

OBJECTIVITY AND AUTONOMY IN THE NEWSROOM:
A FIELD APPROACH

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Jay F. Gabriel
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ABSTRACT

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Jay F. Gabriel

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This dissertation provides a better understanding of how journalists attain their personal and occupational identities. In particular, I examine the origins and meanings of journalistic objectivity as well as the professional autonomy that is specific to journalism. Journalists understand objectivity as a worldview, value, ideal, and impossibility. A central question that remains is why the term objectivity has become highly devalued in journalistic discourse in the past 30 years, a puzzling development considered in light of evidence that “objectivity” remains important in American journalism. I use Bourdieu’s notion of field to explore anthropological ways of looking at objectivity, for instance, viewing it as a practice that distinguishes journalists from other professionals as knowledge workers.

Applying notions of field to the journalistic field through anthropological methods and perspective permits the linkage of microlevel perspectives to macrolevel social phenomena. The dissertation demonstrates how qualitative research on individuals and newsroom organizations can be connected to the field of journalism in the United States. Additionally, it offers insight into why journalists continue to embrace objectivity, even as they acknowledge its deficiencies as a journalistic goal.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction: Journalism and Interpretation

Back in the 1920s, at which point journalism had been moving for some time toward increased professionalization in the form of journalism schools and organizations, a notion surfaced that journalism should become more like a science. The idea of a “journalology” (e.g., Johnson 1928) never really took hold, despite the practices and goals science and journalism shared, such as an affinity for facts, a desire for methods with which to qualify and quantify facts and ways in which to interpret them. The promise of treating journalism as a science seemed obvious; such a move would create better tools for describing reality. The authority of scientists, who carefully controlled access to their disciplines, eclipsed that of journalists when it came to specific subjects, and so a less openly stated, but hoped-for effect of scientizing journalism was to make it more exclusive and thus more authoritative.

As it turned out, while science and journalism possess many similarities, the audiences and purposes of each are sufficiently distinct as to have made this confluence forever unlikely. Another difference, one of the biggest of all, are the conditions under which the workers within each field produce knowledge. Deadlines are of far greater significance in journalism, which, after all, is the business of producing something called *news*, and so journalists have devised all sorts of ways to quickly identify, understand and assemble facts into narratives, with little particular need to conduct extended debates on the theories of such knowledge production, only the methods. Social scientists, on the

other hand, are taught early in their training that facts do not mean much without frameworks with which to interpret them. We would like to think that we favor the kind of theories that are explicit, that is, spelled out, articulated and as internally coherent and non-contradictory as possible. We concede, however, that most people are given to using implicit, unspoken theories (or ideologies) to interpret the world, and, in fact, many of us make our living studying these. Although the journalistic field is “undertheorized,” according even to journalist-scholars (Cline 2006), journalists certainly possess and use theories in both senses; there are explicit theories of newsgathering (such as arguments for a “participatory journalism” that seeks greater citizen involvement in the production of news) as well as more subtle, implicit frameworks within which journalists work. Does journalism mirror older (and some contemporary) models of good science? Why do journalists consider a separation of individual self from their work “good journalism”?

Hoping to learn something about implicit interpretive frameworks in the field of journalism, I conducted interviews with a number of journalists and worked for a time in a newsroom. During a conversation with one of my journalist-informants, a columnist for a daily paper, I mentioned that I had been writing about ways in which journalists interpret facts. He looked up sharply. “Don’t make that mistake!” he snapped, and then continued somewhat more gently, “Columnists interpret. Journalists don’t.” This surprised me a little. In much the same way that social scientists have largely dismissed beliefs in objectivity as naïve or sophomoric, most of my informants and many journalism texts similarly have been quick to describe objectivity as an ideal impossible to achieve. Most of the journalists whom I have encountered openly concede that they hold biases, and that they deal with them in various ways when they write stories. So I

was taken aback to hear a veteran journalist make what I understood to be a claim that journalists do not make interpretations. What did he mean when he said that journalists do not interpret?

This dissertation is about print journalists in the United States, the ways in which they interpret, and the way in which they talk about their production of the news. To make my analysis, I examine the concepts of objectivity and independence, two journalistic practices or worldviews that are grounded in the history and culture of the United States and in the institution of journalism. In particular, I have focused on journalistic discourses surrounding objectivity, a principle in American journalism that journalists have seemingly devalued in recent years. My direct ethnographic experience with journalists consists of fieldwork at an alternative weekly paper and interviews with a number of journalistic staff writers, freelancers, bloggers, editors, and teachers. The main question I am addressing is *why objectivity continues to hold sway in the field*; one answer that I propose is that *objectivity is useful for journalists in distinguishing themselves as exceptional in a marketplace of speakers, and maintaining control over their independence from coercive forces*.

Why journalists and journalism? Beyond the fact that I have a personal interest in newspapers, magazines, reporting and journalism, I see the social scientific investigation of journalism as being necessary to any general understanding of the modern nation-state, globalization and a host of other things from which human beings in modern societies form consciousness of the world based on their indirect experience of the people and history that surrounds them. Human beings in a society as large the United States have little intimate interaction with individuals outside their immediate routines. Still,

members of a society share many aspects of identity, knowledge and social relationships, and partake in many the same discourses, creating a shared body of understanding of the world. Among the numerous discursive practices that exist, journalism is surely predominant, given its reach and the size of the audiences that news media address. For various reasons that I touch upon in this chapter, anthropology has not been terribly attentive to journalism.

The omission is odd considering that a number of scholars have remarked upon the profound effects of media on social structure, social identity and individual consciousness itself (for example, Edmund Carpenter [1972] in anthropology, as well as Marshall McLuhan [1964]). The news provides a field of commonality and serves as a selection system that feeds various discourses on events, topics, people and ideas that can to some extent unite a citizenry that shares literacy in a common language. Scholars such as Benedict Anderson have argued that the post-Gutenberg era and the Reformation saw mass literacy and the printing of language in the vernacular saw the rise of the modern nation-state. Anderson attributes the rise of the modern nation-state after 1500 to the “development of print-as-commodity” (1991:37) in which publishers promulgated works in languages that would appeal to the largest number of people possible.

The present-day model of journalism in the United States has a similar origin in the development of the populist press of the 1830s, which served for the first time, a mass public of varying classes, ethnic backgrounds, degrees of literacy and political affiliations. The modern version is little different in that journalism plays no small role in the construction of a shared sense of the world among individuals who will never meet. Journalists tell stories about the world, particularly the social world, to audiences who

engage with these narratives in some shared way. Although media studies scholars such as David Morley (1980, 1992, 1996) and Stuart Hall (1980) have convincingly shown that audiences are heterogeneous and at liberty to make readings of news and media entirely different from those which media producers intended, news stories and the news cycle constitute a common understanding of what constitutes news.

Journalists work within this cultural framework, adding to it, and in turn, journalists are informed by this cultural framework. I would quickly add here for the benefit of the anthropologists who read this that I use the term “culture” cautiously, and I would argue that the term “cultural framework” does not have to imply homogeneity, sameness, and boundedness, all of which are problematically attached to the culture concept for many anthropologists (see Brumann 1999). S. Elizabeth Bird, in her anthropological “cultural study” of tabloid newspapers in the United States, sees culture as “connections—between people, ideas, values” (1992:1) and as a “web of significance” (Geertz 1973) in which tabloids, their publishers, the stories and the readers are all suspended. Tabloids cannot be meaningfully understood, says Bird, apart from the context of gender, class, and other popular media—all of which constitutes culture.

Journalists have a great deal of control over setting the news agenda, that is, what is discussed and what is not (though perhaps to a lesser extent than they once did, given the advent of citizen journalism via Internet venues such as blogs). The facts, narratives and accounts that journalists place on that agenda as news, however, has less to do with detached observation and more to do with how journalists have learned to construct stories or assemble their observations into a narrative (Bird and Dardenne 1997). A great deal of journalists’ “news sense” is informed by life experience, as is access to

newsrooms, which are populated by a somewhat elite group who are college educated and drawn from the ranks of the middle and upper middle class. But despite the fact that the profession of journalism in the United States is dominated by white, middle class males (Weaver et al. 2007), it would be simplistic to assume that the process of how journalists choose what to report is merely an unconscious expression of class interest or other social position. The decisions journalists make on how to write about the news arise out of a complex interaction of small-scale newsroom politics, larger scale market competition, and audience expectations. All of these are embedded in culture.

While my work provides a better understanding of the relationship of the news to United States society, this dissertation does not focus on audiences or publics, nor is it primarily concerned with the involvement of journalism in the processes through which nation-states and social identity are formed. I am interested in how journalists in the United States understand their work and how that understanding as well as their work is grounded in culture and historical processes, such as the emergence of different types of papers. In the chapters that follow, I discuss journalism and journalistic professionals in the United States who work mostly in urban settings. Journalism in the United States has a particular history throughout which it developed distinct values. Two of these, objectivity and independence, I discuss below.

Objectivity and Independence as Part of a Journalistic Field

In this dissertation, I am demonstrating connections between the entire profession of journalism in the United States and the attitudes, beliefs and behavior of a relatively few subjects. To do so, I have employed the sociological notion of field as a sphere of

influence in society. A field, according to Bourdieu (2005), is a “microcosm” of forces and agents whose beliefs and practices are, to some extent though not entirely, ordered by the influence of the field. Journalism, as one sort of field, is made up of journalists whose practices should be understood in the context of the profession. The approach I am taking here is that to the extent that the parts reflect the whole, it is useful to engage in ethnographic studies of journalists in order to produce statements about journalism. In particular, I emphasize Bourdieu’s attention to processes of differentiation that attend agents in fields, and suggest that one way to understand journalistic practices such as objectivity is to regard them as practices that set journalists apart from other knowledge workers and legitimate their work within a cultural system.

Long established arguments in the study of journalism hold that events in newsworld are situated in cultural knowledge and practice and so journalistic activity therefore draws on and reinforces commonsense notions that, like the journalists themselves, are the products of sociocultural milieus (see, for instance, Bird and Dardenne 1997, Smith 1997, Zelizer 1997b). Two of these forms of practice that characterize journalistic practice in the United States,¹ objectivity and independence, are the focus of my ethnographic analysis in later chapters.

A Reuters web document on editorial policy responds to this frequently asked question: “Why don't you describe terrorists as terrorists?”

As part of a long-standing policy to avoid the use of emotive words, we do not use terms like 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' unless they are in a direct quote or are otherwise attributable to a third party. We do not characterize the subjects of news stories but instead report their actions, identity and background so that readers can make their own decisions based on the facts. (2004)

Among journalistic organizations, newswires probably have one of the strongest “just the facts” approaches to news and devote less attention to analysis, as this policy illustrates. Nonetheless, to varying degrees, this approach to newswork is evident in journalism of all sorts. A “just the facts” approach emphasizes two things: the primacy of facts and an emphasis on the status of Reuters as an independent observer. For most U.S. journalists, facts and opinions are distinct classes of knowledge that their profession trains them to keep separate. Similarly, journalists think of themselves as being in the world of partisan politics, but not of it. These two suppositions have been a source of credibility and authority for journalists since at least the 19th century. This articulation of journalistic method and responsibility did not just emerge fully formed. Journalists, unlike many other media agents, deal in “truth,” which journalists in my interviews viewed as the assembly of facts into representations that best approximate a given event. Of course, they may not always tell the “truth,” and many journalists may generate many different accounts of the same occurrences, or ignore certain types of occurrences and extensively cover others. In their attempts to uncover and properly arrange facts, which exist “out there,” many journalists actively seek to allow facts to “speak for themselves” and utilize methods to limit unduly interpreting the facts once they have identified them. Such active non-intervention is also called objectivity. Objectivity has a history, one on which I elaborate below and in Chapter 3.

Objectivity

Despite a few attempts to rehabilitate it, objectivity has fallen into some disrepute in recent years among critics, who bemoan the lack of it in journalism, and among

journalists, who are less likely to use the term “objective” to describe their work than they were even two or three decades ago. For many journalists, this is not a complete abandonment, but rather a concession that facts are voiceless in the absence of interpretive frameworks. This is the reason that almost no journalists to whom I spoke actually used the term “objectivity” to describe current journalistic values. The term held a special meaning for all of them given the history of journalism, but almost all of my informants used somewhat similar but different words—fairness, balance, for instance—when asked to describe the core values of good journalism. Objectivity, as many of them have remarked, has become somewhat quaint, even antiquated.

Objectivity persists though. Journalists do not and cannot cover all potential news occurrences. Constraints on doing so include resources such as time and money, audience interest, and definitions of newsworthiness that include some events and exclude many more. Researchers have noted that journalists have developed systems for maintaining control of their work, whether in terms of “gatekeeping” (White 1950) or in terms of the social processes of the newsroom (Breed 1955). Journalists also have “routines” to allow them to make decisions quickly and judgment easier when news happens (Tuchman 1973). One way in which journalists are able to ascertain relevant facts when covering controversial issues is through the use of objectivity. The conventions of objective newswriting include the use of “neutral language,” recounting “both sides” of any given story and using newswriting for the “public good.” For instance, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE)’s Statement of Principles (2002) includes responsibility, freedom of the press, independence, truth and accuracy, impartiality and fair play. Despite some clear associations with these particular values,

journalistic “objectivity” has been difficult to define, both for journalists, and for critics and audiences, who tend to be able better to identify its absence rather than its presence (as Mindich 1998 notes). Especially in American public discourse, an “objective” story tends to be one that steers a middle path between two poles of political rhetoric (“getting both sides of the story” was something I heard journalists say quite often). A journalist violates the tenets of “objectivity” to the degree to which his or her story appears to favor one pole over the other.

Objectivity, which I discuss at length in Chapter 2, is a set of values and attitudes through which journalists have conducted work since at least the beginning of the 20th century. What it means to be objective, however, is uncertain, and an exact definition of objectivity seemed to elude most of the journalists to whom I spoke, as well as scholars who have written on the subject such as David Mindich (1998) and Michael Schudson (1978, 1990). These scholars also maintain that “objectivity” imbues news writing with its journalistic authority and serves as a way to insulate news writing from criticism by separating the journalist from the appearance of engagement in the world of news facts. This appearance of disinterestedness became especially desirable after American newspapers developed independence of political parties, especially from the 1830s on.

The roots of objectivity in the United States lie in the appearance of modern newspapers in the 1830s and objectivity became a dominant mode of newswriting from around the beginning the 20th century (Mindich 1998; Park 1923; Schiller 1981; Schudson 1978; Stephens 1986). Prior to the 1830s, American newspapers were often instruments of political parties or journals of mercantilism and sold through subscription to select readership. In contrast, the populist “penny press” that appeared in 1830s

Jacksonian America depended on the revenue generated by street sales and advertising. In their efforts to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, the editors of these one-penny papers printed stories written plainly and pitched to appeal to the working classes. Benjamin Day's *The Sun*, which he founded in 1833 and which became a leading penny paper of the day, featured as its motto, "It Shines for All." This rebranding and remarketing of the newspaper contributed to the eventual expunging of overt partisan rhetoric and 'bias' from news stories.

David Mindich (1998) describes journalistic objectivity as a relationship between reportable facts and ideology. He argues in his social history of newspapers that the rise and evolution of this general concept was concurrent with many other social changes; for instance, later in the 19th century, news writing borrowed liberally from the methods, language and sensibility of scientific disciplines. By the 1890s and through the Progressive Era, the first professional journalism schools and professional organizations with codified ethical codes had appeared. By the time journalism made this transformation into a professional field, objectivity had become a fundamental part of journalistic method.

One reason that objectivity has proven durable is that it provides the credibility journalists require in order to function effectively. Despite the fact that many of the journalists in this study qualified their adherence to objectivity with statements that "everyone is biased," objectivity is often an effective means for them to maintain this credibility. Objectivity also provides a way for journalists to deal with uncertainties and even potentially dangerous situations that include risks such as defamation suits and pressures such as deadlines, both of which together require journalists to ascertain and

write the “truth” quickly and accurately. The sociologist Gaye Tuchman has described objectivity as a “strategic ritual” (1972) through which journalists insulate themselves from the dangers of their vocation. “Attacked for a controversial presentation of ‘facts,’ newspapermen invoke their objectivity almost the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits” (1972:660).

Their role as arbiter of truth and gatekeepers of shared, public reality makes journalists an important part of the processes through which the nation-state constitutes itself and its identity. All media are an important means through which the populations of modern nation-states construct a shared identity. I have no evidence to suggest that the news is more important in processes of community formation than television drama, popular films, novels or other forms of entertainment. Unlike other media workers, however, journalists deal in non-fiction. They report the “facts” and the “truth” and do not depend on metaphor or allegory as an overt means of creating representations of the world for their audiences. In order to maximize the likelihood of telling a story “as it happened,” journalists have to perform a number of complex operations that include determining the importance of various facts and persons to the story and balancing multiple perspectives (though many of my informants spoke of two perspectives, as in “both sides”) in a way that mediates fairness and truth. Journalists have developed traditions and codes of behavior for reporting on the world of the real and are quite aware of the need to approach facts in particular ways, lest they be reduced to mere fiction. As fact-workers, journalists and the institutions for which they work have an authority and power that is potent and unique.

American journalists draw on objectivity in varied ways, and some even reject it outright, but all have to deal with objectivity in some way, whether they work at daily newspapers or alternative weeklies that were born out of critiques of objective journalism that held that objectivity had insufficiently responded to structural inequalities of which it was even a part. Objectivity, as journalists understand it, is not a single, unified theory, but rather a collection of attitudes and beliefs that one could imagine as a spectrum, permitting a generalization about different versions of journalistic objectivity in terms of constellations of traits or qualities. On one end of the spectrum lies the early 20th century manifestation of objectivity, the one in which facts and values are (supposedly) strictly separated and in which facts “speak for themselves,” which I would call a “strong version” of objectivity. The version of objectivity at the other end, the one I discovered in my interviews and fieldwork, allows for some degree of interpretation on the part of the journalist, acknowledges the biases inherent to journalism (such as gatekeeping), and expresses doubts about the prospect or desirability of a perfectly neutral, “value-free” journalism. The skepticism to which modern journalists subscribe is at odds with a strong version of objectivity. A weaker form of objectivity provides an adequate framework for journalists to accomplish tasks and routines associated with processing facts into news.

Journalists such as Brent Cunningham (2003) wonder why objectivity, given its obvious deficiencies, has not been replaced entirely by some other paradigm. One way to address this question, exemplified in the discontinuity I found in the newsroom and in interviews with journalists, is through the notion of field, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu. Objectivity, as I have argued in Chapter 3, enables journalists to differentiate

themselves and the information that they produce from other sorts of knowledge and knowledge workers, to legitimate themselves as agents with an authority to identify facts and to describe their relationship. A second way in which I use to field is to examine the historical relationships between journalists and other institutions. What I and many other scholars describe as “objectivity” is in reality hardly a single unified school of journalistic thought. Objectivity is better described as a group of tendencies and moods toward information and journalistic professionalism, and not a “logical” way of dealing with facts, but one that arose out of particular historical developments in the 19th and 20th centuries such as mass literacy, capitalism and globalization. The word “objectivity” was in common use in newsrooms by the 1930s (Schudson 1978) and, as evidenced by many newspaper codes of ethics, out of style by the 1990s or earlier; for journalists and scholars, however, “objectivity” is applicable to the development and tendencies of U.S. journalism from the 1830s through today. The term “objective journalism” is therefore to some degree a label of convenience that has been over-reified. On the other hand, it is possible to see in the behavior and worldview of contemporary journalists the consequences of events over a century and half ago, and so it makes sense to call this product of a historical trajectory by a single term, objectivity, so long as we do not read too literal meaning of this word. Certainly journalists themselves do not.

Autonomy and Independence

The chapter on journalistic autonomy and independence (Chapter 4) describes how journalists draw on individualism and independence to negotiate the many contradictions that accompany the idea of an individual working in a bureaucratic

organization. In my interviews and experience in the newsroom, I found that journalists have a great deal of concern with something that I have called here independence, a rough analogue of the autonomy, according to Bourdieu, that institutions and fields exert.

Like objectivity, independence is a journalistic value, but one that journalists allude to indirectly much more than objectivity (in other words, most journalists would not probably identify the term “independence” as a core journalistic value). Objectivity is part of the journalist’s methodological repertoire, and because journalists police their methods of obtaining information fairly rigorously, objectivity has an immediate resonance for journalists that the term independence does not. By “independence,” I mean the tendency of journalists to see themselves and their work as ideally free of government or corporate interference, even if they concede that in practice this is not always the case. It also refers to the desire to maintain a degree of independence from the oversight newsroom management. Independence describes the notion that journalists see themselves as individuals within a larger institution that counterbalances government and corporate power. In my interviews and interaction with journalists, I found that journalists exhibited a pattern of talking about newswork in this way; almost all of my informants invariably used terms and phrases such as “fourth estate,” “looking out for the little guy,” and “watchdog” when asked to discuss the function of journalism.

Despite his oft-repeated assertions that journalistic power checks governmental and other types of power, one of my interviewees made an interesting, if often-noted-in-intro-to-journalism-classes type observation during our third interview that journalism is the only profession specifically mentioned in the United States Constitution. By implication, journalism derives its privileged place in society from the legal and social

framework that emerged during the founding of the United States. The First Amendment does indeed mention the press, though not necessarily as a professional class (journalists did not become a profession, or semi-profession, until the late 19th century). Claims of independence notwithstanding, journalistic authority has a longstanding engagement with government in a number of ways. In keeping with other ethnographic research on journalists' relationships and dependence on governmental bureaucratic structures (e.g., Fishman 1997), I observed that journalists drew upon officials for information both on- and off-the-record, as well as corroboration of facts. Herman and Chomsky (1988) have argued that officials, in turn, find a nominally independent press useful for disseminating information conducive to its interests.

This concern for independence and some of the contradictions associated with it is related to the individualism that pervades culture and identity in the United States historically (here I draw on Bellah, et al. 1996). There is a great deal of romanticization of this journalistic independence in popular media. The journalist, as Matthew Ehrlich (2006) points out, is a mythic archetype in United States media--one, that I would add, is similar to the loose cannon detective or gritty cowboy in the way he or she personifies individualism and anti-authoritarianism. Examples of films that include such portrayals of "good journalists" in opposition to powerful bureaucratic structures, even if the journalist characters in the film are not necessarily American, include *All the President's Men* (1976), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005), *Killing Fields* (1984), and *The Pelican Brief* (1994). Even the "bad journalists" who appear in cautionary tales such as *Shattered Glass* (2003), adds Ehrlich (2006), present journalists as rugged individualists and unwilling to accommodate the status quo.

The People and the Places

My project is based on data I collected from interviews and my own work experience in a newsroom at an alternative newsweekly in a major metropolitan area. I have called this paper the “*Metropolitan Weekly*.” I have also conducted interviews with fifteen practicing journalists in two urban areas, one on the East Coast and the other in the Pacific Northwest. The journalists who participated in my project are of varying positions and backgrounds, but they are all local journalists.

In general, who are journalists in the United States? Journalists working full-time for mainstream media in the United States, according to Weaver et al. (2007), numbered an estimated 116,148 in 2002, which constituted a decrease of almost 5% since 1992. This estimate does not count growth in non-traditional media, and the authors suggest that mainstream journalism has actually increased in numbers despite this decrease in full-time editorial newswriters. The number of journalists working full-time at daily newspapers, weeklies and news magazines totaled 81,829.

Statistically speaking, journalism in the United States is largely white and male, significantly Protestant, and leans left in its voting habits. According to Weaver et al., in 2002 the “average journalist was a married White male just over 40, less likely to come from a Protestant background [than he was in 1992], and slightly more likely to hold a bachelor’s degree” (2007:1). Men constitute 67% of all journalists in the United States, outnumbering female journalists by two to one, a statistic that has remained virtually unchanged since the early 1980s. By contrast, the composition of the entire US workforce was 57% men to 43% women in 1981. In 2002, the gender divide of the

general US civilian, non-institutional workforce was 53.6% men to 46.4% women (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). Men, who had an average of 18 years on the job to 13 for women, tended to have longer careers in journalism than women or to have been hired less recently. While a greater number of women than men (45.8/men to 54.2/women) had four years or less experience in the field, men with 20 or more years of experience outnumbered women 45% to 29%.

Journalists are overwhelmingly white. In 2002, whites constituted about 85% of Weaver et al.'s sample (2007). Minorities such as African Americans or Asian Americans are underrepresented by factors of three or four in the profession. On the other hand, at 6.2%, journalists of Jewish origin are overrepresented compared to their numbers in the general population (2%).

Historically, journalists have been more heavily concentrated in the Northeast than in other parts of the country. Weaver and his colleagues found that in 2002 the geographic distribution of journalists more closely resembled the distribution of people in the United States.

In keeping with standard anthropological practice, I have made no attempt to select a sample that resembles this population in terms of these demographic qualities. The newsroom in which I worked was in a large city in the Northeastern U.S., and its staff was almost entirely white; moreover, the *Metropolitan Weekly* is an alternative newsweekly, not a mainstream daily paper. Because of this, the journalists whom I encountered there differ significantly from journalists at daily papers in their approaches to journalism. I enlisted the aid of my interviewees mostly through snowball sampling and cold calling, and they range from full-timers to part-timers, to editors, writers,

reporters, columnists and teachers. So in what ways, if any, are statements that I can make about the journalists involved in my study that are valid for journalists in general? Whether they were daily reporters, editors, or weekly staff, all of my respondents were invested in the idea of being a journalist and everything that entails: the desire to “be in the know” and to communicate that to others, and a sense of responsibility to “inform the public” and a duty to record historical events. Despite their differences, they all had some shared ideas about the “specialness” or exclusivity of being a journalist.

My duties as an intern at the *Metropolitan Weekly* consisted primarily of the factchecking of articles, movie and music listings and other various items that were to go to press. I also researched and wrote several brief 800-word articles, two of which were published. I supplemented this newsroom experience by conducting interviews with journalists from a variety of backgrounds. During these interviews, I attempted to extract biographical data for the purpose of making connections to objectivity and independence.

Each ethnographic subject poses a unique set of logistical problems for the anthropologist. As with any other population, an anthropologist who wishes to understand journalists must travel to the field, make contacts, negotiate at best limited access, build trust and social bonds, and attempt to connect the data extracted from a small community to matters of larger, overarching significance. Because I have focused on the United States (or more to the point, I have not emphasized geographic or cultural distance as a part of my research), the traditional anthropological problem of going into the field was, in one sense, simply a matter of walking out the front door and catching a train into town. Journalists, however, can be somewhat difficult to observe at work, in their own environment. While the newsroom is certainly a locus of journalistic activity,

it is difficult to define the field itself, as journalists conduct much of their work online, on the phone and through visits to their sources of information. When I first sought entry into journalistic work, I thought that perhaps I might focus on this sort of decentralized labor in a direct way by following journalists around through their daily routines. I was unable to find any journalists willing to allow me to accompany them on interviews (understandably so, given that my presence would have almost certainly disrupted the one-on-one conversations through which journalists collect their own data).

I have found that journalists tend to be sympathetic and receptive to my requests for hour or two long interviews (the acceptance rate was approximately 25%). Journalists, like anthropologists, depend on the openness and cooperation of strangers who, by divulging information, are exposed to the dangers of openness and public revelation, and in my experience they have sympathy for anthropologists, though more so when the methods of those anthropologists seem to closely mirror journalistic techniques of data collection. Ulf Hannerz (2004) discusses the homology of anthropological and journalistic goals and methods using the phrase “studying sideways”, a play on Laura Nader’s famous exhortation for anthropologists to “study up” (1972) toward subjects with social power equal or greater than that of anthropologists. Hannerz notes that throughout the history of the discipline, anthropologists have often had to share a niche with other members of a class of worker that I would call the contact professional—people such as missionaries, aid workers, government agents, and tourist industry professionals all engaged in a similar work though to different ends.² Anthropologists, Hannerz says, have long been wary of these other contact workers and go to great lengths

to distinguish the methods, theories and knowledge that belong to anthropology from these other types of contact work.

Scholars writing in the tradition of public anthropology have often extended this defense of anthropology's borders to the points at which it overlaps with journalism (as evidenced by the recent publication of *Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back*, edited by Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson (2005). The anthropologists in Besteman and Gusterson's edited volume attempt to repudiate ideas popularized by scholars and journalists--or "pundits," as Gusterson and Besteman dismissively call them--such as Thomas Friedman, Samuel Huntington, and Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. Although the book levels its critiques at "punditry," this excerpt is probably typical of how anthropologists distinguish ethnography from many forms of journalism:

As anthropologists who have all done fieldwork, we get our knowledge by deeply engaged, intense, face-to-face research, often in settings where disease and violence pose a real threat. Along with reading all the learned books and professional journals related to our subjects, we spend years in local communities, listening, observing, interviewing. Wanting all sides of the story, we talk with everyone from government officials and executives to peasants, activists, workers and criminals. We are experts in the history, the politics, and the economics of the places we study, but we also understand these places in terms of the human interactions we have had with the people who live there. (2005:5)

But journalism and anthropology, as Hannerz notes, do have more in common than the use of interviews to collect information, often more than many anthropologists are willing to admit. "We share the condition of being in a transnational contact zone, engaged there in reporting, representing, translating, interpreting—generally managing meaning across distances, although (in part, at least) with different interests, under

different constraints” (2004:3). Foreign correspondents, the particular type of journalist Hannerz examines in his work, have a beat or a site to which they are posted. They make contacts and informants, some of whom provide the journalists information on a regular basis, over a period of years. Despite the fact that we write for different audiences and have different notions of ethical responsibility to our informants, journalists and anthropologists are similar in quite a few ways.

Despite such similarities, I still had some difficulty determining how to do participant observation in the journalistic community. As white collar professionals, journalists work in a guarded space, a field to which outsiders do not find easy access. Apart from the coursework and a stint as an op-ed columnist for my high school newspaper, I had no training or experience in the field. So I acted the part of any would-be journalist and applied for an unpaid editorial internship at the *Metropolitan Weekly*, where I agreed to perform at least 15 hours a week of unpaid work.

In the chapter on my experiences in the newsroom, I look at this experience with data from interviews in light of a history of the alternative newspaper, which I compare to the more “mainstream” journalism of daily papers that I draw from the experiences of my interview subjects.

Anthropology of Media

Here I situate the anthropological study of journalism within the anthropology of mass media, which means that I have taken an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on sociological ethnographies of journalists (which substantially outnumber anthropological ethnographies of journalism) and communication studies perspectives on journalism.

Doing so has been necessary because of the historical treatment of media in anthropology.

Academic disciplines do not extend catholic coverage to the entirety of the subjects they purport to study. The overall breadth of the subjects of papers, articles, monographs, course syllabi and textbooks is the result of systemic biases towards certain topics and not others, as well as factors such as the influence of prominent scholars or individual interest. Anthropology is no different. Given their preoccupations with tribes, colonialism and the disappearing world, twentieth century anthropologists did not often study media makers, especially when they came from the same sort of societies as the anthropologists. This is likely one of the reasons that, in her 1950 ethnography of the Hollywood production system, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory; an Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers*, anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker drew a comparison between the American movie production system and a more traditional anthropological venue, the small scale society. Despite such attempts to make her subject anthropologically respectable, the book seemed to lack something for everyone—a sociologist found that the typically anthropological approach and ethnographic methods constituted a lack of “scientific rigor” (see Bierstedt 1951), while anthropologists simply ignored it for decades.

The anthropology of mass media has some of its origins in worries that modernity was replacing traditional ways of life as well as the promise that technology seemed to hold for salvaging the cultures of doomed, primitive peoples. Such anthropological concerns with media go back to the 19th century (see, for instance, Franz Boas’ experiments with photography [Ruby 1980] and phonographic data collection [Brady

2002]). Media ethnographies or ethnographic studies that deal with mass media as a normal human activity are fairly commonplace now. Although anthropological articles and texts dealing with journalism date back at least to the 1970s, most of the ethnographically-minded studies of journalism began appearing in the 1990s and 2000s (two full-fledged examples of this include Bird's *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids* [1992] and Mark Pedelty's *War Stories: the Culture of Foreign Correspondents* [1995]; content analysis approaches such as that of Lutz and Collins on the imperialist nostalgia of images in *National Geographic* [1993] also exist).

In her 1993 review of the relevant literature in anthropology, media studies, communication studies and elsewhere, Debra Spitulnik writes that there was “as yet no ‘anthropology of mass media’” (293). She summarizes the potential scope of the field of research:

Mass media—defined in the conventional sense as the electronic media of radio, television, film and recorded media, and the print media of newspapers, magazines, and popular literature—are at once artifact, experiences, practices, and processes. They are economically and politically driven, linked to developments in science and technology; and like most domains of human life, their existence is inextricably bound up with the use of language. Given these various modalities and spheres of operation, there are numerous angles for approaching mass media anthropologically: as institutions, as workplaces, as communicative practices, as cultural products, as social activities, as aesthetic forms, and as historical developments. (1993:293)

Fifteen years later, an anthropology of mass media does finally exist, as evidenced by the relatively recent publication of at least three anthropology of media readers (Askew and Wilk's *The Anthropology of Media* [2002], Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin's *Media Worlds* [2002] and Rothenbuhler and Coman's *Media Anthropology* [2005]).

Although it is strongly interdisciplinary, the anthropology of mass media differs from its counterparts in other disciplines in perspective and methodology. Sociologists, for instance, have tended to concentrate on the organization of journalism as an occupation, as well as systemic structural constraints on the journalist as an individual (Schudson 1997). Anthropologists, by contrast, tend to view media foremost as a cultural practice whose participants, whether producers and consumers, are engaged in “the generation of identities, interpretations, subjectivities, statuses, and meanings,” as Mark Peterson describes it (2003:161). (Peterson is speaking explicitly about media production but notes that the same is true of media consumption, with which media production forms a “double circuit” [59] of media use.) To this ecology, anthropologists bring ethnography as a means of describing media as a set of social relations and as a culturally informed activity.

In his genealogy of the anthropology of mass media, Peterson (2003) argues that its development in the United States as a distinct subfield of anthropology was hampered by its ties to particular perspectives and movements within US anthropology. Peterson points out that community studies, such as those of husband and wife Robert and Helen Lynd, who conducted a qualitative study of Muncie, Indiana in the 1920s, carried out analyses of the “whole community,” including uses of media. In 1929, the Lynds produced *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, which analyzed the use of media and the transformation of leisure time since the 1890s. While neither of the Lynds were anthropologists (though *Middletown* earned Robert Lynd a doctorate in sociology from Columbia University), other community studies followed such as those of the anthropologist William Lloyd Warner, who conducted his study of “Yankee City”

(Newburysport, Massachusetts). Warner, like the Lynds, regarded community as “a collection of social institutions whose interconnectedness created a complete and bounded whole” (Peterson 2003:34), a view that was becoming increasingly unacceptable in U.S. anthropology by the 1960s as the discipline moved toward viewing societies as less bounded.

Another school of anthropological research into mass media was the culture and personality work associated with Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead (Peterson 2003). These studies were grounded heavily in Boasian-era notions of bounded culture and fell into great disfavor in post-war anthropology. National culture studies were contracted by the military in the 1940s and 50s as a wartime program aimed at better understanding the cultures of hostile nations. A number of anthropologists, including Ruth Benedict, were involved with this research at the center for Research in Contemporary Cultures at Columbia University. Because traditional fieldwork during wartime was not an option for them, they sought to understand national character in part, as Peterson notes, “at a distance” through the analysis of media. However, the Cold War world provided more traditional venues for participant observer research, and anthropologists lost interest in culture at a distance. When anthropologists began to question seriously the assumptions of unity and homogeneity underlying “patterns of culture,” “culture and personality” and “national character,” work in this tradition began to falter. As this sort of work mostly disappeared, “with it declined anthropological attention to media” (Peterson 2003:50). Peterson concludes that anthropological interest in media could not survive “the limitations of the... methodological and theoretical assumptions [of community studies and national character studies]” (2003:56).

Anthropological research on media production has received somewhat greater consideration from visual anthropologists, but largely with regard to ethnographic filmmaking (Heider 1974; Jhala 1994; Loizos 1993; Ruby 2000; Worth 1981; Worth, Adair and Chalfen [1971]1997) and “indigenous” media. A great deal of this discourse emerges from the scholarship that examines the relationship of ethnographic filmmaking to its traditional subjects (see Ginsburg 1991). While there are a few examples of ethnographic studies situated among communities of media producers addressing popular audiences (Dornfeld 1998 on public broadcasting; Intintoli 1984 on producers of soap operas and Powdermaker [1972]1950 on Hollywood), but anthropologists have only recently (relatively speaking) been seriously investigating Western media intended for Western audiences.

Ethnography and Qualitative Research in the Newsroom

If anthropologists were reluctant to produce sustained bodies of research into mass media and journalism, sociologists and communications scholars felt no such compunctions. A comprehensive literature of journalist studies that is dominated largely by sociological texts has emerged in social science research over the last 40 years or so. Schudson (1989) describes three major themes of this journalism and newsroom research. The first is the political economy of news concerned primarily with media hegemony and power, exemplified by Herman and Chomsky (1988). The second and largest theme consists of the mainstream sociological approaches to the social structure of news organizations. These include theories about the gatekeeping function within the newsroom (e.g., White 1950); the routine and routinization of newswork (Molotch and

Lester 1974; Tuchman 1973); bureaucratic orientation of news organizations (Fishman 1980, 1997) and organizational interaction (Gitlin 1980). A third thematic trend consists of the “culturological” approaches, which are concerned with the symbolic economy of news and the symbolic and interpretive dimensions of communities of journalists. These include notions like the “interpretive community” (Zelizer 1997a); Turnerian inspired notions of ritual and performance (Ettema 1997; Lule 1992; MacAloon 1984; Pauly 1988); and the narrative and mythic qualities of journalism (Bird and Dardenne 1997; Carey and Fritzler 1989; Smith 1997).

Sociological researchers have made great use of ethnographic and participant observation approaches. Gans (1979) and Tuchman (1972, 1973, 1978) were among the first to conduct this sort of research. Gans and Tuchman were both concerned with selective strategies, ideology and coping mechanisms for engaging in tasks that demanded a great deal of output (what Reese 1997 describes as the “news paradigm”, a model that sets finite limits on journalistic inquiry in a world of near-infinite facts). Often, scholars have imagined the newsroom as a factory (Bantz, McCorkle et al. 1980; Fishman 1997); as fact filtering mechanism (Berkowitz 1997, improving on the gatekeeper model); and as capitalist proving ground (Ehrlich 1997). Others theorize about journalists’ methods of story selection (Lester 1980; Soloski 1989). These models are typically “sociological” in their concerns with understanding the sorts of constraints that news organizations place on individuals who work within them (Schudson 1989).

Anthropology of Journalism

So if anthropology has a lengthy, if inconsistent involvement with mass media, and ethnographers of various fields besides anthropology have studied journalists, what sort of anthropology of journalism exists? How is it different from other perspectives on journalism? How might an anthropology of journalism look?

In the anthropology of journalism that has emerged in this dissertation, I have focused on the community, in this case a newsroom, as one significant unit of analysis. I have also sought to connect how individuals not in one particular community see their work, and to relate all of this to the larger context of the practice of journalism in the United States. As an anthropologist, I am more interested in examining the ways in which social processes and the interaction of individuals in a cultural context give meaning to journalism than I am in understanding the interaction between journalism and organizational structure. Nor do I wish to analyze the news as anything other than as products of journalists' social relationships and cultural knowledge.³ This is in contrast to the way in which communication studies scholars often approach journalism.

Perhaps oddly, one of the more prominent voices calling for such a "culturological" (from Schudson 1989) reorientation in how journalism is studied is a communication scholar, Barbie Zelizer (c.f., 1997b). What does a culturological perspective add to the study of journalism? The need to bring a humanistic perspective to the study of journalism is acute, Zelizer argues, saying that "In adopting a sociological tenor in their scholarship, journalism researchers have fashioned a view of journalism that fits neatly within sociology, but perhaps nowhere else in the academy" (1997b:24). Zelizer believes that sociologists have oversimplified and overstated the case for media

power by focusing on the ‘typical’ ethnographic example. She lays out a case for humanistic inquiry by looking to four areas of scholarship: performance, ritual, narrative and interpretive community.

Narrative approaches, taken from literary studies, are most concerned with “a group’s ability to consolidate around codes of knowledge by examining which narratives are upheld, repeated, and altered” (Zelizer 1997b:26). This view emphasizes the social role of journalism as an institution of storytelling (Gans 1979) in which the news is ever repackaged as a set of recurring tales that whose enduring themes constitute social memory. Narrative approaches have manifested in anthropology as studies of folklore and media. Bird and Dardenne (1997) criticize ‘traditional’ studies of news (e.g. Gans 1979; Schudson 1978) that classify news in dichotomous categories such as ‘hard’/‘soft’ or ‘important’/‘interesting.’ Bird and Dardenne argue that this dichotomy of news conceals the fact that all news, whether front page or human interest, is both constructed and consumed as a narrative text. As “a story about reality, [but] not reality itself” (1997:346), news may be viewed as a visible artifact of culture. Perhaps most relevant to anthropological understanding of the news, Bird and Dardenne note that these narrative structures—the types of stories that are told and retold—are culturally specific.

Whether by better attending to newsroom rituals or other activities that revealed journalists’ preoccupations and inner states, an anthropology of journalism would surely pay more attention to “the natives’” worldview. As Mark Peterson says of many studies of journalism, “Analysts often seek to demystify production, deliberately rejecting the ‘native’s point of view’ to show readers ‘what is really going on.’ This is particularly true of studies of American journalism, in which popular notions of ‘objectivity’ and

editorial independence are belied by attention to actual processes of production.”
(Peterson 2003:161).

Conclusions

This project is an anthropological study of how journalists make meaning of the world and how their inclusion in institutions, occupations and broader social structures affect how they make these representations. To suggest that journalists place their own morality, bias and perspective into their work might seem to be an observation hardly worth mentioning in all of its obviousness. Yet given the relationship journalists have developed with “facts” and “truth,” it is perhaps understandable why the columnist at the beginning of this chapter reacted with dismay when I said it aloud in the way that I did. My informant was, I believe, concerned that I was not able to distinguish the ideal role and responsibilities of the journalist from the reality. In traditional newspaper journalism, a journalist is not allowed to openly analyze facts as an independent actor, except under particular conditions, such as when the publication grants him or her license to do so on the editorial page or as a columnist. When I said I was examining how journalists interpret facts, I was speaking as a social scientist, for whom a large part of the reality of any social fact is in its observation. But just as a newswire does not “characterize the subjects of news stories” but rather “report[s] their actions, identity and background,” for my informant, reporting the facts is not an act of interpretation, but instead representation.

NOTES

¹ In this dissertation, I have specified an interest in the practices of journalists in the United States. While I believe there are distinctions among national traditions of journalism, I do admit that this tends to ignore the porousness of borders and globalization of information more generally. While many scholars and commentators have argued that US journalists more than others tend to prioritize objectivity, the “canon of objectivity” is not strictly limited to the United States. Just as the first populist papers of the 1830s turned toward a more detached form of journalism as a means of transcending political differences among their large, heterogeneous audience, the global press finds an objective mode useful for addressing transnational audiences. Audiences whose members are active in global markets and economic activities generally particularly demand reporting that they see as neutral, detached and unbiased. Reuters, whose editorial policy I give as an example of a statement of journalistic objectivity, was founded in London in 1851 to provide financial information over newly laid telegraph wire that connected Dover and Calais. London remains the site of Reuters’ global headquarters.

² Here I draw on Hannerz’ use of the term “contact zone” (2004:3), which he in turn derives from Mary Pratt’s (1992) work concerning colonial encounters.

³ As culture bearing artifacts, media texts do not go ignored in media anthropology. Media texts are artifacts whose content make it possible to infer uses and meaning. As a form of data, mass media texts have the benefits of being widely and immediately available, especially via the Internet. Because of a disciplinary emphasis on the importance of context and on directly communication with subjects, however, anthropological studies of journalism are less likely to use textual analyses as a primary method. Nonetheless quite a few anthropological studies of journalism use textual analyses at least in part (see Al Shabbab and Swales 1986; Battaglia 1995; Besteman 1996; Laitin and Rodriguez Gomez 1992; Lefkowitz 2001; Lutz and Collins 1993; Peterson 1991). Anthropologist William Beeman (1984) makes reference to “Turnerian drama” in an analysis of the media’s role in the 1979 Iranian revolution. Other anthropologists, such as S. Elizabeth Bird, whose *For Enquiring Minds* (1992) examines the social and cultural dimensions of the supermarket tabloid, make content analyses secondary to studies of the audience and producers. Consistently with a common anthropological tradition, Bird is concerned with challenging the stereotypes of “typical” tabloid readers and producers. She conducted a reader study, soliciting responses through an ad in the *National Examiner*, and visited the newsroom of one tabloid. Throughout her analysis, however, Bird regularly emphasizes the fact that text is socially and culturally generated.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS AND FIELDWORK

Introduction

To rephrase slightly, this dissertation examines how journalists learn to see facts and stories as well as the relationship of that sight to their own institutions and to historical and cultural frameworks. In it, I draw links between objectivity, one such mode of sight and understanding, and the degree to which journalists have autonomy in making the interpretations that eventually become “the news.” This perspective that journalism in the United States is a historically and culturally specific type of newswork is drawn from a literature of journalist studies (e.g., Gans 1979; Mindich 1998; Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1972, 1973, 1978 as well as anthropological studies such as those by Pedelty 1995 and Peterson 1991, 2001, 2003), contextualized in a theory of field (Bourdieu 2005; see Chapter 3 of this dissertation), within which I situate the evidence I acquired through intensive interviews with journalists as well as field experience in a newsroom. Journalists write or work with words and narrative, and the act of writing is at the heart of what it means to be a journalist. Originally, I intended to answer the question of how journalists learned to be journalists, and so I began this study by attempting to find out how journalists learn to write. The answers I received when I asked the question directly revealed little in a surface reading. “I always knew how to write,” said one columnist. “I always had a knack as a kid,” a reporter told me. Unsurprisingly, the preexisting condition of having writing talent (or receiving encouragement to write) influenced their college interests and career path when they became adults.

I found that the question became more anthropologically interesting when rephrased (to myself) as “How do journalists learn to see?”—sight being a metaphor here for the deployment of worldview or fundamental assumptions. Journalists both visualize and impart a vision through their texts, among which the traces of worldviews, socialization and epistemologies are evident. Scholars who have looked at media as artifacts that elicit class assumptions (Wilk 2002) or as evidencing colonial privilege (Lutz and Collins 1993) have demonstrated this amply enough. Unlike the authors of these sorts of content analyses, I hope to establish more about the nature of journalistic sight by asking them to describe it and through my own first-hand experience. In writing my own articles that were eventually published, for instance, I found that while I had some initial difficulty reproducing a journalistic prose (with regard to brevity/word economy and something that might be described as “interestingness” or perhaps “talent,” my first effort was sorely lacking and required the detailed attention of a kindly editor on account of these two things), I was more or less able to reproduce the structure and logic of a news story with far less difficulty. I knew to consult multiple sources with differing perspectives. It seemed perfectly logical to ask a city government official to comment on the subject of my story. Even the story selection was subjected to a particular logic; the story I had chosen was about the conflict between economic growth and quality of life and was rich in potential drama that I wanted to reveal. All of these things might be regarded as little more than “common sense”—“of course” it is best to include multiple views; “of course” information from “official sources” tends to be easier to access and bears an authority that the “man on the street” does not, though “of course” one must include “him” as well in order to have an organic, representative and uncontrived

perspective on the issue at hand. Partly I had learned how to approach a potential news occurrence through a lifetime of consuming the news. I had never paid close attention to this recurring pattern of source consultation, however, until I became a fact-checker, a job that entailed corroborating all of the statements that journalists made in their stories. The structure of a “good” story became much more apparent to me after having to place telephone calls to all of the sources who appeared in a few dozen articles and realizing that they fit into particular categories. Likewise, the range of subjects that were journalistically interesting soon became manifest through much repetition.

Whatever the state of their writing ability upon seeking a career in journalism, the novice journalist similarly learns to see like the organization and like the field through exposure to repetitive tasks and informal conversations with more experienced journalists. These are social processes that the methods of anthropologists are well suited to ascertain. I have detailed at greater length in Chapters 3 and 4 my approaches, arguments and evidence for viewing the notions of objectivity and autonomy in the ways that I do in this dissertation. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the interactions that produced these data and analyses.

The “Fieldsite(s)”

In the broadest sense, the population in which I am interested is print journalists who work in the United States. This is obviously a rather large and diverse group, consisting of more than 80,000 full-time employees of daily newspapers, news magazines, and weeklies (Weaver, et al. 2007). Add in the sorts of freelancers and other part-timers that I included in my interviews and encountered in fieldwork, and the

number undoubtedly increases. These journalists live and work in cities, suburbs and rural areas.

For this project, I formally interviewed fifteen journalists at five different newspapers, all of which served urban and metropolitan areas. The interviews that I conducted were with journalists working as reporters, writers, and editors; staffers and freelancers; and university instructors. I also spent seven months working in a newsroom as an intern at an alternative newsweekly in a city in the Northeastern United States. During this period, I formed working and social relationships with most of the employees of an entire newsroom, a staff of about twenty people, including editors, reporters and interns. I also had published a couple of articles, which I researched and wrote, a process that proved to be an important part of this participant observation. I draw on this work experience in making my analysis of interviews.

In addition to the “*Metropolitan Weekly*,” an alternative newsweekly in a city in the Northwestern United States, I interviewed journalists at

- The *Daily Metropolitan*, a tabloid daily newspaper in the same city as the *Metropolitan Weekly* (one journalist)
- The *Metropolitan Times*, a daily broadsheet, also in the same city (one journalist)
- The *Northwest Herald-Post*, a daily paper in a city in the Pacific Northwest (four journalists)
- The *Northwest Times*, another daily paper in the same city as the *NHP* (four journalists)

In order to protect the anonymity of everyone who participated in my research, I have also provided a pseudonym for each of my informants and interviewees (all of

whom are described briefly later in this chapter under the heading Interviews), and I have called the paper at which I worked the *Metropolitan Weekly*. Because journalism is an intensely public profession, concealing identities is difficult in some cases (upon informing one interviewee, a columnist, that I would do my utmost to ensure his anonymity, he waved a hand and stage whispered, “You know everything I write is public, don’t you?”). In order to obscure the identities of informants who make frequent reference to their public working lives, I have occasionally changed the sex of respondents or altered key details of descriptions of articles they have written in order to keep the participants in this project anonymous. Given the public nature of their vocations, the anonymity offered here has limits. A determined person could most likely crack my ciphers. My informants, however, were well aware of this, and, accustomed to interviews conducted “on the record,” spoke to me mindful of the fact that they could be identified.

The depth of information in terms of biography and its context that an interviewer is able to obtain from a conversation under such conditions is shallow at best. Many interviews, no matter how skillfully conducted, suffer from this deficit. In order to learn firsthand how journalists do their work, many researchers have used ethnography and participant observation in conjunction with other approaches. Warren Breed’s early study of social control in news organizations utilized data from Breed’s own newspaper experience and from intensive interviews with 120 journalists (Breed 1955). Breed, who argued that the power to enforce institutional norms rested at the top in the hands of the publisher, utilized Robert Merton’s functional approach, making the understanding of the organizational hierarchy central to his analysis of social control in the newsroom. David

Manning White, who instead saw the editor as a “gate keeper” (1950) regulating the national and international news content of a local paper in accordance with his or her values, similarly studied journalists from within the newsroom. Unlike Breed, White focused on the experiences of a single individual, a newsroom editor.

The Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s helped popularize the use of participant observation and qualitative methods in the field of sociology. This was, in part, a result of the influence of Chicago School sociologist Robert Park), an early scholar of journalism (e.g., Park 1923) and former newspaper reporter whom Reese describes as the “original media sociologist” (1994:2). The idea that researchers should obtain data from “naturalistic,” firsthand experience proved an influence on later generations of sociologists even after that of the Chicago School had waned. Herbert Gans included ideas about qualitative methods as well as functionalist understandings in his well known work *Deciding What’s News* (1979), a study of mainstream American news media. Gans used participant observation and content analysis, which treats media products such as news articles as artifacts, as the primary methods in this work. Starting with content analysis, Gans looked for patterns in stories from CBS News, and *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines. He conducted participant observation at NBC from October 1965 to April 1966 and at CBS from November 1966 to May 1967.

Gans’ conclusions and recommendations were numerous, but in general, rather than seeing the location of power resting in the hands of the publisher or editor, he argued that the news organization itself is the unit that exerts power over the individuals within it (Reese 1994). Gans and other sociologists such as Gaye Tuchman (1972, 1973, 1978) were both concerned with understanding the selective strategies and coping mechanisms

with which journalists engage in tasks that demand a great deal of output. This is what Reese (1997), who also conducted participant observation of journalists, has in mind also when he describes a “news paradigm,” a model that allows journalists to determine what constitutes news and, perhaps more importantly, what does not. Other sociological and communication studies participant observers have depicted the newsroom as a factory (Bantz, McCorkle et al. 1980; Fishman 1997); as gatekeeper (Berkowitz 1997, building on White); and as a manifestation of free market ideology (Ehrlich 1997, on television newsrooms). All of these studies are typically “sociological” in their focus on news organizations (Schudson 1989) rather than the individuals who work within them.

So in what ways do the methods of my project differ? As Gans says of his work in *Deciding What’s News* (an excerpt also quoted by Reese [1994]):

I collected most of my data by participant observation, but I did not participate in the work itself. For the most part, I observed what people were doing and then talked with them afterwards about the hows and whys. In addition, I asked questions about their past work, and historical and contemporary questions about their colleagues, bosses, and news organizations. I was also a participant in the many informal discussions, in and out of the office, that were always taking place. (1979:73)

This is true of my newsroom experience as well, but like Breed and Park, I participated in the work, something that Gans, for all of the thoroughness and breadth of his study, did not do.¹ Another way in which my study differs from that of Gans and others is in its focus on local journalists, which I discuss further below. In addition to having an interest in how journalists do their work, I have pursued methods that allow me to discuss the understandings journalists have of their work. To that end, I worked within the organization, reporting and writing articles for publication.

I have also attempted to describe better the development of *habitus* of the journalists I encountered in this study. Another difference between my work and most of these studies of journalists that use qualitative data and participant observation is that it is anthropological, and thus somewhat more concerned with meaning than structure. As Schudson (1997) notes, most sociological studies of journalists describe the structures of power, communication and responsibility that affect news production, and ultimately pose a model that describes how journalism works in general. My concern here is more with the social actors that occupy these niches and find themselves having to balance the dictates of the organization with their own personal inclinations, aspirations, beliefs, and, as Bourdieu would say, dispositions and *habitus*.

Like other researchers, I have combined methods with different strengths and weaknesses. I followed up my experience in the newsroom with interviews designed to elicit conversation about how journalists understand their work. In the interviews that I conducted, I asked journalists about their work, prompting them to talk about their biographies, their training, their role within their organizations, and the values of journalism that they find important. I cannot claim to have conducted a study that reveals truths applicable across the entirety of American journalism, nor are the journalists who participated in my project representative of other American journalists. Such was not my intent. I have attempted instead to demonstrate how my experiences and the experiences, beliefs and values of my informants might be understood in the context of American journalism and its history. In doing so, I have taken the words and accounts of interviewees and used them to lend support to my arguments. The risk of decontextualizing and depersonifying the individuals who volunteered to speak to me is

significant; to offset this, I have discussed the biographies and occupational histories of selected interviewees in Chapter 5.

The Newsroom

The *Metropolitan Weekly* is an alternative weekly newspaper established in its current format in the mid-1990s. The paper dates back to the early seventies, when an independent publisher founded it as a small community paper. At the time that I worked there, the paper had been owned by an out-of-town media company for about ten years. What follows is a brief description of my activities at the paper.

Apprenticeship and the Habitus of the Journalist

Here is a good place to draw attention to Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*, and to suggest that the formation of journalistic *habitus* is especially notable for the overt denial U.S. media institutions make of ideology, orthodoxy, and collectivism on the part of its participant journalists—even as they learn a very basic journalistic orthodoxy. This of course is true of *habitus* in many settings (particularly those in the United States that value individualism), as Bourdieu holds individualized *habitus* to be a “socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:133). As a collectively formed idea of what it means to be an individual, one's *habitus* is often resistant to self-examination.

These are linked to the common patterns I observed in journalists' way of seeing the news and talking about their work. As Hanks notes, “From a language perspective, *habitus* corresponds to the social formation of speakers, including the disposition to use

language in certain ways, to evaluate it according to socially instilled values, to embody expression in gesture, posture, and speech production” (2005:72).

Everyday routines are a recursive process; they provide a forum for individual interaction, which in turn generates novel elements of routine and provides for the production and reproduction of a social system (Giddens 1979). Socialization research as a whole has tended to be oriented toward such daily routines of social interaction (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Giddens 1979). In particular, the way in which Lave and Wenger (1991) approach the process of learning fits well with this period of apprenticeship.

Lave and Wenger write about the need for a concept of learning 1) that can account for relationships between the individual and the institution 2) in which social practices generate learning, among other things 3) that could be applied to social settings not usually thought of as educational environments 4) holds that learning is an ongoing process with no clearly defined boundaries, nor clearly defined beginning or end and 5) that holds learning to be a matter of belonging and participation and that sees learning as largely informal and unintentional. It further implies that the vast bulk of learning is informal and contextual. Lave and Wenger call this concept legitimate peripheral learning, which they describe as:

a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (1991:29)

Viewing the newsroom as a community of practice whose members are all engaged with legitimate peripheral learning permits the ethnographer a greater understanding of how interns and other novices learn to become journalists. This occurs most often through interaction with editors in the form of feedback on stories submitted, or on the other work they perform. But before that even, a novice must petition to enter, and once admitted, can only move from the periphery toward mastery largely through his or her efforts to build professional standing.

A newsroom permits little formal pedagogy, and so interns who can teach themselves find favor from editors and other core members. Under normal circumstances, interns are not asked to write stories; they do so on their own initiative, with the understanding that the editor may not run it, and their effort will have been wasted. Interns who can successfully anticipate the editors' needs do not remain novices long. This illustrates another important component of community of practice: learning, social relations and identity are inextricably bound together. The learning most intimately tied to journalists' future career is deeply contextualized in everyday practice and interaction.

“The concept of practice connotes doing,” Wenger writes, “but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do” (1998:47). As a social practice, newswriting has developed out of multiple interactions among journalists and among journalists and publics over the course of a few lifetimes. Newswriting generates news, and so the processes by which journalistic communities of practice reproduce themselves are evident in that product.

Seeking entry to the closed world of journalism, I came across a job posting in the back of the Weekly soliciting applications for two intern positions, one in editorial and the other in advertising. I applied, submitting a statement describing my interests as an anthropologist and an old conference paper as a writing sample. Following an interview with an editor and the favorable results of a fact-checking exam, I started working at the paper two days a week. My tenure as a newsroom intern lasted seven months. As an intern, my primary responsibility was to fact check articles for publication. When there was no copy to be fact checked (which was not often), I filed stock photographs, sorted mail, copied, ran errands, transcribed interviews, and chatted with the other interns and staffers.

In my spare time at work and away from the paper, I also researched numerous leads and wrote three short articles, two of which made it to press. At a superficial glance, one apparent contradiction of the intern system was that its overt purpose was to generate full journalists. Two of the staff writers had, in fact, started as interns. Writing, the activity that defines a journalist professionally, was not a formal part of the job routine, however. While the advertisement for the internship promised applicants a chance to write short articles under the supervision of an editor, at the job interview, the editor who hired me cautioned me that neither he nor anyone at the paper would make any attempts to encourage interns to submit articles. Interns had to prove themselves by “taking the initiative” and seizing opportunities to write and submit articles.

It should be noted that while I enrolled in two courses in a school of journalism, I did not study the role of journalism schools in this process. The necessity for all journalists to have at least a bachelor’s degree in some subject notwithstanding, most of

my informants emphasized the importance of internships and “real world” experience in the making of a journalist. The rules of engagement of the self with the field were thus less formally invoked and inculcated, and in journalism (like many other fields) there is a special emphasis on learning by doing.

Fact Checking

I have mentioned that the internship did not emphasize what I thought of as the formal (that is, important) duties of a journalist. It did, however, require a great deal of fact checking. Fact checking is quite often unpaid labor performed by interns, so despite its importance to the credibility of the publication, I found that many staffers at the *Weekly* considered it necessary but low status work. At the *Weekly* and many other news organizations, fact checking serves as a proving ground for apprentice journalists to make their entry into higher status roles such as writing or editing. Whether performed as a specialized role or by the journalist who writes a story, fact checking is a basic, but highly important part of the journalistic process. While fact checking is usually an unpaid or entry-level position, a few publications, such as the *New Yorker*, with a well-known reputation for fact checking, have salaried staff whose job it is to check facts. Magazines tend to have fact checkers; daily newspapers do not. Alternative weeklies, which have a longer lead time than dailies, have the luxury of printing in-depth articles as well as using a fact-checking system to corroborate them.

Like a great deal of “grunt work,” fact-checking teaches the apprentice to reproduce the basic values of the organization. If American journalism has embraced “just the facts” style writing for much of its history, then what is a fact? In journalism, as

in science, a fact is an observation that is verifiable. And as in science, in journalism, facts are distinct from theories or explanations. In writing articles, journalists approach facts in two ways. They either let a source take responsibility for the validity of a statement (“Police say that two men with automatic weapons robbed the bank”), or the journalists take responsibility themselves for the truth of a statement without giving attribution. In this case, the fact should be verifiable. In either case, it is the job of the fact-checker to challenge the validity of any fact. I could check the former kind of fact by placing a phone call or email to the sources named in the story, which was relatively simple. I spent the bulk of my time dealing with the latter type of fact, ensuring the accuracy of place names, dates, telephone numbers, and other information that I could find in directories and databases. Verifying a phone number was relatively simple, but invariably I encountered more complicated types of facts, such as the past tour dates of an obscure unsigned band or the history of some local political clique. I had to decide on a strategy to verify each one, and then find an appropriate source.

What distinguishes a reliable source? Reliability is often a matter of intuition or of “knowing it when you see it.” Different facts require different kinds of verification. Typically, official or governmental sources are sufficient when it comes to statistics or other quantitative information. (Journalists, whose job it is to report on government, are also often skeptical toward official sources.)

Individuals who apprentice into the journalistic institution via fact-checking jobs have to learn the “common sense” (that is, the institutional definition) of what constitutes a fact. Fact checkers must learn to distinguish “facts” from non-facts in drafts of the article and to classify sources as reliable or unreliable. As a system for determining truth,

the fact-checking system prioritizes standardization, consensus and authority. The validity of an article, and by extension, the authority of journalism itself, is grounded in this process of third party verification.

Reporting and Writing Stories

In order to gain insight into how a journalist deals with facts, sources and narrative structure, I researched and wrote articles for the *Metropolitan Weekly*. If Lave and Wenger's position is that learning and socialization takes place through acting, then my efforts in the newsroom were an effort to act as much like a journalist as I could. Although I approximated to the best of my ability the induction process a new journalist goes through, no person who has failed to obtain clips (published work) can be said to be a journalist.

The intern system cultivates potential journalistic talent at minimal cost to the organization. Individuals seeking careers in journalism need experience and clips; this often amounts to hundreds of hours of unpaid labor as interns. As I have said, the responsibility for pitching and writing articles lies almost entirely with the intern. For whatever reason, some interns never surmounted this passive obstacle of not having active guidance from editors. Others were able to produce stories relatively quickly and frequently. A few interns even had their work featured as cover articles. I had more modest success at getting stories into print. For me as an outsider, simply finding the stories proved to be the first challenge. Because weekly editors often do not give assignments to interns, I soon began grasping at any potentially viable story. The mailroom turned out to be a rich source of leads, and I started paying close attention to all

of the press releases that arrived by fax. Altogether, I wrote three 800-word stories during my internship at the *Weekly*. Of these two were published, while a third was accepted for publication but never printed.

In reporting and writing the articles, I followed a fairly formulaic route, though I would emphasize that I improvised my methods spontaneously. I began with some preliminary Internet research of the setting, the situation and the actors. The next step was the construction of a narrative that would make sense of facts and help me identify a balanced set of sources. For instance, when I wrote a story about an urban university attempts to recruit from outside the city, I decided early in the process that one focus of the article would be the ways in which this was a break with the historical mission of the university to provide education to the working class youth of the city. Making a rough outline of the narrative structure also allowed me to identify a conflict that would be central to the story.

Alternative Weeklies Versus Other Papers

It is a newspaper's duty to print the news and raise hell. –Wilbur Storey, Statement of the mission of the *Chicago Times*, 1861 and motto atop the masthead of the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*

The alternative press in America should recognize that we have a unique mission.... It's my feeling that we should put some of those profits from the sex and cigarette ads to work. –John Sugg, Senior Editor, *Creative Loafing Atlanta*, letter to Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, 20 September 2002

Before describing my interview methods, I wish to pause here momentarily to situate the alternative weekly at which I worked more firmly in the journalistic field. As

I shall argue in Chapter 3, making use of Bourdieu's notion of field requires attention be paid to internal variation within that field. While in that chapter I am reconciling a notion of objectivity in journalism in the literature with the experiences of those newswriters to whom I spoke, I myself formulated my ideas about objectivity in particular journalistic environments. In other words, the fact that I worked at an alternative weekly and not a daily newspaper needs to be addressed.

The modern alternative weekly is a descendant of the alternative press that emerged in the in the 1960s and 1970s (Glessing 1970; Kessler 1984; Peck 1985). Modern day survivors of those decades include *Rolling Stone*, which started as a few monochromatic pages detailing the overlooked music scene of the counterculture and evolved into a glossy national magazine. They also include the *Village Voice* (1955), the *Boston Phoenix* (1966), the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* (1966) and *L.A. Weekly* (1978), all of which survived the end of the era by adopting the now familiar and successful formula of local coverage and dampening down radicalism to a more benign liberalism.

With this adaptation toward long term survival came the necessity of advertising revenue. Alternative weeklies, present today in any major North American city, became a sizeable presence in the media advertising industry, generating approximately \$560 million annually in ad sales (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004). While revenue and readership rose throughout the 1990s, alternative weeklies were losing hard-copy readership to the Internet and otherwise "beginning to suffer some of the pains of establishment daily newspapers" (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007) well before 2007.

Alternative weeklies were born of the desire to circumvent the establishment papers during periods of rebellion on fronts of race and class as well as foreign policy issues such as Vietnam. The social upheavals that led to their creation eventually subsided. In seeking to remain viable and profitable, alternative weeklies have found that raising hell is constructive—to a certain point. The degree to which alternative weeklies are distinct from mainstream media such as daily newspapers, however, is uncertain. When I asked one editor, Sabine, an initial question about “alternative weeklies,” she told me that she preferred to refer to the papers as “weeklies.” The term “alternative weekly,” she explained, had fallen out of favor with industry professionals.

As part of a media industry, the weekly papers are represented by at least one organization, the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies,² which has 130 member publications in “every major metropolitan area in North America,” according to the AAN site. The AAN cites its selective admission policy, and extends membership only to “high-quality journalism that offers a valuable alternative to the mainstream media in their area.” The papers that belong, according to the AAN, have in common “point-of-view-reporting; the use of strong, direct language; a tolerance for individual freedoms and social differences; and an eagerness to report news that many mainstream media outlets would rather ignore.”

This description is consistent with the way weeklies market themselves. They find their market niche in being different from the dailies and in rejecting the use of the objective, disinterested writing that characterizes the dailies. While they may be alternative newspapers in this limited sense, they are very much a part of the mainstream

media. Sabine, who preferred to drop the modifier “alternative,” saw the market relationships of the weeklies as clear evidence of this:

As soon as alternative weeklies—I’ll keep using that term even though it’s not a great term—as soon as they started accepting large national ads from cigarette advertisers and booze advertisers it really didn’t make sense to call it alternative anymore because it was supported by a very mainstream industry and business. I’m not sure when that changeover happened, probably in the 80s or thereabouts.

Really, the newspapers aren’t that alternative now. The one thing that makes us different as a field is the fact that we’re bigger papers that come out weekly. They tend, obviously, to be left leaning. It comes from a very liberal tradition, but a lot less so than it used to be. We’re alternative in that we can go into more depth than the dailies, but we don’t have the long lead time of a magazine and we don’t have the slick advertisers. So we’re free to go into more depth without having to worry about covering all the daily stories.

The one vestige of the old alternative weekly that makes [us] different [from magazines and dailies] is that we’re outright left leaning. There’s usually somewhat of a political agenda in alternative weeklies. Newspapers try to be objective. Magazines are whatever they are, but most aren’t political.

Alternative weeklies, by contrast, do stake out ideological territory. In part, this is a result of how the industry defines itself. The trade organization Association of Alternative Newsweeklies (AAN) mandates that the scope of the alternative weekly remain ‘general interest’, “i.e., not a ‘special interest publication’ with a narrow concentration on subjects including, but not exclusively, music, entertainment, religion, the environment, sexuality or gender identity, or a political party or organization” (AAN 2007). The weeklies end up addressing an audience with specific attributes and lifestyles, tending to consist primarily of young, left-leaning, educated individuals who live in or around a city and who are single and command a measure of disposable income.

The terms “mainstream” and “alternative” media have long ceased to describe insider/outsider status. Today, these terms refer now to genres. As far as their market behavior goes, alternative weeklies do not noticeably differ from other corporate owned mass media. Most print media have two ways of generating revenue: reader subscription fees (or selling papers to readers) and advertising (selling readers to advertisers). Alternative weeklies overwhelmingly rely on the latter. Although many of the people I interviewed flatly denied any advertiser influence on editorial content in alternative newsweeklies, alternative newsweeklies are indirectly affected by the heavy (essentially 100%) reliance on advertising money because publications essentially sell particular types of readers in sufficient quantity to advertisers, and the degree of readership is in turn affected by editorial content.

The term “alternative” describes a format as well as a market niche. “The news,” as Herbert Gans finally says, “is about the economic, political, social, and cultural hierarchies we call nation and society” (1979:284), a set of stories told with a middle class sensibility, using middle class values as a barometer for social normality.

Interviews

One early difficulty that I thought I might face was that of obtaining access to a closed community. Gaining access to ethnographic populations is seldom trouble-free, but the issue of negotiating entry to “high status” communities is a special problem in anthropology known for decades as “studying up” (Nader 1972). Because I was able to draw on a sense of familiarity that journalists had upon hearing that I was an anthropologist who wished to write about them, my experience was more like that of

Hannerz' (2004), who described his study of foreign correspondents as "studying sideways." As with Hannerz' research, this work is indebted largely to the journalists who were willing to spend time answering my questions and walking me through their daily routines.

I conducted interviews with fifteen journalists that lasted on average ninety minutes. In keeping with anthropological conventions and in order to maintain their anonymity, I have changed the names of these informants, as well as the names of their workplaces and any other information that might reveal their identity. In some cases, this has meant changing job descriptions as well as the details of their work that they mentioned in interviews.

My method of selecting these interviewees, again, while not including representative sampling, was in keeping with anthropological method. I typically contacted people via email and asked to interview them. Those who responded almost always said yes. In addition to this cold calling technique, I made use of snowball sampling. For instance, after interviewing Amy, I asked her if she knew any other journalists who would be amenable to speaking with me. She recommended three individuals. Of those, one responded, and in conclusion to the ensuing interview, I asked her to recommend interview subjects. She gave me four names, and again, one person responded. Altogether, I approached sixty journalists, of which fifteen responded and agreed to an interview.

Instrument

The interviews that I conducted were based on a set of prepared questions that encouraged open-ended responses. The questions were divided into three groups: biographical, occupational and institutional. The biographical questions were for the most part basic:

B1. Job title

B2. DOB:

B3. Sex:

B4. Ethnicity:

It also included this question, “B5. How did you become a journalist?” In most cases, this question yielded lengthier responses linking experiences in childhood and early adulthood to the respondents’ current career status. The final question, “B6. How did you learn to write?,” which I asked only if I felt that the previous question had not produced enough data, similarly generated substantial responses.

The occupational section of the interview included the following questions:

O1. What are the most important values of journalism?

I had hoped to use these questions to produce a discussion about objectivity. As it turned out, and not entirely unexpectedly, “objectivity” was never a response to the first question. Instead, journalists told me that values such as “fairness,” “accuracy,” “truth” and “balance” were characteristics of good journalism. I therefore followed this question up at some point in the interview with a request to define objectivity and describe its place in contemporary journalism.

O2. Do you come to work with any biases?

I had originally phrased this question, “What sorts of biases do you bring to your work?,” but since this question reflected my presupposition that journalists would agree that they do so, I changed the wording. In either case, I never encountered any journalist who argued that they lacked biases or flatly denied that these affect their work.

O3. Do you do anything to counter these?

O4. What sorts of biases are appropriate? Where is the line?

O5. Can you think of any examples of times when you’ve allowed your biases to inappropriately influence the creation of a story or other piece?

In addition to writing questions that encouraged lengthy responses with illustrating examples, I left key terms such as “bias” and “values” undefined. In doing so, I hoped to obtain a better understanding of how journalists define these terms.

The third set of questions regarding institutional issues consisted of the following:

I1. What is the role of the news media?

I2. Do the news media do their job?

While this generated further discussion of what journalists believe the role of news media to be, I found myself having to rephrase this question when I asked it. One respondent even complained that the question was so broad as to be meaningless.

I3. What do you think the Internet has done to _____ (use term given in question O1)?

Following this last question, I often asked a few probing questions to gauge respondents’ views on blogs and other Internet-related changes to journalistic authority.

I discuss the results of these interviews along with relevant data from fieldwork in the chapters that follow. The focus of Chapter 3 is objectivity and related journalistic values such as fairness, accuracy, truth and balance. In Chapter 4, I examine the independence and individualism that is characteristic of American journalism, a quality I have called autonomy, which I have linked to the persistence of journalistic objectivity. The biographical data and their relationship to respondents' occupational identities are the subject of Chapter 5.

Participants

Listed here is a brief biographical statement for each of my interviewees:

Francesca, 38, staff writer at alternative newsweekly

A former musician and future academic, Francesca lost interest in school and began writing as a way to earn money after a series of unfulfilling jobs.

Ed, 34, columnist and editor at alternative newsweekly

Ed was a former English major who, like Francesca, discovered a career in journalism by accident. He has since left his full-time position for advocacy work.

Sabine, 35, editor at alternative weekly

A long-time editor at an alternative weekly, Sabine came to work in journalism after completing an MFA program in fiction.

Lou, 64, staff columnist at Daily Metropolitan

Lou writes an opinion column for the *Daily Metropolitan*, a “populist” tabloid newspaper. He was my neighbor; unaware of this, I met him after he left a handbill in my front door announcing his candidacy for political office. He became a journalist in part because he was a poor student but had what he described as a natural talent for writing.

Amy, 31, freelancer and adjunct university instructor

When I first met her, Amy had just decided to leave a graduate program in historical studies, where her focus was on oral histories. She retained an interest in applying the methods and theory of the historian to journalism. Her main source of income came from teaching university classes in communication and journalism. I had repeated interaction with Amy, and we remain acquaintances. See Chapter 5 for a transcript of our conversation.

Gina, 37, freelancer for alternative weeklies, public radio and other publications

Gina went to college in the Midwest, where she developed an interest in environmental journalism. This eventually led her into freelance investigative reporting. She is currently a doctoral student. See Chapter 5 for a transcript of our conversation.

Lisa, refused to give age, obituaries editor for the Metropolitan Times

The obituaries editor for a major daily paper, Lisa was a veteran employee who had held a number of positions at that paper before settling into her current role.

Elene, 28, journalist from Republic of Georgia, reporter at the Northwest Herald-Post

Elene is a Georgian reporter who received a grant to work in the United States at a partner newspaper. See Chapter 5 for a discussion of our conversation.

Nadine, 57, staff reporter for the Northwest Times

Sally, 56, staff reporter for the Northwest Times

Like many of the daily reporters to whom I spoke, but unlike the earlier weekly journalists, both Nadine and Sally attended university specifically to earn a degree in journalism. They then worked their way up to the *Times* after spending time at smaller papers.

James, 56, staff reporter for the Northwest Herald-Post

James had a thirty-year career in journalism, following a typical path that led him from college to small-town paper, to larger paper, to major daily newspaper.

Janice, declined to give age, editorial writer and columnist for the Northwest Times

Janice is a writer with the *Times*' editorial department, a separate entity from the news division. The same "barrier" that separates advertising and editorial is in effect here, as the editorial staff are responsible for generating the analysis and commentary that accompanies the news and features that other departments produce.

Jimmy, 56, features reporter for the Northwest Herald-Post

After finishing college and working at a few smaller papers, Jimmy became a reporter with the *Northwest Herald-Post*. Eventually, he moved into features.

Eugene, 61, chief investigative reporter for the Northwest Herald-Post

An award-winning investigative journalist, Eugene has been recruited by several large papers throughout his career to research and write investigative stories. See Chapter 5 for a discussion of our conversation.

Simon, 31, staff reporter, police and legal beat for the Northwest Herald-Post

At 31, Simon was still at the beginning of his career at a major daily paper. He worked out of a downtown office covering the police and crime beat, a typical entry level position at such a paper. See Chapter 5 for a transcript of our conversation.

Conclusion

How do journalists produce the news? In what ways do the discourses and cultural contexts in journalism occurs affect the ways in which individual journalists engage in news production? In this chapter, I describe my use of participant observation and interviews to answer these questions. In particular, I am interested in how ideas journalists have about objectivity and autonomy continue to inform journalists' work, despite a more recent reluctance on the part of journalists to describe what they do as "objective." Using a combination of data gathering methods and remaining mindful of

their strengths and limitations, I have attempted to draw some links between individuals in institutions and the larger social scheme.

I combined my newsroom experience with interviews in order to be able to “give voice” to patterns I observed in my study of journalists. In particular, I have asked journalists in interviews to elaborate on news values. One potential issue is that while my fieldwork took place at an alternative weekly, I have included a wide range of journalists in my interviews, particularly those who work at daily papers. This, I believe, will show that American journalists draw on some of the same narratives and perform news work with a certain commonality. While alternative weekly journalists are less likely to have concerns that their work remains neutral or value-free, their work is, nonetheless, significantly informed by objectivity. I discuss this further in Chapter 3. Similarly, journalists across publications have a concern with autonomy, a desire to be free of interference. While this could be said of any set of journalists or professionals, the way in which journalists talk about their autonomy draws on what Peterson (2001) and Pedelty (1995) have described as an American narrative of rugged individualism.

I cannot claim to have done fieldwork in a way that will show how all journalists understand their work. I have instead participated in a shared experience of being a journalist and examined some of the commonsense understandings that they have of their work, including that of objectivity. In the following chapters, I tie these things to the literature of journalists’ values and a history of objectivity.

NOTES

¹ It might be taken for granted also that an anthropologist studying journalists would use ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation, but a quite a few do not. Elizabeth Bird (1992), for instance, spent only a day in one of the newsrooms of the tabloids whose consumption she wrote about. When he writes about journalism, Mark Peterson tends to focus on his experiences as a former journalist (e.g., 2001). Most likely because of the difficulty of doing fieldwork given his subjects, Ulf Hannerz conducted most of his research for *Foreign Correspondents* (2004) through interviews. (Mark Pedelty, on the other hand, did commit to a lengthy period of fieldwork in his book on news coverage of the Salvadoran Civil War [1995].)

² From the website of the AAN: “In order to apply for regular membership in AAN, an alternative newspaper must be:

- Published at least 24 times annually;
- Not owned by a daily newspaper publishing company or its affiliate;
- Published under its current majority ownership for at least six months prior to application deadline; and
- A general interest publication, i.e., not a ‘special interest publication’ with a narrow concentration on subjects including, but not exclusively, music, entertainment, religion, the environment, sexuality or gender identity, or a political party or organization.” (Association of Alternative Newsweeklies 2003)

CHAPTER 3

OBJECTIVITY AND THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD

Introduction

To journalists, one of the most important news values is undoubtedly objectivity, which reverberates through more than a century of journalism. Yet when asked, journalists find it difficult to agree on what objectivity means. Since the early twentieth century, objectivity has been both a statement of epistemology and moral order—a mandate to uncover and describe facts. While the term objectivity still endures in the codes of ethics of some newspapers, other words such as fairness, accuracy and balance have come to replace it as challenges toward this positivistic view of facts have proliferated in recent decades. Journalists understand objectivity as a worldview, value, ideal, and impossibility. A central question that remains though is why the term objectivity has become highly devalued in journalistic discourse in the past thirty years, a puzzling development considered in light of evidence that “objectivity” remains important in American journalism. Because of this long history mixed with more recent doubts, objectivity retains a prominent place but uncertain meaning in American journalism. In this chapter I use Bourdieu’s (1998, 2005) notion of journalism as a field to contextualize the development of objectivity into a non-utterance, despite the continuing relevance of the concept to journalists who see it as a practice that distinguishes them from other knowledge workers.

The legitimacy of mainstream US journalism has been long tied to objectivity, which emphasizes disinterestedness, balance and detachment in writing and reporting the

news. While most journalists continue to subscribe to all of these aspects of objectivity, in the past thirty or forty years, debates over the desirability of an “objective” press have intensified such that that the term objectivity itself has fallen into disuse and even disrepute, to the point that journalists no longer readily speak of it when asked to describe their work. Many publications and professional organizations have removed the term from their charters or bylaws (the Society of Professional Journalists, for example, removed the term objectivity from its code of ethics in 1996 [Cunningham 2003]), and as individuals, journalists often prefer to emphasize other aspects of their work such as fairness, accuracy and balance. The tenets of objectivity retain importance in journalistic practice as American journalists continue to utilize an informational model¹ of journalism concerned primarily with the prioritization of facts over (overt) interpretation.

In his classic study of journalists, Schudson defines objectivity as “the view that one can and should separate facts from values” (1990:3), but I found that when I asked journalists to define the term, most began by saying that objectivity is unattainable and that bias is unavoidable. Many sociologists who have found themselves in the newsroom collecting ethnographic data on the practices of their subjects (e.g., Bantz, McCorkle, et al. 1980; Berkowitz 1997; Fishman 1997; Gans 1979; Gitlin 1980; Lester 1980; Schlesinger 1977; Soloski 1989; Tuchman 1972, 1973, 1978) have similarly found that journalists, in keeping with the tenets of their professional training, endeavor to partition their “personal values” from their reporting. The emphasis on this separation is a cultural and historical fact particular to the United States, rather than an inherent feature of news reporting.

Sociologists and other scholars have tended to explain objectivity as the product of institutional constraints. To some, writing the news objectively was a marketing decision that enabled publishers of the 19th century to sell papers to readers whose political beliefs spanned a broad spectrum (Schudson 1990). Others characterize objectivity as an institutionally learned response to the risks inherent in reporting news; thus objectivity becomes a “protective ritual” (Tuchman 1972) that enables “newsmen” to go about their daily routines or a way to deflect the burden of truth claims onto sources (Peterson 2001) in a manner that protects journalists from liability if those claims turn out to be false.

Where objectivity appears in scholarly literature, it is often depicted as a manifestation of some value system that is invisible to journalists or in service to external political or economic interests. People who have written about journalistic objectivity, argues Mark Peterson (2001), have failed to take into account its origins as a social act performed in a social context. Ethnographers of the press have instead emphasized the ways in which journalists operate under institutional constraints (Gans 1979; Reese 1997; Tuchman 1972, 1973, 1978), are dependent on official (state) sources of information (Herman and Chomsky 1988), and whose institutions have grown to mirror the needs and expectations of officialdom (Fishman 1980, 1997).

Journalists, on the other hand, are more likely to see themselves as fully autonomous, independent agents. Peterson describes this as a “structure/agency problem” (2001:201), in which neither perspective is fully capable of analyzing journalistic behavior, particularly the use of objectivity. In keeping with this Bourdieuan critique, I have attempted to remain mindful of individual agency as well as institutional

constraints. One way to accomplish this task is to examine journalistic objectivity using Bourdieu's notion of journalism as a field. Field theory permits the analysis of a profession such as journalism as an integrated, but unbounded, heterogeneous whole. This becomes useful in understanding how journalism interacts with other fields, how journalism is distinct from other professions, how journalisms themselves differ from one another (that is, other national models of journalism, such as "French journalism" [Benson 2005]), and how journalism differs internally with respect to its constituent members.

In this chapter I will describe the place of objectivity in the American journalistic field, current and past. I will begin with a discussion of ways in which journalists' bias continues to be the focus of some critical dialogue; certain voices tend to dwell on political bias, while others are more concerned with a supposed lack of journalistic autonomy. Because this raises the question of why anyone cares whether journalists are objective, I will then discuss the history of the objectivity concept and its evolution within American journalism, tracing it from roughly the 1830s to the present through a review of literature. Finally, I will relate this account of objectivity in its cultural context to my own work, using data I obtained from fieldwork and interviews to illustrate ways in which objectivity manifests in journalistic work. This will contribute to a better understanding of why journalists have been increasingly more reluctant to use the term "objectivity," even as they continue to adhere to its tenets.

Journalism as a Field

Journalists think of themselves as guardians of civil society, historians, and community voices. One way in which to understand these positions of journalism in society as well as the positions of its occupants is by viewing journalism through the concept of field. Bourdieu provides a “simple,” “convenient” (and necessarily tautological) definition of field: “a field is a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these position-takings being aimed at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field” (2005:30). The behavior of individuals who occupy these positions within a field differs from other position takers, both within and outside the field. This behavior is guided by institutional or occupational norms, value systems, and codes of conduct, all of which serve to regulate distinction internally as well as demarcate the boundaries of the field. Such markers include written and unwritten ethical codes, as well as professional societies; internally, journalism has job and rank distinctions such as reporter versus editor, or prestige differences, such as that between a paper of record such as the *New York Times* versus *USA Today*. All of these external and internal distinctions serve to reinforce for members of the journalistic field (and everyone else) the notion that that the journalist has a particular, but also complex and varied role in society, a role that is largely related to the power it holds over the way in which it talks about the world. Bourdieu holds that journalism, like politics and social science, seeks to organize the social world through two common activities, the construction of categories and the effort to solidify those categories as a legitimate ordering of the world. If politics “produces” governance and science “produces”

knowledge, then the most important of journalistic practices is the production of information. The aggregation of facts into units called stories, pieces or articles and the distribution of these units is the purpose of all newsrooms, and the central, defining function of journalism as journalists define the vocation. It is through linguistic and discursive practices that journalists distinguish themselves from other people who make statements, such as, for example, politicians or bloggers or essayists.

Bourdieu's notion of field has a couple of advantages for looking at objectivity as a journalistic practice and discourse.² The first of these is the idea described above that objectivity serves as a way for journalists to legitimate their work and to differentiate themselves. A second is the emphasis Bourdieu places on the relationships among history, social structure, and cultural forms. Despite the fact that Bourdieu proposed neither an explicit cross cultural nor a culturally specific model of journalism as a field (as Benson argues [2005], Bourdieu's idea of journalism is decidedly French, though he intends his model to be general³), an understanding of journalism as a field can, for instance, draw attention to the fact that objectivity did not just appear out of nowhere as a "common sense" practice, but rather arose within a cultural framework. For this reason, I describe below the history and evolution of objectivity as a journalistic concept in order to make the point that objectivity in the United States arose out of technological, epistemological, social and cultural developments particular to the United States. A look at how observers outside the United States view American-style "objective journalism" (such as, again, Benson on French journalism or Pedelty's [1995] research on Central American journalism) further makes it clear that it would be a mistake to assume that a "faith in facts" is common to all journalisms.

To these two advantages of using field theory that I have described, I would add a cautious note that Bourdieu paid more attention to media institutions than he did individual journalists, which could complicate an ethnographic approach in which research is conducted on the level of individuals and the newsroom. “Why is it is important to talk about the journalistic field and not journalists?” (2005:41), Bourdieu asks rhetorically, and suggests the answer that speaking of journalism in terms of individual actions prevents us from being critical of complex social systems. Scholars taking Bourdieu’s approach to the media have largely embraced a macrolevel perspective, taking an interest in field interaction on a national level. By contrast, the ethnographic approach I have utilized situates newsrooms and individuals within a larger, “national” context. This is not terribly at odds with Bourdieu’s ideas about field more generally; certainly, to use Bourdieu to understand objectivity as a practice is to recognize to the fact that objectivity cannot be monolithic throughout the journalistic field. The notion of field can properly complicate explanations for phenomena that too often tend toward oversimplification. Attempts to understand the effects that corporate ownership has on journalistic behavior are often weaker for this sidestepping of complexity. Nonetheless, a common political economy-oriented critique of objective journalism is that it masks the influence that the state and corporations have over an ostensibly “free press.” Noam Chomsky, for instance, argues that the journalistic practice of indexing “truth” to the claims issued by official sources conceals the hegemony of government and corporate-owned media, who have a number of common interests that they jointly defend (Herman and Chomsky 1988). While corporate ownership and consolidation of news media in the United States certainly should attract

inquiry and critique, Bourdieu would emphasize that individual actors bring histories and dispositions (*habitus*) with them to the field of journalism, which we must consider alongside the constraints placed upon them by corporate owners, the state, and the institution. To be fair, commentators such as Chomsky and Edward Herman are generally concerned with creating large scale, society-wide models of media roles in society. Field theory, however, is an effort to show relational positions among institutions and broader occupations.

“To exist in a field... is to differentiate oneself,” claims Bourdieu, speaking of individual practitioners of the social sciences. Of those social agents, he writes that “he or she functions like a phoneme in a language: he or she exists by virtue of a difference from other individuals” (2005:41-42). Therein lies the value of a field-centered ethnographic approach that uses a relatively small sample of individuals within a much larger population that makes up a field. The norms of journalism place certain constraints on *all* journalists, but to some degree *each* journalist interprets and practices objectivity idiosyncratically. Of Bourdieu’s ideas about journalism, it is this point that I believe requires the most development but that has the most relevance to ethnographic methods and perspectives because objectivity is a practice of differentiation for journalists.

The Ideologies of Objectivity

In achieving this state of differentiation, journalists, like all other social agents, learn and enact objectivity as a normative or “normal” part of their occupational identity. All the while, publics have conceptions of journalistic identity that differ from those of

journalists. I diverge here to discuss briefly what it means to say that journalism and objectivity are ideological and to distinguish a few of the understandings of objectivity that exist. Objectivity is both a “slippery concept” (Mindich 1998) and a term prone to a great deal of slippage, in that objectivity has a great many meanings among fields. The expectation of objectivity exists not only in journalism, but is maintained by various publics, including critics of journalism. In employing a perspective of field and habitus, it would seem likely that understandings of objectivity would differ significantly between journalists and publics or journalists and publishers, as well as among journalists themselves as members of each set find different incentives or liabilities for making use of objective perspectives. What might be termed political science perspectives generally hold that journalistic bias is defined as the framing of any story in tone, word choice, arrangement of facts, choice of quotes or sources that readers might construe to support a political position; in this perspective, bias takes a liberal or conservative form. Much of the public discussion about journalistic bias, especially on the part of conservative critics, similarly invoke the right-left spectrum in making their critiques of journalistic practice and institutions. While journalists themselves will readily classify themselves on this spectrum as liberal, conservative or moderate if researchers ask them to do so, in my interviews and fieldwork, I failed to find much evidence that journalists themselves define potential bias problems primarily in terms of right vs. left or that they see a lack of objectivity as veering too far to either end of that scale. Instead, they tended to identify as the more serious error of bias the imposition of one’s “ego” on the article, that is, of failing to maintain a certain level of detachment; they also pointed to institutional constraints that could spoil their reporting: deadlines, space issues and “bad editors.”⁴

Many critics argue, however, that as a rule, the media are “liberally biased,” and they often cite research that seems to confirm this. As a group, journalists themselves would appear to describe themselves as leaning more left than right. Others have pointed out that the mainstream news tends to reflect an inclination toward both social reform and free market values (as Gans argues in *Discovering What’s News* in his descriptions of a journalistic “paraideology” of “right-liberalism” and “left-conservatism” [Gans 1979]). Media research in which journalists readily describe themselves using such terms as “liberal”, “conservative”, and “moderate” reveals little about the meaning of such categories, though one research study does include ideologically tinted follow up questions such as whether a belief in God is necessary “to be moral and have good values” (only six percent of national journalists agreed) or whether “homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society” (only four percent of national journalists felt homosexuality should be discouraged) (Pew 2004). Media critics point to such differences as evidence that journalists differ ideologically from the society they serve.

Journalists are ideological, of course, in the sense that all social actors operate under the influence of unstated, implicit norms, values and rules, but for journalists, these do not fit well within the limits of the right-left dichotomy. In an extremely broad sense, the term *ideology* describes two distinct conceptual areas that have attracted different sorts of scholarly attention. Ideology in the realm of political science connotes a spectrum of thought onto which one might map most of the discourse in American society, or a division of a few discourses into oppositions. The notion of conservatism and liberalism, of right and left is the sort of ideological discussion that informs Gans’ arguments about the newsroom. *Ideology* also refers to the socially derived experiences

that predispose individuals to act in certain ways, or the ways in which individuals impose interpretation onto people, places, events and other things in a way that serves their interests given their position in society (Irvine and Gal 2000). In examining the concept, social scientists and critics have tended to favor the idea of objectivity being ideological in this latter sense, in that it has “reproduced a vision of social reality which refused to examine the basic structures of power and privilege” (Schudson 1978:160).

By contrast, the authors of studies of journalists’ political affinities tend to dwell on differences between the political ideologies of journalists and those of their publics (Lichter, Rothman and Lichter 1986; Sutter 2001; Weaver, et al. 2007). Given their numbers among the general public, conservatives are conspicuously absent from the newsroom, according to many studies. Journalists are often more likely to describe themselves as politically liberal, especially those working on the national level. A 2004 study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that self-described liberals outnumbered conservatives by five to one in the national press. By contrast, 20% of the public called itself liberal and 33% described itself as conservative in figures that the authors cited (2004). The authors of the report, which includes data from the responses of 547 national and local journalists, also note that these journalists were more likely to describe themselves as “moderate”, both nationally and especially at the local level.

Weaver, et al. (2007:17) find a similar pattern with regard to liberals versus conservatives in the newsroom. In 2002, they say, 40% of journalists described themselves as left of center (9% reported being “pretty far to the left and 31% called themselves “a little to the left”). About 25% of journalists were right of center. One

third of the respondents described themselves as having “middle of the road” views. A closer look at the structure of the newsroom reveals some relevant variation in this ideology. Newsroom executives are a little more likely to be politically conservative (26.8%) than are staffers (24.3%), and lot less likely to report being “left” or “leaning left” (37.1% for executives to 43.2% for staffers).

It is easy to think of certain problems that might arise from reliance on such self-reported data, not least uncertainty about the many possible meanings of “moderate.” Just as claiming middle class status brings many working Americans (whatever their actual net wealth) into conformity with a set of important cultural and historical values and beliefs, by professing their own moderatism, journalists are enacting a historical structure of values and beliefs that girds their occupation. A significant pattern throughout my interviews and conversations, especially with daily reporters, was that it is good to ‘see both sides,’ to be fair and non-partisan, often expressed as being willing to support the best candidate for public office, and to ignore party in these deliberations. Being “moderate,” while not identical to these characteristics, nor necessary to do the job, is useful and in keeping with the historical goals of journalists and publishers to be able to address large, politically heterogeneous audiences.

Whether “subjective” or not, the data, when collected by these methods, do seem to indicate a preference for political and social liberalism, at least in comparison to the general public. Other sorts of studies render a similar picture of journalists’ ideology. A reasonable criticism of media bias studies such as those above is that they rely on self-reported data. One popularly cited study by political scientists Tim Groseclose and Jeff

Milyo, who attempt to address this issue by using “objective statistical techniques” (2005:2), asks the question, “Do major media outlets in the U.S. have a liberal bias?”

Groseclose and Milyo count the number of times that news organizations cited particular think tanks favorably in their reporting and compared this to patterns of think tank citation among members of the U.S. Congress. The authors used an adjusted Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) score for each of these politician to create an ADA score for each news outlet (the ADA, an American political lobbying group that supports liberal policies, assesses the similarity of the voting records of members of Congress to ADA positions with a 100-point scoring system in which 0 is at the conservative end and 100 at the liberal end; so the authors were attempting to show, in their words, “whether the *New York Times* is more liberal than Senator Edward Kennedy or whether Fox News is more conservative than Senator Bill Frist” [2]). The authors conclude that “All of the news outlets except *Fox News’ Special Report* and the *Washington Times* received a score to the left of the average member of Congress. And a few outlets, including the *New York Times* and *CBS Evening News*, were closer to the average Democrat in Congress than the center” (2).

Some media critics, especially those inclined to believe that news media are liberally biased, have responded to that news and the similar results of other media studies with a knowing nod that such research confirmed what they had been saying for decades, that news media were out of sync with their audiences. Bruce Bartlett, writing for the conservative magazine *National Review* emphasizes this ideological disconnect:

Liberal bias is a tiresome subject, I know. We have been hearing about it for at least 30 years. Although those who work in the media continue to deny it, they are having a harder and harder time explaining why so many

viewers, readers, and listeners believe it. ... Whatever the media think about themselves, there is simply no denying that a high percentage of Americans perceive a liberal bias. The credibility of every single major media outlet has fallen sharply among conservatives and Republicans, while falling much less among liberals and Democrats. (2004)

Robert J. Barro, a Harvard economist writing in *Business Week*, declared that the “Groseclose-Milyo study shows the media are skewed substantially to the left of the typical member of Congress. Thus, if the opinions of viewers and readers are similar to those of their representatives, the media slant is far to the left of that of most of their customers” (2004).

This last, offhand admission that news media are businesses serving the public as customers is also the focal point for many leftist critiques of journalistic objectivity. The rise of politically partisan conservative media venues on radio and cable television has spawned a counter-industry of watchdog groups such as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) or Media Matters for America (MMfA) that document journalistic practices (usually those of right-leaning media) that supposedly violate the norms of fair journalism—usually this amounts to accusations that conservative media has misrepresented liberal media, commentators or other personalities. Where the right tends to see media bias in partisan terms, the left issues criticisms of business models or neoliberalism. A frequent complaint among left-leaning media activists, which includes groups allied with the Democratic Party, as well as progressives and independent radicals, is that the media favor the interests of their corporate owners rather than the public.

So journalists often fail to meet numerous standards of objectivity that measure different types of bias. The popular conception of journalistic non-bias, powered by the

work and arguments of political scientists and other researchers, is that the properly behaved journalist is non-political or non-ideological, to the point that his or her political inclinations remain unknown. American journalists themselves share this ideal to some degree, as some ethnographers have found (Pedelty 1995). Again, the question I ask now is not why or how much the media display bias, but rather this: Where did these expectations of journalistic neutrality and political non-bias, coupled with objectivity, originate for journalists?

Rise of Objectivity

The rise of objectivity in the 19th century resulted in a system of news writing and reporting that produced distinctions on a number of levels. As an artifact of the field, journalists used objectivity to lay claim to an authority to describe and report news events. On the macrolevel, societal plane, the “objective press” became a way of talking about intersocietal cultural difference, particularly during the 20th century. I have described two ways to apply Bourdieu’s idea of field to objectivity as a journalistic practice: 1) developing an understanding of the history and context of a journalistic practice, and 2) understanding the ways in which practice enables journalists to achieve differentiation from others. This section addresses the first of those concerns, historical and cultural context. In order to make a “thick description” of the cultural and historical context in which objectivity came to be, it is necessary to recount the history of journalism in the United States. Because its central activities are observation and reportage, journalism is necessarily dependent on other segments of society for its defining purpose. The history and causes of the rise of objectivity has been debated in

great detail elsewhere (Glessing 1970; Kessler 1984; Mindich 1998; Mott 1962; Schiller 1981; Schudson 1978, 1990; Stephens 1986), but here it suffices to say that the objective mode was the result of political, economic, demographic, and even technological changes in the United States. Objectivity arose out a great many interconnected factors: the formation of a two-party system, the rise of working and middle classes, mass literacy, the professionalization and standardization of journalism, and the proliferation of telegraphy and the railroad, none of which alone seems sufficient to account for the development of objectivity. Throughout its development, the journalistic field in the United States has been particularly bound to the economic and political fields, and so using existing historical frameworks (particularly Schudson's as well as Mindich's) I will examine these in particular (without necessarily discounting arguments such as the thesis that technologies such as telegraphy gave rise to a factual, streamlined form of newswriting [e.g., Bagdikian 1971]).

In the three decades between the presidency of Andrew Jackson and the Civil War, American journalists operated as what Mindich calls a "nonpartisan press" (1998), in contrast to the journalistic system that existed before. Prior to the 1830s, there was a common distrust of political parties in public life, a sentiment exemplified by George Washington's farewell address of 1796 where he warned that "[party] serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity of one part against another; foments occasionally riot and insurrection." As Mindich notes, during the American Revolution at least one Tory newspaper editor, James Rivington, published on "both sides" of the conflict. The first North American paper, *Publick Occurrences*,

promised its readers “a Faithful Relation” of said occurrences. The *North Star* of Vermont offered to the public a pledge that “unjust personalities will in all instances be avoided, and strict impartiality observed” (1807:1). A “Note to the Public” in the 1788 inaugural edition of the *Federal Gazette*, a Philadelphia paper, announced that the paper was “open to writers on both sides of every political or other question, so long as they are governed by decency” (1788:1).

The brief existence of nonpartisan politics came to an end with the rise of the two-party system, and factionalism in public life became the order of the day. But as politics and publics became more partisan, the public press strived to be less so. This is not to say that they sought to mask opinions—quite the contrary given the proliferation of the advocacy press such as that of the abolitionist movement—but rather that the papers published post 1830 had fewer formal links to the parties of government. As the mission statement of *Publick Occurrences* or even Washington’s words above suggest, however, this was not a sudden change, but rather a gradual process, one with a historical and philosophical basis in the institutions of the era.

Before 1830, newspapers in the United States were mostly either chronicles of mercantilism or party organs. An example of the former, the *Boston Gazette*, declared its intention to “make this Paper the more Acceptable to the Trading Part of this Town and other Parts of America” by publishing every other week “an Account of the Prices of all Merchandize” (1719:1). Even a typical newspaper of the late 1820s was often a weekly publication of fewer than ten pages of which advertisements often dominated the first and final pages. News and editorial columns appeared on page two, but a great deal of space was dedicated to the arrival and departure of ships and their cargo. Whether commercial

or political, newspapers prior to the 1830s were periodicals for the upper class as an average issue cost six cents, well beyond the reach of the working class. Most were sold by annual subscription, rather than individually, further removing them from circulation among the common person.

The turn toward the journalism of a modern, populist, mass-oriented medium coincided with a change in both the marketing structure of the American newspaper and the composition of the mass audience. While newspapers and their contents became more general interest and fact-oriented in their efforts to reach the working class after it appeared that there was a market for this novel product, the news, the idea that facts should remain strictly separate from values in reporting did not gain its full and widespread popularity among journalists until the early 20th century. The intervening seven or so decades saw a number of social changes the sum of which proved conducive to the American objective news model that predominated in US media by 1950 at the latest. While Mindich cautions that the constituent parts of objectivity “—fairness, detachment, nonpartisanship, and balance—were venerable claims even before the 1830s” (1998:11), and it is evident that they were, objective newswriting did not, and probably could not, develop except for the rise of mass audiences in the first decades of the 1800s.

When the *New York Sun*, one of the first widely circulated American papers to divest itself of political parties appeared in 1833 in New York City, it was sold as a “penny paper” to a customer base whose ranks were quickly swelling with immigrants, the newly urbanized, and the recently literate (on a generational scale as it was likely that their parents were not literate). Its more successful competitor, James Bennett’s *New*

York Herald, appearing in 1835, became the leading mass-circulation paper of the era, catering to the working classes, but also seeking a middle path between the Wall Street mercantile papers and the more sensationalist of the penny papers (Bennett eventually raised the price to two cents as if to distinguish it further from these latter [Schudson 1978]). Whether it was the outcome of democratic ideals or the shrewd foresight of early media capitalists, or most likely, both, the “penny press” was successful because it brought to the marketplace a product that proved popular with its audiences—an ostensibly politically independent and populist perspective.

News became a good after 1830, something produced and sold; objectivity represented the standardization of that product and the conditions under which it was processed. Through much of the 19th century, American journalism was characterized by a lack of specialized jobs or special training. A journalist then might have often performed any number of tasks that would transgress modern ideas of job description. The famous pioneering journalist Walter Williams, who completed neither a high school nor college education, started in the composing room in his teens, became an editor at 23, founded the world’s first journalism department in 1908, and ended his life as president of the University of Missouri. While this meteoric rise evokes Horatio Alger more than it represented the typical career paths of 19th century journalists, the idea that a journalist should be able to operate a press as well as perform layout tasks and other jobs was fairly common in the 1800s, as Schudson notes (1978). In his biographical arc, Williams embodies the idea of journalism as a trade, but as many have noted, Williams himself helped transform journalism into a profession (Pursell 2003). Professionalization proved influential on the press in more ways than one, as the idea that journalists needed

education and specialized training took hold throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Upon the death of Walter Williams, the *New York Times* published an obituary that gave him much credit for establishing objective reporting through the influence of his “Journalist’s Creed,” “one of the potent factors in eliminating the subjective element in the objective reporting of news” (*New York Times* 1935:19). Williams’ creed, reprinted in journalism texts and inscribed today upon a plaque in the journalism department at the University of Missouri, emphasized truth as a central concept, “I believe that clear thinking and clear statement, accuracy and fairness are fundamental to good journalism.” Interestingly, however, the creed leaves quite a bit of space for subjectivity and interpretive intervention on the part of a journalist, stating, “I believe that a journalist should write only what he holds in his heart to be true.” The notion that an individual worker is qualified to act in such a fashion is, of course, a strong indicator of professionalization. Sociologists and others often characterize professionalism as a system seeking balance between educated, skilled laborers in jobs that require creativity and their institutions, an attempt to grant skilled workers the autonomy they need to do complex tasks but not so much that they thwart the interests of their employers. Soloski (1997), for instance, specifically suggests that objectivity is a way of thinking that enables journalists to operate independently, but not too independently, by defining the limits of journalistic speech in a way that would be internalized as a value (this concept is developed much further and more generally, of course, by Michel Foucault [1975] in his notion of surveillance in modern institutions).

Science and Objectivity

Like other disciplines, journalism underwent a process of standardization of educational curricula, ethical codes and other processes of socialization. This was part of a process of strengthening the claims journalists made regarding the authority of their knowledge. A final factor in the development of objectivity, noted in the standard journalistic histories as articulated by Schudson and others, is the late 19th and early 20th century interaction of scientific and journalistic worldviews. To this interaction, it is useful to bring to bear the concept of fields interacting and affecting one another. Although science and journalism are closed to participation by all but a few and produce privileged forms of knowledge that possess authority to describe the world, we should not assume the results of such confluence to be automatically hegemonic, though they often have been.

Oftentimes, journalism has been the production of a vision of a world generated by scientists and consumed by mass audiences. Western publics were the beneficiaries of a broad Victorian project aimed at the edification of those masses. Zoos, museums and other public displays of science featured prominently in this movement, and by the beginning of the 20th century the idea of teaching through “scientific” displays was widespread. Public science and entertainment blurred into one another as museum displays, public lectures and expositions sought general audiences. More than one person (e.g., Baker 1998; Mindich 1998) has remarked upon one particular example of this. In 1893, a collaboration of business leaders, politicians, academics, artists and urban planners built a white city of spires and classically inspired architecture, all of which sprawled across more than 600 acres in Chicago along the shores of Lake Michigan. Part

trade show, part fairground, the World's Columbian Exposition and Fair was a paean to industrialism and an exhibition of social, technological and evolutionary progress. In the White City, fairgoers, having bought entry for fifty cents, could view demonstrations of the newest military weaponry or learn how state-of-the-art mining techniques extracted precious minerals from the earth. The fair had an entertainment district as well, the Midway Plaisance, across the river and segregated from the White City, where visitors could sample novel beverages like Welch's grape juice, or ride George Ferris' Wheel, which towered above the fairgrounds. Along the Plaisance, in contrast to the displays of technology, fairgoers could view a collection of "savage villages," living ethnographic dioramas representing peoples from all over the world, created with the knowledge and the assistance of expert anthropologists and ethnologists.⁵

Vignettes such as this (and this scene was repeated numerous times throughout the 19th and 20th centuries as fairs like these were common in North America and Europe) prove illustrative of the degree to which turn-of-the-century journalism took an interest in science and technology. For the press, the 1893 fair symbolized American exceptionalism and growing world prominence, and it assumed a vigorous role in the various preparations and debates surrounding the preparations. Two years before the fair was to open, a *New York Times* editorial pointed out that Chicago's inland location made it a poor choice for a world's fair, saying that "not one-tenth of the foreign exhibits will be sent to Chicago that would have been sent to New-York," and lamenting that "those that are sent will necessarily be of the less valuable and interesting kind" (1891:4). Newspapers also took great interest in the ethnological aspect of the exposition, as when the *Chicago Herald* published a call for an Indian parade, warning that "English visitors

would have their ideas of local color dislocated if the noble red men were not conspicuous in Chicago” (1891).

By the 1900s, journalists were increasingly likely to have attended college or to come from the ranks of the elite classes, and were more likely to have had exposure to scientific training and fields of knowledge. In plying their trade, journalists drew from a 19th century scientific worldview that emphasized empiricism to a fault, resulting in a mentality that at the heart of any event or phenomenon there laid a set of facts that could be faithfully reproduced in description, along with their meaning, what Mindich calls “naïve empiricism” (1998). At the advent of the 19th century, scholars of the natural sciences were concerned mostly with collecting and classifying. This changed somewhat as “under the influence of Darwin and Spencer, the meaning of science to the popular mind shifted” (Schudson 1990:172); hence, at the end of the 19th century, science on display in the form of technological and ethnographic exhibitions were demonstrative, dioramas and visual displays that fit exceptionally well into a master narrative in which the West subdued Nature and gained access to everything within it (such as coal reserves, iron ore, and “red men”). This body of science still emphasized the classification and order of things, but biological evolution and social evolution contained the implications of a narrative in which facts were connected historically. That the world and the people in it could be construed as a story or sets of stories proved appealing to journalists and influential on their writing, especially when they bore the imprimatur of scientific knowledge.

Another example is the case of Ota Benga, a Pygmy from what was then the Belgian Congo Free State, whose status as ethnological celebrity has been reexamined by

journalists and anthropologists (Phillips Verner and Blume 1992). Ota Benga made his first appearance at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, having been brought there by the missionary, amateur anthropologist and explorer Samuel Phillips Verner. Sometime around 1903, troops under the hire of King Leopold II exterminated many of Ota Benga's people. Having killed his entire family in the pogrom, the marauders sold Ota Benga into slavery, after which Verner came across him in a market and freed him from his bondage. After the 1904 fair, Ota Benga returned to Africa, but unable to rebuild any sort of life, he went back to the United States in 1906. In New York, he took up residence at the Bronx Zoo, helping care for the animals. He developed a special bond with a chimp and orangutan. Zoo officials encouraged him to hang his hammock in an unused cage in the Monkey House, and he did, bringing with him a bow and taking up archery practice. Once he was established within as an occupant, the officials then hung a sign: "The African Pigmy, "Ota Benga." Age, 23 years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches. Weight, 103 pounds. Brought from the Kasai River, Congo Free State, South Central Africa, by Dr. Samuel P. Verner. Exhibited each afternoon during September." (*New York Times* 1906)

The papers, which followed the spectacle with much interest, were drawn to the "man-monkey" relationship. As the *New York Times* reported:

The performance of man and monkey is not easy to describe.... [T]he pigmy was not much taller than the orang-outang, and one had a good opportunity to study their points of resemblance. Their heads are very much alike, and both grin in the same way when pleased. (1906)⁶

Objectivity was, by this time, established in journalism as a taxonomic system of the sort Bourdieu describes, one of the "explicitly practical principles of vision and division" (2005:37) that members of fields attempt to impose as "legitimate categories of

construction of the social world” (37). Reporters, finding themselves confronted by an aspect of humanity that was completely outside their immediate experience, used an “evolutionary” narrative (or more accurately, a framework of scientific racism) to make sense of what they saw. It is difficult to find a single clearer example of the degree to which “objective reporting,” the plain factuality of the journalist’s description of Ota Benga, is bound by culture.

To conclude this section, I register my agreement that this sort of “naïve” objectivity was largely hegemonic. Objectivity has been long condemned for this sort of service to power that it provides by cloaking racial and class ideologies in an air of normalcy and even “scientific” authority, a charge with which Mindich (1998) ends his book. It is possible, however, to find historical examples in which a critique of objectivity on this account becomes complicated. Mindich notes that the ways in which lynching was covered is another example of how objectivity can conceal the worst biases from critical scrutiny. *New York Times* coverage of the institution of lynching, which resulted in the deaths of some 4,000 people, most of whom were black and Southern, between 1890 and 1930, was “objective,” “balanced,” and dispassionate, often gave “equal time” to the pro and con sides of extra-judicially torturing and executing human beings. Mindich is quite rightly critical of this practice. It lends a different character to the notion of hegemonic objectivity to learn, however, that the black press also took an “objective” perspective when reporting lynchings. Here, the context is quite different, as the black press was seeking a type of legitimacy on terms the mainstream media had set. As Blau and Brown (2001), argue, one strategy by which the black press attempted accomplish this was to adopt the discursive terms of mainstream papers, and by letting

the facts “speak for themselves” provoke outrage and reform. It is more accurate, therefore, to say that while all objectivity draws heavily on claims of truth, objectivity also consists of multiple potential taxonomic systems, rather than just one hegemonic manifestation.

Cold War “Othering”

As a style of reporting, objectivity arrived at the *New York Times* by the 1890s, though the phrase “objective journalism” had yet to become commonplace in journalism. A search of the *New York Times* archives reveals that references to “journalistic objectivity,” “objective news,” and “objective reporting” begin to appear as phrases in stories by the early 1930s. One noticeable pattern is that once journalists begin to use the term objectivity, they often did so in order to make explicit comparisons between the “freedom” of the United States and civil liberties in other countries. In one article, a foreign correspondent recounts the regime of Francisco Franco objecting to his “objective reporting” of the government’s activities (1947) while another report the same year complained that Franco’s decision to bar a *Times* reporter from the country was tantamount to banning ““objective’ journalism” (1947; scare quotes in original). In 1940, a correspondent in Japan was detained for 61 days; the *Times* described this as a measure to “check objective reporting offensive to nationalistic elements” (1940). Objectivity was often symbolic of the vast differences and conflicts between the United States and parts of the world it considered non-Western, illiberal or uncivilized—in short, all of the things the United States was not. Soon after World War II ended, the Soviet press system became a particular focus of this use of term objectivity. “Would Objective Reports of

Foreign Reaction to Moscow's Diplomacy Make Any Difference?" asked Edwin James in 1946, who argued that a Soviet-style state controlled press was diametrically opposed to an objective news media whose worth lay "not in their advocacy of this candidate or that ideology but rather in their presentation of the news as a mirror of human activity, as real current history" (James 1946). "Objective reporting is not on the cards in any Communist-controlled country," concluded an editorial piece four years later, adding that "In the Communist motherland the spectacle of a reporter, domestic or foreign, going freely about his business as he does in this and other civilized countries, would be considered scandalous" (1950). Post-war reconstruction efforts often emphasized the establishment of a "free press," one based on a market system and with no direct connections to the state, as a prerequisite for democracy. In 1946, the US occupation authority handed control of forty-one newspapers to a West German organization only after "breaking down the German tradition of discussive news writing and introducing objective reporting, [and] separating fact from opinion in the German press" (1946). In 1977, when the South African legislature moved to sharply curb the ability of the press to criticize the government, the *Times* summarized the South African government's position as denying that it was "suppressing objective journalism" (1977). The idea that the success of an objective, "free press," creates the groundwork for democracy is one that endures among members of the press (an idea, for instance, expressed by most of interviewees at the daily papers, who felt that a democratic society required a vigorous journalism), which is probably why the terms "objective reporting" and "objective journalism" make a reappearance in articles in the *New York Times* about the Soviet Union as the Cold War came to an end.

Despite the strong identification of objectivity with American identity and core values, the appearance of fact-based objective reporting carried with it from the beginning deep doubts about the attainability of value-free reporting. On the eve of World War II, authors attending the World Congress of Writers at the New York World's Fair discussed the best ways to reach populations living under "regimes of force," but expressed doubts that "objective reporting" was a likely means by which democratization and liberalization would take place (1939). While publics could still unproblematically identify objectivity with the press during the war years, by the era of domino theory foreign entanglements of the late 1960s, this was no longer the case. By the 1970s, after the Vietnam War and Watergate, two heavily journalized events that revealed deep rifts in the American social landscape, individuals were not nearly as willing to accept at face value that journalists were professionals specially trained to abstain from bias and distortions of perspective.

Summary of This History

Objectivity, the idea that one can and should separate values from facts in recording and analyzing them, developed as an orienting concept in the field of American journalism over the course of a century as a result of specific historical circumstances such as the rise the mass public by the 1830s. The increasingly public science of the day popularized the idea that facts were measurable with the right tools; technologies such as photography and sound recording seemed to bear this out. The years leading up to World War II and the Cold War saw objectivity become a metonym for the Western "free world," though this distinction was subject to assault by critics who began to question the

extent to which the American government, the American press and American society lived up to the ideals of democracy and freedom that they promulgated. Although the idea of “objective journalism” remains a part of U.S. journalism, over time, publics and journalists alike have become skeptical in different ways about the existence, viability and even desirability of an objective press. It is evident that objectivity, viewed from this historical perspective, does not fit very well into the categories of right-left bias that pundits, critics and researchers use to describe it.

One of the reasons that journalists and critics have found it so difficult to define objectivity is that it consists largely of the historical coherence of many elements that happened to be compatible. More accurately, as Nerone puts it, objectivity represents an accord among the social actors comprising the forces of news production and consumption: reporters, publishers, publics and government. The result was that "objectivity gave reporters their independence, owners their prerogatives, and the public a guarantee of service (within limits). It also promised that journalism would become a profession" (2000:256). Neither a single coherent concept nor type of news writing, objectivity is best described as a set of strategic practices and beliefs.

“An Old School Way of Reporting...”

As I have noted, journalistic commentators and critics alike have noted both the longevity and apparent diminishing value of the objectivity concept. In my fieldwork experience and interviews, which I discuss here in order to provide an ethnographic perspective on this conundrum, I similarly found that journalists do not describe their work as “objective,” though they recognize the concept and do not entirely reject it. In

interviews, they used terms that have attained far greater significance in journalistic practice, such as fairness, accuracy and balance. Most even proffered critiques of “objective” accounts of reality similar to those that have arisen in scientific discourses over the 20th century, for example, describing objectivity as an ideal but untenable, citing the interfering effects of multiperspectivity on achieving single, unified “truths.” At the same time, most of the journalists to whom I spoke professed belief in the same sets of assumptions underlying “traditional” objective journalism, especially the idea that removing one’s subjectivities from a work produces more faithful and accurate reproductions of “reality” and “truth.” The degree to which the journalists to whom I spoke saw the specific concept of objectivity as antiquated and insufficient as a journalistic value was often dependent on whether they worked at dailies or weeklies. This bears out the point I have made, drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (1985), that journalists positioned differently in the field use objectivity in different ways to distinguish themselves from other knowledge workers.

In interviews, I asked journalists a standard question, “What are the most important values of journalism?” I avoided using the term objectivity until after they had described these values. The values that they did mention, however, were related to objectivity, especially its claims to truth finding. Gina, a freelancer whose work has appeared in a number of national progressive and left magazines, and who does most of her investigative reporting for alternative weeklies, replied:

[The most important value] is fairness and accuracy. If a source or a reader tells me that they don’t like what I’ve written, my response to that would be, ‘Is it accurate? Is it balanced?’ If they say yes, but they still don’t like it [then I don’t] really feel bad about it. I don’t really care.

Similarly, Lou, columnist at a large daily paper, responded, “accuracy and fairness” when asked this question, though he appended a disclaimer that “columnists [such as himself] don’t have to be fair.” Whether they were reporters or not, Lou said, all journalists should be “above board,” adding, “Don’t break your word.”

The notion of dealing fairly with sources and others in an interpersonal sense figured heavily into the response of Amy, a freelancer and adjunct university instructor still struggling to “build up clips” or accumulate a history of published stories:

Amy: I think integrity is the best one, but a lot of [values] come from respect for others, so I think integrity first, integrity for the work and representing information or writing information accurately. The second thing is to respect the people that you interview or that you’re writing about. I think sometimes there are people who do not . . . and as a result they don’t really listen to what they’re saying. There’s a big difference between hearing someone and listening to them.

Gina, who had made similar points, emphasized that regard for others must be tempered with respect for the facts of a story and accurately representing the people who appear in the story:

Well, when you’re a reporter, doing what I’m doing, exposing wrongdoing in government, it’s guaranteed that you’re going to piss people off. And there are always going to be people who don’t like your writing because it reflects poorly on them, or it’s controversial or they want to keep something on the downlow. Even when you cover the stories that you wouldn’t think are controversial, people don’t like the way you describe their appearance or you spelled their name wrong, or whatever. People are always going to have [a problem]. There are a ton of things I would miss about journalism, [but not people being pissed off at me]. [laughs]

And Edgar, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter at a major daily newspaper, said this:

Truth is the most important value. . . . [And] secondly, meaningful truth. In other words, for example, I could find out you did something, right? But it doesn’t mean anything. Now I might get all excited that I discovered

something, but it doesn't mean anything. Does it tell society something they need to know?

I asked him: How do you decide what is meaningful?

We decide this on several principles: One is that our readers need to know this stuff. Number two is that... it's something that we want to tell them... simply because we happen to like telling the story as well. [Also], there are the other forces, I mean competition... [W]e might take one story over another, just simply because it's a much more interesting story to tell. That's a factor sometimes too.

After discussing news values in interviews with journalists and finding that objectivity did not merit mentioning by name, I would ask journalists in interviews more directly to tell me about journalistic objectivity. Lou, columnist for a large daily paper, pointed out that until more recently, journalists tended to assume objectivity to be a quality inherent to their work by virtue of it being journalistic: "Objectivity was a standard practice for years, but more of an assumption of grace than a goal. About twenty years ago, journalists decided it was more of a goal or ideal." The general commentary of the literature that I have cited supports Lou's assertion that objectivity declined in importance throughout the latter half of the 20th century. With this shift in the field of journalism came a realization that though objectivity remains important, it is an unattainable standard and even unreasonable expectation.

Objectivity, as Amy describes it, is something like what Clifford Geertz had in mind when he said, "I have never been impressed by the argument that, as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is) one might as well let one's sentiments run loose. As Robert Solow has remarked, that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer" (1973:30). As Amy explained when she defined objectivity:

Objectivity is a goal. The goal is to be objective and to report without allowing biases to influence your perspective or the output that you provide. That's what objectivity is. Non-bias is unachievable. It's sort of like perfection. Perfection is always desirable, but it's not achievable. You strive to be as accurate as possible. I think even though journalists can't be entirely objective, they can strive for it. I think that's what separates a good journalist from a poor one.

If "objectivity" does not have quite the same cachet that it once did in the journalistic world, many still find it at the very least a background presence with which they must contend. For instance, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), authors of a text that ties together theoretical concerns with practical ones for would-be reporters, state that they have discarded objectivity from a list of essential components of ideal journalism. These include among other things, a public mindedness, independence, accessibility and multiperspectivity. The authors further claim to have discarded objectivity by most of its names: fairness, balance and so on. They have, however, retained a sense of the importance of observational authority, as evidenced by their first admonition: "Journalism's first obligation is to the truth" (2001:12).

Even journalists who work in "non-objective" media such as alternative weeklies find this to be the case. As an author of a number of investigative pieces, Gina echoed this argument that the journalistic norm of completely separating facts from one's values was an "old school way of reporting." She added:

When I teach journalism, I tell my students to be fair and balanced, but it's almost impossible to [not include] some kind of slant. I don't think it's a bad thing. I'm sure you've heard this in your interviews too, [you're choosing sources, you're choosing quotes, order in which to put them]. [...] And I would say as a writer, most of the time, I wouldn't [interpret what other people do as a bias]. Your readers come to the story with their own bias.

While this statement might have been less likely from a daily reporter, Gina, being a freelancer who wrote for “non-mainstream,” left-leaning media outlets such as alternative weeklies and public radio, had articulated an extremely common view of “bias” that I found among staffers when I worked in a weekly newsroom. The alt weekly reporters that I came to know, especially the reporters who produced “hard news,” saw their publications as an alternative to the objective reporting of the dailies, as a journalistic outlet for journalism informed by certain politically liberal sensibilities. This was especially true at the *Metropolitan Weekly*, where editorial staff spoke of their efforts to push the paper toward coverage of racial and class issues that the dailies ignored (while I was there, one reporter developed a beat in the African-American community, which was somewhat uncommon among city media).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, editors at big papers distinguished between “color” and “facts” in reporting. Some of them wanted both in their news stories, though most prioritized fact and some attempted to ban colorful writing altogether. “Color” is a vivid writing style that allows the reader to “see” events as they are described, and modern weeklies and dailies alike strive for this. The weeklies, however, consider this sort of reporting much more their specialty, and weekly reporters are under fewer constraints to refrain from the sort of interpretive reporting that this entails. This does not mean that the individual reporters practice journalism without constraint. Gina, like every other journalist that I encountered, whether they were weekly or daily writers, placed distinct limits on the radical potential of individualism. She rejected a strong version of objectivity, but accepted in its place a weaker one:

JFG: So objectivity is balance, multiple points of view?

Gina: Yeah, and not writing a story in a way that solely reflects your own beliefs. One of the problems that I've had with some writers, the thing that drives me crazy, is that they tell the reader how to think about something. I mean, what I always try to do is tell a story and let the reader come to own conclusions. You shouldn't have to insert your opinion. I mean you don't often say "This is how I feel about it," or "This is right, and this is wrong," [but bias] can still come across because of the way you write a story.

JFG: So objectivity is the idea of disinterestedness and keeping facts and values separate?

Gina: To me, that's a much more old school way of reporting...

Over and over I had discovered that objectivity was a hard term to elicit from a journalist short of direct questioning. I finally related this observation in an interview with Eugene, the daily reporter, mentioning that no one I had interviewed had used the term "objectivity" without prompting, and asked him, "What's happened to objectivity?"

Well, I [mentioned] "objectivity," but I used a different word, I used "truth." I said the highest value in journalism is "truth." You can't get at the truth unless you're objective. Objectivity is simply a method of getting at the truth. Objectivity is subservient to the truth. The truth is even a higher value than objectivity, but they are one and the same.

He clarified what he meant:

The truth is higher than objectivity, because objectivity is just one element of the truth. You can't be telling the truth if you aren't objective, and yet there's more to it. For example, I could be completely objective, and still [misrepresent] right? But I could fail to discover something else, that's part of it. The truth is objectivity is simply a way of getting at it. But you could fail to get at the truth and be completely objective. Let me try to give an example here: Say Joe Blow is a crook, and [you find out that] he stole \$10,000. Well, the truth is that Joe stole a hundred thousand dollars, and we failed to get at that. You were completely objective in finding out that he stole \$10,000 dollars, you didn't go in there wanting to prove him a crook, you listened to him, but you didn't discover the truth.

Many of the journalists that I interviewed spoke of other values, such as truth or fairness, that they later identified as objectivity or being like objectivity. Challenges to objectivity such as those that began in the 1960s counterculture movement may have had the effect of inoculating audiences and journalists alike against uncritical acceptance of the simple form of objectivity that facts and values can be separated in the presentation of news. This simple definition of objectivity, one that many journalists today can easily dismiss as “unrealistic,” should not be confused with the broader overarching ideology and practice of objectivity that many journalists cannot as easily ignore. It is one thing for a particular word to draw criticism and eventually fall into disuse, in part because critics judge that the word inadequately carries meaning, but just because a word attracts critical attention does not mean that the same process of criticism affects the practices and beliefs to which it is attached. Journalists and their critics alike have attacked objective journalism, and one response on the part of the journalistic community has been to reexamine and redefine the goals of journalism.

Amy, Lou and other journalists do profess skepticism when asked whether their methods produce objective truth. “‘Objective’ means there’s a limited number of answers and it’s either right or wrong.” Amy had said earlier. “Journalism is not objective. It’s subjective, although journalists, good journalists, work to eliminate as much subjectivity as possible. It’s inherent in the way we are as beings.”

Journalists on the whole do not believe that their accounts *are* “reality” and “truth,” but rather that they describe these, an important qualification. This journalistic version of objectivity does not see truth as lying somewhere “out there.” The acknowledgement of the notion of subjectivity in a framework of thought implies the

existence of objectivity as a concept within that framework. The duality of subjectivity versus objectivity is reflected in a journalistic taboo against imposing individual interpretation in favor of seeking a group consensus on the “way something happened,” a consensus journalists attempt to achieve by consulting multiple sources and getting “both sides.” That is, journalists tend to agree that efforts to suppress individual voice and individualistic interpretive frameworks results in articles that are closer to the “way something happened” than they would be otherwise.

Objectivity as Differentiation

In introducing Bourdieu and field theory, I argued that a concept of journalism as a field requires a historical and contextual awareness and implies that we should look at behavior on the part of social actors as attempts to distinguish themselves from others, both among and within the field. Thus far I have examined the history of objectivity and discussed my research data in light of that history. In the sections that follow, and in keeping with the field theory that I outlined, I look more closely at the desire on the part of journalists to differentiate their work from that of workers in other fields. Here I use two anthropological concepts, *genre* and the gift, as themes with which to discuss the functions of objectivity.

Journalism and Genre

Journalists have many good reasons for disavowing objectivity, but why does objectivity continue to be a part of journalistic practice? In applying field theory, one answer that emerges is that objectivity is a means through which journalists can assert

identity, just as they lay claim to authority. As a way of structuring linguistic practices, objectivity marks the journalistic production of knowledge as extraordinary, different from other linguistic practices. The objective mode of reporting and writing offers journalists a way in which to distinguish themselves as a community, and a way to make distinctions among information workers, both within and outside journalism. Objectivity is not the only thing that distinguishes journalists from these other information workers, but the objective mode serves as a way to distinguish between journalism and advertising or press releases, between journalism and the layperson, or, more recently, between journalism and blogging, bloggers being a type of layperson to journalistic sensibilities.

As a community, journalists define themselves primarily by the act of communication, not with each other, but with “the public,” which in reality consists of many groups that differ in social and occupational statuses and language use. In addressing these gaps and widest possible audience, journalists attempt to use language that transcends such statuses with their associated frames of reference; in doing so, they employ particular words, frames, and phrasing that signal the language’s journalistic characteristics. Journalistic speech is a genre in this respect. In anthropological linguistics, a genre means

a speech style oriented to the production and reception of a particular kind of text. When an utterance is assimilated to a given genre, the process by which it is produced and interpreted is mediated through its intertextual relationship with prior texts. The invocation of a generic (i.e., genre-specific) framing device such as "Once upon a time" carries with it a set of expectations concerning the further unfolding of the discourse, indexing other texts initiated by this opening formula. (Bauman 2000:84; emphasis in original)

It might be tempting to view objectivity as a framing device, but as it is the product of context and not a single linguistic detail, I do not consider objectivity a single framing device. Examples of framing devices for journalistic speech include writing that prioritizes facts and information: the inverted pyramid, leads that answer who-what-when-how-why, flat declarative statements that tell the reader “what happened.” The regular use of “neutral words” (such as “militant” instead of “terrorist”) and the obvious decision-making underlying their use is another framing device. Even conventions such as the inclusion of “both sides of a story” or an emphasis on “official sources” are framing devices that indicate that one is reading a news story and not some other sort of narrative. As reason for doing each of these, journalists can articulate methodological and ethical reasons that have nothing to do with making an article look newsy, but the end result is that news articles have a particular style that other types of writing do not.⁷

To draw from my project an example of this, one of the many faux pas I made while working as an intern was to submit a writing sample in which I wrote in the first person rather than a more impersonal third person perspective. The editor to whom I had given this piece sent it back with comments, among which was a note that, ‘unless there is a good reason, news stories are not usually written with first person pronouns.’ As gatekeepers, part of the editors’ role is to bar the door to not just unnewsworthy stories but also corruptions of “voice” that do not fit the publication. One editor, who was fairly well known for a column in which he revealed intimate details of his personal life, told me that weeklies differ on this point

Well, that’s another thing about alternative weeklies: voice. We think that distinctive, familiar voices is what distinguishes us. It’s not just straight

editorial; it's more magazine-y.... But writing in the first person is a big debate among weeklies. I've tended to notice that.

In journalistic writing, objectivity emerges from these framing devices and the interspectivity that they imply. By "interspectivity," I mean that journalists are knowledge brokers whose job it is to move information from one domain into another (usually the public domain). Without that ability, journalists would not be able to provide news of relevance to the general public as it occurred in the scientific field, the political field, or the economic field. Without objectivity, or something like it, journalists could not present knowledge across fields or ideologies. Journalism as a genre of speech carries with it objectivity, which confers authority on the journalist, who through its use has access to privileged forms of knowledge. Here I emphasize, however, that objectivity is not the only way to achieve interspectivity and authority; I would even argue that some degree of interspectivity is a common characteristic of all journalistic fields wherever they exist.

Objectivity is tied to a form of writing that makes journalists distinct as knowledge workers, and has helped them do their jobs by routinizing the task of communicating, both with heterogeneous sources and publics. Ideologically diverse sources in disparate fields are more likely to speak to journalists if they have some notion of the rules of engagement (what is likely to be printed, what will not be printed, how the journalist is likely to represent them, what sort of representations are off-limits); journalistic ethics and objectivity provide this framework. Ideologically diverse audiences find in objectivity firmer ground on which to negotiate the meanings of news than they might have otherwise.

Objectivity and the Gift

Journalists avoid entanglements that would hinder their ability to cover subjects. In such instances, objectivity can serve as a sort of “firebreak” or protective barrier between news and bias contaminants. For instance, while the editorial boards of American newspapers generally have an identifiable political position (depending, of course, on who is making the identification), longstanding convention requires that they remain as separate in management from the news reporting of the paper as is the advertising. Thus, the *Wall Street Journal* might be a “conservative” paper because of its editorials, but this description is not “supposed” to extend to its reporting. European papers, on the other hand, often openly support particular parties or their news reporting has clear ideological positions.

It becomes easier to get a sense of how this differs from the U.S. model by comparing it to these other traditions. In his ethnographic study of the foreign press corps in El Salvador, Mark Pedelty (1995) identifies some key characteristics of the objective press. Pedelty performed his research on the Salvadoran Foreign Press Association (SPCA) during the twelve year long Salvadoran civil war that formally ended in 1992. He argues that objective writing devalues particular behaviors or perspectives: emotion, value systems, and political ideology.

News writing in mainstream United States journalism stigmatizes extremism and so objectivity is a “perspective most closely associated with political centrism” (1995:171), Pedelty says. As such, objectivity is a view that classifies left and right perspectives as “subjective, value-laden and thus ‘biased’” (171). To the objective

journalist, the objective perspective remains ideology free. Pedelty argues that, in contrast to anthropological writing, journalists attempt to channel the facts without changing them. Normal journalistic writing is adamantly unreflexive.

All of this, Pedelty found, resulted in conflict when Salvadoran journalists sought employment with U.S. news organizations. U.S. news organizations who hired Salvadoran journalists to cover the civil war placed a great deal of pressure on them to adopt “professional” codes of journalism. Central to professionalization were the codes of objectivity, which the Salvadoran journalists widely viewed as epistemologically and methodologically unsound. One of Pedelty’s informants, a Salvadoran journalist, describes her distaste for “gringo journalism,” revealing in the process the cultural connotations that objectivity carries for her:

I do not believe in journalistic objectivity. For me, objectivity cannot exist, because we are human beings, with feelings, thoughts, and the capacity to analyze. We are not simply transcribers of what one or the other says. We have a right and duty to analyze what is said.... Once you make a selection of any sort, it is not objective. The only people for whom objectivity is important are the gringos. (1995:209)

Objective journalism also places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of verifiable sources, which often translates to the use of official sources. This complicated the business of covering a civil war in which military regulars and government-supported groups regularly killed groups they deemed oppositional. Because they themselves were often targets for these reprisals, issues with objectivity assumed a particular significance for the Salvadoran journalists of SPCA.

Another aspect of U.S. journalism that seemed odd to Pedelty’s informants was the emphasis U.S. journalists placed on avoiding the appearance of conflict of interest or

what Salvadoran journalists view as minor, insignificant demonstrations of independence.

As Latin American journalist Calixto says:

I have seen that they will not let sources pay when they take them to breakfast. They will not let them pay the check because they fear this will corrupt their sense of objectivity. To me, this seems somewhat stupid. I do not care who pays the bill. [Objectivity] is a principle that I do not respect.... To me, total objectivity is a lie. (Pedelty 1995:220)

Here, Calixto has connected the American journalist's desire to be free of conflicts of interest with objectivity.

It is an anthropological commonplace that people in every society use gift-giving to build rapport, curry favor, and generate bonds of obligation. "What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?" Marcel Mauss ([1990]1925) famously asked, as he placed the gift at the center of all human social transaction in "primitive societies." In their film *The Feast*, Tim Asch and Napoleon Chagnon (1970) use Mauss' framework to demonstrate how gift exchange becomes the basis of political alliances among villages separated by distance and commonly beset by armed enemies. The "potlatch" or competitive feast is a venerable subject in anthropological literature (e.g., Harris 1989). A standard list of introductory anthropological readings invariably includes Richard Lee's account (1969) of how Kalahari Bushmen derided his gift of a fat ox as a means of equalizing the differences in power between them. The anthropological perspective is fairly clear in this respect: Across all societies, gifts are given as an exercise of power. As such, they lead to obligations that most U.S. journalists would rather avoid.

Institutionalized bribery, which is one form of gift giving, is an important part of the economy in some countries, especially in countries where the state pays civil servants

a pittance. Bribery and other such practices, however, are not openly acceptable practices in the United States. El Salvador, on the other hand, has a tradition of *menta*, or mint—bribes that “sweeten’ the work of the reporter” (Pedelty 1995:208). A national context is therefore relevant to understanding why U.S. journalists would have an aversion to accepting gifts as a possible conflict of interest.

Journalists to whom I talked exhibited a pattern of concern about gifts. Lou, the columnist at the mainstream daily, similarly identified refusal of gifts as a feature of ethical journalism, saying that “a reporter shouldn’t accept anything for free.” Lou seemed to feel, however, that these pronouncements could be tempered with some common sense. In a subsequent conversation, he showed me a mug he had received as an honorarium for presiding at an academic conference. Chuckling, he explained that the organizer who had given it to him was a journalist who was known for berating those who accepted even the smallest of gifts in the performance of their duties.

Lisa, a writer at the *Daily Metropolitan*, used a story of bribery to illustrate what she meant when I asked her to describe the most important value in journalism:

Truth is number one. I can’t tell you how many times that when I’m collecting information from someone for an obituary and they slip a hundred dollar bill in my hand when they shake my hand. And I can’t get it out of my hand fast enough. Stop it! You don’t pay journalists. I don’t take money under the table. I will write this if it’s a worthy story, otherwise I won’t. But don’t do that. And it’s happened to others too, where they’ve tried to be bribed. These people in this building have so much integrity and I am so proud to work for this caliber of person that it’s really hard to explain. They’re so smart and they’re so ethical and moral that I don’t think the readers appreciate how much we care and how much we try to really tell the truth and give both sides.

The taboo against gifts and obligation continued to be a persistent pattern throughout my encounters with journalists. In response to a question about alternate press models, Amy combines all of these concerns about accepting gifts and becoming “involved”:

JFG: To what degree is an activist journalism appropriate? An activist journalism that works to “better society” rather than just reporting on things or taking snapshots?

Amy: Actually, there’s a lot of warning not to get involved. In fact some [journalists] aren’t even registered for political parties for that reason.

JFG: Are you [registered]?

Amy: I am, yes. But, I don’t belong to the civic association locally because I am a journalist and if I had to cover that association I feel it would be a conflict of interest. So same thing. One time I went to interview a restaurant owner and he kept asking me if I wanted food, but that wasn’t the reason I was there. And it was very kind for him to offer, but I believe it was a conflict of interest to accept food from him.

How threatening is “involvement” of any kind to the independent role of the journalist? The answer varies by journalist and institution. *Washington Post* reporters are forbidden to engage in any political activity except voting. The executive editor of the *Washington Post*, Leonard Downie, Jr., goes further; he stopped voting once he attained his current position at the paper, saying, “I wanted to keep a completely open mind about everything we covered and not make a decision, even in my own mind or the privacy of the voting booth, about who should be president or mayor” (2004).

Conclusion

JFG: So you try to avoid any kind of involvement?

Amy: Yeah. I think basically... there's only a limit to what journalists can do. It's up to the people to really react and respond. Someone could write—and things have been written about global warming and things like that and certainly global warming is an issue we're looking at. It's a severe problem. I don't care who you are. But nothing is going to be done about it. The most brilliant writer could tackle it. But unless people in a society do something about it, it doesn't matter who's writing about it. People have to believe that it's a problem.

Amy's final words reflect a journalistic preoccupation with independence and individualism, tying these to objectivity. If journalists have celebrated the idea of a “free press” in which one person speaks freely to others who are free to listen, then they have also invented ways to limit the radical potential of that individualism. The ways in which they have done arose in the circumstances specific to the history and cultural framework of the United States.

The historical development of journalism has left within it a core “faith in facts, a distrust in values, and a commitment to their segregation” (Schudson 1978:6) that colors the perceptions of journalists and the expectations of their audiences. This treatment of facts has a significant relationship to the market economics of print journalism, as objectivity developed from publishers' efforts to alienate the least possible number of readers. Even those journalists (such as those at the alternative weeklies) who cater to consumers with more specific ideological tastes (such as urban, middle-class 20 and 30-somethings) find themselves practicing a certain form of objectivity, so influential has it been.

Despite the longevity of objectivity, many contemporary journalists are uneasy with the term. Many see “objectivity” as outdated and even dangerously naïve. “In a world of spin,” warns Brent Cunningham, managing editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “our awkward embrace of an ideal can make us passive recipients of the news.” With its emphasis on balance, objectivity at its worst encourages a “lazy reporting” that requires no analysis on the part of journalists who simply rewrite talking points given them by two sides. But Cunningham adds, “Objectivity has persisted for some valid reasons, the most important being that nothing better has replaced it” (2003). To some extent this appears to be true; none of the journalists whom I came to know were able to work entirely outside it, so established and far-reaching was its influence, though many were able to question it in various ways. More than one version of objectivity exists, however, and there are important differences between what publics and journalists consider “objective” as well as significant differences within the field. Evidence suggests that journalists continue to find objectivity useful as a way of defending prerogatives eyed hungrily by corporate and state power, and by their own employers and even their sources--as a means of creating a distance between themselves and the forces that imperil their independence.

NOTES

¹ I take this term from Rodney Benson (2005), who derives a notion of a distinct American “informational model” of journalism from his comparison of the US press to the French press, a mode of journalistic practice he terms “political/literary” in contrast.

² I describe objectivity as a practice in that it requires a number of actions of journalists as they write stories: verification of facts (accuracy), inclusion of multiple

perspectives (balance, fairness), and removal of self from the article (detachment). Objectivity is also a discourse in that it describes a journalistic way of speaking about facts and news as well as journalism itself.

³ As an example: Undoubtedly with the French version in mind, Bourdieu argues that the journalistic field has a low degree of autonomy; journalism, which is “increasingly subject to the constraints of the economy and of politics, is more and more imposing its constraints on all other fields, particularly the fields of cultural production such as the field of the social sciences, philosophy, etc., and on the political field” (2005:41). For Bourdieu, the journalistic field has become less autonomous and more heteronomous—subject to the influence of economic and political fields—because of its increasing reliance on market indicators of economic success such as audience ratings. These are observations of media that would be so taken for granted in the US, UK or Australian media systems that they would not bear mentioning; however, in France, the media received subsidies from the state during the postwar years. When privatization of television and certain papers occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, this opened new debates in France on the role of the media.

⁴ I asked seven respondents, “What keeps you from writing a good story?” The responses were uniformly time and space constraints, and many mentioned the positive or negative influences that editors had on their reporting.

⁵ The themes of race, progress, and “civilization” came from the highest offices in the land. More than two years before the fair was to open, President Benjamin Harrison issued an invitation to “all the nations of the earth to take part in the commemoration of an event that is pre-eminent in human history by appointing representatives thereto, and sending such exhibits to the World’s Columbian Exposition as will most fitly and fully illustrate their resources, their industries, and their progress in civilization” (Harrison 1890:1).

⁶ Ota Benga drew huge crowds who similarly took interest in the man’s supposed resemblance to an ape, but outraged black ministers helped organize public sentiment against the zoo, and the exhibit was soon ended. After he left the zoo, Ota Benga went into the care of a colored orphanage, where he attended school, and eventually found employment at a tobacco factory. He never returned to Africa, having no funds, nor any sort of home there. Unable to find a place for himself in North America, either, he walked into the woods near his home one day in 1916 and shot himself in the heart.

⁷ The fact that news stories have a “look” that can be mimicked by “advertorials” or press releases serves as further evidence of this point.

CHAPTER 4
RECURSIVITY AND INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY IN THE
JOURNALISTIC FIELD

Introduction

Having earlier handed me a nine-page professional biography that listed among his accomplishments two Pulitzer Prizes and a book, Eugene, an investigative reporter for a major daily paper, spoke often of a self that needed to be harnessed. As a good reporter, I'm always doing battle with myself, Eugene told me, when I asked him to describe what it meant to practice objective journalism. "An ego can do all kinds of things when you're working on a story," he said, drawing from psychoanalysis to name his adversary-self. "You don't just want to cleanse yourself of your opinions when you're working on stuff. You also cleanse yourself of your ego so you're not interrupting the truth, because the ego causes you not to listen."

In interviews and in fieldwork, I found that journalists have a preoccupation with self and independence that operates on multiple, hierarchical linguistic domains within the journalistic field. While neither my methods and sample size nor my theoretical frameworks permit me to posit an ultimate cause for this, I can point to some connections among these domains. In this chapter, I will situate these various meanings of "independence", "autonomy" and "ego" in a concept of field and explore ways in which individualism becomes a powerful metaphor for journalists that operates on multiple levels of meaning.

Journalism is a field in which concern for both individualism and individual effort is paramount. For all of the implicit comparisons social scientists have made between news work and mass production, in the production of news, journalists usually retain an authorial identity, signing their articles and assuming responsibility for their work, both in terms of rewards and liabilities. Failures to get the story right rebound upon the individual as loss of reputation, public disgrace and even legal sanctions. Success leads to acclaim such as industry awards and the respect and reputation that one acquires from being known to the public. A newspaper article is decidedly a group effort, a team of specialist contributors overseeing particular tasks assembles statements, accounts, interviews and data into narrative prose, but much of the uncovering and transmutation of facts to news is the work of an individual, at least in terms of attribution, as audiences come to recognize a reporter's name and his or her work, an extremely public individualism.

The simultaneous celebration and subjugation of self and agency in journalism should be considered in light of the fact that journalism, compared to professions such as medicine or law, is more of a semi-profession. Although some sociologists have depicted newsrooms as factory-like,¹ journalists are educated and skilled workers whose jobs demand a great deal of creativity, spontaneity and, as noted, individual initiative. If news is a "product," then unlike mass produced material goods, the conditions under which it is produced is subject to a limited degree of fine control as it involves creating accounts of things that happen in the world. This, according to well rehearsed arguments in the literature of journalism studies (e.g., Soloski 1997; Tuchman 1973), requires a workforce

that is capable of responding to a fair amount of novelty and uncertain conditions. The average journalist is subject to a great deal of managerial oversight, questioning of news judgment, and alteration of their work. For this reason as well as the direct First Amendment injunction against state interference with the press, American journalism has no ethics boards or licensing bodies as does medicine or law. Journalists desire freedom from interference, but as Weaver et al. (2007) found, the perception among journalists at daily newspapers regarding the extent of their individual autonomy is that it has declined in the past 20 years. For the most part, this research focuses on individual journalists' perceptions of their work and their relationships with their institutions. Presumably, this perceived decline in individual agency has resulted in some tension and indicates some sociologically interesting structural changes.

The interest that individual journalists express in this independence has its roots in institution-level concerns with autonomy, especially with regard to conceptions of identity that attend the profession. Nearly every journalist learns in school that theirs is the only profession mentioned in the constitution of the United States, which guarantees government non-interference with the press. Almost every journalistic code, from Walter Williams' "Journalist's Creed" to the founding charters of papers, emphasizes that the ability of the journalist to write stems directly from the freedom from influence, whether corporate or state. The purpose of journalism as a "fourth estate" (that is, a pillar of power in civil society that is distinct from other pillars such as the state) has long lain in the capacity of "watchdog" or in "looking out for the little guy," as many of my informants and interview subjects phrased it.

To restate all of this, I have described thus far two interrelated domains of “autonomy”. The first is that of the journalist-as-worker in the newsroom who resents too much oversight on the part of management and desires what I will refer to as *independence*. Second is that of the journalist representing an institution whose ability to mediate between the “little guy” and large, impersonal “big business” or “big government” or “city hall” is contingent on what I will call here the *autonomy* of journalism, the independence of the news organization and the profession from the subjects that journalists cover. A third is the domain of the individual self, as with the journalist who must reconcile his or her behavior with the role of a journalist; I use the term *ego*, taken from my conversation with Eugene, to describe individualism on this level.

Scholars of journalism and professions use the term “autonomy” in at least two different and potentially confusing ways. In writing about autonomy, Bourdieu and others responding to him (e.g., Schudson 2005) have drawn upon a Weberian notion of professions, such that autonomy refers to the degree to which a field can dictate its own actions, uphold its own interests, define the major concepts and terms it uses, and otherwise play by its own rules (Hanks 2005). In their journalist attitude studies, by contrast, Weaver et al. define autonomy as “the wide latitude a professional has in carrying out his or her occupational duties” (2007:70).² I am attempting to use my ethnographic and interview data to explore the relationship between both of these, but independence, as I have outlined it, is more like this latter type of “autonomy.”

Autonomy, in the Bourdieuan sense, is a much broader term than independence, one that

refers more to the state of fields than the dispositions of people within them. The difference between autonomy and independence is one of domain or scale rather than of character. In the following section, I propose that one way to understand an obvious yet unclear relationship between autonomy and independence is to treat it as a metaphorical transfer between domains, and suggest that a journalistic way of thinking (and therefore talking) about the profession has a relationship with the ways in which journalists understand (and therefore talk about) their role in the newsroom.

Fractal Recursivity and the Journalistic Field

Fields, according to Bourdieu, make their own rules to differing extents. Philosophy, poetry and mathematics are examples of fields he cites as being highly autonomous. Other fields such as politics exist with a high degree of interconnectedness to one another, a state Bourdieu and others describe as heteronomy. Bourdieu argues that the journalistic field has a low degree of autonomy; journalism, which is “increasingly subject to the constraints of the economy and of politics, is more and more imposing its constraints on all other fields, particularly the fields of cultural production such as the field of the social sciences, philosophy, etc., and on the political field” (2005:41). For Bourdieu, the journalistic field has become less autonomous and more heteronomous—subject to the influence of economic and political fields—because of its increasing reliance on market indicators of economic success such as audience ratings. The American press is similarly influenced by other fields, especially the economic (and where media privatization is somewhat novel to the French, as the norm in the United

States it goes fairly unnoticed with the exception of concerns about media consolidation). For journalists, this high degree of heteronomy leads to a great deal of concern for both their newsroom independence as well as the autonomy of the profession.

In seeking visible traces of this link, it becomes useful to speak of independence as a set of linguistic and symbolic practices that are linked to autonomy. Irvine and Gal (2000) articulate a semiotic approach to language ideologies in which three processes, iconization, fractal recursivity and erasure, describe changes to the relationship between social groups and their linguistic practices. Fractal recursivity, the projection of distinctions, usually oppositions, from one level of social interaction onto another, is a means by which differences between groups become a way to talk about distinctions within a group. Because the concept originates in sociolinguistics, examples that occur in the literature tend to be language-oriented. However, as Bucholtz (2001) notes, as a semiotic concept, fractal recursivity extends beyond the use of language to semiotic relationships, so that researchers can understand ideology and power relations in terms of their recursive relationships.

As an example of fractal recursivity, Irvine and Gal (2000) describe how during a period of social and linguistic contact between Khoi and Nguni peoples in southern Africa, Nguni populations began using the click sounds that occur as a regular part of Khoi phonologies. In intra-Nguni usage, the click consonants have come to denote social distance among individuals, which reflects the social distance on the level of inter-group relations between Khoi and Nguni. The symbols of social distance, in other words, were mapped from one level of social interaction external to the Nguni onto another level that

was internal. Similarly, Bucholtz argues that linguistic markers of white-black racial difference (intragroup difference) in one high school that she studied were modeled into markers of status difference within the population of white students (intergroup difference), where “racialized” speech markers were associated with the “cool” white students, who often appropriated African American words, whereas “nerdy” white students strove for a “hyperwhite” form of speech.

In the case of journalists, ways of conceptualizing power and difference at the intergroup level, that is, between the journalistic field and other fields such as politics, are also relevant at the intragroup level. Journalists, especially in the area of investigative reporting, often perceive stark differences among the people they write for versus the individuals, organizations and social institutions that they write about, represented most of all in the “big guy, little guy” dichotomy,³ a classification scheme that generates a number of terms and archetypes: on one side lie corporate entities and the government, bureaucratic collectives of state and corporate power whose influence the “fourth estate” seeks to check; on the other side, there is the “whistleblower” who speaks out against the “company,” the consumer who has been ripped off, the veteran who cannot collect benefits, protagonists whose personal problems are thrown into sharp relief with social issues in the articles journalists write about them.

Because one of the most important stated purposes of journalism in the United States is that it is a means of scrutinizing power and opening political processes to discussion, it would not seem unlikely that journalists’ ways of talking about this, the metaphors, analogies and tropes that journalists employ, would have some bearing on

how they talk about the power structures of the newsroom. Examples of this occur when reporters claim an identity that is separate from that of editors, or when reporters and editors assert a set of interests and values that differ significantly from those of the publisher. Recursivity is a means of examining this pattern of discourse as it manifests across domains.

Finally, I have described two domains, that of the profession as an abstract whole (the level of intergroup difference, on which journalists contrast themselves with non-journalists) and the newsroom (where intragroup distinctions among journalists occur), but what of the domain of the individual? Irvine and Gal provide for fractal recursivity on the individual level, but stipulate that when “such oppositions are reproduced within a single person, they do not concern contrasting identities so much as oppositions between activities or roles associated with prototypical social persons” (2000:38). In the case of individual journalists, a preoccupation with regulating the self is evident that manifests as separating facts from values, endeavoring not to engage in acts of explicit interpretation when writing articles, of doing battle with the ego so that the facts are left intact. On the other hand, journalists have to act upon their subjects to elicit information, and openly admit that they do so. Only somewhat less obvious to many journalists, however, is that they also actively encourage their sources to provide information that easily fits into journalistic narrative schemes by asking certain types of questions or that they ignore information that does not do so (see, for instance, Fishman 1997 on city hall beat coverage). Most journalists are aware that they run the risk of imposing their preconceptions on “the story,” though they see this as a problem of individual bias, and

are trained to take steps to avoid “leading questions” or incomplete accounts from any source (two examples that informants often cited). On the individual level, the dichotomy of power projected from the domain of the profession is this: Journalists have to balance an objective ideology of newsgathering that emphasizes non-interference with the data with the need to obtain that information from human subjects. For many journalists, self-effacement is in frequent conflict with what Eugene called his ego.

Below, I discuss the ways in which journalists draw from these domains of individual, newsroom and institution in talking about themselves and their work. I begin with a discussion of the notion of a field-level *autonomy* in which journalists and publics often articulate the role of the journalist as defender of individual liberties. Using the concept of fractal recursivity, I make connections between autonomy and a newsroom-level *independence*. Journalists in my study frequently suspected that infringement upon their independence—for example, major changes to stories they had written or refusing to publish certain stories altogether—was the result of editors and publishers acting in the interests of advertisers, or other influential “big people.” Thus they invoked conceptual schemes at the abstract level of journalism versus non-journalists to describe differences within the newsroom. Finally, I give examples of ways in which these oppositions are reproduced within individual journalists. Using the term *ego*, which I have appropriated from Eugene, the investigative reporter, I look at issues of power and control as pertains to the prototypical journalist role.

Professional Autonomy

In formulating its institutional roles, journalism draws much from the mythic history of the United States, in which journalists protectively uphold the rights of the individual. Popular media often romanticize journalists and journalism, identifying in the profession a profound individualism. In the public imagination, the profession of journalism is fraught with danger and excitement. As a community, journalists draw upon this knowledge in the construction of their identities. Journalism has a factual and folkloric history grounded in the same political, economic and militaristic activities that generated individualism as an American value. Publications from the Revolution era evidence a great deal of effort to distinguish the rights of the individual and the obligation of the state, and to distinguish the two, as when pamphleteer Thomas Paine, in what might be considered an early op-ed piece, wrote that “Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil” (2004[1776]:6).

Journalists regularly appear as the subjects of many fiction and non-fiction books and films. While many of these valorize the journalist, Christopher Hanson argues that in films of the 1990s, Hollywood stopped showing journalists as heroes as much as it once had, and instead examined the “rogue” journalist (1996). Matthew Ehrlich (2006) contends that these film portrayals of “bad journalists” who break rules have actually “helped shore up the press’s preferred self-image, either by seeing through lies and pretense to the truth or by paying the price for not telling the truth” (501). Ehrlich says that cultural studies and communication scholars have identified key myths of journalistic practice, including the “myth of the free press” (Bennett 2005) that makers of movies

about journalists find especially resonant. The “myth of the free press” rests on the ideals of good journalists who ‘look out for the common person,’ and keep a watchful eye on government and otherwise fulfill a constitutional mandate. Citing Barsamian 1992, Ehrlich says that although they are portrayed as flawed,

‘Bad’ journalist characters flout professional rules and niceties, but do their part in perpetuating [these] myths. They keep alive the nostalgic image of the journalist as a rugged, anti-authoritarian individualist who sticks up for the common man and woman rather than being a stenographer to power. (2006:2)

In my interviews, I found a pattern that fit this thinking. I present below a number of descriptions of journalism and journalistic values that I obtained from interviewees, in which the notion of a “little guy” or big guy” is important to the respondent’s conceptualization of journalism:

Example 1: Francesca, 38, Staff Writer at Alternative Newsweekly

JFG: [As a journalist,] how do you see yourself functioning in society?

Francesca: I guess fighting the good fight, just trying to give the little guy an even break, trying to piss off the big guys who have all the money. In my own little way trying to correct the essential injustices of the system I suppose. I feel that way whether I’m writing about music or about politics.

JFG: What sort of decisions as a writer do you make to fulfill that role?

Francesca: I could have gone to law school and had some high power suit and tie job, living in the suburbs with 2.5 children but for some reason that never appealed to me. I wanted a career that was going to be somehow creative, that was going to have a certain measure of freedom and creativity, whether that was through art or through journalism. To me there’s a fine line between art and journalism.

JFG: What's the difference between those two then, if any?

Francesca: I suppose there is. I suppose in the most reductive explanation, I suppose art is using a lie to tell the truth, and journalism is using the truth to expose lies – or essential untruths, falsehoods that pass for fact.

Example 2: Lou, 64, Columnist at Daily Metropolitan

JFG: What biases do you come to your work with?

Lou: I hate hypocrites. [Journalism is about] looking out for small guy. I love stories about [people] getting screwed over by the system. I also like doing columns about anti-smoking laws, gun control and political correctness.

Example 3: Amy, 31, Freelance Writer and Adjunct Journalism Instructor

JFG: What are some of the most important values of journalism?

Amy: ...to respect the people that you interview or that you're writing about. I think sometimes there are people who do not respect them and as a result they don't really listen to what they're saying. There's a big difference between hearing someone and listening to them. I think that sometimes there are reporters who want to get good quotes and don't really care about the feelings of the people and I think that they undermine it too.

Example 4: Simon, 31, Staff Writer, Police and Crime Reporter, Northwest Herald Post

Simon: Journalists want to be an essential part of their community.

JFG: Do you think that's emphasized more at some papers than others?

Simon: Probably at the smaller papers. Though sometimes, people call us when they want a phone number, which may seem idiotic, but at the same time we are the newspaper and on some deeper level people like that are calling the newspaper because they trust us, regardless of what it is and because there is that sense of community.

Example 5: Gina, 37, Freelance Investigative Reporter for Various Alternative Weeklies and Other Publications

JFG: So what are the most important values of journalism?

Gina: Well, when you're a reporter, doing what I'm doing, exposing wrongdoing in government, it's guaranteed that you're going to piss people off.

Big Guys and Little Guys

These interviews are representative of the attitudes that I encountered during my time in the field at the *Metropolitan Weekly*, though these excerpts come from interviews with many different types of journalists who made some mention of journalism's responsibility to the "community", usually in response to the question, "What are the most important values of journalism?" In the examples above, which include freelancers, columnists, weekly writers and a daily reporter, my informants conceptualize their audiences and subjects as "people getting screwed over," as individuals to be 'heard, not just listened to.' Some members of the public trust newspapers enough that they call them for phone numbers, an error that Simon found simultaneously ridiculous and endearing. In short, journalism is "giv[ing] the little guy an even break, trying to piss off the big guys who have all the money." The "big guys" are "government," "hypocrites," and "the system."

Journalists and Independence in the Newsroom

I found in my fieldwork and interviews these same mythic ideas of individualism and anti-authoritarianism to be recurring themes. Journalists must reconcile these

conceptions of identity with the contradiction that they are members of organizations, that these news organizations are privately owned in a market system in which the news is a commodity, and that news organizations are made up of hierarchies of management and labor, each level populated by individuals with a different relationship to the institution. Accordingly, reporters and editors have different desires and goals and see their work differently depending on their position within this organization. In talking to journalists, a group that included writers, freelancers, staff reporters, columnists and editors, I observed a relationship between discourses of individuality and autonomy and relationship to a journalistic organization.

At the paper at which I worked, an invisible line divided the newsroom into two parts whose boundaries were straddled by a room of uncertain provenance that contained the copiers and office supplies. One half of the newsroom belonged to editorial and the other to advertising. The paper's editor, who often invoked the metaphor of a "Great Wall" that separated editorial and advertising, made it clear that he considered advertising potentially toxic if permitted contact with the journalism. Money made the paper run, but this revenue model posed a threat to the credibility of the news it printed, even nestled as it was among ads for massages and escort services. The presence of the advertisers, or their necessity, was a source of constant low-level tension. I became familiar in passing with a few of the advertising people, but being of the editorial tribe and having few contacts on that side, I seldom crossed the line or even thought to do so. This wall could be breached, however. One specific case cited to me by an editor, which I describe here in nonspecific terms, was that of an enormous media conglomerate who

made threats of pulling a sizeable account any time the paper published an article it perceived to be unflattering to its public image. While the paper continued to print articles critical of this company, its editors did not do so often or with great enthusiasm. The informant who had mentioned this to me bore no small measure of resentment, to the point that he joked about writing an expose once he “no longer need[ed] this job.” Overall, the editor saw the decision not to cover the media company as a failure to adhere to basic journalistic principles, a decision publishers and senior editors had made after considering the exigencies of the situation and the likely economic consequences should they offend an advertiser.

Bourdieu would agree that the journalistic field is anything but independent of the economic and political entities that journalists are supposed to oversee. Despite the high degree of dependence that journalism has on advertising revenue and information management efforts (public relations), journalists tie much of their authority to their independence. Working in the newsroom, I encountered many such reminders that while ideally the journalist is beholden to no one, in practice this becomes more complicated. Journalists know that they are not free of the institutions in which they work or of the relationships they form with their subjects in their role as journalists. Nonetheless, the sense of identity that they derive from their training and the mythic history of journalism implants deep within their codes and institutions a powerful association of ethics with independence. The linkage between the two becomes clearer when it is understood as a refraction of the “big person, little person” dichotomy that is so prominent in that history.

A significant amount of the conflict that occurred between reporters and editors/publishers in my study had to do with what reporters thought should go to press versus what editors actually sent to press. As a general theme of my interviews, when an editor altered, displaced or cut a writer's article, writers often raised questions about editorial independence, seeing economic pressure as one likely source of interference. Take, for instance, Gina's account⁴ of how one of her stories, scheduled to be a cover story on a weekly, underwent demotion:

I did a cover story about brownfields in [a recently gentrified neighborhood], and the developer is a huge political contributor, and he also owns a ton of real estate there. He develops apartments, you know? The story was supposed to be on the cover, but just before it went to press, the editor took it off the cover and replaced with a caricature of [a local official]. I'm sure it's because [the paper] is full of real estate ads. [...] And the excuse they gave me was so dumb... they put an illustration on the cover of [the local official], a cartoon of her on the front. So my story ran on the inside, and the paper came out, and I didn't even know that was going to happen. I picked up the paper that morning, and I was like 'What? Where's my cover?' The excuse [that the editor] gave me was that they didn't have a good way to illustrate the brownfield story, that there was no [good] image to put on the cover. And I was just like, 'Be honest with me. Tell me you didn't because you were pressured. I'd have a lot more respect for you. Be honest. [The developer] came in here and threatened to pull his ads and you caved.' But that's not what he told me. Other than that, I would say generally that I can't think of anything.

As a necessary part of their work, news organizations and the individuals within them have social relationships to other organizations and the individuals within them. Editorial staff are not "supposed" to have dealings with advertisers regarding news content, but there are many open unofficial channels of communication between the two. Factcheckers and writers telegraph the intent of the publication in researching the story,

and anyone, including advertisers, is free to contact editors and complain or comment on the content of a story about them.

Amy, as a free-lancer and journalism instructor, was able to articulate these problems of journalism in a fairly conscious manner. In contemplating the limits of her own independence in writing journalistic articles, Amy points to the place of the publication in the broader socioeconomic scheme. Discussing a story she wrote about a church collapse, Amy said:

[M]ost of my writing is for a neighborhood paper, as I said, and I'm more or less expected to take the viewpoint of the neighbors. I live in the same region and I see my neighbors every day and I talk with my neighbors everyday. So it's more or less expected that I'm not going to [take sides against them]. For example, I doubt very much that the newspaper I write for out here would [allow] a piece that totally condemned a particular business because that would hurt their ad revenue. So certainly your audience and publication is going to determine what type of articles you're going to write, unfortunately. That's not to say that an article that condemns a particular business wouldn't have an audience somewhere else with some publication, it's just saying that it wouldn't be in the best interest of the paper to publish it. It's going to hurt their ad revenue. It's a shame—that's another thing you might want to ask in your interviews: How does advertising impact what is covered and what is not covered?

I have recounted two specific examples to illustrate a general pattern: Journalists who resent mightily infringements upon their authorial independence invoke the very ideological basis of journalism in condemning it. In other words, it is “unjournalistic” to not print a story that is critical if it is otherwise relevant, fair and accurate. In each case, the journalists' complaints had to do with the fact that the editors' or publishers' interests were more aligned with those of the big guy than with those of the organization, and by extension, the journalist.

The Journalist and the Ego

In my explanatory scheme, which draws on the concept of fractal recursivity, the connections between journalists' sense of self and the overall autonomy of the field are more tenuous than those between newsroom organization and the autonomy of journalism. Nonetheless, I found in my work evidence that journalists do conceptualize the individual in a way that relates to how they see the field. As I noted earlier, Irvine and Gal (2001) believe that when oppositional categories on one level become significant at the individual level, they tend to involve the "activities or roles associated with prototypical social persons" (2001:38). As I have suggested, a tension between involvement and non-involvement exists in newswork at the individual level that mirrors the conflicts over the judicious use of power seen in other domains. Below I use two examples of journalists working in the "objective" tradition to illustrate what I mean by roles of involvement and non-involvement.

Examples and Discussion

Over the years, Eugene has systematized his interview techniques by drawing on eclectic sources ranging from "eastern thought" to behavioral sciences such as psychology or criminology. Ego, as Eugene maintained, can lead journalists into error by leaving them unable to "hear" the truth underlying the accounts that sources provide when they answer journalists' questions. Eugene told me that as one remedy he recommended for his protégés a regimen of meditation and other mental practices to "cleanse" the mind prior to interviews. This, he said, was a psychological way of

conceptualizing the problem of separating facts from values. Eugene also used questioning and interview techniques he had picked up from psychology texts, police interrogators, private investigators and lawyers. At journalist conventions, Eugene regularly gives workshops on his methods:

I teach how to approach someone, to get them to talk to you, how to organize their brain so that information that is scattered about in there is accessible. And then I teach how to crack open that brain so they tell you what they know. So it isn't so much that I have a reputation that gets me in the door, it's what I know how to do. I can turn people into jelly.

Though he cited a number of psychology texts he had read to obtain this knowledge, he seemed to have no deep interest in the underlying theory, only the methods and the results they produced. The methods were quite powerful and the results were effective enough. Once, he said, he had even brought a woman he was interviewing to the brink of admitting to a series of nursing home murders. His techniques worked because they involved asserting dominance subtly:

You get people to talk about anything, and then you give them a simple task, and then you take them through things. You do this very politely, and there's a lot of putting people at ease. However, at the same moment that you're being put at ease, I am probably positioning you where I walk into the room in a manner and treat you in a manner in which I am taking control. But you don't know it.

Eugene, in particular, had a way of speaking about his role and behavior as an investigative journalist that was quite fractured and even oppositional. He prefaced his tutorial on effective interrogation and how to effectively drain a source of every bit of useful information with a homily on the dangers of the ego. This opposition of involvement and control versus non-involvement and abandonment of ego, a relationship

that was as much about power as the relationship between the “big guys” and “little guys” or the publishers and journalists.

In example two, Amy, who freelanced and taught journalism courses as her primary source of income, recounted an example of the way in which she considered herself autonomous by linking autonomy to nonpartisanship:

JFG: So how about your politics?

Amy: Uh huh huh huh [nervous laughter]

JFG: Oh, you look uncomfortable with that. Did you vote in the last presidential election?

Amy: Yes, and I absolutely voted against President Bush. My politics as of right now are extreme left. Left, left, left.

Like all of my other informants, Amy was able and willing to describe her values. She believed, however, that it was important to keep these values separate from her work.

I think that if you read my articles you wouldn't be able to tell that, and that's my goal unless it's an opinion piece. I'll give you an example. I had to write this article [about a] church [whose] steeple collapsed. And I did a follow-up article to that because [...] their insurance company denied their claim. I write for a neighborhood paper, so more often than not I would be expected to take the side of the neighbors, you know? If I were to take sides, which I don't.

Here, Amy has described a “typical” narrative that she felt obligated to honor, in which a group of “little people” face abuse from a larger, more powerful corporate entity. She has also acknowledged the watchdog role of the journalist, who is “expected” to take the side of the “little guy.” At the same time, Amy argues, journalists have a particular obligation to *report* facts, not analyze them.

Anyway, I had to get the information about people who were affected by this, [including] people in the congregation. I also had to talk to, of course,

the insurance company and a geologist who was able to talk to me about the stone and the wear and tear and all types of things. And I think that if you read my article, you would not be able to tell whose side I took. Most people would have assumed that [...] I would have taken the side of the congregation because how can this big, bad corporate machine reject the claim against these poor people, etc., etc. In fact, I felt the congregation didn't maintain the building. That was my personal feeling. But if you read the article you wouldn't be able to tell that. And that was my goal. I don't want to say it was a challenge to write so that you couldn't tell my opinion, but I was very conscious of the fact that my opinion, that I had a definite opinion about whose fault it was and whether or not the insurance company should pay. I had to very consciously not include that opinion in the way I structured the article. And it's not easy sometimes.

In each of these examples, objectivity serves as a strategy for journalists to achieve a balance between engagement and disengagement with audiences, sources, and publishers and editors. Eugene found it necessary to devise ways to prevent himself from contaminating the “truth” as he extracted it from his sources. In Amy’s account, she was subject to external pressures as well as her own personal sentiments to present stories in certain ways.

Conclusions

In attempting to make connections among social structures and institutions as well as social structures and individuals, I have drawn on the semiotic concept of fractal recursivity. An individualism that is core to both American mythology and American journalism informs the ways in which journalists see their work, profession, their subjects, and the constraints on their work. While the idea of a professional class seeking relief from excessive oversight is hardly limited to journalists in the United States, the

discourse that surrounds individualism in journalism draws its character from that larger national history.

I have focused attention on issues of agency, power and control, over self, work, and profession because these issues are obviously manifest in all three of the domains of individual, newsroom and profession that I have identified in this chapter. The ideologies of power present from the socialization of journalists, the training, daily interaction and even popular media that describe ‘what a journalist is supposed to be’ are detectable when those journalists are asked to represent themselves as individuals in their role of journalist. These ideologies call for the disengagement of journalism from other fields of influence, while simultaneously allowing a high degree of economic and political over the activities of journalists. Although the ideologies of ‘being a good journalist’ value disengagement, noninterference and independence, ultimately they also bolster heteronomy and interdependence.

NOTES

¹ Sociologists studying journalists have focused on the extent to which the organization limits the full extent of the autonomy of the individuals within the newsroom. The metaphor of newsroom as factory, whether intentional or not, is abundant in this literature. Some, such as Tuchman (1973), argue that newsrooms provide journalists a set of tools for dealing with unexpected occurrences and making their jobs more predictable so that they maintain greater control of outcomes in the face of unexpected or dangerous occurrences such as allegations of libel or a “bad” source who misinforms a journalist. If the goal of the newsroom is to produce news quickly, efficiently and with a high degree of quality and uniformity, news work, in Tuchman’s portrayal, has a somewhat Fordian character to it. Similarly, Soloski writes of professionalism and its various codes and conventions “as an efficient and economical method by which news organizations control the behavior of reporters and editors” (1997:139).

² Based on responses they received in 2002, Weaver et al. claim that journalists perceive four categories of limitation on their autonomy (2007:76):

1) Outside agents, usually sources, and even more specifically, government sources who stonewalled, restricted or withheld journalistic access to information

2) Journalistic ethics and other professional guidelines that journalists often view as necessary, not with resentment

3) Economic constraints, such as direct or indirect advertiser influence on news coverage

4) Organizational culture and other norms particular to a given news organization

Additionally, Weaver et al.'s findings indicate that differences in perceptions of autonomy are linked to the type of medium (print, television) and format (daily, weekly, magazine).

³ While the term “guy” may be gender specific, and if literally read, exclusionary and sexist, I do not intend to deploy it here in a sexist manner. Rather, after considering the awkwardness of the phrase “big person, little person,” I have decided to retain “guy,” both because it is the term several of my informants used and because it is more recognizable as a common saying that people use to make distinctions between privileged classes, people or entities and the masses, publics and less privileged individuals.

⁴ Although when I asked her how much autonomy she felt she had, her answer, which directly preceded the excerpted interview below, was, “Well, my experience has been a significant amount. The only—I have to tell you that there have been a couple of times I was writing an article [where I felt censored].” A much more complete account of her attitudes and beliefs about journalism as well as her description of formative experiences may be found in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

ALTERNATIVE MODELS

Introduction

Thus far I have examined journalism largely in terms of its “traditional” practices and ideologies of distinction and independence seeking. Journalism contains (and has throughout its history) many dissident voices and ongoing conversations about dominant normative beliefs about the nature of journalism and how it is supposed to function. In this chapter, I present selected interviews to illustrate the heterogeneity within models of “traditional journalism” that individual journalists draw upon in their work.

It should be noted here that the phrase “traditional journalism,” as its critics use it, carries an implicit charge of failure, stagnation, and irrelevancy, especially with regard to notions such as objectivity and noninvolvement (Rosen 1999). It is in short a term that, in the mouths of its critics, implies that change is desirable. Since the 1990s, a number of journalists have emerged to critique the perceived failures of traditional journalism and offer alternative models, not just of newsgathering and reporting but also of the very assumptions that what journalists do is to simply gather news and report it. One such idea, public journalism, is a concept that developed out of challenges to “traditional journalism” and its relationship with the public as well as its role in a democratic society. Rosen (1999), one of the best known and earliest proponents of public journalism, says that to speak of people as *citizens* means viewing them as potentially—and ideally—engaged in public life, taking up the obligations of discussing and solving

“social problems”. This last is a task to which traditional journalism is especially poorly suited, says Rosen, and so public journalists seek ways to connect the citizenry to political process. Often this entails overtly defining a social problem to be solved as well as direct interventions such as town hall meetings that involve citizens, government and the journalists themselves. In particular, public journalism seeks to allow “community voices” to emerge, whether by allowing residents to become guest columnists or establishing Internet message boards on which readers can engage in dialogue directly (Nip 2006).

According to Rosen (1999), a couple of examples of what would come to be called “public journalism” include the following:

- In the aftermath of a major round of regional job closings in the 1990s, the *Dayton [Ohio] Daily News* undertook and ran a series on proactive solution finding rather than coverage of the closing. This included examining changes to the local economy and resulted in the drafting of a 12-page report that the paper sent to government officials.
- In another departure from traditional journalism, the *Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk informed candidates for public office in 1994 that it would emphasize “a citizen’s agenda” (Rosen 1999:129) rather than the usual coverage of scandal and campaign strategy. The staff of the *Virginian-Pilot* compiled a list of “problems” that the state and the citizenry faced, told the candidates that it would like them to articulate position statements in response, and thereby openly set the news agenda in advance.

These instances of journalism differ in scale, scope and divergence from traditional journalism, but all of them do violate the norms of an autonomous journalism that “mirrors” society and prioritizes and rewards taking great efforts to stand apart from it.

While the public journalism movement of the 1990s enjoyed a measure of reformist enthusiasm on the part of its proponents, who included scholars and practitioners, it was also subject to a great deal of criticism and doubt. As Rosen (1999) argues, this fell into a few categories:

- Journalists have a hard enough task of playing the watchdog role without efforts to radically change their profession.
- Journalism-as-usual could benefit from some reform, but at its best, traditional journalism already does what public journalism prescribes with regard to an informed, engaged citizenry.
- Because the role of journalism includes acting against public sentiment, public journalism would leave journalists vulnerable to the whims of the mob.

As Nip notes, public journalism “has declined in momentum” (2006:212) in recent years, and has seen a sharp drop in funding as well as the dissolution or refocusing of organizations for which public journalism was a central interest. She attributes this somewhat to the appearance and availability of Internet media that brought with them the technological means to support public discourse, allow news users to “talk back” and to otherwise make their voices heard. This may have in part obviated the need for a special domain of journalism to address these deficiencies. More importantly, Nip argues,

mainstream journalists have accepted some of the tenets of public journalism, while rejecting certain forms of citizen engagement (Nip gives the example of a newspaper that decided to shut down its public Internet message board because of the low quality of the discourse that ensued).¹

The reabsorption of some of the aims of public journalism into mainstream journalism as well as the extant disagreements over “what journalists are for” (to paraphrase the title of Rosen’s [1999] text) may therefore manifest in the way journalists speak about their work, or in the differences among individuals in the way they talk about their work. What I found is that when asked to, journalists readily invoked their own sense of “traditional journalism”. They did so, however, in different ways that had much to do with their own position within the field. To evoke these differences, in this chapter I present interviews from three different practitioners from diverse positions within the field. The first, Eugene, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist and book author who has worked at a number of major daily newspapers. Being a recipient of its reward system, he has much invested in “traditional journalism” and of all of my informants probably personified most the “traditional journalist.” Even so, he expresses dissent at the notion of a “pure” objectivity. The second informant sketch presents Amy, a freelancer and adjunct university instructor who presents an alternative to Eugene’s version of journalism in many ways, but who also agrees with him in a few significant ways regarding the normative conditions of journalistic practice. The third conversation is with Elene, a journalist from the country of Georgia who worked in the United States under the auspices of a grant-making agency that promotes “Western journalism” in

developing countries and emerging democracies. For her, “traditional journalism” (or “American journalism”) is a corrective to a Georgian journalism caught between two poles of power, unfettered industry on the one hand and authoritarian state power on the other.

Eugene and Traditional Journalism

At a party back in the 1980s, Eugene and his wife were making conversation with a corporate public relations representative. When Eugene finally introduced himself, she started, exclaiming, “You’re Eugene? You’re such a jerk!” As it turned out, Eugene had once interviewed her for a story in a particularly brutal way. Eugene made frequent recourse to these sort of approaches, especially when dealing with corporate spokespersons whose job it was to keep an investigative reporter such as Eugene from doing his job. Eugene described this as stemming from a character trait that made him effective at his job, to a point. “In the old days, when I was a very young reporter, I used to speak to people in a fairly confrontational way,” Eugene said, “and I would get angry at people if they didn’t tell me what I wanted to know.” It was after this encounter that Eugene decided to temper his approach.

I was so abusive in my behavior toward her, and that was really telling to me. And then I started to study interviewing as well, which I had done for many decades and teach [interviewing] as well. What I learned and what I found is that the interviewer needs to be open to what they are hearing, to allowing the person an opportunity to speak, and to feel comfortable about speaking. Your confrontational tone and behavior isn’t the story as it is with Mike Wallace sometimes on TV.

The story is the story. And it may end up being a story that... upsets a lot of people (laughs). But that’s the results of what you’ve written, your

demeanor in talking to people is not the point, and that's what I've learned from those experiences. So I have since adapted that personality of mine.

For Eugene, investigative reporters have two basic personality types, aggressive and passive. Both of these can contribute to an effective journalism, provided that reporters learn to harness their personalities. While his approach is decidedly aggressive, Eugene held that either way, detachment was an overall more important goal for journalists. To that end, a passive reporter could do the job just as well as the aggressive reporter:

You might have somebody that is shy, well that personality can be adapted to reporting as well. That shy person can become a fly on the wall that doesn't disrupt the scene, but take it in beautifully.

Eugene became successful in his field by learning to be more slyly aggressive, to use the power of suggestion on his interviewees or manipulate people rather than bully them. He “studied psychology as a bit of hobby” and read authors such Eckhart Tolle, an author of texts in the “spirituality/personal growth” genre whose bestselling book *The Power of Now* (1999) advises readers who would realize their own potential to discard the “ego” and the “analytical mind.” Fragments of Tolle's ideas and words surface frequently in conversations with Eugene, and he has made them a significant part of his occupational practice, incorporating them into his methods of interviewing as well as the workshops he leads at annual conferences on investigative reporting. At these, he advises attendees to walk into interviews “without assumptions” and to “cleanse” themselves of ego and opinions through meditation:

You don't just have opinions, you have an ego, which is a primitive device that was installed in your psyche about a billion years ago to warn you to run from tigers. It's a stupid device, and so you use meditation, which is

basically a process of having no thought in order to cleanse yourself of your ego, and so you interview cleansed of your ego. An ego can do all kinds of things, it can cause you to worry about your next question, well you get away from that by having one word hints on a piece of paper to remind you of your next question, and you can write other one word hints on that piece of paper to remind yourself of the following question. Your ego might ask you “are you impressive enough?” and so you always either act angry, or you’ll act like a big shot rather than listen.

Over the course of his career, Eugene has secured a position in the field as a highly respected investigative reporter. Having worked at a number of major newspapers, Eugene currently directs much of his current paper’s investigative activities. His sense of the importance of these accomplishments is evident when he discusses his job; having been the recipient of two Pulitzer Prizes, he often referred to events as occurring relative to his winning either his “first” or “second Pulitzer.” The stock Eugene places in these accolades serves to conform for Eugene the importance of his vocation as well as his own importance within the field. Such notions form no small part of Eugene’s definition of the purpose of journalism, which he sees as being the pursuit of an entire, unembellished, but entertaining story. Describing the act of reporting as “triaging” and “gatekeeping,” Eugene portrayed the journalist as a practitioner with authority to proactively shape public discourse. On what it means to be a journalist, he said:

We glean important information, the stuff people need to know, but what if nobody reads it? You know, is a story-- is a tree meaningful if it falls in a forest and nobody hears it? [chuckles] I learned to go back to what I was originally when I came into reporting, a writer.

In short, Eugene practiced journalism confidently, secure in the knowledge that he was privy to privileged methods and information and vested with requisite amounts of a

quality he called “news judgment” that was necessary to deciding how to report the news. He also had, to put it in terms Eugene himself used, quite a substantial ego regarding his abilities and accolades. Eugene claimed a certain form of awareness of this ego, though he saw it mostly as a possible impediment to doing his job, and used techniques to control the ego that he cobbled together from popular psychology, police interrogation methods and other sources. As described in the chapter on autonomy, Eugene described his methods as effective to the point that they had once elicited from a source a confession of murder.

Although he did not use the term “science,” Eugene saw interviewing as a form of forensics; reporting was the pursuit of “truth” but also a methodical effort to reconstruct into meaningful patterns facts and memories that had degraded over time.

I teach how to take over a conversation as you walk in. But I do that at the same moment which you’re having a nice easy conversation, and then I’m taking you chronologically through events, and [listening] to the logic.... [T]his works in certain ways by asking certain kinds of questions in certain sequences, taking you through chronologies to extract things and also to discover holes.

And, ultimately I’m going to set things up so I’m going to re-interview you if possible.... In that second interview, ... I’ve analyzed all the information. This is very, very complex, I teach it in about a sixty-minute session called “Loosening lips” but I don’t have time here to take you through it, though I’ve given you a kind of an idea. It involves things like taking people back in time and having them remember what they were feeling like that day.

Of all of my interviewees and informants, Eugene was probably the least reluctant to use the term “objectivity” to describe what he thought of as good journalism. He maintained that the highest value of journalism was “truth,” of which objectivity was a lesser part. Here again, his conception of journalistic method veered strangely close to a

somewhat 19th century version of the scientific conception of objectivity (Daston and Galison 2007), as when he spoke of the journalist's responsibility to investigate all manifestations of the truth in the chapter on objectivity.

Objectivity is simply a way of getting at [the truth]. But you could fail to get at the truth and be completely objective. Let me try to give an example here, say Joe Blow is a crook and he stole \$10,000. Well, the truth is that Joe stole \$100,000, and we failed to get at that. You were completely objective in finding out that he stole \$10,000 dollars, you didn't go in there wanting to prove him a crook, you listened to him, and all of the reasons, he said, you get all the material, you were very, very careful, he's the one who eventually admitted he stole \$10,000, he admitted it, and the evidence was all there, but you didn't find out that he really stole \$100,000.

Like most journalists, Eugene was never trained in any of the sciences nor particularly influenced by scientific training in learning to be a journalist. Yet his practice of journalism, also like that of most other journalists, approaches a mimesis of science in a number of ways: the methodical gathering of information, the emphasis on the context of facts and the detachment of the observer, all ideas that had become established in journalism by the beginning of the 20th century with the professionalization of the vocation and emergence of training sites and standardized curricula.

Amy

Amy is in her early 30s, and works as a grad student, adjunct university instructor and freelance journalist for a few small neighborhood publications. I first came to know Amy as a co-worker. She taught introductory courses on news writing and we would trade stories about classroom experiences and seek each other's advice on things such as

teaching strategies and syllabus writing. Eventually, I asked her to participate in my project. I found that Amy was far more of a skeptic of objectivity than journalists such as Eugene or Lou, both of whom were decades older than Amy and had fulltime jobs at large daily newspapers.

Unlike Eugene, who is firmly established as a member of a journalistic organization and had to some extent internalized its values, Amy is a freelancer. Her attitude toward journalistic values differs from the salaried journalists that I interviewed in that Amy emphasized “respect for the people involved with the story.” This is not to say that other journalists saw respect as inconsequential methodologically or ethically, but no one else in my project foregrounded this as an important journalistic value. One important piece of contextual biographical information here is that Amy was also trained as a historian in a graduate program, where her focus was on the taking of oral histories. She had therefore learned some the values that she associated with information gathering and knowledge work in academia, not the newsroom. Because Amy is an adjunct instructor of introductory newswriting classes, part of her job entails her ability to reproduce and articulate in a university setting a set of “standard” journalistic values that she communicates to students seeking to enter the journalistic field.

The level of doubt that Amy expresses regarding journalism’s efficacy as a tool of reform is not inconsistent with the attitudes that other journalists in my project held. This follows the “warning not to get involved” that many journalists encounter as a part of their socialization. Amy concludes that while a proliferation of information to the point of overproduction has occurred, this actually serves to create some measure of job

security for “traditional journalists,” who have the training and resources to provide a third party perspective on all of this. Journalists have a “legitimate” viewpoint because of their training and detachment that other sources of information lack.

Below I present the conversation with Amy as a series of edited transcripts of our conversations about journalistic values, biases, and the role of media and the Internet in journalism.

On Occupational Values

JFG: As far as you’re concerned, what are the most important values of journalism?

Amy: Um... integrity.

JFG: What is that?

Amy: You have to get people who are honest and they’re going to check facts and call people and not fabricate things. I mean, I had people in my master’s degree program who were like fabricating stuff left and right and it was really [worrisome].

JFG: How does that make you feel, knowing that many people are making stuff up?

Amy: Well, I just have to hope that it will catch up with them some day. But how does it make me feel? It totally undermines everything that honest people are working for people who want to do well and respect the field and that type of thing. You know you’re going to find people like that in any profession, people who want to cut corners just to get it done, so journalism isn’t an exception. It is more or less a historical record

and you have to respect the past enough or respect the events enough to document them correctly, you know.

JFG: Did you ever see *Shattered Glass*?

Amy: No, but I sometimes have my students look up the great plagiarizers of our time. I stopped doing that though because I want them to focus on the people who do it well, not on the people who have managed to dupe the system.

JFG: So what are some other values?

Amy: I think integrity is the best one, but a lot of [values] comes from respect for others, so I think integrity first, integrity for the work and representing information or writing information accurately. The second thing is to respect the people that you interview or that you're writing about. I think sometimes there are people who do not [...] them and as a result they don't really listen to what they're saying. There's a big difference between hearing someone and listening to them.

I think that sometimes there are reporters who want to get good quotes and don't really care about the feelings of the people, and I think that they undermine it too.

JFG: Why should they care about feelings?

Amy: Why should they care about feelings? Because there's a big difference between listening and hearing. If you hear someone, you just merely hear what they say, but if you listen to someone, it means that you actually are comprehending what they say, and you are trying to understand where they're coming from. The greatest compliment I've ever gotten has been about people or places that I've profiled where I've had people call and say "You really got it, you really understood what I was saying. Other people

have written about me before and they didn't get it, but you did." That meant to me that I'm actually listening. Not only hearing, but I'm listening to what they're saying. Does that make sense?

JFG: Sure. It means you understand the context.

Amy: Let me put it another way. My grandmother tells this story about... my grandmother met my grandfather on a blind date. And my grandmother would tell this story about how she was looking for him to arrive the day of their date. In order to understand that, to us today, we meet someone online and go out on a lot of blind dates, but you need to put it back in that context in 1929... so you need to put that in the context of the young woman who is looking out the window of her dead end street for this man to show up that she's been eagerly anticipating meeting over months because her friends have talked so highly about him. And then as he's getting out of the car, she turns to her mother and says, "Oh, we're really going to have fun tonight because he has his white flannels on." Any person who doesn't really care about this story would be like "oh, he was wearing white flannel pants." But someone who really wants to understand what my grandmother meant by that would say, "what does that mean, that he was wearing white flannel pants." You see, because what she told me is that was what people wore when they got really dressed up in those days. So it illustrates that not only was she so excited that he would get so dressed up for her, but he thought enough to dress up for this date. So can you imagine how exciting that must have been to see that—no, you can't; you're a guy—but to me as a woman, there's [significance to that]. I asked my grandmother, "well what does that mean?" and she said, "oh, he was really dressed up." so that adds

another dimension to this story, and if I hadn't ever asked that I wouldn't be able to put myself in her shoes more and understand what sort of significance that had. If I was just there to get a good quote, I would have just stopped with the flannels.

JFG: I'm trying to figure out whether I passed or failed the test so far.

Amy: People need to be detail oriented and they need to get those types of details and they need to know to ask about them. I have some students who miss things like that and then the interview's over and sometimes they can't go back and get them. It really depends on... integrity, certainly. What was the second one I said? Respect for the people involved with the story.

JFG: So does that include listening and things like that?

Amy: Oh absolutely. I think it goes back to respect. If you don't have a basic respect, you'll never get it. But also, skill [is a second value]. People need to be detail oriented, and they need to have really good observation skills.

On Occupational Biases

JFG: So I'm going to ask you this next question: What biases do you come to your work with?

Amy: What I would do with that question is maybe say "What sort of biases do journalists work against..."

JFG: But I want to know about you.

Amy: Biases? Well, this does go back to the objectivity thing because everyone is biased. There's no way to get around it because it has so much to do with upbringing and

social perspective even what part of the country you were raised in, what religion you are, family structure, siblings, everything you've experienced, including when you become a journalist. All of that affects how objective you can be, and you're going to create certain biases. Biases are actually categories—you mean, what biases do I know I have?

JFG: You can talk about categories or perhaps examples of how you approach writing?

Amy: Yeah... well, I always tell my students that if you want to learn how to write well, one thing you need to do is be aware of your biases, know what your prejudices are. I think once you know what your prejudices are, that's sort of the first step to working against them, making sure that you don't give into them.

JFG: [One example is how you don't like the South.]

Amy: Yeah, we can talk about the South, but I was going to talk about my family, for example. For example, I trust women much more than men. I've been looking for a mentor for my writing and my photography and that type of thing. I sort of befriended a person in the neighborhood here who used to teach photography at pretty impressive institution and I've been talking to him about the field. I would rather have a male boss than a female boss. That has to do with my family. It's not that there aren't good women out there or that they're not as talented or any of that. It's that my personal experience has been that so traumatizing--by the fact that my mother sort of walked out on my family that it causes me to really question... when it comes to criticism, I would rather

pick a man because I feel they're more trustworthy. So that's an example of one. Does that make sense?

JFG: Yes. But would that affect your writing?

Amy: No, no, no. I don't think so. No. It affects my preferences as far the workplace, but as far as writing a story, if there were a man and woman there I would certainly try to interview both of them. I wouldn't just say, "I'm going to interview just the man." It doesn't operate on that type of level. I think it depends too on what level these sort of biases operate on. Like when I'm going to go to someone I trust to give me advice, I think that's a very different level. If I'm going to go to someone to give me advice on my career, that's a very different situation than just interviewing someone for a story. [...] And so for example we were talking about the South. Again, another example of my family is that pretty much the only exposure I've had to the South—you'll want to check the time on this one to go back to it—the only interaction I've had were with my first cousins, who were raised in an [small town]. They are the most fake, two-faced people I've ever met. So because they're my only contact with that region that I've ever had, then somehow it sort of shades how people from that region must be. Now, I know that it's not all true. But at the same time it sort of colors and shades how I see things because of that being such a negative experience and that being the only interaction that I've had.

JFG: You mention issues of class and ethnicity that I don't think you mentioned before. [What about those?]

Amy: I was raised in a very vanilla type of environment. It was just all white people. There were maybe two African-American students in my school. So now... I really don't... there are certain ethnicities I understand better than others just through exposure but I don't think that I have any ethnic or racial type bias. I think there are good people and bad people in every race and ethnicity and every societal strata, and I don't think that it has to do with race. I think a lot of it has to do with economic opportunity or lack thereof. I'm trying to think of where I was... social classes... and if I had an issue with a social class, it would be with the upper classes. I believe people who are more elitist are just pulling the shades over their eyes when it comes to the inequities in our society. But—with that said, I still interview them, I still ... them. It wouldn't prevent me from writing an article and being objective as possible. Does that help at all? Is that what you're looking for? [laughs] You had to bring up the South...

JFG: So in journalism, what sort of biases are appropriate?

Amy: What sort of biases are appropriate? Well... I don't know that biases are ever appropriate. Maybe a better way to put it is which ones are workable. Some biases... if I were a journalist with, for whatever reason, I had a racial problem—I already said I don't, but let's say I did—and that impacted my ability to communicate with people of a particular race, that would prevent me or hamper my ability to be a journalist, but since I don't have that, it's okay. I think it really just depends on the level of it and whether or not a person can work through it or how they can work around it. It depends of the degree and also the type.

JFG: One of the things I had in mind when I wrote this question was that in traditional journalism you have things like muckraking and New Journalism and other sorts of journalism that do take up a perspective on things that is identifiable as “progressive”. I’m not really asking whether those are appropriate, but...

Amy: Well, I think anything that betters society is appropriate as far as subjects. But I feel like I’m not really answering your question...

JFG: I’ll rephrase. To what degree is an activist journalism appropriate? An activist journalism that works to “better society” rather than just reporting on things or taking snapshots?

Amy: Actually, there’s a lot of warning not to get involved. In fact some people [journalists] aren’t even registered for political party for that reason.

JFG: Are you?

Amy: I am, yes. But, I don’t belong to the civic association locally because I am a journalist and if I had to cover that association I feel it would be a conflict of interest. So same thing. One time I went to interview a restaurant owner and he kept asking me if I wanted food, but that wasn’t the reason I was there. And it was very kind for him to offer, but I believe it was a conflict of interest to accept food from him. I mean, it wasn’t a bad article, it wasn’t a [...] or anything like that. It was a conflict of interest to accept free sort of things from him.

JFG: So you try to avoid any kind of involvement?

Amy: Yeah. I think basically “activist journalism” as you wanted to put it, I think... the thing about journalism is... there’s only a limit to what journalists can do.

It's up to the people to really react and respond. Someone could write—and things have been written about global warming and things like that and certainly global warming is an issue we're looking at. It's a severe problem. I don't care who you are. But nothing is going to be done about it. The most brilliant writer could tackle it. But unless people in a society do something about it doesn't matter who's writing about it. People have to believe that it's a problem. So maybe that's a bad example, but does that sound okay?

JFG: Let me give you an example of what I consider activist journalism. The *New Yorker* has an identifiably political perspective. Not as much as *Harper's* or *Mother Jones*, but...

Amy: When you look at that though, you're looking at niche publications where people who are interested in the sort of activist stances in *Mother Jones*—I think that magazine is brilliant—but not everybody is going to subscribe to it. And by subscribe, I mean subscribe to that type of ideology. For example, trying to think about what other articles... the one for example that I read years ago were about flowers, roses from South America and people who had to harvest them for the American market were becoming ill and having all these reproductive problems because they were exposed to all these pesticides and they didn't have the proper protective gear. Well, someone like me I find that really horrifying. But someone you know a lot of people don't care about those things or what happens in South America and how their need for a rose for their sweetheart for Valentine's Day is affecting someone who is thousands of miles away from them. So you have to get someone with a certain mentality or a certain belief system to take an interest in some of those stories.

JFG: So—it's not inappropriate, it's just... ineffective in terms of effecting large-scale change?

Amy: No, I think it depends. I think the issue of society is that no one is motivating anyone to do anything. Okay, so there were rallies in Washington over the weekend because it was the fifth anniversary of the war. There were rallies but still it was only I think 20,000 people. I mean that's a lot, but it's not a million. Let's face it, okay. So I think our society is such right now that it's going to take a lot to motivate them to get up and do anything about it. People right now in our economic times are comfortable and they don't see anything that needs to change much. So unless people lose their beachfront properties to rising water levels, that type of thing, unless they actually see things then that's when they react. And even that is, you know. So it's not ineffective. I'll put it this way—it doesn't reach the number of people that are needed initially. Maybe these types of alternative publications plant the seed that eventually leads to something, but I have yet to see anything in my adult lifetime that has really done anything. Journalism changing the face of the world—it hasn't happened. I don't think journalism will change the world, not until people become more desperate economically. Just my opinion.

On the role of media and Internet

JFG: We've [discussed] the goals of the news media, but do the media do their jobs?

Amy: I think that they do more than their job. The market is so saturated that it's too much and as a result people can't be focused on things that are important. They're more focused on Britney Spears shaving her head or Anna Nicole Smith collapsing in a hotel room. I mean, it's interesting to see how celebrities live, don't get me wrong, or don't live, or don't live as the case maybe. What should be important to society is the fact that children in [in this city] cannot get a proper education, do not get a proper education. What should be important is that our sidewalks are not clear and therefore people can hurt themselves. What should be important to us is that our environment is changing and we're not doing enough to stop it or to prevent further problems. Those are the things that should be important but because there's this super saturation of media people can filter to such an extreme that they never caught sight of what's important. For example, with my journalism students the first day of class, asked them how many were aware that eating more than one serving of red meat a day doubles women's chances of getting breast cancer. You know in my class of twenty, one hand went up. One hand. Who doesn't know a woman? So why is it that information that is important to pretty much everyone in the world, especially in the United States where we're big meat eaters, how come that information was not available? How come that information did not get to the people who need it? That's a problem. Because of the Internet and because of supersaturation of information publishing these sorts of stories that don't really matter, it's just for entertainment, it's all purely entertainment.

JFG: So to what degree do you think that the revenue model creates this problem with the advertising that you just mentioned?

Amy: I have to think about that one, Jay. I'm sorry I don't know whether I can give you an answer. I'll have to get back to you about that. I don't want to blame it entirely on the revenue structure. It's also technology, too, and the development of "I want it now; I want the information I want." That also comes from consumerism... I could almost entirely blame consumerism, but I'd need to think about that.

JFG: And you actually anticipated my next question: What do you think the Internet has done to the news values that you've cited?

Amy: Integrity and respect? Certainly, in some ways, it's made information gathering easier. I often think about that. There was this one story where I had to find this woman's phone number and I found the phone number but I wanted to confirm it was her, so I hopped online to the [city] website and check the property assessments to make sure it was the same person and it was. If I hadn't had the Internet as a tool for research it would have taken me days longer. I would have had to go to city hall and get the property record and confirm that it was the right person, or just start calling and hope it was the right place, which can be embarrassing if you don't get the right number. So I think it's made in terms of research and availability of information in most cases it's made it easier. However, there's very much a... you remember when 9/11 happened everyone was trying to get on CNN, so much so that it was clogging the system. People are used to getting the information, getting the news as it happens. Well, when you get news as it happens, you can't check facts. Look at the Dan Rather thing where he basically ran a story that wasn't confirmed. That's where you get a problem like that. Dan Rather ran a story, I can't remember it was something with Bush's National Guard

thing, I can't remember, and he didn't confirm the information. But in all honesty though, nobody who's reading is confirming the information, which is a problem. That's the way it's going. It's certainly affecting integrity.

JFG: It's affected the news cycle

Amy: It's affected the news cycle, but it's also affected the respect factor, too, because if you aren't careful you run the risk of publishing false information.

JFG: And the other side is that if you don't publish...

Amy: You get scooped, yeah.

JFG: [I think that] some of the best coverage of developing stuff has been on Wikipedia, of all places. Not just the typical article full of mistakes, though it's probably comparable to *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Amy: Bloggers are more or less replacing talking over the garden fences or to speak. So many people are blogging, who in the heck is reading all these blogs? I mean yeah, I'll start a blog, but who's going to care about my day? "I don't really have anything to say... I, uh, walked down to the coffee shop, talked with Jay, picked up [my friend's kid], went to the store with him, made him dinner, put him to bed." What is in it that is worth blogging about? I don't know.

JFG: Well, some bloggers build audiences.

Amy: It's just that there's so many of them.

JFG: I've asked other journalists about this, [the extent to which] bloggers might replace them. Lot of uncertainty. Fear and loathing, too.

Amy: Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, I think the thing is about the field and this is exactly what I told my students last week: the field isn't disappearing, it's just shifting. I think there will always be a place for some print media. Maybe not as much as we had. There will always be a place for talk radio, for all these things. But instead of having copy editors sit at the [*New York Times*], they're going to be sitting at Yahoo!. Or they're going to be remote somewhere, copyediting things by telecommuting. I think the demand has [actually] increased. That's sort of my guess. It takes a lot of people to document every minute of the day. So demand is increasing, but not in the print media jobs. I hope that's helpful.

Discussion

It is to be expected that a journalist such as Amy would have a different position toward traditional journalism than would someone such as Eugene. Eugene, a senior practitioner of his craft, a recipient of awards, author of texts and speaker at conferences, has been well rewarded and publically recognized for his practice of a journalism that is resonant with prevailing "traditional" beliefs in "what journalists are for." That is, Eugene pursues a journalism that is a search for "truth" and "in the public interest." He upholds the ideologies of "traditional journalism" such as independence. From his high-status position within the field, Eugene practices journalism for journalism's sake.

Amy is much more of an outsider. She is at best a freelancer and has never written for any major newspaper. As a university instructor of introductory journalism courses, she is an adjunct, which like the position of freelancer, confers less than full

membership in the institution that its labor benefits. From this position, Amy emphasizes different journalistic functions than Eugene. Where Eugene speaks of responsibilities to the public that take precedence over any regard for the journalistic source, Amy emphasizes the relationship of journalist to informant. Where Eugene describes the need to control ego and the ability to “turn people to jelly” in order to obtain information, Amy speaks of listening versus hearing. It would be simplistic, however, to attribute this dissimilarity to differences in employment status. Amy, an intermittent graduate student, was trained in the methods and perspectives of the academic historian, which colored her approach to newswork. She was, for instance, probably one of the only people I interviewed who was familiar with the principle of informed consent. Amy had less invested in the idea of “traditional journalism” than Eugene and was somewhat more at liberty (or more willing) to bring to her practice of journalism ideas that did not entirely originate within journalistic institutions.

But Amy also made her living, at the time I interviewed her, by teaching (or socializing) journalism students, and was therefore conscious that she was transmitting a body (or tradition) of journalistic norms, values and beliefs to future journalists. When she refers to values such as “integrity” or the “skill of observation,” she is likely drawing from this frame as she frequently invokes classroom experience to illustrate various points. Most of all, her reluctance to join civic associations and desire to remain to a significant degree an impartial observer places her well within the sphere of “traditional journalism”. In her final analysis, journalism reports on society and reflects it, but is

basically powerless to help create real social change of the sort Rosen and company envision.

Elene: Democracy and the “Free Press”

While Pedelty (1995) finds that many Latin American journalists have strong objections to the American mode of “traditional” reporting, a broader American model of journalism (as well as the social and economic circumstances that produce it) proves attractive to many international journalists, especially those who look to the United States and see fewer governmental and even advertiser constraints on journalists. It is not difficult to understand why journalists in countries whose governments have direct control of news media would find desirable the prospect of greater autonomy. This, however, must be considered alongside the fact that Western governments and private institutions actively promote a vision of journalism through exchange programs, grant-making foundations, and international aid programs. The models of journalism that these groups promote, especially those with ties to the United States, emphasize independence from government with participation in a free market as an alternative to government funding.

Elene is a young journalist from the country of Georgia working in the United States on one such grant (though it was not government funded). On the afternoon that we met at a coffee shop, she was preparing to return home after six months in the United States. As part of a fellowship program that brings journalists from “developing nations” to work in American newsrooms, she had been working as a reporter at the *Northwest*

Herald-Post. Her life that has spanned the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, a civil war and the reemergence of an independent Georgian state, and the 2003 Rose Revolution that resulted in the deposition of the existing government following allegations of rigged elections.

Journalists in Georgia tend to be quite young and have little professional experience. Elene estimated that on average her colleagues are in their early 20s and have either just finished a university education or are working their way through school. Few talented or experienced individuals elect to work as journalists for very long. “People can’t afford to stay in journalism,” says Elene, whose family responsibilities include a young daughter. “When I arrived here, I was amazed to find people who had been journalists 10, 15 years!”

Since the demise of the USSR in the early 1990s, Elene said, laws and reforms have granted the Georgian press unprecedented liberties, but journalism still has an uncertain role in public life. Elene linked many of the inadequacies of Georgian journalism to the considerable degree of economic uncertainty in Georgia. According to Elene, she and most other Georgian reporters make the equivalent of US\$100 a month. Shaking her head and smiling, she added, “I should have gotten a different degree and gone into a different field.”

Often, Georgian reporters do not work as salaried staff but are paid per story. Eager to write enough stories to achieve a livable income, many reporters end up writing articles that are little more than thinly veiled press releases for private business interests, especially in rural areas. “In Georgia, you are not free of advertisers,” Elene said,

describing a lack of independence as one of the biggest problems with the Georgian press. She made a chopping motion with her hand. “At the *Herald-Post*, I know nothing about the advertisers. In the U.S., the two are very separate.” She paused a moment, and added, “Though I hear this is not always the case, especially at smaller papers.”

As I have mentioned, the separation of advertising and editorial is a key value of American journalism, one that nearly every editor I spoke to mentioned at some point. In earlier chapters, I described this segregation as a fairly porous wall, owing to the fact that the American “free press” model in fact depends upon advertising for its survival. Georgian reformers make note of this in plotting the future direction of their country’s media. For example, Bassa Janikashvili, of Radio Utsnobi, argues that the embrace of free market values is a means to liberate the media from governmental influence. Speaking as a member of a panel study group assembled by IREX², a U.S.-funded international nonprofit organization, Janikashvili said, “Unfortunately, the media is still not a business in Georgia. The majority of media does not depend on advertising revenue. Some continue to think that media is for managing people and not for making money” (International Research & Exchanges Board 2006).

Elene elaborates on this last point about media “managing people” early in the interview, telling me that the 2003 popular revolution “happened because of media. After the revolution, the new government realized the role of media” and pursued much the same policies toward journalists as the old, ostensibly less democratic government. The Georgian government and its supporters use a variety of legal, semi-legal and illegal tactics, many of them economic and some that are more direct, to exert influence over

news media. Through supporters, the government maintains a stable of loyalist media, for example, leading television station, Rustavi-2. State-sanctioned or condoned violence against other news media occurs fairly often, as with recent instances of police harassment of reporters covering protests and a grenade attack against an editor at a leading oppositional newspaper.

Elene herself was the target of what she described as a case of intimidation that was “not serious.” She had been writing a story about torture that, though it did not involve much investigative reporting, had required inquiries that brought her story to the attention of someone in a particular government ministry. Out in public one day, a man approached Elene and introduced himself as an old college acquaintance. “Don’t you remember me?” he asked, and offered to buy her coffee. In conversation, the man abruptly raised the subject of the story she was writing, and warned her not to name anyone from the ministry in her story.

This was the latter part of an answer to a question I had asked Elene, “What prevents you from writing a good story?” Threats or intimidation were less of a worry for Elene than the lack of resources required to perform the quality investigative journalism that she described as “good journalism.” As she had pointed out earlier, she said, Georgian journalists must write as much as possible to make a living wage. Newspapers do not have money for long investigations, and reporters do not have the time.

In the years since independence, a “free press” in the Western mold has slowly emerged as an alternative to state-run media. Elene has many of the same concerns about

autonomy and independence that I outlined in Chapter 4. One result of the development of Georgia and other “new democracies” into potential media markets has been the increased interest of investors abroad. Another has been the rise of Georgian oligarchs who suddenly found themselves with a great deal of political influence. One such media magnate, Badri Patarkatsishvili, owned Georgian news company Imedi Media Holding. Patarkatsishvili was supportive of the 2003 Rose Revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power, but in recent years, Imedi has become an oppositional media outlet. Widespread anti-government protests in November 2007 resulted in a state of emergency order by the government, which included a 15-day ban on independent broadcasts and street demonstrations. Imedi television was one of the outlets targeted by the shutdown. As security forces entered the premises to enforce the government order, Imedi newscaster Giorgi Targamadze sat at his desk and calmly described the closure as it unfolded, right up until the cameras were turned off:

Targamadze: We hope that we are watched not only in Georgia, but also in the embassies. Here in the building is the president of Imedi, Lewis Robertson, who has been captured by the police forces. Also, there is a search on the third floor, and all employees on the ground floor are lying with their faces down. I don't know what is going on outside. I don't know what is going on in the control room. Is anybody hearing me? We are in a very difficult situation. We were not warned that police were coming into the building. By closing the channel the government is violating the constitution. That means that this is a dictatorship regime. I address to all embassies to protect the citizens. Here they are coming into the studio. I hear shouts in the control room.³

Targamadze: So far we are still on the air, but our guests have arrived. Goodbye, and don't worry. Everything will be all right.

Unidentified voice: Turn it off!

Targamadze: It's off. We are not on the air anymore.⁴

The government ended up suspending Imedi's broadcast license for three months, but despite the media shutdown, one of Targamadze's largest audiences for that last broadcast turned out to be the global online community. A clip of the news caster's last few moments on the air was posted to YouTube by the English language Russian news organization RussiaToday. As word of the video spread through links on discussion boards, the comments it elicited from this largely Western audience on the Internet reflected a general consensus that Targamadze had acted bravely in the defense of core journalistic ideals.

A coda to this tale that seems to reflect to some degree the debate over journalistic autonomy for Elene and other Georgians is that in October Patarkatsishvili sold a controlling interest in Imedi to a Western media corporation, Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp, owner of conservative-leaning United States based Fox News Network. At a conference to announce the deal, NewsCorp Europe executive F. Lewis Robertson announced that Imedi would continue to be independent of the government. Of pro-government reporting, he said, "[T]hat is not the business that we are in. We are not in that business in the United States with Fox News channel or with our own news station in America," he said. "Fox News channel has a saying: 'We report and you decide.' And I think that is really appropriate here in Georgia" (Corso 2007).

Individuals in a Journalistic Field

The positions of each of these three agents to the field of journalism is markedly different and so in turn is their understanding of the purposes, methods and goals of

journalism. By most measurements, Eugene is the most well established and successful of the three. While not an editor, he leads a team of investigative reporters, and so he has stability, status and seniority in his work. Asked to explain “what journalism is for,” Eugene supplies an answer that reproduces most faithfully the notions of mirroring society and questioning the behavior of its structures of power—though seldom the structures themselves—that lie at the heart of journalistic independence and autonomy. Amy, whose position is more tenuous, less anchored in the field of journalism, gave an answer that differed from the idea that journalism owes its allegiance only to the public. Elene, who wants greater autonomy from the state and from advertisers, sees both as free-for-all meddlers in Georgia’s nascent journalistic enterprise. She seeks a solution, as do other media workers in her country, by turning to the West and particularly the United States for a viable model that can survive the transition to democracy. Alternatives, such as the state of news media in post-Soviet Russia, loom just over the border.

I have argued from field theory that journalistic speech and behavior are a means by which journalists maintain distinction between themselves and others. Moreover, these processes of differentiation extend from interfield differences to differences within the field, so that individuals reproduce journalistic values in different ways, according to their position within the field. Obvious examples immediately present themselves; alternative newsweeklies have an institutional history, audience and market niche that differs from those of the daily newspaper. Accordingly their “voices,” while recognizably journalistic, diverge from one another significantly in terms of style, format and perspectives on political neutrality and objectivity. Likewise, the writers and

reporters who staff each kind of publication bring their positionalities to their practice of journalism.

NOTES

¹ The rise of Internet-based forms of audience participation along with the partially successes of public journalism requires distinction among different models of audience participation with journalism, argues Nip, who offers the following typology: 1) traditional journalism versus 2) public journalism, 3) interactive journalism, 4) participatory journalism, and 5) citizen journalism.

² IREX, the International Research & Exchanges Board, describes itself on its website (irex.org) as an “international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development.” A number of U.S. universities established IREX in 1968 to facilitate exchange programs with Soviet bloc countries. In the post-Cold War era, IREX has expanded its geographic scope and continues to advocate for “scholarship and free intellectual inquiry among scholars and individuals worldwide.” Its financial supporters include the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of State, the European Commission, and the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO). Supporting organizations include the Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the European Journalism Centre.

IREX publishes annual reports that assess the progress of media and other institutions in moving toward “pluralistic civil society development.” In the case of the Media Sustainability Index cited here, IREX assembles a “panel of experts” from the countries under assessment, who rate the country in five areas, “the most important aspects of a sustainable and professional independent media system”:

1. Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.
2. Journalism meets professional standards of quality.
3. Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.
4. Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.
5. Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

After these panels make their assessments, “IREX representatives” in Washington, DC review the scores and evaluations and make final revisions, which are posted to annual reports on each country IREX monitors.

³ RussiaToday translation (Imedi television broadcast 2007)

⁴ Translation according to Asatiani (2007)

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Objectivity, while unfashionable, remains important to journalists as a strategy for achieving distinction and independence from coercive forces in the economic and political spheres. Acts of distinction, or what I have called in this work “differentiation” (to avoid confusion with Bourdieu’s other uses of the term distinction), are one factor that ties together both of these manifestations of objectivity. Here I have approached what it means to be a journalist through differentiation, separation, independence and autonomy. The question I have set out to answer, “Why is objectivity important to journalists, even when its interlocutors say that it is not?” is more generally a question about how journalists construct, guard and define their roles in society.

Interest in debates over objectivity effectively ended in many journalistic and academic circles years ago. Obviously, any human observer imparts bias to his or her observations. While Schudson, Mindich and others have looked at the problem of objectivity as a historical phenomenon, the question of whether “objectivity is possible” is rightly regarded as sterile. Journalists, including those I spoke to, dismiss questions about objectivity as naïve queries by an outsider at best and utterly clueless at worst. Out a sense of propriety and sophistication, few people speak seriously of objectivity.

What has caught my interest, however, is that they actually do speak of it without using the word. Journalists use terms such as “truth” and “fairness” that altogether mean

much the same thing. Probably more importantly, one sees fewer significant differences than expected between the “objective journalism” of the daily journalists of the pre-Vietnam era versus the journalism of today, however we might characterize that. The question, I have suggested, is approachable from an anthropological perspective that contextualizes objectivity as a form of speech with cultural and social contexts. Objectivity, as American journalists understand it, has a character obtained from the development of journalism in the United States. As a form of discourse it eventually came to symbolize distinctions between the United States and other parts of the world with supposedly alien values, as is apparent in the use of the term during the Cold War or in the years leading up to World War II. Within the United States, it served as a form of speech with which journalists lay claim to a special identity as knowledge workers. Within the field, journalists have viewed and used objectivity in ways that vary according to the politics of their publication. Thus when it came to lynching, the early black press was “objective” for reasons that differed considerably from those of the *New York Times*, a result of the position each held with regard to the predominant racial and political paradigms of the era. Given their different market niches, alternative newsweekly journalists take a far dimmer view of objectivity than do daily journalists, though both are given to the same paradoxical habits of simultaneously disavowing and embracing objectivity.

In the introduction, I raised the issue of journalism being a profession concerned with representation more than interpretation. In this, journalism generates an index for a pool of notable events and utterances whose contents are determined externally, by

elected officials, public relations workers, and others. Journalists engage with this repository of all possible reportable events through the two concepts that I have examined here: objectivity and a sense of their own independence and autonomy, which also has an effect on relationships in the newsroom as well as the formation of journalists' sense of what it means to be a journalist. This prototypic journalistic self, in turn, emphasizes an individualism that is markedly American in character, as outsiders often note.

Throughout the work I have returned to the question of the relationship of the individual to social practice and belief among journalists. One accomplishment I have made here is to show some of the ways in which we can put to use Bourdieu's ideas about media. The concept of field supposedly promises a way out of deterministic thinking about the behavior of individual agents. Testing this proposition in a way that is anthropologically useful requires applying the concept at anthropological fieldsites.

Future Fieldsites

This research left a number of areas unexamined. Below I discuss some of these and their relationship to a study of journalism informed by a concept of field.

Newsroom as a Small Scale Society

Because of the emphasis I placed on interviews as a source of data on journalistic discourse as well as the need to protect the anonymity of publications mentioned in this project, a deep analysis of the newsroom did not emerge in this dissertation. A better understanding of a newsroom as a whole, along with its place in the field, would be

useful as a means of utilizing one of the strengths of ethnographic method, the analysis of the “small scale society.” To take the *Metropolitan Weekly* as an example, an in-depth analysis of its history and place in the field might have focused on its place in the market and thereby clarified relationships between the two. The *MW* began its life as a small counter-cultural neighborhood weekly, unlike the current format of typical alt newsweekly that it now uses. Editors at the paper often solicited essays as well as reporting. When it was sold to an out-of-town publisher in the 1990s, it changed its name and adopted its current format of weekly cover story that was usually hard news investigative reporting. Accompanying this was the arts and entertainment reporting and a back of the book spread of advertisements, among which the sex, entertainment and real estate industries were heavily represented. The majority of newspapers publish with respect to the bottom line, but it would be fair to say that profit motive had played an extremely significant role in the development of the *MW*. Evidence of the impact that advertisers’ influence had on publishing and editing decisions was on frequent display, as I have outlined elsewhere in the dissertation. Ethnographic method would have been an excellent means by which to examine this relationship, had that been my primary interest.

Lest I seem dismissive of the economic dimension of journalism (though I have at least acknowledged it in my analysis of autonomy, as advertisers are one entity from which journalists say they seek independence), I do see market forces as a potentially useful and immediately obvious way to link the culture of a single newsroom to larger national or even global systems. A worthwhile use of ethnography and long-term involvement—both anthropological strengths—would be the study of a newsroom or

other journalistic organization in the face of significant economic shifts. Certainly such widespread social changes are currently in no short supply. Given the small scale on which it exists, starting with the newsroom as a basic social unit would permit the researcher to isolate and defend manageable claims about the interaction of the journalistic organization and larger-order concepts of anthropological interest such as gender, class, race, language or even globalization.

Globalization and Cross Cultural Research

The application of anthropology to journalism demands attention to the differences among societies and social systems in which journalism arises and functions. Ethnographic work in this respect has emerged recently (see for instance *Ethnography* Vol. 7, No. 1 [2006], which was entirely dedicated to the ethnography of journalism and contains articles by Bishara on Palestinian journalists and international media; Hasty on Ghanaian journalism; and Ståhlberg on the press in Lucknow, India). But do aspects of journalistic autonomy and independence manifest in social systems other than those of the United States or the “western world”? If so, what would these look like? The question of journalism and emerging democracy, which I addressed briefly in the section on Georgian journalist Elene in Chapter 5, is an example of such an issue. Elene, who worked as a reporter in Georgia, came to the United States under the auspices of an international program that seeks to export “Western journalism” to other countries. For her part, Elene was blunt about the need in her country to develop a journalism that more

resembles that of the United States, particularly with regard to the place of the state in the news industry.

Conversations about journalistic autonomy generally involve either the political or economic fields and the degree to which independence from one means greater dependence on the other. In Georgia, this pattern seems apparent as newly created media magnates seek foreign investment (such as that of News Corp) as a remedy to the influence of the state. In future studies of journalism that unlike this one pay attention to globalization, scholars wanting to understand the journalistic fields that have emerged since the end of the Cold War would have to address the role of multinational corporations and external states. It would need to look to the global origins and destinations of media, money, people, and language.

This may be something that is difficult to accomplish straightforwardly with the notion of journalism as a field as initially articulated by Bourdieu and others. Implicit in Bourdieu's formulation of journalism is that it is bounded entirely by a nation-state; others, such as Benson (2005) have followed suit by talking about journalism in terms of national character ("French journalism"). Applying a theoretical model that emphasizes the porosity of borders, such as Appadurai's notion of flows and scapes (1991), may prove to be a solution. Certainly Appadurai's influence may be seen on media anthropology and media and culture studies (see, for instance, Dayan on "credoscapes" or globally mediated religious practices and belief [2005]; more generally, media anthropologists often make note of his comments on the global and the local and deterritorialization [e.g., Sreberny-Mohammadi 2002; Larkin 2002]). Perhaps a

“journoscape” could similarly assist in understanding the globally decentralized and transnational qualities of modern journalism.

A related, but different question: In what forms does something like objectivity as an epistemological vantage point exist in various cultural and social systems? This project deals with objectivity as it has manifested in American journalism, and in it I have tried to maintain distinction between journalistic objectivity and scientific or philosophical (in the disciplinary sense) forms of objectivity, which have a related but different genealogy. It seems apparent, however, that just as journalistic objectivity is tied to social and technological conditions, so too is objectivity in Western science, which is an epistemic value that arises out of modes of observation that regularly change over time. Daston and Galison’s (2007) recent historical study of scientific objectivity and imagery identifies at least three distinct types of scientific sight, of which objectivity is one variety arising in the 19th century with the rise of photography.¹ It may be that objectivity as journalists in the US understand it is incompatible with ways of seeing and modes of representation that exist in particular social systems.

This of course falls into a broad anthropological mandate to avoid assumptions grounded in Western conceptions of self and society. As Hasty, speaking of her fieldwork among Ghanaian journalists, puts it:

Both journalism and mass communications scholarship rely primarily on a modern liberal notion of the western individual, a primordial subject with naturalized freedom and autonomy either accommodated or suppressed by the superimposed state. Existing before and potentially outside the state, the independent journalist is naturally inclined to pursue and speak the truth about state and society. (2006:84)

In this work, I have focused on the use of a genre of language in achieving and maintaining identity and independence. The ways in which journalists deploy language will differ according to historical and social circumstances, such that objectivity as Americans understand it is unacceptable in many national traditions. Objectivity in the U.S. and European traditions prioritizes the accounts of government officials. In countries where tribal affinities, clan loyalties or village obligations often supersede bonds to the state, the practice of objectivity as Westerners understand it may be extremely unwieldy for non-Western journalists. Anthropology should be of considerable use here in determining what alternatives to objectivity in journalism exist.

Finally, in considering the global, it becomes necessary to firmly root analyses in some sense of the local (and it is in doing this that the concept of field becomes more useful). Given the strong profile that the United States maintains globally, many journalists and publics in countries the world over have a model or imagined model of “good” journalism (which may or may not include objectivity) against which they contrast their own journalistic practices and beliefs. Although as Appadurai points out, the United States is hardly the only dominating force internationally:

[I]t is worth noticing that for the people of Irian Jaya, Indonesianization may be more worrisome than Americanization, as Japanization may be for Koreans, Indianization for Sri Lankans, Vietnamization for the Cambodians, Russianization for the people of Soviet Armenia and the Baltic Republics. (2001:50)

Again, given the attempted coercion on Georgia of corporate and political forces as well as pro-United States and pro-Russian interests, Elene’s account of Georgian yearnings for a “free media” are instructive here, though they require much greater

investigation and corroboration, ideally in a Georgian newsroom. And, as Appadurai broadly suggests, do nation-states other than the United States offer their own models of “proper” journalism via the mediascape? This, too, is a potentially fruitful area of inquiry in an anthropology of journalism.

The “big” global perspective questions that this work in particular suggests are these: What sort of strategies of representation and control of autonomy exist in the global journoscape? And where do these become distinctly local strategies of representation and control of autonomy?

Conclusion

What are the implications for objectivity and autonomy as journalistic phenomena? In past discussions of objectivity, it has been somewhat a custom to end with an argument or meditation on the future of objectivity. Schudson (1978) described a moribund objectivity that was stripped of meaning in an increasingly skeptical society. Mindich, writing 20 years later, attempts to deal with the reification of objectivity into meaninglessness by subdividing it into historical moments, and concludes with notes on a “post-objective profession” (1998:138). I have suggested that while it is true that objectivity (or “objectivity,” as Mindich prefers) is quite abstract, the same historical and social occurrences that produced it are still considerations for journalists.

I hesitate to use anthropological perspectives to speculate what lies in store for those journalists who participated in my study. I am certain, however, that establishing and maintaining authority and voice in a society where everyone can shout into the

commons via the Internet will remain of great concern to journalists. Whether the result is a recommitment to the tenets of objectivity as a means of distinguishing themselves from blogsites and talk show hosts, or a move toward pre-1830s partisan publishing, or perhaps both, is difficult to ascertain at present. Based on what the journalists told me, and given their ongoing concern for their independence and autonomy, I do not think that the new, attenuated form of objectivity will be displaced anytime in the near future.

NOTES

¹ In their study of scientific “atlases” (scientific texts of the natural sciences containing illustrations of scientific specimens), Daston and Galison identify three ways in which science has “drawn” the world and thus practiced a particular type of vision. The first, *truth to nature*, was the result of 17th, 18th and 19th century naturalists and trained scientists having to rely on illustrators in order to produce a vision of the world. The result was collaborative, one in which scientists often lacked full control (unless they could draw). More importantly, the illustrations were an amalgamation of all individuals of the type. An illustration of a sparrow, for instance, reflected not just one particular bird, but instead the “average” of all “normal” sparrows. Eventually, scientists began using photography to make images and while they would select photographic subjects for their perceived normalcy, the image they made was that of a single individual who could not possibly represent the variation within a species or type (notable exceptions to this notwithstanding, such as Francis Galton’s attempts to make composites of criminal faces to produce a single image that reflected the physical attributes of criminality). The outcome was the rise of *mechanical objectivity*. Dissatisfaction with this mode of representation, particularly a suspicion that photography promised no easy way to distinguish between normal and aberrance, resulted in a third mode of sight, *trained judgment*. Thus it became insufficient for a doctor making x-rays just to make images of the specimen “as it was;” instead he or she now approached those data with an interpretive eye.

While I would argue that we must not assume that the use of a given technology will produce an identical set of changes in perception within different societies, perception and worldview are obviously tied to technology use, among other things.

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