

READING THE NEWSMAKERS  
IDEOLOGIES, NORMS, AND TRIBAL CUSTOMS  
OF JOURNALISM\*

by  
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Journalism and communications are the trade schools of the social science faculty, and as such are looked down upon by the other social sciences and certainly by the liberal arts. Journalism professors publish volumes of histories and research studies, many of which feed upon the larger category of memoirs of working journalists. Yet these memoirs and histories are mostly ignored by linguists who study the mass media, in favor of their own discourse analysis or criticism, or that of other journalism-external fields such as sociology. Journalists' own evaluations and expansions of their work, intended for an educated popular audience that includes many of their peers, are cited by sociologists (Gans, Tuchman, Schudson), but not by linguists.<sup>1</sup> Whether this neglect arises from powerful social constructionist tendencies that encourage focus on the text itself, from a conviction that language users themselves cannot think clearly about their motivations, or from simple time pressures, I do not know.

There is another possible explanation: For the ambitious scientist, it may be well to avoid becoming contaminated by the standards of a field not one's own, particularly if one wishes to keep a professional distance from it. This is especially true when the field in question is focused on the production of clear and engaging writing at the expense of depth and sometimes of accuracy. Nevertheless, I think it is worth seeing if there is anything of value to linguists in the journalism section of the library, and I may be well suited to do so, since I have already been contaminated, perhaps beyond rehabilitation, by journalistic values during my intermittent career as a magazine and newspaper writer and particularly during my training at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. I will be concentrating mostly on print journalism, and drawing examples from the American context. I will make one terminological excursion, defining the term 'war story' before I proceed with the main argument, namely that there is something to be gained by studying insiders' accounts of the folkways of their communities.

*War stories*

The war story is the unit of anecdote in journalism. From the journalist's point of view, the 'real' story is the 'war story', to be told later about how he or she wrote the article and what kind of reaction it got. Every reporter, except for the most green or deluded, knows that the story he or she wrote for publication is not the real story, cannot be the real story because of the institutional constraints on subject matter, sourcing, newsgathering behavior, and writing style, among other things. Many readers know this as well. (Exactly how many is a prime question for audience studies researchers within journalism departments). If the story that is printed in the newspaper is not the real story, being too constrained by conventions, then war stories also have their conventions, like any other folklore, and they are not necessarily truer for being more personal; in fact they are often recognizably exaggerated or self-serving. These stories follow a typical narrative arc of presequence (sometimes deliberately clever, like a tantalizing headline or lead on a news story), episodes with complications, denouement, epilogue and evaluation, with the emphasis on the last two. The journalist-hero may be superior to the environment (he or she gets the story, the audience loves it) or inferior (the story never reaches the public, or it does and is challenged).

The television reporter Linda Ellerbee (1986), in one of the best-selling journalism memoirs of recent years, provides copious examples of well-formed war stories, her own and other people's. For example, Ellerbee tells how on her first day at NBC, she criticized another reporter's story about adoption in which only the birth family was interviewed. To her surprise, the editors then put her on a plane to interview the adoptive family – 'to get the other half of the story':

I got the story. Much as I would prefer to say I got it by dint of journalistic endeavor, that's not how it happened. When I got to the major's house in Blackstone and the major's wife came to the door, I began to babble about my own children, who would soon be on the street and hungry because their mother had shot off her mouth and gee, I'd only been a network correspondent one day and it would be a big help if I could finish out the week before I got fired this time, which surely would happen if she slammed the

door in my face and I had to go back to this evil assignment editor in Washington empty-handed. I may have cried a bit; I try not to remember, but I will always remember those nice people in Blackstone. They gave me the interview, two cups of tea, and a Kleenex (1986:54).

The anecdote is followed by the obligatory evaluation: that it is horrible to see children reduced to 'stories', and that 'contrary to popular opinion around newsrooms, assignment editors *do* have senses of humor. Bad ones'.

The value of this story to the researcher who has no personal experience as a journalist is that, assuming it is substantially true, it shows that a) chance and personal charm play a significant role in reporting – here Ellerbee tries to get the mother to identify with her and grant her the interview; b) it is much easier to send someone else out to get a story than to go out and presume upon strangers oneself – hence the cliché of the demanding, unsympathetic editor – and of course it is easier to criticize a story than to create it; and c) reporters can be ambivalent about the use they make of their subjects. In harmony with the last point, Ellerbee devotes considerable space to lampooning intrusive or stupid interview questions: 'How do you feel, Mr. Arevir, about eight of your nine children dying in that fire? How does it feel, Cindy Lou, being the only little blind girl to pitch in the major leagues? How do you feel, Mr. President, about peace?' When interpreting quotations in the news, it is well to remember that there are many statements that would never have been made if they had not been prompted by such a question, and these should, where possible, be placed in context as elicited speech.

Anecdotes like Ellerbee's are told in many versions and contexts, monological and dialogical: to one's colleagues at the bar after work, to one's family and friends (with a certain amount of modification), in conversations and lectures and memoirs and interviews many years after the fact. Some war stories are long enough to be published as books, such as Bernstein and Woodward's (1974). War stories may be retold secondhand in media criticism columns such as the *Village Voice's* 'Press Clips', and in columns by newspaper ombudsmen. They are also told during the profession's confession and therapy ritual, namely the 'ethics panel' in which a group of reporters discuss recent problematic assignments, what they did and what they wish they had done, with greater or lesser degrees of truth and self-revelation

depending on who is in the audience. Ethics panels take place within news organizations, at journalism conferences, and occasionally on television; the late Fred Friendly conducted a popular series of televised ethics panels with media celebrities, with the stated mission of educating the public about the freedom of speech.

*Journalists as authors*

Joseph Pulitzer's conviction that journalism is 'one of the great and intellectual professions' may not be universally shared, but it is certainly one of the most self-reflective and graphomaniac professions. One could spend a lifetime just reading autobiographies of broadcast anchors. Textbooks and stylebooks aside, books about journalism cover a wide range and are difficult to classify. They include at least the following fuzzily bounded categories:

0. news critique (not by the same person who wrote the news) e.g. Lippmann, CDA analysts	
1a. autobiography with war stories e.g. Ellerbee, Steffens	1b. history of specific news organizations e.g. Kluger, Halberstam
2a. topical book, with war stories e.g. Woodward & Bernstein, Shirer, Rieff	2b. history of the coverage of specific topics e.g. sociologists, Nelkin
3a. analysis and/or social theory, with war stories e.g. Schudson & Manoff, Carey	3b. history of the media industry e.g. Mott, Bagdikian
4a. theory of journalism	4b. theory of communications

Not all journalism books are written by working journalists. The books that combine analysis and social theory with war stories are very often by journalism professors, long retired from short careers in the field, or by social scientists. The remaining categories of books, namely those which are not focused on war stories about the practice of news coverage, are often written by nonjournalists, including linguists and other social scientists. News critiques seem to be

considered open game for everyone and it can be instructive to try to identify the differences between similar critiques by people from different backgrounds. Can you identify the disciplines of the authors of the (slightly edited) extracts on the following page? (Answers at end of the article).

The historical and structural studies tell a great deal about ownership, readership and media technology; this kind of information is considered critical for philologists working with earlier periods, but is somehow dismissed as obvious in many studies of contemporary language. Successive editions of Bagdikian (1997) have charted the contraction of power in United States media to a handful of companies; however, he is more concerned with beating the drum against corporate giantism than with producing examples where it actually harmed the news. Kluger (1986), perhaps the most comprehensive history of a single American newspaper (the now-defunct *New York Herald Tribune*), is dense with facts: early typesetters, dropping the letters into the printing forms by hand, could set only 70 lines an hour, and so dozens of them were needed; the Transcendentalist philosopher Margaret Fuller, the first woman on the staff of the *Tribune* in the 1840s, was bylined with a simple asterisk at the end of the story; even after bylines were introduced a century later, reporters might remove their names from stories if they disagreed with the editing. When it comes to war stories in the original sense of the expression, if anyone is tempted to study censorship during the Gulf War or other recent conflicts, she or he should note that it did not originate with General Schwartzkopf; Mott (1950) indicates in his weighty history of American journalism that war reporters at the turn of the last century were usually hampered by military rules, to the point where magazines called the Russo-Japanese War 'the end of the war correspondent.' And for anyone concerned about the supposed decline of taste in the media, Mott notes that the *New York Herald* had to discontinue its personal advertisement column, 'long infamous as a means of making assignations', in 1907 after a conviction for obscenity.

*Puzzle: Identify the disciplines of the authors quoted below.*

(a) How a political group is labeled by the press often says more about the journalist doing the labeling than the group itself. *New York Times* correspondent Serge Schmemmann, reporting on the results of municipal elections in Berlin, stated: 'Both the extreme left and the extreme right gained ... The left-wing Alternative List, as the West Berlin chapter of the Greens is called, gained about two percentage points, getting 11.7 percent of the vote ... But most surprising was the eight percent of the popular vote garnered by the Republican Citizens Party, a 'far right group' that campaigned on a racist anti-immigrant platform ... Schmemmann never explains in what way the Greens are 'extreme' – a term laden with negative connotations. By lumping the nonviolent Greens together with a neo-Nazi party, he implies a moral equivalence between the so-called extremes.

(b) In paragraph 1, the author unmistakably ascribes a certain amount of guilt for the introduction of the compulsory visa to the refugees themselves, since they are 'economic refugees'. The perceived reason for their leaving the country of origin (i.e. fleeing dire living conditions) is presented by the author as being clearly evident and understandable, yet at the same time the author recognizes that the initial premises of the 'economic refugees' are mistaken: they came to the receiving country with 'false expectations.'

(c) One of the most striking ideological structures manifested in virtually all op-ed articles in the WP and NYT is blatant nationalism and ethnocentrism. US-THEM polarization characterizes, understandably, not only the opposition between US (Americans, westerners) and THEM (terrorists, Arabs, Muslim fundamentalists, etc.), but more generally Americans and the rest of the world, also in op-eds and other opinion articles. This is obviously also a result from the fact that the large majority of opinion articles are written by U.S. citizens (one article in the 'terrorism' data-base is written by an Israeli journalist, but he is also an associate of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy).

(d) The elite media set a framework within which others operate. If you are watching the Associated Press, who grind out a constant flow of news, in the mid-afternoon it breaks and there is something that comes along every day that says "Notice to Editors: Tomorrow's New York Times is going to have the following stories on the front page." If you're an editor of a newspaper in Dayton, Ohio and you don't have the resources to figure out what the news is, or you don't want to think about it anyway, this tells you what the news is. These are the stories for the quarter page that you are going to devote to something other than local affairs or diverting your audience... If you try to break the mold, you're not going to last long. That framework works pretty well, and it is understandable that it is just a reflection of obvious power structures.

*Killing the messenger*

Books by working journalists, concentrated in the categories of autobiography and topical study (1a and 2a) often consist entirely of war stories, perhaps because the journalists are unable to abandon the powerful, reaction-getting narrative mode for a more analytical view. Some journalists get so wrapped up in the folklore of their organizations that they end up writing histories of them (category 1b, cf. the ever-growing shelf of books about *The New Yorker* magazine). These books are generally viewed suspiciously as less than respectable research and little more than gossip. They are indeed often used to flatter bosses and settle scores, and they are reviewed savagely by colleagues in return. Still, even books that are 'just' journalistic war stories, self-serving and mendacious as they can sometimes be, contain clues to journalists' values and working practices. Nora Ephron (1978) describes having to steal a telephone from someone else's desk at the beginning of each working day at the *New York Post*; the owners might have been making money, but the reporters were kept in conditions of shortage and competition. Timothy Crouse (1973) explains how the journalists covering the Nixon-McGovern presidential race coalesced into a hierarchical pack, and began copying each other's conclusions and style. Ellerbee emphasizes that most TV news stories are orchestrated and written not by the star reporters who embody 'the journalist' on the air, but by producers who are invisible. However, the on-camera reporters are usually the ones held responsible for the stories by the public. Ellerbee also describes using various wiles to get information (as quoted above) and to break television norms for what could be shown on the air. Malcolm (1990) is the classic treatment of the contradictions and betrayals of interviewing.

Freelance journalists with book and magazine contracts often end up writing illuminating critiques of their peers who work on daily deadline. In *Slaughterhouse* (1995), a devastating critique of the West's inaction in the Bosnian war (the book was said by one pundit to have caused the bombing of Kosovo), David Rieff describes aides to UNPROFOR General Michael Rose telling journalists off the record that the Bosnians had been shooting at themselves. Saying something is 'off the record' presupposes that the information is true and damaging – too true to print. Here the information was false, breaking one of the maxims of good faith assumed in an off-the-

record transaction. The aides attempted to alter the journalists' perceptions of the war without taking responsibility for their words, and Rieff implies they succeeded. Most journalists were unwilling to break the off-the-record agreement and burn their sources by putting the UNPROFOR version to a public truth test.

Michael Maren, a foreign aid worker turned freelance journalist, analyzes coverage of the Somalian war of the early 1990s in undisciplined but incisive style in *The Road to Hell* (1997). He describes how journalists 'raised the level of horror high enough to provoke an international military response', not deliberately, but by being caught up in the gathering momentum of their own stories. He gives a five-step template for famine stories: 1) an 'early predictor' story warning of a possible famine; 2) stories instigated by relief organizations about how a famine is being ignored; 3) further stories about the 'forgotten people', implying that neglect by the West is responsible for mass starvation; 4) increase in numbers reported, use of terms like 'holocaust' and 'hell'; 5) coverage of the response and donations. Maren contends that the food shortage in Somalia in 1992 was exaggerated by the media, and the resulting attention helped destabilize the region further. His reporting and analysis should certainly be checked by both social science researchers and discourse analysts – and be integrated into the academic framework as a well-conceived or misconceived analysis, and not simply ignored because it comes from a journalist.

### *The view from Mount Olympus*

Some discourse analysis researchers choose to study editorials and opinion columns, an area of the newspaper where rhetorical or emotional impact is valued over factual accuracy. The production context of these pieces is harder to reconstruct, since writing from one's head does not generate war stories and other meta-texts in the way that more active reporting does. And on the reception side, it may well be that many readers who are news junkies never read editorials, considering them to be dull and tendentious corporate pronouncements, or reflections of the more conservative values of publishers as opposed to reporters. There are some publications that reward readers of editorials with extra information or pungent

analysis; the British magazine *Economist* and the now-defunct *New York Newsday* come to mind. However, most editorials are rehashes.

Opinion columns, too, come in a range of strengths. Celebrity columnists generally earn their space in the newspaper and in readers' minds with powerful writing and prescient awareness of public opinion. However, it is well to remember that some of the most powerful are regularly charged with making up quotations or getting facts wrong; the 'street columnists' Mike Barnicle of the *Boston Globe* and Jimmy Breslin of *Newsday* are two of the best-known exemplars of the tension between accurate reporting and emotional truth (see for instance Kluger 1986 for accounts of mistakes in Breslin's reporting on the Kennedy assassination for *The New York Herald Tribune*). Furthermore, some columns, after a while, are no longer written by famous columnist who gets the byline, but by his or her research assistants. And some columnists get their jobs on grounds other than writing talent and being in touch with the Zeitgeist.

In an article on ideological discourse analysis for *The New Courant*, Teun van Dijk (1995b) cited as examples a number of columns written by A.M. Rosenthal of *The New York Times*.<sup>2</sup> Rosenthal was for many years the top editor at the *Times*, and on his retirement from the job in 1986, he was given a regular column, called 'On My Mind'. One could certainly class him as a worthy representative of a certain generation of journalists; he had even won a Pulitzer Prize in 1960. However, that did not mean everyone took him seriously. His simplistic, Cold War view of the world made his opinions unpalatable to many, and his self-indulgent and pompous style, with many a sweeping statement fastened to the page with an 'of course', made him easy to mock. Competing media representing the counterculture old (*The Village Voice*) and new (*Spy*) did regularly mock the column, calling it 'Out of My Mind' and taking it as evidence of how out of touch the *New York Times* management had become. They assumed that the column was a consolation prize for an involuntary retirement, and that at some point the *Times* would come to its senses and retire Rosenthal for good. *The Village Voice* and *Spy* were widely read by people under 40, many of whom probably did not bother reading the *Times* op-ed page regularly, especially since these secondary reports confirmed any prejudices they had about hawkish older editors.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Rosenthal's columns could hardly be considered an example of subtle or manipulative use of discursive structures; rather, they were transparent. The precise ideological biases and rhetoric which van Dijk exposes in his article were obvious to many readers. How many, is something worth investigating.<sup>4</sup> Rosenthal is still writing his column, now at *The Daily News*, and I continue to be amazed by the number of times he is quoted on the Web, so I must concede that many readers seem to take him seriously. More reactions to his work will probably come out in the history books, and we could debate, following Galasiński (1997a, b) and Blommaert (1997), how many versions would be needed to get the whole picture. But the Rosenthal case certainly presents an example of the dangers of decontextualizing individual stories and writers.

#### *Dissension in the ranks*

Perhaps the most valuable thing one can get out of reading books by and about journalists is examples of how the newsgathering process is contested and is the site of struggle – as is the resulting product. Certain global conventions can be shown to apply<sup>5</sup>, and there may be striking uniformity in the treatments of a story or subject by neighboring news outlets over a short time period. However, over wider spans of time, geography, or ideology, there is noticeable variation in the selection and presentation of 'news'.<sup>6</sup> This variation may be influenced by material considerations such as the technology and funding available to news producers; the time, money, and alternative news channels available to readers; and the legal penalties available to punish journalists.

Thus it is a mistake to deal only with discourse entities like 'the journalist' and 'the President' to the exclusion of material facts about who actually conceives, writes, edits, and otherwise contributes to (and eventually reads) the texts, particularly where this information is available for the digging. Like any other 'subjects' who are studied by linguists, journalists are individuals. They work at particular intersections of business culture, history, and technology; at a given juncture they may have different opinions about how to proceed. For example, postwar studies of foreign correspondents showed them operating according to two contradictory ideologies: they were required to appear to adhere to 'objectivity' or 'neutrality', yet they

also had a folkloristic understanding of themselves as participants in the events they were covering: 'participant journalism, "like illicit liquor ... is found everywhere"', but it is rarely acknowledged.' (Schudson 1978:186, reviewing the work of Bernard C. Cohen; see also his remarks on Leo Rosten). This suggests that the submerged traditions in journalism would support not only differences, but considerable shifts in ideals with prevailing conditions.

Accordingly, some fruitful areas for further investigation might be:

- (i) the writing styles of controversial individual journalists like Jacob Riis, Tom Wolfe, and the recently active Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times*, all of whom broke the norms of objectivity by using emotionally charged language and strongly narrative story structure. Such writers are criticized by their peers for abandoning the neutral stance, and yet they are also the role models who pull young people into the profession, and their stories may also have the most impact on readers.
- (ii) the effects of movements like 'investigative journalism', 'precision journalism', 'New Journalism', and 'public journalism' – the media business equivalent of business fads like 'total quality management' and 'lateral thinking'. Each of these represented a deliberate correction to perceived imbalances in objectivity or value to the reader, and the idea of imbalance points to implicit norms that affect the texts in question.
- (iii) the survival and mutation of the mainstream media in the face of a cynical public. Discourse analysts often assume a sincere and uncritical relationship between the media and its audiences – which, in my experience, rarely obtains. How rarely, is a matter of debate, but it is certain that if the amount of decoding done by audiences were recognized, there would be less decoding left for analysts to do. Reader-response studies have so far failed to explain why increasingly literate and sophisticated populations have not demanded more sophisticated news products – that is, why 'trash TV' and tabloids continue to sell when the average office worker can get an infinite array of alternative news products and second and third-order commentary on the Internet. The joy of decoding and the solidarity with other

critics at the family dinner table or office coffee break (or the Internet chatroom) may be part of the attraction, at least for the surfing classes.

- (iv) the effects on the rest of the world of American journalism models, which spread through the presence of international students in U.S. journalism classrooms and through the installation of American-style programs at, for example, Charles University in Prague and the University of Hong Kong. Finnish media magnate Aatos Erkko studied at Columbia and later built his own training program at *Helsingin Sanomat*, supposedly on the Columbia model. The Fulbright Commission, the Soros Foundation, and the Freedom Forum (Gannett Newspapers) all help fund the missionary-minded spread of American media technologies and values. Similarly, (other) colonial countries' media have influenced the media of their colonies.
- (v) the eternal tensions between (a) writing and reporting; (b) observing and participating; (c) 'objectivity' and partisanship. This could be approached using an intellectual history framework as in Laurendeau (1990), which emphasizes the 'struggles of ideas' within a discourse from various points of view: individuals, values and rewards, taboos and lacunae, historicism, the influence of other discourses.

Academic researchers and journalists both live in worlds of simulacra, but there is no harm in temporarily exchanging one set of simulacra for another, and the change in perspective may put research findings in a new light. Or at least provide some entertaining war stories.

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## Notes

- \* An earlier version of this article appeared in *Pragmatics, Ideology, and Contacts Bulletin* Vol. 5 (May 2000), pp. 28-40 (University of Helsinki, Finland).
1. The conspicuous exception is Allan Bell, who draws on his own experience as a journalist in describing the way journalistic texts are constructed.
  2. For a more formal treatment of ideological discourse analysis, with a different set of examples, only one of them from Rosenthal, see Van Dijk (1995a).
  3. This exemplifies the *Mad Magazine* syndrome so prevalent in post-Vietnam generations: 'No, I haven't read it, but I've seen it satirized'.
  4. It also matters which readers they are. Stephen Hess (1984) notes that editorials and columns are routinely reproduced in the customized clipping packets prepared for civil servants; thus a *New York Times* editorial or column on transportation will be brought to the attention of officials at the Department of Transportation, and possibly even to the attention of the President. So in some cases the most significant communication may be between elites, with any other readers being eavesdroppers. Fairclough's observation (1989) that elite readers may be less likely to question dominant ideologies because they have more to gain from accepting them is also relevant here.
  5. Great work has been done by corpus linguists in charting the unwritten conventions of news language; however, it must be kept in mind that their conclusions are usually drawn from a narrow sample of news outlets. The American sample that is the basis for the new *Longman Grammar of English* (Biber et al. 1999) was drawn from only three outlets: the Associated Press, the *San Jose Mercury-News*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. The AP is generally assumed to set the default style for newsrooms, and most newspapers rerun some of its stories, so the choice is motivated. However, if these three happened to share certain style preferences that were not universal, then such conclusions would be biased. For example, Biber et al. (1999) assert that semi-absolute time formulations like 'Wednesday' are favored in American press reports, while relative time formulations like 'yesterday' are favored in British press reports – yet the *New York Times* fairly consistently uses 'yesterday'.
  6. Ben-Aaron (forthc.) examines some of this variation in stories about national independence days.

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## Sources of excerpts

- a. Lee and Solomon, 1997 (journalists and media critics, left wing).
- b. Wodak 1996 (linguist: Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse-historical methods).
- c. van Dijk 1995 (linguist: discourse analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis).
- d. Noam Chomsky talk at Z Media Institute, June 1997.

The first two excerpts are plain-English analyses of specific news articles in terms of the journalist's supposed ideology and how it affects classification and naming systems. Excerpt (a), intended for the general public, accuses the journalist personally, while (b) is more academic and impersonal, but the critical stance and points made are similar. Excerpts (c) and (d) are broader comments on the media business by linguists, (c) from an academic paper based on data and sources, and (d) from a public lecture by Noam Chomsky, who keeps his media criticism separate from his linguistics. Note that in his media criticism in general, Chomsky restricts his topics to industry structure and apparently clear and deliberate lies by the media, leaving aside subtler cases of manipulation.