, if you come across tweets saying a police officer was shot at a White Castle in Boston, you could easily debunk that by searching if White Castle has any locations in Boston. (They don't, and that's okay.) Similarly, Google Maps' street view can sometimes be used to double-check details about a setting. You could even check if the weather conditions in a photo are corroborated by weather records about the location where the event allegedly took place.

Finally, fact-checking websites like Snopes can be immensely useful when a rumor starts to pick up speed. Such websites will often quickly identify and debunk misinformation, disinformation, and simple hoaxes spreading on the web. Quite often, a new rumor (and supposedly corroborating evidence) is just a rehash of a previously debunked piece of misinformation or disinformation.

Bookmark Reliable Information Sources

Local, state, and federal governments are major producers of factual information, as are academic institutions, non-profit interest groups, and supranational governmental bodies (e.g., the United Nations). Familiarizing yourself with their websites and the kinds of information those institutions produce can be a useful time-saver.

For example, if you are looking to double-check unemployment statistics in the United States, a good first stop would be the Bureau of Labor Statistics' website, which compiles monthly unemployment reports. If you want to double-check crime rates in the United States, a good first stop would be the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program (or, for more recent local information, a local police agency's website). If you want to double-check whether the United States has a higher per-capita death rate than Brazil for an infectious disease, a good first stop would be the World Health Organization's website.

There are many useful directories for finding the right websites for certain kinds of information – so many that I cannot possibly list them all here. However, the key is come up with an effective system for bookmarking useful sources of information and organizing them in a way that allows you to quickly find the right bookmarks. For example, many journalists will use tags in conjunction with their bookmarks. That way, if they're ever looking to double-check any 'health' information, they can quickly find the right subset of websites. To that end, it is helpful to master your preferred browser's bookmaking functionality or to use advanced bookmark managers (e.g., Raindrop and Memex).

Keep an Accuracy Checklist

Once you have finished writing your article, it is also helpful to use an accuracy checklist. For example, your accuracy checklist may involve double-checking:

- The spelling for all names, companies, titles, and place names that are featured in the story.
- All of the statistics featured in the story, taking special care to ensure you are using the right scale (e.g., "million" vs. "billion").
- All references to times, distances, and dates.
- All of the quotations in the story, ensuring that they match any recordings you may have of those statements.
- All arguments or narratives that depend on a fact, ensuring that they are logically consistent with that fact.

To apply that checklist rigorously, it can be helpful to print a copy of the story (e.g., article or voice-over script), go through every sentence, and circle every fact or assertion in it. If you can attribute all those red circles to an authoritative source or to multiple sources, then you can feel good about filing your story.

Key Takeaways

- Verification refers to the act of establishing or testing the truth or correctness of a fact, theory, statement, etc., by means of special investigation or comparison of data. It is an essential component of 'good' journalism.
- Verification helps protect a journalist's credibility, which is a key form of social currency for journalists.
- There is no single way to engage in verification but there are a number of resources that can help you verify information quickly. Moreover, it is helpful to learn best practices like keeping an accuracy checklist so that, over time, verifying information can become second nature.

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Unit X

Creating Journalistic Content

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Chapter 46

Leads and Nut Grafs

The term *lead* (also spelled as 'lede') refers to *the first paragraph of a journalistic story*, or first two paragraphs, in the case of an *extended lead*. In the case of a broadcast newscast, the term can be used to refer to either the first story of the newscast (opening segment) or to the way the individual broadcast story begins.

Leads carry the critical responsibilities of drawing in audiences' attention and interest while informing them of the key elements of a story, and effectively 'leading' audiences into the rest of an article. Both of these goals are equally important.

Leads are particularly instrumental in giving news consumers a brief glimpse into the story before they have to commit fully to reading it, listening to it, or watching it. Put another way, a lead should make your audiences either want to continue reading beyond the first paragraph or feel sufficiently informed that they'll get the gist of the story even if they move on before reaching the conclusion.

The 5 W's and H

The typical news lead aims to first and foremost inform news audiences. It does this by *including the most essential information about the story right at the beginning*, namely by addressing the so-called "5 W's and H" of a story. These are the essential questions journalists must answer about any topic: Who? What? When? Where? Why? And, of course, How?

For example, a journalist might make clear in the first paragraph of a story that Candidate X (who) won an election (what) in Amherst (where) last night (when) because 67 percent of voters cast their ballots for them (why).

This kind of lead is called a *summary lead*. It is highly descriptive and is a hallmark of so-called "hard news" stories written in a "straight news" style. Audiences will often encounter these in breaking news coverage or in stories written by newswire services.

The Nut Graf

News leads are typically short (two to three sentences in length) and get to the point of an article quickly so as not to lose the audience's attention. Because of this short length, it is sometimes impossible to answer all 5 W's and H in a single lead paragraph – especially if the lead is crafted to draw the audience in.

When that is the case, journalists generally provide the second-most important information, or answer the critical questions they could not address in the lead, in the *nut graf* (also spelled "nut graph" or "nutgraph"). The nut graf is usually the second paragraph of an article, or the paragraph immediately following an extended lead.

The responsibility of a nut graf is *to contextualize the most important facts of an article and provide audiences with a clear understanding of that article's angle*. (The angle is the lens through the journalist approaches the central issue or topic examined in the story. For example, when a journalist decides to write a story about a new town zoning ordinance, they could focus on the potential impact of the change on the town's 'character,' or on the individuals who stand to gain or lose most from the change.) The nut graf tells audiences why the story is important and timely. It helps explain where the story is coming from, where it is going, and what is at stake.

This traditional news combination of a strong lead and a clear nut graf right at the beginning of a news story follows the inverted pyramid style of newswriting. Under that style, journalists organize news stories so that they begin with the most essential or important information at the top, and continue with successively less important facts and context.

Other Types of Leads

The aforementioned approach, which packs information quickly at the very beginning of a story with a no-nonsense writing style, reflects just one kind of introduction to a journalistic story. There are several other kinds of leads, especially in stories produced by non-traditional news outlets; longer, in-depth (*long-form*) stories; and in certain genres of journalism (e.g., Arts & Culture journalism).

Anecdotal Lead

One particularly common alternative is the *anecdotal lead*. This is a type of lead in which a journalist begins a story with an anecdote, or illustrative story, to depict a scene or event that guides audiences into the broader context. For example, while covering that same local election, a reporter writing an anecdotal lead might choose to describe the moment Candidate X learned they had won the election – for example, while on the phone with their partner in a room full of exuberant supporters who were about to be showered in red, white, and blue balloons. A similar variant involves starting the story with a powerful quote or a startling statement that immediately grabs the audience's attention.

Analysis Lead

In an *analysis lead*, a journalist synthesizes and analyzes important information in a more contextual introduction to a story. This type of lead helps put current events into perspective for audiences. Using the same local election story as an example, a reporter writing an analysis lead might choose to begin the story with a focus on Candidate X's legislative priorities and how their election has the potential to change the city and impact its citizens in the coming years.

The Blind Lead

With a *blind lead*, the journalist sets a scene or tells a story without immediately making clear the Who or What of a story, in order to build tension, establish a tone, or pique audience interest. In the aforementioned example, the story might begin with details about the supporters' sense of euphoria and surprise before going on to introduce Candidate X.

Selecting a Lead

There are several more types of leads, though. Notably, different types of leads pair better with different topics, and even different tones (e.g., serious, humorous, melancholic, and so on). So, after reporting all the necessary information to produce a good piece of journalism, you'll need to consider what type of lead is the best fit for it.

No matter what type of lead you choose to begin your story, you must inform audiences and interest them in your larger story. As journalist Chip Scanlan put it: "An effective lead makes a promise to the reader or viewer: I have something important, something interesting, to tell you. A good lead beckons and invites. It informs, attracts, and entices."

When deciding how to start your story, take stock of what its strongest element is. This may be a strong anecdote that gives a face to your story and establishes a connection with the audience. Or, it might be an eye-popping statistic that shocks the audience and makes them want to read on. Or, if you are producing a shorter news brief or breaking news story, the strongest element may simply be a succinct summary of what happened.

Example: Worker's Compensation

For example, in 2015, journalists from ProPublica and NPR found that people living in different U.S. states could receive drastically different worker's compensation benefits for the same injuries. They crunched some more numbers, talked to several experts and victims, and wrote a story titled, "How Much Is Your Arm Worth? Depends On Where You Work."

Using data from different states, the journalists were able to assign a maximum dollar amount to a number of different body parts. There was a fair bit of data behind the story, and it is easy to imagine a lead that simply pointed to the disparity.

However, these journalists had a different idea. They chose to lead with extended anecdotes involving two men: They were of similar age, lived just 75 miles apart, were married to a spouse and had two kids, and had lost a portion of their left arm in a machinery accident at work in an industrial plant. However, the fourth paragraph hits us with a major discrepancy: One of those men received just $45,000 in workers' compensation for the loss of his arm. The other was awarded benefits that could surpass $740,000 over his lifetime. Then, in the fifth paragraph, we finally get to the nut graf: These experiences illustrate the vast gaps in the workers' comp benefits offered by different states. The rest of the story goes on to describe other differences in workers' comp benefits across states, and the reasons for them.

What ProPublica does well here is to suck the reader in with a story about two similar people who were forced into two very different paths when they had comparable problems. The strength of their anecdotes, and in particular the discrepancy in their outcomes, outweighed any other potential opener.

Example: Refugees in Europe

As a contrast, consider a 2016 story from *The Guardian* titled, "Quarter of child refugees arriving in EU traveled without parents." In that case, the strongest element in the story is the observation that almost 100,000 child refugees who arrived in Europe the previous year came without their parents.

This is a staggering figure whose magnitude is likely to shock the audience. It is thus an apt choice to serve as the centerpiece to a summary lead: "A quarter of all child refugees who arrived in Europe last year – almost 100,000 under-18s – traveled without parents or guardians and are now 'geographically orphaned,' presenting a huge challenge to authorities in their adopted countries."

From there, the story goes on to highlight other interesting bits of data from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. While that story is also a prime candidate for a strong, compelling anecdote, it is quite possible that the journalist was unable to speak to a child refugee before their deadline. Thus, the statistic was likely the strongest element the journalist had to work with – and so they led with it.

Ultimately, it is crucial that you think strategically about your lead and its goals. Use that short space as an opportunity to draw in audiences, and avoid things that could distract or turn them away, such as clichéd language, rambling sentences, irrelevant or unimportant information, or direct questions. The best leads are succinct and introduce audiences either to new information, a captivating incident, or a striking statistic. And, a successful lead will linger in the minds of audiences long after they have consumed it.

Key Takeaways

» The most common type of journalism lead – the summary lead – addresses the classic "5 W's and H" of journalism: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? It is often paired with a nut graf, which contextualizes the most important facts of a news story and provides audiences with a clear understanding of that story's angle.

» There are other leads beyond the summary lead. These include the anecdotal lead, the analysis lead, and the blind lead. Different types of leads pair better with certain topics and the desired tone of writing.

» Regardless of which lead you choose, the goal is to quickly inform audiences and interest them in your larger story. Audiences who are not engaged by a lead will often not go beyond it.

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Chapter 47

Story Structures

Although news stories are sometimes demeaned as being formulaic, that doesn't have to be the case. Journalists are sometimes allowed to exercise a considerable amount of creativity in their writing. In fact, this is increasingly becoming the case as journalistic outlets find themselves in an ever more competitive information environment and fighting for audiences' attention. Put another way, strict, traditional forms of journalistic writing are becoming more flexible, and in some instances have given way to more inventive and engaging forms.

One way in which journalists can express that creative license is in developing a story structure, or *the structural framework that underlies the order and manner in which information and/or a narrative is presented to audiences*. Before doing so, however, it is helpful for the journalist to first take stock of the pieces (i.e., information and anecdotes) they have. Then, they can proceed to seeing how those pieces fit together best.

Below is some advice for how you can organize your pieces and select an appropriate story structure for them.

Taking Stock of the Pieces

Before you start writing a news story, take some time to revisit all of your interview notes in order to refresh your memory. If you notice any gaps in your notes, fill them in as best you can. If those gaps are especially important, conduct supplemental interviews with individuals who can address the gaps.

Second, try to categorize the information in your notes. Start by filling in the 5 W's (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) and H (How) of the story. However, you can also start to categorize the information into themes that could potentially stand as distinct subsections of a story. For example, in the case of a story about police shootings, the themes might include: "Police Training", "Community Anger," "Police Feeling Unsupported," and "Legislative Responses Being Considered."

Third, start to match your quotes with your factual information. In an ideal scenario, every major fact in the story should have a corroborating or exemplifying quote — though this is seldom the case in practice. Quotes are sometimes the most powerful parts of a story, and most news stories include a quote after every few grafs (paragraphs).

Fourth, prioritize the information. Which facts are most newsworthy? Which quotes are most interesting? Use a system to denote which categories of information, and what information within each category, are most important. It can be helpful to color-code the information in order to make it easier to drop information into a story and to have a better sense of what can be cut later on.

Finally, write a quick statement that you feel best encapsulates the story. You can imagine this exercise as how you would tell the story to a friend during a short elevator ride. This can serve as the basis for either your lead or nut graf.

Once you are ready to start writing, you'll want to select a story structure that helps you tell your story in a compelling and informative way. This will make the actual writing process much easier and help you produce a story that flows well (and is thus more enjoyable to consume).

Different Story Structures

The *most common* story structure in U.S. journalism is the "inverted pyramid." However, it is not always the best choice, and it is generally best reserved for breaking news stories and short- to regular-length "straight news" stories. Feature stories, investigative stories, and most long-form pieces of journalism are more likely to use alternative structures that allow the journalist to intersperse anecdotes, facts, and quantitative information in more interesting ways.

Common journalistic story structures include the *inverted pyramid*, the *martini glass*, the *kebab*, the *accordion*, and the *pyramid*.

The Inverted Pyramid

The inverted pyramid is characterized by having *the most important, substantial, and interesting information at the beginning of the story*. Then, *with each successive paragraph, the information becomes less important or relevant*. The final few paragraphs of the story will typically include background information or other general context.

For example, an inverted pyramid story might begin with the following lead: *Members of an Amherst church* (who) *wrote a letter to the Select Board Monday* (when) *arguing that a marijuana dispensary* (what) *under construction on Belchertown Road* (where) *will compromise safety in the neighborhood and represents an attack on their religious values* (why). The next couple of paragraphs might detail the objection, and the paragraphs after that might describe the dispensary's position and perhaps any crime mitigation efforts they plan to support. Then, the tail end of the story might cover when the business license was issued and provide some context about the number of dispensaries in the region.

The key advantage of this structure is that it condenses information efficiently and allows the audience to get the key points of a story even if they stop reading after the first few paragraphs. However, this structure can get rather repetitive and dull, and that may result in the story failing to stand out among its competitors.

The Martini Glass

A related structure is the "martini glass." Like the inverted pyramid, the martini glass will begin with the most important, substantial, and interesting information at the top – often through the use of a summary lead.

However, once the lead and nut graf have been presented, the story will transition to a chronological format, with *the most recent information being followed by continually less recent information*. As with the inverted pyramid, the story would then end with some general or contextual information, or a good "kicker" (a quote or anecdote that effectively encapsulates the story or wraps it up in an aesthetically or emotionally pleasing way).

This structure works best for a sequential news event, such as a crime or disaster story where the journalist needs to explain what happened from beginning to end. However, the temporal approach can be limiting, especially if the issue is multifaceted.

The Kebab

Feature stories will often use a more creative structure like the "kebab" (or the "circle"). This structure typically *begins with an anecdote about someone who is affected* by a trend, issue, or event. Then, it quickly transitions to the nut graf, which describes either the five W's and H or summarizes the broader phenomenon.

Following the nut graf, the structure continues by *adding detailed analyses of different aspects of the trend, issue, or event*. These are the 'meat' parts of the kebab, with each aspect representing a different piece of meat, and the journalist moving quickly from one piece to the next. The kebab ends with a closing anecdote, often about the same person featured in the lead, effectively bringing the story "full circle."

This structure works best when the journalist has access to an illustrative anecdote that aptly encapsulates the big takeaway from a story.

The Accordion

A remix of the kebab is the "accordion" structure. Like the kebab, the structure begins with a strong anecdote or quote that represents the main topic of a story and quickly transitions to a nut graf.

However, unlike the kebab, this structure follows a 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' pattern that uses a compelling central figure (or small cast) to illustrate multiple aspects of a story *throughout the story*. In the 'zooming in' phases, the journalist uses different anecdotes from the central figure (e.g., aspects of their experience with the issue) to illustrate and personalize an aspect of the story. In the 'zooming out' phases, the journalist contextualizes the experience by focusing on the 'big picture,' or how representative the anecdote is, often by incorporating side characters (e.g., subject experts). This structure will typically end in similar fashion to the kebab, with a closing anecdote from the central character.

This structure is especially useful when the journalist has a compelling central character that can effectively encapsulate the issue through their lived experience. It can also work when the journalist has a cadre of characters who collectively encapsulate the issue through their lived experiences, as the journalist can insert a different character during each 'zooming in' phase.

The accordion structure is also particularly useful for data-driven stories, as it makes it easy for the journalist to oscillate between data analysis and anecdote, thereby keeping the reader well-informed and engaged.

The Pyramid

A less common storytelling structure in journalism is the "pyramid." It is, as you may have guessed, roughly the opposite of the inverted pyramid structure.

This structure, which is more often used in long-form feature writing or journalistic non-fiction books, builds *up* to the most interesting information. It is more akin to storytelling in a novel, where information of increasing importance is revealed as the narrative develops in order to build up tension and conflict. It is only near the end that the reader is exposed to the full depth and breadth of the story, which serves as a form of (or immediate antecedent to) resolution.

Selecting a Structure

No one story structure is inherently better than another. However, structures like the inverted pyramid are better suited for shorter or breaking news stories. By contrast, structures like the accordion are better suited to longer stories with compelling characters.

When selecting your story structure, try to be mindful of the purpose of your story (e.g., to quickly inform or to entertain), the amount of space you have to work with (e.g., a shorter story is usually better suited to a simple structure), the range of themes you have (e.g., a story with many themes may require a kebab-like structure), and the quality and appeal of the evidence and experiences you have uncovered through your reporting (e.g., several captivating anecdotes may benefit from a more creative structure). Moreover, you'll generally want to be aware of your target outlet's writing style in order to produce content that is aligned with those audiences' expectations.

Key Takeaways

- Before you start writing, take stock of the information you have. This will help you organize your information thoughtfully and subsequently select an appropriate story structure.
- Common journalistic story structures include the inverted pyramid, the martini glass, the kebab, the accordion, and the pyramid.
- When selecting your story structure, try to be mindful of the purpose of your story, the amount of space you have to work with, and the quality and appeal of the evidence and experiences you have uncovered through your reporting.

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Chapter 48

Quotes and Attribution

Good quotes are essential to turning a story from being *good* to being *great*. They play an important role in breaking up the journalist's writing, transitioning from one fact or sub-issue to the next, giving authoritative heft to a story, and conveying the richness of the human experience. Put another way, quotes are useful in both substantive and stylistic ways.

However, quotes are also a representation of the individuals featured in a story. They must thus be conveyed accurately and clearly. This can present a challenge as journalists simply lack the space to fully quote everything their sources said during the course of interviewing several people. And, even if they had the space, fully quoting everyone would surely result in a story that is an incoherent mess.

Quoting sources in a story thus involves a process of *selection* and *placement*, and often requires journalists to move between *direct quotes* and *paraphrased statements*.

Below are some tips to help you choose who and what to quote, and to successfully employ quoting and attribution styles that are commonly used in U.S. journalism.

Direct Quotes

Direct quotes are *statements that reflect the exact words used by the source*. They are always placed in between quotation marks to make clear that they are the source's words, and not the journalist's.

Direct quotes are most useful for conveying emotions, opinions, and personal experiences. Quoting dry, basic facts (or descriptions that you can easily observe with your own eyes) is generally neither interesting nor a good use of space (as you can typically convey those facts more succinctly yourself). Instead, listen for quotes that tell you *how people feel or think about the subject*. An ideal quote will exemplify or elaborate upon a fact.

When using direct quotes, it is important that you change things as little as possible. Most interviewees are able to express themselves coherently – especially since many public figures and experts now receive media training – so you typically only have to 'tidy up' a quote.

Tidying up typically involves largely mechanical tasks like removing 'ums' and 'ers' or correcting a tense (e.g., using "have" when the correct syntax calls for "had"). However, you should never change the *meaning* of a quote. It is not your job as a journalist to make an interviewee sound "smarter" – nor should you try to make them sound "dumber." Your job as a journalist is to accurately convey the source's intended meaning (as best you can).

What journalists can do, however, is *patch* quotes. Patching allows you to link one sentence from an interview with another sentence from earlier or later on in that interview. This is particularly useful if you have an inexperienced interviewee or a fast thinker who jumps around a lot during an interview. For example, consider the following portion of a hypothetical interview: "Arsenal are one of the most storied clubs in England. I mean, last weekend was a pretty poor showing, but they're typically quite good. Still, they remain the only English team to complete a top-flight season undefeated. And, they have won 13 top-flight titles, which is pretty darn impressive."

We could easily patch that interview segment by writing: "Arsenal are one of the most storied clubs in England," Zamith said. "They remain the only English team to complete a top-flight season undefeated."

Patching is critical for ensuring good flow for a story, and journalists therefore frequently use that technique. Direct quotes are *typically* between one and three sentences in length. Unless they are particularly compelling, longer quotes will often slow down a story.

Here are a few other things to keep in mind when quoting a source:

- Every quote should be clearly attributed so audiences know exactly who said what.
- When you quote a person for the first time, introduce them. The introduction typically includes the person's full name and title. For example, in the aforementioned quote, you might write: "said Rodrigo Zamith, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Massachusetts Amherst."
- With subsequent quotes, use the source's last name. If there are two sources with the same last name in the story, use their full name.

- If there are several paragraphs between a source's previous quote and their next one, remind the audience of the source's qualifications. For example, you might later write, "said Zamith, the journalism professor."

- It is perfectly fine to use the word "said" repeatedly in your story to transition between the quote and the attribution. This is a neutral term that does not ascribe motivations that you cannot ascertain to your source. Most publications will stick to the past tense (as the interview already took place), though "says" is permissible at some outlets.

- You should typically use the "[NAME] said" construction when quoting sources. However, you may invert this when an explanatory clause (or attribution) is added. Here's an example of such an inversion: "said Zamith, who has watched nearly every game over the past decade."

- Single or multi-sentence quotes are usually given their own paragraph in a story. This helps draw attention to the quote. Partial quotes (i.e., a sentence fragment) or short quotes may be incorporated into a paragraph containing the journalist's own words.

- When using multi-sentence quotes, insert the attribution after the first sentence. Do *not* add it to the very end of a multi-sentence quote.

- In *feature writing*, you may break up a single sentence into multiple segments for effect. For example: "Last weekend was a poor showing," Zamith said, shaking his head. "They're typically quite good."

- In the United States, punctuation (e.g., commas and periods) typically appears *within* the quotation marks.

Paraphrased Statements

Journalistic stories also make frequent use of paraphrased statements, which are sometimes also called indirect quotes. These refer to *statements attributed to a source that are conveyed through the journalist's choice of words*.

For example, rather dedicating space to an extended quote, you might simply write: According to Zamith, Arsenal have won 13 top-flight titles in England.

Paraphrased statements are important for adding authority and connective tissue to a story. They allow you to attribute a range of information – which adds heft to your story by highlighting that the information is not just your opinion or feeling – and make it easier to introduce transitions to the story by interchanging your words with those of your sources. They are also useful when a source clearly intends to express a specific idea but does so in a clumsy way. In such an instance, you are not simply helping the source look "smarter"; you are helping the audience more easily understand the point.

Paraphrased statements are particularly useful *for conveying purely factual information* since facts, in isolation, are typically not very exciting and can be conveyed succinctly. If there's nothing unusual, interesting, or newsworthy about the exact wording of a statement, it is typically better expressed via paraphrasing.

For example, consider the following quote: "The new Journalism building will house eight lab spaces and two lecture halls," Zamith said. "These classrooms will offer seating capacity for 480 students. It will open next fall."

There is nothing particularly interesting about that expression. Instead, it would be better to paraphrase it as: Zamith said the new building, due to open next fall, will seat up to 480 students across eight lab spaces and two lecture halls.

Because the journalist has greater control over the word choice of a paraphrased statement, it is even more crucial that they take care to accurately capture the source's meaning and intent. For example, a source may intentionally use the word "good" to refer to an above-average instance of something. By using the word "great" or "outstanding" in the paraphrasing, the journalist may end up conveying a greater sense of pleasure than the source actually feels. It is thus wise to stick closely to the source's language, even when paraphrasing.

Similarly, journalists should be careful with the attribution terms they use. For example, the word "claims" can raise undue skepticism about a statement. Instead, it is best to use the following neutral descriptors: "said," "stated," "according to," and "added."

The LQTQ Format

One structural approach to newswriting that highlights the value of quotes is the *LQTQ Format*, with the acronym standing for Lead-Quote-Transition-Quote.

The approach begins with a strong lead (e.g., an anecdotal lead or a summary lead) that conveys the essence of the story or hooks audiences in.

Then, in the second full paragraph, important information not found in the lead is offered to help further contextualize the story (i.e., the nut graf). This second paragraph ends with a transition or set-up for the first extended quote in the story.

The third paragraph consists of a direct quote that helps to illustrate or elaborate upon the information provided in that second paragraph. As this is the generally the first direct quote, it typically includes complete attribution information for the source.

Subsequent paragraphs follow the Transition-Quote model. For example, the fourth and fifth paragraphs become linked thusly: The fourth paragraph introduces the next major fact or important piece of information, all the while transitioning the *previous direct quote* to the *next direct quote* – which comprises the fifth paragraph. That subsequent quote should elaborate on the transition, offer an expert opinion, or illustrate the issue via an individual's experience or emotion. Transitions may include paraphrased statements (by the same source or a different one), original facts uncovered by the journalist, or contextual information.

A transition does not have to be a single paragraph in length; it can cover two and even three paragraphs. The idea is that direct quotes are appearing frequently in the story, ensuring that audiences are able to regularly hear from someone other than the journalist.

This process continues until the end, with the story concluding with a *kicker quote* that aptly encapsulates the story, points to what is to come, or otherwise leaves the audience with a satisfying conclusion. (Don't just summarize the story in the concluding paragraph. Your audience will have just consumed the story, so they don't need to be reminded of it. Try to end it with something interesting instead.)

Choosing Who and What to Quote

Journalists will frequently speak with far more sources than they end up quoting or paraphrasing. Put another way, *it is perfectly fine to speak with a source and not quote them in the story*. If another source is able to express something in a more informative or compelling way, refer only to that other source. (However, it can be helpful to include multiple sources to illustrate that a particular opinion or belief is shared.) Similarly, if your source says something that is inaccurate or offensive, you can choose to omit that information or exclude the source altogether (so as to not misinform your audience). In short, *be selective with what and who you quote*.

You should also be mindful of the source's authoritativeness on a particular subject matter. For example, a quote from a company's CEO will typically carry more weight than a quote from that company's media spokesperson. (Keep in mind, though, that many quotes in press releases are effectively written by spokespeople.) In general, you should seek to attribute information to the most authoritative sources you were able to interview.

Moreover, if your story angle changes over the course of reporting it, you should simply drop the now-superfluous material. While quotes can be highly useful, they can also be detrimental when used improperly (or overused). There are better uses for space than a tangential quote. (Journalists are often temped to include a particularly juicy quote in a story even though there's no apparent place for it. Resist that temptation and keep your story focused.)

Finally, as a rule of thumb, *journalists should paraphrase dry facts, but directly quote emotions, opinions, and newsworthy expressions voiced by sources*. As suggested by the LQTQ Format, direct quotes should be placed throughout the story – generally, at least after every few paragraphs – regardless of the story structure.

Key Takeaways

» Quoting sources in a story involves a process of selection and placement, and often requires journalists to move between direct quotes and paraphrased statements.

» Direct quotes are statements that reflect the exact words used by the source. Paraphrased statements are those that are attributed to a source but are conveyed through the journalist's choice of words. Try to include a direct quote after every few paragraphs, and use paraphrasing to help with transitions.

» It is perfectly fine to speak with a source and not quote them in the story. Try to attribute information to the most authoritative and interesting sources you interviewed.

Chapter 49

Integrating Quantitative Information

Journalists frequently use quantitative information in their stories. This includes statistics they find in reports produced by non-profit organizations, industry groups, and research centers, as well as data analyses that the journalist may have conducted themselves.

Such quantitative information can be highly useful to lend a news story greater authority, especially as numbers and statistics are often associated with being more neutral and objective than anecdotes and expertise. (This mythology is highly problematic, though. Quantitative information often has its own biases. For example, decisions about what to quantify about a phenomenon and how to measure it are still made by human beings. The measured information thus takes on some of its creator's biases.)

In general, journalists are known to struggle with some core numeracy skills, such as calculating a percent change, differentiating a mean from a median, and determining a per capita rate. They are more likely yet to struggle with many applied statistical concepts, such as interpreting a margin of error or statistical significance (e.g., a p value). Journalists should *not* report quantitative information they do not understand, as that increases the likelihood they will misinform their audiences. Put another way, either seek out clarification in those cases, or omit your interpretation from the writing.

These struggles are compounded when it comes to the general public, which has, on average, even less training in numeracy. The average news consumer will not be familiar with statistical terminology and generally needs help to *make sense* of quantitative information (and, especially, to connect results from different statistical analyses).

Thus, knowing how to conduct (or even just interpret) quantitative analyses is only half the battle for a journalist. The second half is making such information comprehensible for a non-specialized audience.

Here are a few tips for effectively integrating quantitative information.

Focusing on What Matters

One key thing journalists bring to the table in the journalism-data relationship is the ability to identify what is most interesting about some dataset or analysis.

Datasets will often include many different variables about a large number of units of observation. Therefore, they can contain a large amount of interesting data points and trends. A scientific or industry report may similarly detail several findings of note. However, a journalist rarely has the space in a short story or broadcast segment to go into all of those potential findings.

Instead, your task as a journalist is to narrow things down to just a few results, relationships, or values that are especially interesting. Put another way, *focus on just a few things* and enrich them with detail, anecdotes, and context.

For example, the most interesting thing in a government report about crime in a city might be the increase in a few particular types of crimes. Rather than detailing the levels of all types of crime, focus just on the crimes that have increased at a disproportionate rate. (Conversely, maybe the story is that crime has generally remained flat over that period of time. If that's the more important or representative story, focus on that.)

Alternatively, perhaps the most interesting thing in a dataset about crime is a single outlier. That is, maybe regional crime has stayed flat, with the exception of one particular city, which has seen a shocking increase in crime. How far is that outlier from the average? Why might that be the case? What is so unique about that outlier?

In deciding "what matters," it is crucial that you *keep your audience in mind*. You may encounter a report or dataset that includes data for schools all around the country, but your audience will likely care most about how their local schools are faring. It might make sense to just focus on those few local schools, and perhaps even on just a few different measures that you consider to be most important in representing how those schools are faring.

Simplify Language and Analyses

When a journalist produces a regular news story for a typical outlet, they are usually producing it for someone with little more than a high-school education. The journalist will thus typically use short, declarative sentences and avoid jargon or esoteric language. Incorporating quantitative information into a story is no different. Chances are your audience will know little about regression analyses, or even fully understand what a statistical correlation entails.

Your job as a journalist is thus to *simplify, simplify, and simplify* in order to make sure your story can be understood by most adults. You can do this by including examples throughout the story to make the quantitative information easier to comprehend. For example, a massive devaluation of a foreign currency can sometimes be expressed in a more comprehensible way by describing how many hours a person would have to work at a minimum wage job in that foreign place in order to afford a cheese pizza or a cup of coffee.

Additionally, you should only include the methodological and statistical details that are essential to understanding a story, and express those details in an accessible way — *even if it comes at some expense to precision*. If you want to include the nitty-gritty details, it is often best to include it as a sidebar or as a companion (separate) methodological piece.

The only caveat here is if you are producing content for an outlet that has a numerically savvy audience that expects greater depth. This includes niche outlets that cater to experts (e.g., doctors) or particularly knowledgeable audiences (e.g., baseball junkies). Then, you can talk about the more complex details of particular analyses and methods, and use jargon those audiences are likely to understand.

Interrogate the Causes or Implications

Journalism is more than presenting facts — or, in this case, numbers. It is about helping individuals make sense of some phenomenon by showing them how the dots are connected.

When producing your story, ask yourself: How does this story help the audience better understand the issue? What does your reporting add to what's already out there?

You can make your story insightful by focusing on the causes behind a trend identified in an industry report, or by focusing on the implications of your original data analysis. What might be driving the identified phenomenon? How might that phenomenon of interest affect the audience, or the people living in their communities?

For example, if you come across data showing that sexual assault cases are becoming more frequent in a particular county, you can produce an important story. However, that story can be made more *useful* if you're able to identify what might be behind that increase in sexual assault cases (e.g., there were budget cuts at many police departments in that county that year). Similarly, you could perhaps use the report to point to existing resources and services for helping people deal with sexual assault, or connect it to a bill that might be under consideration that would change the funding for counseling or violence prevention programs.

Use Examples Throughout

Numbers can feel rather abstract and faceless, and staring at a bunch of them can make even the most ardent data lover's eyes glaze after a while. Indeed, as a former ruler of the Soviet Union reportedly quipped once: "If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that's only statistics."

Great stories tend put a human face to the quantitative information in order to make it more relatable. This means using anecdotes and direct quotations from people who were affected by some issue or have intimate knowledge of that issue. Such anecdotes and quotes not only help break up the most informational parts of a story but they create opportunities to forge emotional connections with an audience.

It can often helpful to zoom in and out of stories by interchanging anecdotes and quantitative insights, such as by using an 'accordion' story structure. Quantitative information is often best used to illustrate the big picture and the trends; but it is often the human stories that help make the journalism compelling.

It is important to note that examples will sometimes come at the expense of analytic depth due to space constraints. For example, in order to make room for an anecdote, the journalist may need to cut some of the quantitative insights. This is a judgment call but it is important for journalists to remind themselves of the old adage: *sometimes, less is more*.

Visualize Information

The use of quantitative information in a story often lends itself nicely to the inclusion of data visualizations and tables alongside the narrative. In fact, humans are much better at finding patterns, relationships, and making sense of a large number of data points when such information is presented visually. This is especially the case when there is a stark contrast between things, and the audience can be shocked by just taking a quick glance at two visuals that show a clear disparity.

Visuals should not simply duplicate prose, though. Instead, visuals should complement narratives. A common way to do this is to *tell and show*. Tell your audiences what you believe to be the most important take-away quantitative insights through your prose and show that point through a compelling anecdote in the narrative (and an accompanying data visualization that shows the relevant pattern).

If you are integrating quantitative information from an industry or research report, there's a good chance a visualization already exists. However, that visualization may be too sophisticated for a general audience – it was likely designed with a specialized audience in mind – and you may thus need to recreate it in a more accessible (and, oftentimes, more aesthetically pleasing) way.

Visualizations can also be used as asides to a story, via the use of sidebars and the like. Such spaces are reserved for information that is important and relevant, but that might be too tangential (and thus disruptive) to include in the middle of a story. Additionally, visuals and tables can be useful tools for opening up a dataset to audiences and allowing them to draw their own inferences. This can be accomplished by either creating an online front-end for the dataset (e.g., a searchable database) or by creating an interactive visualization that allows someone to explore all of the data points. Such aides allow you to have a highly-focused story, but still permit the audience to identify new relationships or story angles on their own.

Focus, Simplify, Interrogate, Exemplify, and Visualize

The most compelling and comprehensible stories tend to employ all of the above tactics. Put another way, these tactics shouldn't be thought about in isolation but rather be employed in an integrated way. Try to focus on just a few things, simplify the information, make it insightful by connecting the dots, increase the relatability by including a human face, and take advantage of visual aides to express information.

Doing all of these things at once can prove to be a challenge to journalists, but it is a challenge that gets easier with time. However, even doing just a few of these things will go a long way to producing a story infused with quantitative information that general audiences can both learn from and enjoy.

Key Takeaways

» Journalists and audiences alike struggle with numeracy skills. Journalists should not report quantitative information that they do not understand, as they risk misinforming their audiences.

» While you may have access to a range of quantitative information in a report or dataset, your story will likely only end up focusing on a small subset of that information – namely, the most important or interesting findings. Oftentimes, less is more.

» When integrating quantitative information, be sure to simplify it, connect the dots for the audience, seek human faces to exemplify it, and consider the use of visual aides.

Chapter 50

Solutions Journalism

If you have ever heard the journalistic quip, "If it bleeds, it leads," you know that news headlines and stories are often dominated by negative stories about topics like violence, crime, and corruption. After all, professional journalists' system of news values tends to prioritize stories that deviate from the norm, and that deviation regularly comes in the form of violations (e.g., murders or kickback schemes). Moreover, news audiences are attracted to negative news across many beats. For example, when it comes to politics, people are more likely to click on negative news headlines. In fact, scholars have long documented a "negativity bias," through which people pay more attention and devote more mental effort to consuming negative information.

However, negative news can have a draining impact on audiences. People regularly complain about negativity in journalism, and often report negativity as a key reason for news avoidance. (This is despite the fact they are more likely to consume negative stories when they do consume news.) Moreover, such news can leave audiences feeling powerless or hopeless, which in turn can lead to their withdrawal from democratic processes and discussions about civic affairs.

To combat this, some journalists have sought to re-calibrate journalism toward a solutions-oriented approach. Through solutions journalism, reporters cover a wide variety of social issues facing citizens *in a way that hones in on and emphasizes the potential responses, or solutions, to those issues*. The resulting stories aim to provide deeply reported, in-depth information about a particular issue and make clear to audiences what possible means of solving that issue have been, or may be, applied.

Solutions journalism advocates believe that pairing problems with their potential responses in rigorous, evidence-based reporting helps provide audiences with a more complete and dynamic understanding of the issues that shape and influence their communities. Moreover, advocates believe that it can empower citizens by helping them clearly see how they might take part in combating those issues or being part of 'positive' change. In short, solutions journalists seek to make their audiences more informed and efficacious citizens.

Solutions Journalism in Practice

Solutions journalism stories cover a variety of social ills and injustices, but they are united by their shared focus on a solution's effectiveness, limitations, and resulting lessons. For example, reporters have applied solutions journalism practices to cover how teachers were improving classroom discipline practices; how Los Angeles community leaders were fostering more inclusive activism; how New York social justice experts were opening doors for prison reform; how a range of communities were working to reduce violent crimes; and how medical leaders were improving access to health care. As evidenced by these examples, solutions journalism is ideally suited for local news because it is easier to connect audiences to concrete resources within their communities to address problems they likely encounter locally.

According to the Solutions Journalism Network, solutions journalists tend to engage in four critical acts when producing journalism:

1. They center the story on a response (or potential solution) to an important issue, and they cover that response clearly by providing all the critical information and detail that audiences need to know in order to understand how the response works (or doesn't).
2. In covering a response, they emphasize its actual effectiveness (or lack thereof), rather than what the response was intended to achieve. Clarifying the response's effectiveness requires providing audiences with understandable evidence.
3. They make audiences aware of the response's potential limitations and break down the boundaries and scope of that response to the problem.
4. Finally, solutions journalists include insights about the problem that is illuminated by a response in a way that can be useful to their audiences and seekers of alternative (or follow-up) solutions.

Another way of remembering these four key acts is to remind oneself to tell the "WHOLE story" through this mnemonic device:

- W – What response does the story address?
- H – How does the response work?

- O – Offer insight.
- L – Include limitations.
- E – Evidence of impact.

Solutions-oriented stories are thus not merely stories about a problem that end with a quick paragraph about ways people are thinking of solving that problem. The would-be solution(s) are the very core of the story. Notably, the solution(s) don't have to be a perfect or even largely effective responses to an issue. Occasionally, the response might be ineffective or only partially effective. However, by sharing insights about the potential response, solutions journalism can help audiences learn from both failed and successful responses.

Although solutions journalism focuses on potential responses to systemic challenges – a strategy that can help to engage audiences who feel overwhelmed by typically negative news – such stories are not necessarily positive ("happy news") pieces. Instead, they find specific newsworthiness in the examination and coverage of solutions for the problems that citizens face, especially when those solutions arise outside of traditional social structures. Put another way, they are designed to offer a pathway forward, and thus a form of hope, for seemingly intractable issues.

Benefits to Solutions Journalism

Proponents of solutions journalism believe that this approach to news construction makes readers more engaged with news about issues facing their communities. Additionally, research suggests that people who consume solutions-oriented journalism are more likely to share the stories they read and seek out additional information about the problems being covered. Put another way, solutions journalism can advance both professional and economic objectives, as well-informed and highly motivated audiences can both partake in democratic processes and become more likely to consume an outlet's future news products.

Unsurprisingly, a large number of mainstream and alternative journalistic outlets (e.g., *The Boston Globe*, *The Seattle Times*, and *The Chicago Reporter*) have adopted solutions journalism practices in their news coverage in recent years. Moreover, non-profit groups like the Solutions Journalism Network have helped to popularize the practice in recent years by offering educational resources and training for individual journalists, journalistic outlets, and journalism educators.

Key Takeaways

- » Solutions journalism stories present responses to important social problems through evidence-based reporting that makes clear the extent of a response's effectiveness, what its limitations are, and what insights can be gained from that response.
- » Solutions journalism stories are driven by the need to engage and inform communities, not to give them "happy news." They are critical and detailed examinations of a potential solution, not soft news pieces glorifying a social actor or problem response.
- » Research shows that solutions-oriented journalism can engage readers, make them more informed, increase their likelihood of sharing news, and drive them to seek out additional information about the issue being covered.

Unit XI

Future of Journalism

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Chapter 51

Social Media and News Production

The term "social media" refers to *platforms that allow users to create a public profile, develop lists of connections (e.g., friends), traverse those connections by viewing others' profiles and public messages, and add short posts of their own to the network (which may include text, images, videos, and links to things like news stories)*.

While those platforms were not designed with journalism in mind, they became an important part of journalism starting in the 2010s and are now routinely factored into journalistic work. Journalists use social media to gauge public interest and sentiment, keep tabs on the competition, identify story ideas, find and verify sources, and promote and distribute their work. It has become so central to many journalists' day-to-day activities that many journalistic outlets now have social media policies to guide journalists on how to appropriately use social media (and deal with some of the challenges it introduces).

Social Media and Newsgathering

While journalists have long looked to their friends and peers for story ideas and validation, they now increasingly turn to social media for those things. Journalists listen to the general public primarily through the use of hashtags and indicators of popularity (e.g., trending topics on Twitter). They also engage directly with particular members of the public by replying to social media messages they come across and through replies to comments they receive themselves.

While journalists have been critiqued for employing a pack mentality well before the popularization of social media, researchers have repeatedly found that journalists interact primarily with other journalists on social media. This has led to critiques that social media has intensified *professional insularity*. That is, they may be increasingly operating within echo chambers of their own. Additionally, it is now easier for journalists to see what their peers are up to (and which behaviors are being socially rewarded among their peer group), and follow the pack leaders (i.e., the most influential journalists). This is driven, at least in part, by a desire to reduce professional uncertainty. For example, journalists often look to signals from their peers to validate their belief that the topic for their story (or story idea) is indeed newsworthy.

News consumers and journalists are not the only people on social media, though. The sources that journalists frequently turn to may use social media themselves (and often do so in strategic ways). Journalists, especially those who work a consistent beat, develop extensive lists of sources that they follow closely on social media. They not only read the sources' posts to learn new information for a story but also selectively disseminate (e.g., retweet) the juiciest information, such as an injury update from a star basketball player herself. In doing so, journalists who are active on social media take on an additional role: that of a *curator* of online information. Researchers have also found that journalists routinely turn to social media for "person on the street" reactions, often embedding tweets and Instagram posts in their stories as examples of the public's reaction to a development. This is, in many ways, a continuation of traditional journalistic practice that simply leverages a new tool.

Nearly all major news events today are *live-tweeted* or *live-blogged* in some capacity. Those terms refer to a relatively new practice of constantly posting short bits of developing information on a social media stream in real time during a news event, such as a press conference. That practice has become so ingrained for some journalists that they now take notes in the form of short social media updates (e.g., tweets).

Most U.S. journalists today use Facebook and Twitter to conduct research for their stories. Journalists also use these platforms to request help in verifying information, such as by asking native speakers to help translate information, having locals visit the site where an incident allegedly took place, or having experts double-check complex or specialized information. For example, David Fahrenthold, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, won a Pulitzer Prize for his Twitter-assisted coverage of Donald Trump's claims of charitable givings. Fahrenthold periodically posted on Twitter lists of dozens of charities he intended to contact, and solicited help from his followers for finding people who could confirm or deny that Trump had donated to those organizations. After four months of work and countless tips from his followers, Fahrenthold found only one charity confirming that Trump personally donated to them over an eight-year period.

Personal Branding

Social media have become central to journalists' growing efforts to develop personal brands. As journalists have become more entrepreneurial – driven in part by economic uncertainty within the journalism industry – they have used their social media profiles as billboards for their work. This does not simply mean posting their stories on social media. It also means highlighting their credentials, training, and expertise in order to appear more authoritative.

Audiences don't just crave professional, authoritative work, though. They also value authenticity and connection. To that end, journalists now increasingly mix professional and personal information as part of their personal branding efforts – part of a phenomenon called *context collapse*. For example, many journalists will offer more commentary online than they do in their news stories. Additionally, journalists may post pictures of personal activities, such as attending a sporting event as a fan or playing with their dog. As audiences feel a stronger sense of connection with particular journalists, they become more loyal followers. That, in turn, increases the journalist's perceived value and reach, which can be translated into better job offers and higher salary – or just greater potential impact for their work.

The blending of personal and professional affairs on social media has presented challenges to both individual journalists and their employers. While some journalistic outlets *require* their journalists to maintain a presence on social media (and some even stipulate a minimum number of social media posts and interactions per week), they also frequently employ social media guidelines that limit what those journalists can do on those platforms. This often puts journalists in a bind. If they act too professional or scripted, their personal brand may suffer from a perceived lack of authenticity. However, if they are too lax and casual, they risk being disciplined by their employer.

Attempts to build a following on social media can also backfire for journalists. An attempt at humor may be ill-received, for example, resulting in intense backlash from followers. Additionally, the pseudo-permanence of online postings means that commentary from years earlier – such as criticism of a source or public official – can come back to haunt a journalist, or be used as a weapon by critics to discredit that journalist. This is the case not only for journalists who specialize in objective journalism but also professional columnists and editors at lifestyle-oriented outlets. For example, in 2021, Alexi McCammond was forced to resign as editor-in-chief of Teen Vogue shortly after being promoted to the position when flippant tweets posted a decade earlier that espoused offensive stereotypes about Asian people resurfaced online.

Journalistic Ethics on Social Media

Can journalists advocate for social justice causes on social media? Can they use hashtags to participate in protest movements? Can they publicly admonish or defend alleged wrongdoers? The answers to these kinds of questions often depends on the journalistic outlet the journalist works for and the specific issue in question.

For example, *The New York Times*' in-house social media guidelines includes this cautionary clause: "Social media presents potential risks for The Times. If our journalists are perceived as biased or if they engage in editorializing on social media, that can undercut the credibility of the entire newsroom." *The Washington Post*'s social media policy includes a more direct prohibition: "Post journalists must refrain from writing, tweeting or posting anything – including photographs or video – that could objectively be perceived as reflecting political, racial, sexist, religious or other bias or favoritism." While these guidelines are not always strictly enforced, they do shape journalistic behaviors.

Journalistic social media guidelines aren't always explicit, though. The reality of social media interactions today leaves plenty of room for interpretation (and accidental violation) of different journalistic norms, many of which have changed considerably in recent years. This includes the ways in which journalists share details about their reporting or how they should engage with audiences who critique their work. For example, social media often serve as the primary sites of toxic digital attacks against journalists (especially female journalists and journalists of color) and their sources. That online harassment can have severe consequences for their emotional and mental health. Social media can also tempt journalists to get sucked into online arguments with users who disagree with them, resulting in unproductive and alienating debates. In short, journalists today must navigate an ethical landscape that is arguably more complex than in previous times.

Key Takeaways

» Social media are now routinely factored into news production. Journalists use social media to gauge public interest and sentiment, keep tabs on the competition, identify story ideas, find and verify sources, and promote and distribute their work.

» Social media have enabled a new role for many journalists: that of a curator of online information. Many of today's news events are live-tweeted or live-blogged in some capacity.

» Social media have become central to journalists' growing efforts to develop personal brands. This often results in clashes with those journalists' employers, who advocate more professional social media use via their social media guidelines.

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Chapter 52

Social Media and News Distribution

According to a 2021 survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 42% of Americans say they use social media as a source of news. (A separate survey by the Pew Research Center pegged that figure at 53%.) Additionally, 31% of Americans surveyed by the Reuters Institute reported sharing news through social media, messaging apps, or e-mail. Those numbers have grown considerably since 2013, when 27% of the population reported using social media as a source of news. These increases have occurred despite the fact that most Americans claim they have much lower levels of trust in the news they encounter on social media (especially when compared to traditional media, such as local TV news).

The rise of news consumption on social media has had a major economic impact on the journalism industry and has had broader impacts on audiences' knowledge about public affairs. In considering such impacts, it is important to remember that social media is just a tool – one that is capable of advancing both positive and negative developments. Some undesirable changes to journalism and society are directly attributable to the rise of social media, such as changes to the technical infrastructures that govern the flows of information. However, many undesirable changes attributed to the rise of social media are actually symptomatic of other developments within society, such as the devaluing of expertise and declining trust in institutions.

Nevertheless, it is evident that journalists and journalistic outlets today must contend with news consumption and distribution patterns that are configured in no small part by social media.

News Knowledge and Content Moderation

According to a 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center, 74% of U.S. adults use YouTube, 68% use Facebook, 40% use Instagram, 25% use Twitter, and 15% use Reddit. Many of their users regularly consume news on those platforms – in the cases of Facebook and Reddit, more than half of users reported regularly getting news on those platforms. Social media are thus crucial platforms for linking news producers with news consumers.

However, researchers have also found that relying on social media as a dominant source of news can have a negative influence on one's knowledge and media literacy. For example, the Pew Research Center found that people who received their political news primarily from social media had lower levels of knowledge about COVID-19 and were more likely to be exposed to false information. This is particularly concerning as Pew also found, in a separate study, that nearly half of Americans said they were getting at least some news or information about COVID-19 vaccines from social media.

The apparent paradox imbued in the fact that large numbers of people get news from social media even as they find it to be an untrustworthy source of information has also led to a shift in attitudes toward the governance of news information flows. According to a 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center, nearly half of U.S. adults said that the government should restrict false information online, even if it means that people lose some freedom to access or publish content. (There was even greater support for having tech companies serve as the moderators.) This is not a uniquely American attitude. Elsewhere in the world, several authoritative regimes have passed so-called "fake news" laws that grant their governments greater powers to restrict the publishing of information. In many instances, such laws have been used primarily to punish critical journalism.

The partisan divide that complicates news consumption in the United States also appears on social media. In the Pew survey, support for having the U.S. government restrict false information online was sharply divided among partisan lines, with those who self-identify as Democrats being more than twice as likely to support the restriction of false information as Republicans. In a separate study, the Pew Research Center found that 64% of Republicans believed that tech companies prioritize liberal viewpoints while just 28% of Democrats thought so. These beliefs, in turn, impact the extent to which individuals trust the news content they casually encounter on those platforms, especially if that content is not consistent with an individual's preconceptions.

Platform Dependency

In order to remain relevant in the information ecosystem, journalistic outlets must seek out audiences where they are. This has resulted in growing *platform dependency*, a phenomenon wherein journalistic outlets come to depend on platforms like social media (and thus place themselves at their whims) in order to gain exposure to news audiences. When those platforms make changes to their sites, the impacts can be significant – especially for journalistic outlets whose revenue models depend on audience engagement and advertisements.

For example, in 2015, Facebook decided to prioritize videos in the algorithms it uses to curate the personalized News Feed users see on the site. Many journalistic outlets subsequently invested heavily in bolstering their video teams in order to produce more video content. (This is sometimes called the "pivot to video" era.) Those investments sometimes required laying off significant numbers of long-time journalists and editors who were not well-versed in multimedia journalism. Later, however, it was discovered that Facebook dramatically overstated the success of videos posted on its platform. The company soon tweaked the algorithms once more to prioritize other signals instead (e.g., the number of reactions to a post). The journalistic outlets who pivoted toward video were forced to pivot back, firing many of the multimedia producers they had recently hired.

As this example illustrates, the fates of news content, journalists, and journalistic outlets can depend on just a few large, commercial social media platforms. With one tweak of their algorithms, an organization's content may become largely invisible to the platform's user base. This becomes especially problematic as more people congregate on fewer, larger platforms (resulting in a *network effect,* where the value of the platform increases as more people participate on it). The consolidation of massive audiences on those few platforms results in news organizations depending on referrals from those networks.

Platformization, or the rise of platforms as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the contemporary online environment, also presents a brand problem for journalistic outlets. Researchers have found that users tend to associate the news content they come across with the platform, and not the journalistic outlet. Thus, not only are journalistic outlets losing distributional control, they are also losing recognition.

Spreadable News

The sharing of news content is not a new social phenomenon. People have long described the news they heard on the radio or saw on TV to a work colleague over lunch, or even cut out and shared newspaper stories of note with friends and loved ones. However, in the online environment, it is much easier to share news content – often by simply clicking a button, whether on a platform (e.g., "retweet") or on the story itself (e.g., "share").

The term *spreadable media* has been coined to describe how participatory culture accelerates the distribution of media content. Today's news consumption is often *incidental*, meaning that people frequently encounter news as part of their constant connection with social media, and not because they were actively looking for news. Put another way, even if their primary intention for accessing social media was to connect with friends, they may encounter a number of news products from different sources along the way. The consequence of this is that news consumption today is increasingly about exercising sociability – and part of that is by sharing content that people find to be interesting or relevant.

Moreover, the proliferation of social media has resulted in a user-centered distribution model. Only a relatively small share of the stories published by *The New York Times* that users encounter on Facebook originate from the *Times*' Facebook page. Instead, the vast majority of those stories – and a large portion of external traffic driven to the *Times*' website – comes from users who voluntarily shared the story (often with some commentary). Thus, journalistic outlets are not only becoming increasingly dependent on platforms, they are also becoming more dependent on users who are willing to share the outlet's work.

There are many reasons why users choose to share. These range from having genuine interest in a story to promoting an identity marker, such as their intellect (e.g., high-brow think pieces) or political ideology (e.g., a story about partisan corruption). In order to get users to serve as willing sharers, journalistic outlets must find ways to appeal to those users. This might include, for example, writing a more provocative headline, including an emotional cover image, or even producing more opinionated content.

Thus, as some scholars have argued, while speed and quality used to be considered the twin pillars of good journalism, *sociability* has become a third pillar. It is no longer sufficient to be first and comprehensive; now, journalists must also produce journalism in a form that is capable of spreading effectively. Put another way, today's journalism must be both findable and shareable to succeed in a user-centered distribution model.

This means both tweaking news products to optimize shareability (e.g., using salient keywords in the headline) and seeking out key nodes of content distribution (e.g., influencers) to help promote a story after it has been published.

Key Takeaways

» Nearly half of all Americans now consume news on social media, with much of it occurring on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

» People who consume news primarily through social media tend to have lower levels of knowledge about some issues. There is also growing appetite among Americans for greater moderation of false information on social media.

» Journalistic outlets have become increasingly dependent on social media in recent years due to changes in digital infrastructures and news consumption habits.

» Audiences now lie at the heart of news distribution, and journalists must be even more attentive than before to the shareability of their products.

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Chapter 53

Computational Journalism

According to media scholar Nicholas Diakopoulos, "computational journalism" refers to *the application of computing and computational thinking to the activities of journalism (e.g., newsgathering), all while upholding core values of journalism (e.g., accuracy)*. As such, computational journalism isn't just about the technology; it is also a way of approaching the practice of journalism.

As a way of thinking, *computational journalism is rooted in the idea of translating the messy world into organized (structured) information schemas*. For example, the many attributes (aspects) of a murder incident can be indexed based on taxonomies and categories of people, entities, concepts, events, and locations (e.g., who the perpetrator was, what kind of weapon they used, and what sort of location the murder took place in). In a way, journalists have always done this in an informal way in order to produce things like the summary lead (5 Ws and H). However, computational journalism requires journalists to do it in a formal way, such as by storing each part of that information as a distinct item in a database.

A Brief History

Although computational journalism may seem like a novel thing, we can trace some of its informal origins to the 1800s. For example, the very first edition of *The Manchester Guardian* (May 5, 1821) offered a table listing the amount of patients at a local hospital who were inoculated against the cow pox, the amount who were released after surviving the disease, and the amount who died from it. It similarly offered other figures about the patients who were being treated for an accident as well as those being held in its 'lunatic asylum.' While no computers were used to compile that table – computers had not yet been invented – the *Guardian* journalists were already engaging in the form of thinking that powers computational journalism today.

The machine-aided form of journalism that is more typically associated with today's computational journalism arguably began in 1952, when CBS News used a digital computer to predict the outcome of a presidential election by using partial results. By the 1960s, journalists like Phil Meyer of the *Detroit Free Press* and Clarence Jones of the *Miami Herald* were using computers to analyze things from survey data (e.g., to determine the underlying causes of the 1967 Detroit riot) to court records (to uncover bias in the criminal justice system in Dade County). By the 1980s, an array of different computational practices for gathering and analyzing news began to emerge, many of which were categorized into what was termed "computer-assisted reporting." Put another way, the logic used in computational journalism was being increasingly paired with the technology that is now associated with it.

As the Internet proliferated in the 1990s, journalistic practices became even more computationally oriented. In particular, journalistic outlets started investing more money in "digital" positions, resulting in new jobs and departments. This included the hiring of multi-person software development teams who could work with non-technically savvy journalists to produce computational journalism stories and develop computational journalism workflows. While such teams, processes, and products remained relatively small and had limited influence on the broader practice of journalism, they were important for seeding the changes to journalistic norms and logics that would accelerate in the coming years.

Computational Journalism in the 21st Century

By the late 2000s, new areas of specialization were emerging. These include *automated journalism* (having machines produce news content from data with limited human supervision), *conversational journalism* (communicating news via automated, dialogic interfaces like chat bots), *data journalism* (using data to report, analyze, write, and visualize stories), *sensor journalism* (using electronic sensors to collect and analyze new data for journalistic purposes), and *structured journalism* (publishing news as data).

While some of those specializations emerged relatively independently from one another, they are still centered on interpreting the world through data, and generally rely on computational processes to translate knowledge into data and data into knowledge. As such, they are fundamentally computational forms of journalism, regardless of the amount of technological wherewithal that is actually required.

Computational journalism also aims to blend logics and processes spanning multiple disciplines, such as journalism, computer science, information retrieval, and visual design. With regard to journalism, it involves a significant shift away from the traditional focus on nuance (in reporting), individualism (in subject or focus), and creativity (in writing). Instead, it orients itself toward standardization (in reporting), scale (in subject or focus), and efficiency (in writing). These differences in logics and approaches often make it difficult for editorial and technical actors to work together on computational journalism projects. In fact, researchers have found that when computational journalism projects fizzle or fail, it is often due to the philosophical and procedural differences among members of the team.

Nevertheless, computational forms of journalism have been used to produce highly impactful work in recent years, both in terms of journalistic content and new tools for producing journalism. Several computational journalists (who don't always self-identify as such) have won prestigious awards for their computational journalism. For example, Jay Hancock and Elizabeth Lucas of *Kaiser Health News* won a Pulitzer Prize in 2020 for exposing predatory bill collection by the University of Virginia Health System, which had forced many low-income patients into bankruptcy. Hancock and Lucas worked together with an open data advocate to collect and analyze information about millions of civil court records in Virginia – far more than a human journalist could inspect manually. Their reporting resulted in the non-profit, state-run hospital changing its behavior.

On the software side, journalists have worked alongside software development teams to create technologies like DocumentCloud, an all-in-one platform designed to help journalists (and teams of journalists working across multiple journalistic outlets) to upload, organize, analyze, annotate, search, and embed documents. The project brings together existing tools from disciplines like computational linguistics into an interface that is accessible to many journalists. Similarly, MuckRock has made it easier for journalists to make several Freedom of Information Act requests at the same time, write news stories from them, and share the data with other journalists.

Computational journalism demands the same high ethical standards as traditional journalism to ensure that the process of gathering, analyzing, and disseminating information to the public is truthful, independent, and inclusive. However, computational forms of journalism do not always have a distinct code of ethics. This can be challenging as computational journalists tend to place a greater premium on transparency and openness than traditional journalists, which can introduce ethical tensions. For example, some computational journalists have been critiqued as being naive for posting unredacted datasets (that placed unwitting individuals at risk) or not reviewing automated stories (that included misinformation).

It is expected that computational journalism will only continue to grow in the coming years. For example, *The New York Times* launched a short program to teach its journalists data skills, and the outlet made that course open-source when publishing it online. And, journalistic outlets like *BuzzFeed News*, *FiveThirtyEight*, *The Marshall Project*, and *The Washington Post* sometimes post the code powering their computational journalism on the code-sharing platform GitHub in order to promote their craft. Moreover, as computers become more powerful and intelligent, automation is likely to become more commonplace – as will the tasks related to translating the natural world into structured data.

Key Takeaways

» Computational journalism covers both the application of computing *and* computational thinking to various journalistic activities, including information gathering, sensemaking, and information dissemination.

» Computational journalism is not an entirely new phenomenon, but it has developed intensely in recent years as new forms of journalism emerged.

» Computational journalism has been used to produce both award-winning journalistic work as well as impactful journalism-oriented technologies.

Chapter 54

Artificial Intelligence and Automation

According to researchers Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "artificial intelligence" (AI) refers to *a system's ability to correctly interpret external data, learn from those data, and apply those learnings to achieve specific goals through flexible adaptation*.

As their definition suggests, the intelligence in AI is based on some form of "learning" that usually comes from data covering events or instances that occurred in the past. AI will then use that past learning and adapt to some related phenomenon in the present. And, it will then conduct itself in the present in a way that we would consider to be "intelligent" if that same task had been performed by a human being. Finally, AI generally continues to learn as the present becomes the past, and continues to adapt as the future becomes the present.

Artificial intelligence plays a hidden but significant role in our daily lives. When you type half a phrase into the Google search bar and Google suggests several ways you might finish it, a predictive algorithm is at play. When you look for flights online, an intelligent (well, not always) algorithm may try to guess your budget based on your browsing history and suggest a nearby hotel within that price range. When Facebook recommends tagging yourself in a photo because it recognizes your face, it's because an intelligent algorithm has already analyzed your face many times. Moreover, we are increasingly seeing applications of AI in many different facets of journalism.

AI in Journalism

As with other segments of everyday life, artificial intelligence is no longer just some niche idea within the news industry. AI is already being used, in varying ways and to different extents, within every major stage of news production, from helping journalists find 'the story' to automating personalized distribution of news content.

Generating Story Ideas

Coming up with a unique and compelling story idea is one of the most creative parts of journalism. The world is filled with newsworthy events – each of which can be approached through a large array of story angles – but journalists only have the capacity to tackle a relatively small amount of them. Moreover, audiences have limited time and attention, and can only consume a sliver of the content that is already out there. To stand out, journalists must identify the most interesting and informative angles for the most interesting and important events. While AI still struggles to come up with unique and compelling ideas of its own (and is generally limited to phenomena that have been digitized and structured), it is nevertheless being used by journalists to manage information overload and to help them find 'the story' in large troves of documents.

For example, in 2016, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published a series of stories that examined sexual abuse of patients by their doctors. While a human journalist decided that this was an important story to explore – it would go on to be a Pulitzer Prize finalist – intelligent algorithms still played a major role in helping the journalist find what was most interesting and significant about the story. The algorithms reviewed a set of disciplinary documents that were manually identified (by a human) as involving sexual misconduct and learned about the sorts of words and phrases that were commonly used in such documents to describe sexual misconduct. (After all, there usually wasn't a clear sentence in the disciplinary documents that read, "this person sexually abused someone.") That algorithm then applied that learning to more than 100,000 documents, which had not been reviewed by a human, and gave each document a probability that it involved a case of physician sexual misconduct. This helped point the journalists at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* toward doctors, clinics, and areas where that abuse was most prevalent or disproportionate.

As another example, in 2019, a whistleblower secretly leaked documents from a law firm in Mauritius to a group of investigative journalists. The documents provided a rare look at how multinational companies avoided paying taxes when they did business in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. There were more than 200,000 documents in that leak, with some of those documents being hundreds of pages long. To help journalists make sense of that information, the digital news outlet *Quartz* built a machine learning algorithm that helped journalists locate the most relevant portions of the most relevant documents. Specifically, when the journalist found a document of interest, the algorithm would analyze it and link the journalist to other documents in the leaked trove that had similar kinds of information or involved the same individuals and organizations.

Sourcing and Verifying Information

As journalists flesh out their story ideas, they frequently turn to different sources of information, from expert human sources to databases. When sourcing information, journalists typically look for the most authoritative source. That authority may come by virtue of someone's position (like the CEO of a company), their area of expertise (like an academic who studies a very specific thing), or from someone's proximity to a phenomenon (like a person who saw the car crash). However, there are often multiple sources who can speak with authority about some topic. For example, there are several academics who study police funding – and even though they're all experts, each may bring a different perspective to the table.

News organizations are already using AI to help them not only identify potential sources but to correct systematic sourcing biases that may arise in the course of reporting. For example, in 2018, the *Financial Times* began using AI to review stories and warn journalists if they were relying too heavily on male sources. The *Financial Times*' technology was not particularly sophisticated; it mostly guessed the gender based on a person's name and the use of pronouns. But it was enough to make a journalist reflect because several biases operate at a subconscious level – and having something prompt the journalist to reflect is sometimes enough to mitigate the worst effects. A more sophisticated technology produced by the Ryerson School of Journalism, JeRI, similarly aims to score the institutional power of sources by weighing factors including their placement in a story and frequency of attribution. This helps journalists see if some people, organizations, and locations are receiving too much attention.

The use of AI isn't just limited to sourcing. It is also being used to help journalists both interview and make use of interviews. For example, United Robots, a Swedish tech company, offers technology that can automate the process of conducting (simple) interviews. In the case of a soccer match, the technology is able to analyze a game recap, identify potential questions for the winning and losing coaches, send those coaches text messages with the questions, and integrate the coaches' responses into the game recap. All of this can occur with limited human supervision. AI has also been used by journalists to parse interview transcripts (some of which are computer-generated) and identify the most interesting aspects of the interview, or to link a source's present remarks with things they've said elsewhere in the past.

News organizations are also using AI to fact-check information, either by intelligently linking new stories and claims to existing, human-led fact-checks or by attempting to intelligently rate a claim by independently looking up information in knowledge bases. For example, Storyful, a company that specializes in fact-checking information on social media, partnered with Google in 2020 to create Source, a tool that automatically looks up an image's public history (to ascertain its origin), checks it for artifacts suggestive of digital manipulation, and extracts and translates any text (e.g., from a meme). This helps journalists more quickly ascertain if an image is likely to be a hoax or part of a disinformation campaign.

Producing Stories

A great deal of newswriting is formulaic. The inverted pyramid remains the dominant narrative structure for breaking news, and journalists often adhere to, and repeat, certain sets of words, phrases, and syntax (e.g., "said" and "according to"). Unsurprisingly, AI is therefore already used by some leading news organizations (e.g., *Bloomberg News* in the United States, *The Canadian Press* in Canada, and *Helsingin Sanomat* in Finland) to produce tens of thousands of seemingly human-produced news stories each year with limited supervision.

For example, *The Associated Press* uses AI to review hundreds of thousands of public filings to the Securities and Exchange Commission and turn them into news stories. The process is largely automated. It begins by accessing the SEC's system and downloading all new filings, such as a quarterly earnings report. It then translates a filing into a structured dataset, looking for expected markers like the company's reported revenue for that quarter and trying to make sense of unstructured information (e.g., the company's forecast for the next quarter or its expected threats). It then analyzes that filing, sometimes comparing it to previous data (e.g., the previous quarter's revenue and forecast) to identify the most interesting data points. It then inserts those data points into one of many potential story templates previously written by human journalists. (You can think of these templates as a Mad Libs of sorts.) Finally, it publishes the story on *The Associated Press*' newswire. The entire process is largely unsupervised – after setting up the algorithm and writing the templates, the *AP* journalists can take their hands off the wheel.

AI is also used to personalize segments of human-produced stories, such as by localizing or rewriting portions of a human-crafted narrative to appeal to each individual user. For example, *The New York Times* has used AI to identify a reader's location and personalize a human-produced story about air quality around the world by adding a computer-generated paragraph about the air quality in the reader's location.

Additionally, journalistic outlets like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) have used AI to summarize stories written by humans and machines alike, producing either bullet-point rundowns or shortened versions of those stories. Those summaries can serve as the basis for companion products, such as an auto-generated news roundup for a voice assistant like Amazon's Alexa. The BBC has even experimented with automating the transformation of a text story into a multi-panel visual story that can be instantly shared on visually oriented platforms like Instagram.

AI is not just being used in text-oriented journalism, though. News organizations have experimented with using "deep fake" technology to automate broadcasts featuring both semi-human and entirely synthetic anchors. For example, Reuters has prototyped a fully automated sports news summary system that pairs automated game summaries with photographs of the key moments being described, all of which is presented by synthetic footage of a real news presenter (i.e., a "deep fake" based on pre-recorded footage of the presenter). Put another way, Reuters' technology is able to combine the words describing the event with relevant pictures, and present the package through a realistic-looking anchor. China's Xinhua News Agency has prototyped similar technology that is able to operate outside the realm of sports and that uses an entirely computer-generated anchor.

These technologies represent advances on existing uses of AI in multimedia journalism. For example, AI is already frequently used to help editors 'tag' audiovisual content (e.g., label the people, objects, and locations in a picture) in order to help them more easily find relevant photos later on.

Distributing Stories

News consumers regularly engage with news distributed via intelligent algorithms. For example, when a person visits a news outlet's website, they often encounter several widgets on the sides of the article that direct the person to other articles they might want to read next. Those recommendations may be tailored specifically to that person, based on the stories they have previously read on that outlet's site, or even elsewhere on the Web. For example, if that person usually reads political news stories or watches videos about the Boston Celtics, the journalistic outlet's algorithms may point the person toward more stories about politics or the Celtics.

Such recommendation algorithms are used by digitally native and legacy outlets alike. For example, even *The New York Times*, an organization that takes great pride in its journalistic expertise and editorial stewardship, has relinquished some of its agenda-setting power by adopting personalized distribution via the "For You" section of its app. Some organizations, including publications owned by Sweden's Bonnier News Local, allow intelligent algorithms to take the lead in organizing the news content appearing on those publications' home pages, leaving human editors to play more of a supervisory role (i.e., to occasionally overrule the algorithm's editorial decision-making).

More broadly, in an information ecosystem that is arguably oversupplied with content, there is an economic imperative for some news organizations to employ AI to intelligently distribute their products in tailored ways across platforms and to multiple market segments. This includes adapting their existing content to fit the expectations of different platforms, such as by creating a shorter automated news summary for TikTok than what might appear on YouTube. It also involves adapting promotional messages to take advantage of different platforms' technical affordances, such as by identifying trending hashtags and automatically applying the relevant ones to the journalistic outlet's work.

Ethical and Legal Dilemmas

AI is not some neutral thing. AI is not only shaped by its creators but it shapes individual and collective human behaviors via the ways it is put to use. It is thus crucial to take stock of the fact that market-leading technologies at the intersection of AI and journalism are being developed by people and companies with backgrounds outside of journalism, and to wrestle with the positive and negative implications of that. For example, AI technologies are often benchmarked through notions of efficiency and scalability. This is a stark contrast to the ideals that shape understandings of 'quality' journalism.

AI technologies can also become highly biased: depending on how (and by whom) the AI is developed and what it is trained upon, it can adopt and replicate (at scale) a number of human flaws. For example, Amazon created an AI-based hiring tool that ended up disproportionately rejecting female applicants. A 2021 investigation by *The Markup* found that an algorithm used by a large government agency was more likely to suggest denying home loans to people of color than to White people with similar characteristics. That was just one of many investigations by *The Markup*, a non-profit data-driven journalistic outlet, that have repeatedly shown that 'color-blind' algorithms are anything but.

Within the context of journalism, AI can unintentionally reproduce problematic depictions and promote inaccurate stereotypes. For example, an automated story about a decrease in the number of immigrants entering the United States may automatically embed a stock photo of immigrants being detained by immigration authorities. That, in turn, might promote and perpetuate the association between immigration and criminality, simply because the algorithm has learned that previous stories about immigration tended to focus on elements of legality and crime. Journalists and their outlets must therefore remain mindful of how they are employing artificial intelligence, and how such applications may advance or detract from their mission to represent truth.

On the legal front, the United States legal landscape remains unclear about key considerations involving the applications of AI in public communication. For example, legal standards in the U.S. make it difficult to hold algorithms (and their creators) liable for libel, leaving unclear who can be held legally responsible for defamation when the communication is enacted by a machine. Moreover, even established case law is now being reexamined as AI proliferates. This includes safe-harbor provisions that have shielded operators of digital infrastructure (and portions of news websites) from certain liabilities.

AI and the Future of Journalism

The future of journalism will involve greater human-machine interaction. While humans will likely remain at the center of news production, the work they do and the ways they go about it will look different. This will invariably result in the downsizing of certain roles and aspects of the job, but it will also create new roles and possibilities – from developing new technologies to managing knowledge systems to specializing in new beats and formats.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that although the aforementioned applications of AI in journalism show promise, the technology is still limited in important ways. For example, although algorithms already produce hundreds of thousands of business and sports news stories, their applications remain largely limited to news briefs and game recaps. An algorithm would have a much harder time writing a story that gets at *how* a CEO's sex scandal might affect their company, or produce a feature on *why* a player decided to sit out the season due to health concerns. Put another way, only a small amount of the news stories people regularly consume can be produced using the present AI technology, and those stories generally rely on either pre-existing data or phenomena that can be easily translated into structured data. And, products resulting from AI-led processes are usually relatively basic: they still use fairly simple expressions to convey information and can only offer surface-level analyses. They do not feature compelling leads or writerly panache, and they don't win Pulitzers on their own.

Nevertheless, there is good reason for journalistic outlets to invest in AI, and good reason to believe such investments will only increase. Journalists and journalistic outlets that fail to adapt to this changing environment will find themselves at risk of falling behind competitors who are able to leverage AI to increase efficiencies, scale upward, and even improve the quality of their work. Algorithms can generate news stories far more quickly than human journalists, and they can be useful aides for creating the first documentation of an event. Put another way, they can free up human journalists to focus on the more meaningful follow-up stories and draw some attention to stories that might otherwise not receive any coverage (for lack of human resources).

However, it is not just news producers who must adapt. The future of journalism will also likely be filled with 'junk,' from misinformation and disinformation to more fundamental issues involving information overload resulting from an influx of automated communication. That, in turn, will require individuals to adapt their existing media literacies and seek out their own trusted, intelligent assistants to help separate signal from noise.

Key Takeaways

- Artificial intelligence refers to a system that is capable of learning from the past, adapting to the present, and acting in a way that would be considered "intelligent" if a human being did it.
- AI is today used in some fashion in every stage of news production, from coming up with story ideas to distributing news content.
- AI is not a neutral technology; it takes on values from its creators and the objects it is tasked to learn from. This introduces a number of ethical and legal dilemmas that journalistic actors must be mindful of.
- Humans will likely remain at the center of news production. However, the work they do and the ways they go about it will look different.

About the Author

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Zamith's research has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals, including *New Media & Society*, the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, and *Digital Journalism*. He has received multiple research awards from AEJMC, ICA, and other organizations. Zamith is a Faculty Associate of UMass' Computational Social Science Institute and a Faculty Affiliate of its Department of Communication.

Zamith's teaching includes both conceptually-oriented and skills-oriented courses, ranging from a broad overview of journalism to data-oriented journalistic practices. He is a former Lilly Teaching Fellow, recipient of UMass' College Outstanding Teaching Award, and finalist for the University's Distinguished Teaching Award.

Zamith holds a Ph.D. in Mass Communication from the University of Minnesota, an M.S. in Mass Communication from Florida International University, and a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Minnesota. Outside of work, he likes to exert himself on a tennis court, make odd gestures toward the television while watching Arsenal FC, and find reasons to end up on Stack Overflow.