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Reporting, Writing
and Editing

R. THOMAS
BERNER

MARQUETTE BOOKS LLC
Spokane, Washington

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berner, R. Thomas.

Fundamentals of journalism : reporting, writing, and editing / R. Thomas Berner.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-922993-76-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Reporters and reporting. 2. Journalism--Authorship. 3. Journalism--Editing. I. Title.

PN4781.B39 2007

070.4'3--dc22

2007009030

Edited by Darcy K. Creviston

MARQUETTE BOOKS LLC
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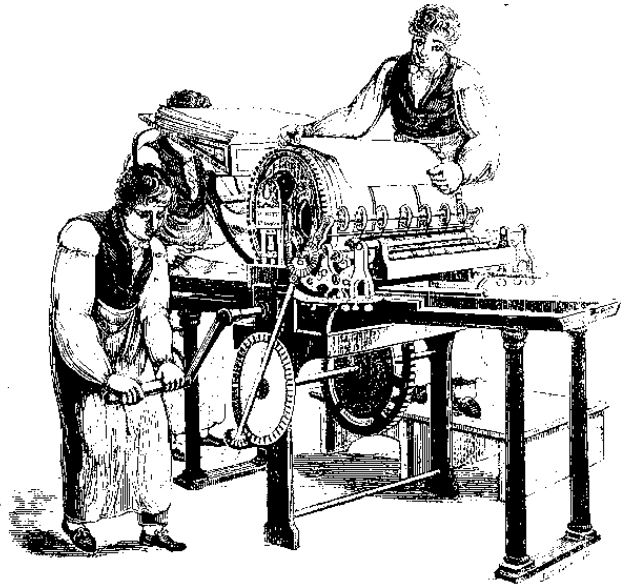


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PREFACE

This book was developed for use in three journalism skills courses: newswriting and reporting, feature writing, and copy editing. It distills much of the content in other books I wrote during my 28 years teaching at Pennsylvania State University, including *The Process of Writing News*, *Writing Literary Features*, *The Literature of Journalism: Text and Context*, *The Process of Editing*, and *Language Skills for Journalists*.

When I pitched the idea to David Demers, publisher of Marquette Books, I pointed out that journalism students often pay far too much for their books, only to sell them back for a lot less at the end of the semester. Why not publish and sell one for a reasonable price? For his day job, Professor Demers is a member of the journalism faculty at Washington State University. He understood the situation immediately and agreed that I could take a stab at such a book. And so here it is.

As the subtitle to this book indicates, the first three chapters focus on the role of the reporter. Chapters 4 through 7 focus on writing. And chapters 8 through 13 focus on editing.¹ The last chapter briefly examines ethical and legal issues. The appendices on language and style can be used on an as-needed basis. In fact, should there be a required course in language skills, Appendices A through D would provide the core of such a course.

One of the major changes that has taken place in the journalism field and in journalism education has been the rise of designers and photo editors at newspapers and related courses in journalism programs. My earlier editing textbooks assumed that copy editors performed those functions (I certainly did when I was a city editor.). Today copy editors don't design pages and size photographs as routinely as they did in my day, and so I have not picked up any of that material from my earlier editing books. Although the editing section mentions the role of other editors, it focuses on copy editing, and headline and caption writing.

¹Chapter 3 also contains information helpful to editors.

You will also notice that I reference *The New York Times* a lot. It has had problems in recent years, some of them bad enough to result in the dismissal of top editors. But no matter, the *Times* remains the No. 1 newspaper in the world. If you watch the evening news, note how many times the newscaster credits the *Times* for originally reporting a certain story. Or, if you tune into television or radio talk shows, you will notice that the subject frequently will be something first reported in the *Times*. Because of the scope of its coverage, the *Times* remains the benchmark. (And in fairness, when the *Times* follows up on a story from another newspaper or television station, it credits the original source.)

GOAL OF THIS BOOK

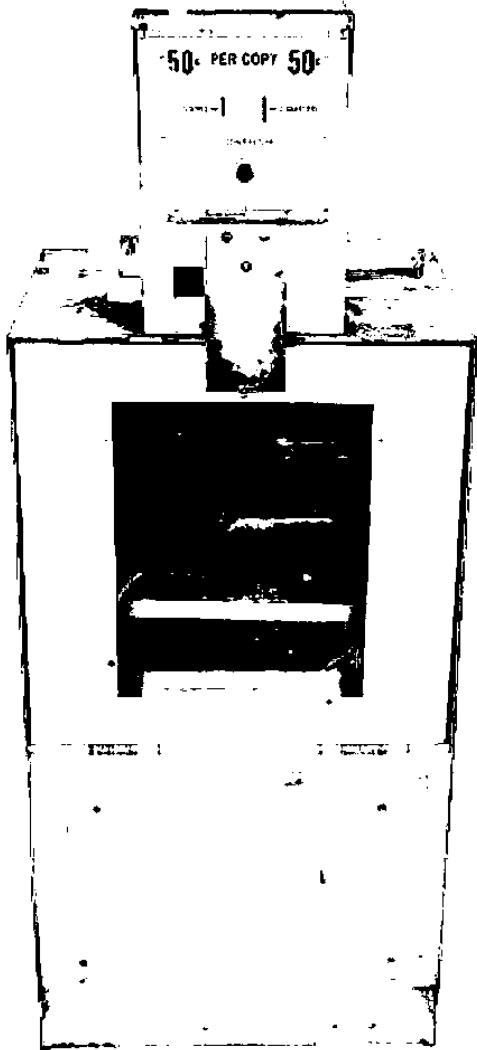
I'm a news junkie. I check the news online, on the air and in print throughout the day.

A lot of people are like me. They expect to be provided with fair, unbiased, clear, concise and interesting news. They want to know why things happen and how events might affect them. They want to learn about other people and gain perspective about how others deal with the good and the bad in their lives.

Granted, I teach online mass media courses (even though I'm retired), so I must keep up with the news. But many people who don't have any such obligation do the same thing I do every day for the same underlying reason: They want to understand the world around them. Curious by nature, they crave reliable information about what's going on at the state, national and international levels and how that ultimately relates to them at the local level.

If you are a journalism student, these news junkies will be your major audience. If you are a journalism teacher, you are teaching young people to feed the addiction of these junkies. This book intends to present components that can be packaged in different ways for different courses with the same basic goal: to produce capable, savvy, ethical and vibrant young reporters and editors who will serve the public — news junkies and all — well. I hope it accomplishes that task.

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NEWS

For two millennia, writing has been a medium through which the public has gotten its news. Historians credit Julius Caesar with publishing a newssheet, titled *Acta Diurna*, that gave the public a summary of happenings in the Roman Senate. *Acta Diurna* means “Daily Acts,” and the Latin word for daily, *diurnal*, is the antecedent for the word *journalism*. Two-thousand-plus years later news media are still telling readers, listeners and viewers what is happening in their world.

ROLE OF NEWS MEDIA IN SOCIETY

“We in the press,” editorial writer Jean W. Otto once said, “create one of this nation’s common denominators – shared information. We unify. We create the base upon which our nation’s diversities can co-exist without destroying themselves and each other.”¹ Viewed in that light, journalism has a mission. Journalists generally do not see themselves as holding down a job but as following a calling, much the way someone who takes religious vows might. Journalists seek to convey a larger truth about the world, to shed light where there are shadows, to make the sun shine through the clouds of obfuscation, to give a voice to the voiceless.

With the rise of the printing press in western culture came the rise of censorship,² which involves attempts by government to silence journalists and other dissenting voices. In England during the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth I, the crown established a monopoly on printing through the Stationers Company and then proceeded to censor content. Elizabeth also

¹Jean H. Otto, “The Meek Shall Not Inherit,” The John Peter Zenger Award for Freedom of the Press and the People’s Right to Know (given at the University of Arizona, Tucson, Nov. 11, 1988).

²Censorship is frequently misunderstood by the public. It is not censorship when an editor refuses to publish a story, column or letter. That is an editor’s prerogative. It’s called editing. Censorship occurs when the government attempts to suppress information.

established the infamous Star Chamber, which prosecuted, among others, printers who failed to submit to her editing pencil. The licensing system that attempted to keep printers and others in line and to keep negative information away from the public lasted for a century.

In the American colonies attached to England, some people attempted to provide information not controlled by the crown or its agents. One of the first newspapers was the *News-Letter*. Published in Boston, it proclaimed it published “for the Publick Good, to give a true Account of All Foreign & Domestick Occurrences, and to prevent a great many false reports of the same.”

One of the best known journalists in the colonies was Benjamin Franklin, who established the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in colonial Philadelphia. In the early days of journalism, the owners of the newspapers did everything. They gathered information, set type, ran the presses, delivered the papers, sold advertising and kept the books in order. As technology advanced, those jobs were split among many people. Today, interestingly enough, one person with a personal computer can effectively once again follow in the steps of Franklin, for the personal computer allows someone to write and correct the information, design and print the pages (if necessary), distribute the information electronically (if desired), and, with a spreadsheet program, keep the accounts.

Franklin was one of many bold journalists. “If all printers were determined not to print anything until they were sure it would offend nobody,” he once wrote, “there would be very little printed.” Franklin made that comment in the days before the First Amendment protected the freedom of the press and speech.

In some countries, boldness came with a price. Napoleon once had a printer executed. Still later, another newspaper condemned the general, leading him to refer to the press as “the fifth great power.” Around the same time in England, Edmund Burke referred to the press as the Fourth Estate,³ and Thomas Macauley saw the press as the equal of the three estates of the realm: the Lords Spiritual, the Lords Temporal and the Lords Common. Neither Burke nor Macauley was happy with the power of the press. And Napoleon observed: “A journalist is a grumbler, a censorer, a giver of advice, a regent of sovereigns, a tutor of nations. Four hostile

³“There are three estates in Parliament but in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder there sits a Fourth Estate more important far than they all. It is not a figure of speech or witty saying; it is a literal fact, very momentous to us in these times.” From: “Speaking of a Free Press” published by the American Newspaper Publishers Association in 1987.

newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.”

In the newly formed United States, newspapers began as extensions of political parties, their distribution through the mail subsidized by the federal government, and it was not until the 1830s that newspapers shifted from party ownership to private ownership, signaling what is considered the rise of the penny press. Communications scholar Michael Schudson says it was then that fact gained prominence over opinion in news stories. Schudson also notes changes in the names of newspapers, away from commercial names such as *Advertiser* to functional ones such as *Herald* or *Tribune*.⁴

Schudson also credits the press with taking advantage of the technology of the time. One major advance was the steam press, which enabled publishers to reproduce thousands of copies of a multiple-page newspaper in a short amount of time. Before the steam press, newspapers were still printed on presses with moveable type, which Gutenberg introduced around 1450. They didn't have many pages, yet printing them consumed much of the publisher's labor.

Also popular with the press was the telegraph, which enabled newspapers to get information quickly and across great distances. The telegraph first proved its worth to newspapers during the Civil War, when correspondents at the site of battles could quickly send their stories to waiting editors in the major cities.

As the 19th century closed, newspapers had become more democratic, more egalitarian and more middle class. The mass distribution of newspapers meant that many people not only read the news stories but also the advertisements. Thus was born the mass market. A larger audience shared information. Furthermore, Schudson notes, the newspaper changed “from something to be borrowed or read at a club or library to a product one bought for home consumption.”

Also born at the 19th century's close, according to Schudson, was the formal position of reporter. The division of labor common for most of the 20th century had arrived. Some workers, such as the printers, became unionized, usually under the International Typographical Union, which has been subsumed by the Communications Workers of America. Where once travelers provided information to the local editor, reporters were now hired full time to gather news and write stories. Some of those early reporters went on to become masters in American literature. Realism was

⁴Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), p. 17.

a major element in the American novel at that time, and scholars today trace that to the journalistic work that predated the novels.

With World War I ended and the Depression just beginning, American journalism broadened its outlets. One such addition was *TIME Magazine*, a combination of news and interpretation in each story. One of *Time's* founders, Henry R. Luce, disdained those who spoke of objectivity: "Show me a man who thinks he's objective, and I'll show you a man who's deceiving himself." Other magazines followed.

Then came the rise of the radio. Suddenly, Americans could hear for themselves the words of the president of the United States or of a dictator from a foreign land. Broadcast stations created networks and hired their own reporters. Edward R. Murrow assembled a team to cover the war in Europe. Murrow would broadcast live to the United States during German bombing raids on London.

Murrow went on to present equally intensive and exciting journalism on television. The newscast evolved from someone sitting behind a desk reading the news to a 15-minute program with two anchors to half-hour or longer programs that we see and hear today. Live coverage of both parties' presidential conventions helped advance the careers of some broadcast journalists.

Today, information junkies have much to choose from. If they have the time, they can read in print at least three newspapers distributed nationally — *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *USA Today* — as well as a local newspaper and any other newspaper that appears on the World Wide Web. If our information junkies live in an area served by cable, they probably watch news from NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, PBS, and Fox and at least one C-SPAN channel. They probably also have access to a couple of regional television stations that provide some local news. And don't forget local radio stations.

All of these outlets are telling people about current events. But they are also doing what Jean Otto talked about — they are creating an environment of shared information from which we, a diverse people, draw.

Also, there's local flavor. In a study of what makes smaller newspapers excellent, journalism professor Thomas Connery identified, among other things, thorough coverage of the community, original reporting, in-depth reporting and a strong editorial voice. One editor told Connery:

Our job is to make our readers care. Not just about government, but about the way people live, about the way the world lives. Our job is to

see that they know the facts and figures, but the human stories, too, and to do it honestly and responsibly.⁵

Implicit in the editor's statement is a view of the press that derives from a 1947 study funded by Luce of *TIME Magazine* and conducted by a group of scholars led by chairman Robert M. Hutchins.⁶ The Commission on Freedom of the Press said it had five expectations for communications media:

1. A truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives the meaning.
2. A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.
3. The projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society.
4. The presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society.
5. Full access to the day's intelligence.

This came to be called the social responsibility theory of the press. Although news media at the time gave little news coverage to the commission's report, it nevertheless had an impact on journalism programs, which passed the commission's ideas on to their students. Some critics argue that the industry has been slow to adopt these ideas. But news media are not monolithic, not even when referred to as "the press" or when *media*, the plural form of *medium*, is used erroneously as a singular noun. The lack of a monolithic structure means that each outlet – each newspaper, radio station, television station, related and unrelated Web sites – behaves the way it wants. And that means that each outlet does not necessarily measure up to the expectations of the Hutchins Commission.

Still, the Hutchins commission's expectations continue to state succinctly and explicitly what the role of the news media ought to be in a democratic society. The underlying assumptions in this book are that the commission's expectations are worthy ideals for modern journalists to follow.

⁵Thomas Connery, "Management Commitment & the Small Daily," *Newspaper Research Journal* (Summer/Fall 1989), p. 64.

⁶Commission on Freedom of the Press, *A Free and Responsible Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947).

NEWS VALUES AND BEATS

Defining news is not easy. In the world of the beginning newswriter, news can refer to such things as rising tuition and dormitory fees, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, a noisy dorm floor, a cutback in library hours, the scheduled appearance of a favorite musical group on campus, downtime on the server, and the success or failure of an athletic team. For others, news can be increasing taxes, the rising cost of medical care, the stability and future of Social Security, the inefficiency of the trash collection system, the infrequency of police patrols in a neighborhood, and plans for a new – and expensive – school.

Lord Northcliffe once described news as “something someone wants to suppress.” Another, even more classic definition, says that when a dog bites a man, that isn’t news; but when a man bites a dog, that is. And perhaps the simplest definition: News is what is printed in a newspaper (or broadcast on a radio or television station or on the Internet). Although interesting, these definitions aren’t very useful in terms of helping journalists decide what to print. Thus, journalists often talk about values that influence the selection process.

Among them are these, which Professor Wallace B. Eberhard of the University of Georgia found after examining 14 newswriting textbooks: timeliness, proximity-nearness, prominence-eminence, change, action, audience, impact, unusualness, conflict, significance, magnitude, human interest, consequence-probable consequence, sex, children, animals, tragedy, oddities-bizarreness-novelty-rarity, interest, importance, economic impact, familiarity, humor, pathos-pathos/bathos, currency, emotional stimulus-emotion, accuracy, certainty, explanation, clarity, sensationalism, suspense, objectivity, conciseness, irony, drama, surprise, identification, concreteness, personality, progress, disaster, news balance.⁷ Although news stories often contain one or more of these values, journalists in the real world don’t sit around filling out scorecards on lists of terms. With experience, they develop a sense of what their readers need and want to know.

For example, five U.S. soldiers killed in a foreign conflict might rate five paragraphs on an inside page, but if one of the soldiers lived within the newspaper’s circulation area, the story would lead that day’s paper with photographs of the dead soldier and a sidebar containing interviews

⁷Wallace B. Eberhard, “‘News Value’ Treatments Are Far from Consistent Among Newswriting Texts,” *Journalism Educator* (Spring 1982), pp. 9-11, 50.

with survivors, other relatives and friends. A second sidebar might enumerate the deaths of other local residents in faraway wars. In one such situation, the return of the body of a local soldier from Iraq received higher billing on page one than the visit of the president of the United States in Montana on the same day in November 2006. Another example: A fatal nursing home fire in California might mean nothing to newspapers in other states, except when those states have issues with nursing homes violating fire codes. Newspapers there might very well play the California story on the front page and add comment from local fire officials.

Although journalists must ultimately decide what to publish or broadcast, values are not the only thing influencing the news selection process. Another factor is how news organizations are integrated into a community. Most news organizations create news beats – such as city council, the mayor’s office, the police station and the courts – where reporters routinely collect news and information. Larger news organizations have staff that cover the governor’s office, the state legislature, the three branches of federal government, and sometimes federal agencies (FBI, EPA).

These beats are not randomly distributed in a community. Not all organizations have an equal chance of being covered regularly. Most beats are linked to powerful institutions or organizations, and the people who run those organizations – leaders or elites – help define the news. They conduct public meetings, issue press releases and pass ordinances and laws that affect everyday life. In other words, leaders or elites who work in powerful institutions play a disproportionate role in creating and defining the news.

There is nothing sinister about beats and the way journalist cover them. Powerful people and institutions generally are considered to be credible sources of news, and people want to know what they are doing, because their actions affect people’s lives. But overdependence on such powerful sources and on some values, such as conflict, has a downside. It means that less powerful groups have more difficulty making the news, and sometimes they have to create conflict to make the news.

The late John Chancellor of NBC News defined news as “a chronicle of conflict and change.” Implicit in that definition – perhaps “description” is a better word – is that peace and stability are not news. News organizations seem to detail war more than peace, just as history courses focus more on wars than on the peace between the wars. Given Chancellor’s description, one can understand why some under-represented groups in our society (e.g., minorities, labor movements, environmentalists) have found it necessary to become confrontational and

hostile — that was the best and sometimes only way to get the news media's attention.

In fact, political scientist Lance Bennett wonders if news isn't an advertisement for the system. In other words, news reinforces the status quo.⁸ A great deal of social science research actually supports this theory.

But it would be wrong to conclude that journalism is simply a lap dog of powerful elites. It often publishes content that is critical of them and their actions, and, historically, the evidence suggests that journalism has given increased coverage to social movements. News rooms are much more diverse today than in the past. Editors realized that ethnic and gender variety in the newsroom helped diversify the news and create a newspaper or broadcast program that was more relevant to the population. Stories were no longer defined through the narrow prism of one ethnic group or one gender.

Thanks to an increasing number of women in the newsroom, editors began assigning stories on childcare and women-in-the-workplace. The arrival of ethnic minorities gave rise to broader reporting of social issues. Does welfare work? What are the conditions among the disenfranchised? How does racism hold people back? Is the education system working? How accessible is the community? What are mental health services really like? The news media are often criticized for focusing on personalities rather than issues and for covering what is familiar rather than going into new places and finding new sources.

News, then, can be defined as a social product that is shaped by values (journalistic as well as societal) and by the way news organizations are integrated into a community. News reflects the power structure, but it can also be critical of it. In fact, one scholar even argues that journalism produced by corporate news organizations is much more critical of the status quo, and that, historically, the news is becoming more, not less, critical of the status quo.⁹

The upshot of this is that journalists should seek to be as inclusive as possible when covering the news. Journalists also can help by producing more in-depth stories about community issues rather than filling the paper and the airwaves with reports from the police and other routine news beats.

⁸Status quo is defined here as the current state of affairs, especially in terms of political and social power.

⁹David Demers, *The Menace of the Corporate Newspaper: Fact or Fiction?* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996).

NEWS AS A CONSTRUCT

Anyone who has examined the process of writing news soon realizes that news really is a construct — that, far from being something inherent in nature (as some journalists seem to believe), news is whatever the journalist writes and the editor prints or the producer broadcasts and the audience consumes. That's not necessarily bad when everyone, including readers and viewers, recognizes the process. News gets tangled in a web of disputes when some try to make it something it is not. While news is based on fact, it does not replace truth, and it is not an objective account of something, although journalists strive to be fair and balanced in their writing and disinterested in the outcome of any dispute on which they are reporting.

Some journalists have claimed that the news media merely reflect society, but the truth is that many journalists often write stories for other journalists (especially for editors), journalists often conform to stereotypes, and journalists often come to a news event predisposed to a storyline rather than with an open mind. Journalists are hardly the objective fact-gatherers and presenters that they claim to be. News is not an inherent part of nature, but is something constructed by journalists for their readers. Depending on the audience, the story is constructed differently. Writing about broadcast news executives, Gans says: "They more or less operated on the assumption that a news story could be shot, edited and narrated in a number of different ways, and that the producer was responsible for reconstructing it along lines that met the standards and policies of the network."

The same is true of newspapers. I have in my files stories about the governor of New York testifying before a House committee about tax revisions. *The New York Times* version includes references to Governor Cuomo's "sharp tongue," has him making declarations and refers to him as "the star of the show."¹⁰ *The Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, has Cuomo pleading and asserting, but also makes reference to Gov. Richard Thornburgh of Pennsylvania, as a champion of the tax revisions.¹¹

What lessons can a beginning journalist draw from this? Consider how each journalist portrayed the people in the story. Although both

¹⁰David E. Rosenbaum, "Cuomo Takes Case to House," *The New York Times* (July 18, 1985), p. D1.

¹¹Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, "Cuomo, Others Plead With House Panel for State, Local Tax Break to Be Kept," *The Wall Street Journal* (July 18, 1985), p. 14.

stories acknowledge Cuomo's prominence, the *Times'* account casts the governor in the role of someone who is showing up those scoundrels in Washington. It helps that Cuomo is the governor of New York, home of the *New York Times*.

The *Journal's* account, on the other hand, strikes a more even-handed pose, even comes across somewhat dryly. Cuomo rates an "asserted" and Thornburgh gets a "champion" in a story otherwise powered by relatively neutral verbs.

Both stories were written with the audiences of the newspapers in mind. If New York is the highest tax state in the nation and the deductibility of local taxes is in jeopardy, then what the New York governor says is of importance and interest to *New York Times'* readers. In fact, the story appears at the bottom of the first business page with a photograph, whereas the *Journal's* account appears on page 14 and without a photograph.¹² The *Journal's* audience is made up of business persons from around the country, from low-tax states as well as high-tax states, and people who probably favor lower taxes period. Knowing that, the *Journal* reporter isn't about to paint Cuomo as a David up against a Goliath. The *Times*, on the other hand, gets an interesting story for its audience by adopting that storyline. Conflict is newsworthy.

Both newspapers are considering the interests of their audience. When a newspaper does that, it considers the make-up of its readership. What is the educational level of its readers? Where do they work (in a steel mill or for a defense contractor)? Where do they live (suburban area or an urban area)? What is the racial make-up? What are their leisure time interests? Is religion important? Is church attendance high or low? What are their politics? What is the mix of all of the preceding?

What journalists need to remember is that the audience plays a major role in reading the story. Stories are not merely something laid down by a journalist and then received with the same intensity or understanding by all readers. Readers bring to stories their prejudices and predispositions. What might appear positive to one reader could be negative to another.

In a locale where hunting is popular, for example, a newspaper will publish photographs of hunters and their kill. Not everyone in the newspaper's audience approves; some people in the audience oppose hunting and suggest that the newspaper is condoning the practice because it publishes the photographs. But the editor might reply that since hunting

¹²At the time, the *Journal* was not publishing photographs.

is important to many in his audience, he is responding to his audience. Curiously, though, the editor has never skipped a year of publishing the photographs to see if the hunters really care as much about their absence as the nonhunters do about their presence.

Sociologist Herbert Gans says news is “often the highlights of highlights,”¹³ but the important message from Gans for readers and viewers is not to rely on one outlet and one medium for your news, but get involved and dig deeper. Journalists are the ones who decide what the highlights of the highlights will be. The mayor of a city in Pennsylvania, one of the few in the nation with independent competing newspapers, once observed that new ownership of one of the newspapers had resulted in increased coverage of local government. It wasn’t that local government had done anything more newsworthy; it was that the new blood in an old competitive situation had redefined news in this city.

NEWS VALUES AND CONTENT

Now that you have heard the nuances, it is time to discuss news values, starting with content. Let’s discuss the content of one edition of a 25,000-circulation newspaper that publishes seven days a week. The newspaper is divided into four sections, which in itself makes a statement about what is news. Each section enables the editors to emphasize aspects of the community they think are newsworthy. Thus, the newspaper that begins a section with business news but buries sports in a section that leads off with arts is making a statement about its news values.

The bulk of section one is devoted to what some people would call “wire news” — that is, nonlocal. But an exception appears on page one. It is a feature story about a local gunsmith who makes replicas of muzzle-loaders. It’s a human interest story, a typical feature story. Otherwise, the front page contains stories distributed by the Associated Press, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and Knight Ridder Newspapers.¹⁴ Three of the stories focus on current events. In two instances, the events are elections; the third event is a demonstration in Moscow. All three stories are international.

The last two stories are not about events. One is a feature story on the demise of a sport called “cornerball,” which is played by the Amish and

¹³Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), p. 92.

¹⁴In 2006, The McClatchy Company purchased Knight Ridder.

Mennonites, and the other story tells about Congress' use of mailing privileges (called "franking"). Neither the cornerball story nor the mailing story is tied to a specific event and could have just as easily been published the day before or three days from today. So why are they newsworthy?

The cornerball story fits several categories on Eberhard's list. It has human interest and is about change and novelty. The mail story, despite the apparent lack of a current event, was current because it was an election year and candidates for Congress were announcing for office. The mail story represents an attempt to monitor the system. This is something the news media do.

Inside, a story details a meeting in the United States between the president of the United States and the chancellor of West Germany (at the time, soon to be unified with East Germany and become Germany). Another story announces that the planned launch of a U.S. space shuttle has been delayed. One more story uses a recent controversy over cigarette smoking to focus on the first year of service by the secretary of Health and Human Services. Similar in purpose to the mail story on page one, this particular story recounts the secretary's first year in office and the problems he has had and makes the case that he has finally found a popular issue in condemning cigarettes. Twenty-five percent of one page is devoted to the weather forecasts — local, national and international. The weather is always of interest.

The second section, which is the local news section, contains a story, with photograph, about the owners of a local airport contesting a proposed development at the end of their runway. Controversy makes news, and this is all the juicier since one of the developers is also a state senator. Is he receiving favored treatment? The story outlines the concerns of the airport's owners and their suggested resolution. The story also reveals that the airport's owners have not contacted the developers about their concerns. The newspaper has become a mediator, publicly relaying messages between the squabbling parties.

Another story tells that an unidentified woman crawled out of an elevator stalled between floors and fell 20 feet to the bottom of the elevator shaft. She was in critical condition with a head injury. A third story is what is known as an "advance." It announces that two municipalities' planning commissions are going to hold a joint work session to discuss proposed land use regulations. Consultants working on the regulations will be at the meeting, the story says, and the public is urged to attend and offer comments.

On the next two inside pages appears routine accident and police

reports, a listing of municipal meetings for the week ahead and the milestone-type information — births, hospital admissions and discharges, deaths and funerals. (Some newspapers have started publishing the obituaries of pets.) Later on in this local section can be found state, business and entertainment news.

Section three carries an advice column, a profile of a YMCA director, and information for senior citizens. Inside is more information, most of it about library activities in the county.

Section four is the sports section. This particular day, a Monday, devotes most of its space to the results of Sunday's professional, collegiate and high school games and meets. Half of one page is given over to box scores, other results and standings — all in minute type. This is the page for the truly devoted, who will read it in detail.

The last page of the paper will receive equal attention, but probably from a different segment of the audience. This is the page that carries the television listings and reviews of shows on television that night.

Larger newspapers have more sections or divide the paper along different lines. Some newspapers devote an entire section to business, for example, and others give more space than one page to arts and entertainment. Examine any metropolitan newspaper's Website and you'll see how news is broken into sections and cross-referenced — a process made simple because of the technology. Examine your local newspaper and see how it breaks out the content, then look at another newspaper from another state.

A reporter covering an event that includes several topics must decide what is newsworthy and what is not. At the least, the reporter must select the one point of a story that's newsworthy enough to make the first paragraph.

One reporter, faced with four actions by a board of elected officials, had to choose from among routine appointments to advisory boards, an announcement by the township manager that construction of a new township building was on schedule, a vote on protecting water-well sites not just in the one municipality but across the region, and approval of plans to develop an industrial park, which had been reviewed by various advisory boards in public with no objections.

The reporter chose the appointments to advisory boards but was redirected by his editor to rewrite the story and lead with the discussion on water. Why? Well, the newspaper's circulation area included at least 65 municipal boards, all of which routinely appointed people to advisory boards. The appointments were of no interest outside the one municipality. Water, on the other hand, cuts across municipal boundaries,

and at this time was a topic of concern among several municipalities in the newspaper's coverage.¹⁵ They all drew their water from the same aquifer. By highlighting water, the reporter was developing the story to have broader appeal. The water story would function as a unifier within the newspaper's audience.

In sum, news is something journalists construct. They aim to provide information they believe their readers and viewers should have or want to have. That information is usually timely and is pegged to current events. Sometimes news is what is said locally about something that happened hundreds or thousands of miles away. Sometimes news is about local government or local problems. Sometimes news is a human interest story about someone residing in the newspaper's circulation area. Sometimes news is a human interest story about a subculture not residing in the newspaper's circulation area. News is what journalists believe will interest their readers and viewers. News is a disruption in the rhythm of a community, a state or a nation. News, in the words of historian Mitchell Stephens, is "what's on a society's mind."¹⁶ News is what makes people talk.

¹⁵Based on my travels throughout the world, water is a story everywhere.

¹⁶Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), p. 9.



REPORTING

News stories are based on facts gathered by reporters. Journalists do not make things up out of thin air. No journalist can fashion a news story without gathering relevant information, getting details, finding examples and then planning the story. The factual base of news stories distinguishes them from fiction.

THE VALUE OF CURIOSITY FOR REPORTERS

Norman Mailer won one of journalism's highest honors, a Pulitzer Prize for his book *Armies of the Night*. Subsequently, he wrote a book about the Apollo space program, and in it was a discussion of the accolades he had received for his journalistic work. He considered receiving the journalism honor ironic because he knew how hard journalists worked and did not feel he could live up to that standard. But he also said something I have always considered a defining point about journalists:

They had, first of all, to have enormous curiosity, and therefore be unable to rest until they found out the secret behind even the smallest event.

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it defines a good journalist.

On a more mundane level, editors throughout the country were asked a few decades ago what they wanted in beginning reporters. Language and writing skills were high on everyone's list. But somewhere in the body of the article, the author listed some of the comments editors had offered, comments that had not found their way onto the list. One editor said what he wanted in a reporter was someone who took a different route to work every day. In other words, a curious person.

Good editors also like reporters who don't hang around the office waiting for the phone to ring. Curious reporters are usually out of the office digging up news. They may use the phone to schedule interviews or to check a random fact. But usually they get out on the street and feel

life just like the cop walking the neighborhood beat. Inexperienced reporters sometimes try to write about matters they haven't seen. A reporter assigned to write a story about a particular traffic problem should go to the scene of the problem. See it first hand. There's no substitute for being there.

It is true that many news stories come from the police beat or from town council and school board meetings, or from the planning commission and zoning board. It is true that many news stories come from a reporter's beat or specialty, from labor, health, education, sports, the legal system, business, science, technology, religion or politics. But what really drives every successful story is curiosity. Good reporters want to know everything. They won't take "no" for an answer. They search everywhere; they're never satisfied. They know that little stories lead to big stories.

A good reporter goes beyond the routine information from the beat to see if there's a better story. For example, one day Vanessa Winans of the *York (Pa.) Daily Record* read on the police blotter that the bookkeeper for the York YMCA was robbed while taking the Y's money to the bank for deposit. She could have written a four-paragraph story from the information the police gave her. But instead she called the victim and got a better story. And to find the woman, Winans had to dial several phone numbers because the police did not have the woman's home address or her husband's name, which would have made finding her phone number a snap. One of the questions Winans asked the victim: What went through your mind as you were struggling with the robber? Here's the story:

ROBBERY VICTIM GOES DOWN FIGHTING¹

YMCA Bookkeeper Struggles with Thief Who Took *Cash*, Checks

By Vanessa Winans

Judy Reed did not give up without a fight when she was robbed while on the way to make a bank deposit in the rain Monday.

Mrs. Reed, the bookkeeper for the York YMCA, was walking in the 100 block of west Market Street at 10:15 a.m. when she saw a man pass her, she said Monday night. She saw him stop at a parking lot, turn, and wait for her to pass.

Moments later, she felt a pull at the white satchel that contained the

¹Vanessa Winans, "Robbery Victim Goes Down Fighting," *York Daily Record* (Aug. 21, 1990). Copyright 1990 by the *York Daily Record*. All rights reserved.

YMCA's weekend receipts — \$1,100 in cash and \$2,300 in checks, she said.

Tightening her grip on the satchel, the 5-foot, 51-year-old woman whirled to face the much-taller robber. She said she tried to jab the man with the point of her umbrella, but at the moment of truth, it blew inside out. So she tried to hang on to the satchel.

"I was tugging and he was tugging," she recalled. "Eventually, he was stronger, and he pulled it out of my hand. I fell down and started yelling, 'Police! Police!'"

Her attacker said nothing as they struggled.

The man, who did not show her a weapon, ran north through the Columbia Gas Co. parking lot, city police reported. Police had not caught the thief Monday night.

The robber was black, about 5 feet 8 inches to 5 feet 10 inches tall, wearing dark or neutral clothes, in his 20s, with a thin to medium build and close-cropped hair, Mrs. Reed said.

The woman said she tried to fight the man because the idea of being robbed angered her.

"I was just mad," she said. "I wasn't going to give in to him completely."

In retrospect, she was glad she fought, despite her bruised left hip and left elbow and three broken fingernails. She takes classes at the YMCA and considers herself fit. But if another robber had a gun or knife, she wouldn't argue again, she said.

Norman L. Walters, YMCA president, said the deposit robbery was the YMCA's first.

YMCA officials plan to change the way employees take deposits to the bank, Mr. Walters said. The money taken Monday was insured and the checks were all marked for deposit.

"You would guard against that in the evening or the early morning, but you'd think at that time of day, you'd be safe," he said. "It's supposedly the safest corridor to the bank we've got."

Mrs. Reed, who has walked the route for the 22 months she has been the YMCA's book keeper, said the attack upset her.

"I get shaky when I think about it."

Elsewhere, two reporters for the *Post and Courier* in the Port of Charleston, S.C., saw a police blotter item about an officer who had pulled his gun on a dockworker during an argument. Shots were not fired. No one was hurt.

But the two reporters were curious. First, they wanted to know what the officer's record was like. They learned he had a temper that had shown up in other police jobs. The next question: Why was he hired by yet another department? Did anyone track potentially dangerous police officers? Was this problem larger than their circulation area?

²Glenn Smith and Ron Menchaca, "Problem Cops: A Systemic Failure," *Post and Courier* (March 5, 2005).

designed to ease overcrowding in prisons, but instead, the *Sentinel* discovered, the program recycled criminals, some of whom graduated to a higher level of criminal activity. Not even state corrections officials were aware of the immensity and enormity of the problem.

A reporter new to an area was impressed by how efficiently the local transportation system operated during a heavy snowstorm. Curious about its efficiency in those circumstances, he checked with the transportation authority, drivers, passengers, meteorologists, and other interested parties and produced a 350-word story. It was a nice news feature that kept the public informed. And it came about because someone was curious.

At one newspaper, reporters on beats are required to meet with other beat reporters to informally discuss what is going on. The reporter in one municipality revealed that plans for a new shopping center had hit a snag because it hadn't been designed with public transit in mind. So the regional transportation authority intervened informally and got the municipality to make some changes.

How could that planning mistake be avoided in the future? The transportation beat reporter interviewed the authority's manager and learned that he was preparing legislation requiring authority review of all plans in those municipalities using the regional bus system. The transportation manager felt money and time could be saved if the authority were involved early in the process. The transportation reporter wrote a story, using the shopping center as her example of why the regionwide legislation was needed.

Local government tends to be a major source of stories for reporters. Lazy reporters write nothing beyond the town council meeting or the item on the police blotter. They don't see the larger story. They aren't curious. Good reporters, on the other hand, see each meeting and each blotter item as an opportunity to pursue information further and write a unique story. They look for trends. They maintain good files. They ask questions. They're curious.

Good reporting includes getting specific information. Nothing raises an editor's eyebrows more than to read an account of a city council meeting and see a direct quotation attributed to "a member of the audience." Wasn't the reporter curious enough to find the person's name and address and other particulars? Track down those speakers in the audience. Get their complete names and addresses. Don't give your editor room to doubt your abilities.

Some reporters who cover meetings believe that their job is that of recording secretary. It is not. Questions may arise during a meeting that should be answered in a story. For example, during a planning

commission meeting the members of the commission express concern that the local university, which is leasing space off campus, may pull back suddenly and create economic problems in the downtown. Even though no one on the planning commission gave a figure of how much space was being leased and how much in rent the university was paying, that information should have been in the story the next morning.

Where would it come from? After the meeting, the reporter could check with the planning commission chair or the staff planner. Either one might have a good idea. If they don't, call the university's spokesperson. If that fails, call the university official who oversees leases. And if that fails, call a real estate agent who leases to the university. The agent might give you a figure. Make sure the source for the figures is clear in the story.

The same curiosity should drive a reporter in verifying all claims in a story. If A says something about B, call B and ask. If B contradicts A, call A back.

On a larger scale, Jean Ward and Kathleen A. Hansen³ offer advice on verification – advice they link to the traditional tests of evidence. In addition to the verification advice already given, Ward and Hansen urge reporters to make sure information is internally and externally consistent. Is information from different sources used within a story consistent? Does information derived from one source agree with other sources? When dealing with different pieces of information, Ward and Hansen urge that they be compared for quality.

Not all sources are equal, and the reporter who believes he has written a balanced story merely by quoting all sides of an issue could be wrong. A reporter has to evaluate all sources for knowledge and credibility. What is the source's reputation? A congenital liar is useless. Ward and Hansen also suggest that the reporter ensure that the information has been provided in its true context and that any statistics be validly derived. That means checking the original document. Also, does the information have one unmistakable meaning? Is it recent? Is it relevant?

A reporter must interview not only the people who speak up the most or the loudest, but also the people who are silent. Beware of people who claim to represent a segment of the community and who sound as though they might. Check with other people in the community to see if the spokesperson is self-appointed or really representative.

³Jean Ward and Kathleen A. Hansen, *Search Strategies in Mass Communication* (New York: Longman, 1987), 35.

In researching stories, reporters need to appreciate that their best sources may not be the people at the top but the people at the middle level. People at the top feel the need to hoard and guard information, for they believe that to share it is to diminish their power and authority. A reporter who relies on such people will be their servant, which is not a good position for a journalist to be in.

Reporters also need to cultivate sources on their beat. Talk to people without interviewing them. Develop a rapport. Every conversation doesn't need to result in a story. The reporter whose every contact with someone results in a story will give the source the feeling that the reporter is using the source. Cultivate sources the way you would a garden. Do a little work everyday but don't try to harvest crops everyday.

News stories begin with background work. Not doing background work is akin to starting a novel in the middle. Sources appreciate a reporter who has done some background work. A good reporter checks the clip files so she knows something about the story and so she can fine-tune her questions. Approaching a source with too broad a question could result in a rebuff.

One beginning journalist found himself losing an interview with the administrator of a hospital because his first question was: "Tell me everything you know about the open meetings law." Granted, the interview had to do with whether the hospital's board came under the law, but the question was the reporter's way of finding out what the law was. He should have read the law and background clips in order to have specific questions for the interview. Remember, specific questions usually beget specific answers. (The next chapter discusses what to do when they don't.)

SOURCES OF STORIES

Stories can be found in many places. Curious reporters listen during conversations at social events. They read specialized journals. Meetings, of course, generate follow-up story ideas. Journalists also ask themselves what might interest readers and what readers need to know. The classified advertising section of a newspaper, especially the legal advertisements, yields tips on stories. It never hurts when bumping into someone you see only occasionally to greet him or her with a "What's new?" and then to stand back and listen. Try that in a beauty shop or barber shop. Both businesses traffic in information (some people call it gossip, or unverified information).

News releases also offer story ideas. The announcement that a

company has a new CEO (chief executive officer) may mean the previous one was fired. Is the company having problems? Or a new CEO may suggest a news feature or personality profile. A news release announcing shorter hours at the local library could lead an inquisitive reporter to find out what's behind the change. Perhaps a change in state funding caused a shortfall in the library's budget and forced the cutback. The taxpayers and library's users need to know about this.

Then there is investigative reporting. Andrew Schneider of the *Pittsburgh Press* once gave a talk titled "Eight steps toward successful investigative reporting,"⁴ and, while this chapter focuses on the more basic reporting concepts, Schneider's ideas can still be applied. A story, he said, starts with an idea. Step two is research and identification of sources. In steps three, four and five, determine the scope and timeline of the story and develop a budget. Step six is figuring out the objectives and step seven is preparing the story. (Step eight is layout, which is beyond the scope of this book.)

Schneider says that the reporter is the best source for a story idea, since a reporter exploring her own idea will be doing something she wants to do. But he also notes, as previously mentioned, that ideas can come from editors and fellow reporters.

Idea in mind, a reporter next does some research and identifies sources. The reporter wants to make sure she's not going over old ground. She's looking for a fresh approach. Then she wants to know what and who her sources are going to be and where the information she wants can be found.

Now the reporter must determine the scope of her story. "In your initial planning," Schneider says, "you've got to know where you're going." The problem Schneider is warning against is the one of a reporter picking a topic that is too wide in scope. Such stories become unwieldy. If the reporter lacks a hypothesis, she will have difficulty doing research and determining the scope of her story. Narrowing a general area like "the city jail" to specific questions like "Are they starving the prisoners?" is an essential step in shaping good news stories, according to one editor, who adds that a journalist needs to know the difference between an area (city

⁴ Andrew Schneider, "Eight Steps toward Successful Investigative Reporting," speech given at the Roy W. Howard Public Affairs Reporting Seminar, Bloomington, IN (September 3-4, 1988).

jail) and a story (Are they starving the prisoners?)⁵

At some newspapers, the timeline, as Schneider calls it, does matter. Some reporters have been turned loose and allowed to do research for an extended period before starting to write, although this is less likely to occur at smaller news outlets. Editors need to know how long a reporter might be researching a story so they can deploy other newsroom resources accordingly. Good stories take time, and editors know that and will allow for it.

When it comes to a budget for a story, editors need to know what kind of travel the reporter is planning. This dovetails with the earlier step of identifying sources. Some sources may be in the state capital or in Washington, D.C. Will Freedom of Information requests need to be filed? Will an attorney be needed to help in the process?

The objectives stage encompasses many of the preceding stages. Schneider says reporters need to know

- what it is they want to write or photograph,
- what has been done before,
- who are possible sources,
- what are the ground rules (Will your editors allow off-the-record interviews, etc.?),
- how long will it take and how many people are involved,
- and how much will it cost?

Story preparation caps off the reporter's work. This is where the fruit of the reporter's research pays off. Schneider warns that writing a story about something being wrong isn't of much use if the story doesn't include information on how something should be done right.

Schneider's approach isn't the only one. Ward and Hansen note the amount of back and forth that occurs between and among a reporter's sources on a particular story. The process they describe emphasizes that what a reporter learns in an interview may lead her to a library source and a source subsequently found in the library may lead the reporter back to the person interviewed. The Ward-Hansen model begins with developing the right questions and ends with the selection and synthesis of the information gathered, a process that results in a story.

Another approach comes from Robert I. Berkman, the author of *Find*

⁵Frank Caperton, "Finding the Story in an Idea and Other Advice to Journalism Students," speech given at the Roy W. Howard Public Affairs Reporting Seminar, Bloomington, IN (September 3-4, 1988).

It Fast: How to Uncover Expert Information on Any Subject, a book that every reporter should have.⁶ Berkman starts by defining the goal of a search, locating the basic sources, obtaining the technical sources, talking to experts, redirecting focus (as needed) and getting expert review.

PERSONAL BIAS CAN AFFECT REPORTING

All manner of biases can affect the work of journalists. S. Holly Stocking and Paget H. Gross have compiled a list of problem areas that journalists and journalism students need to be aware of.⁷ They note, among other things, that journalists can rely on an eyewitness, although eyewitnesses are not necessarily reliable. They warn against making too much of a compelling anecdote that contradicts scientifically collected statistics. Contrary to the oft-stated remark that exceptions prove the rule, exceptions *don't* prove anything. Stocking and Gross caution against a reporter's predisposition leading him only to those sources that confirm the story the reporter believes exists. And they advise journalists to be careful about false correlations.

Citing earlier research, Stocking and Gross warn about problems with eyewitnesses. "Observations can vary and err as a function of a variety of factors such as prejudice, temporary expectations, the types of details being observed, and stress," they write. Several years ago, clerks from stores that had been robbed picked the robber from a line-up. The news media had a field day because the person identified was a Catholic priest. So confident were they of their eyewitnesses, that the police never checked the priest's alibi. Six months later, the real robber confessed. Not surprisingly to specialists, the robber and the priest didn't even come close to looking alike. The eyewitnesses were unreliable for a variety of reasons, among them stress. When you're looking down the barrel of a pistol, you're not focusing on the person holding the gun but on the gun itself.⁸

Stocking and Gross say people fail to appreciate the validity of statistical information against the randomness of a compelling anecdote. Journalists, they say, need to be cautious that the anecdote they use fits the statistical information. People tend to generalize from anecdotes even

⁶It's now in the fifth edition.

⁷Holly S. Stocking and Paget H. Gross, "Understanding Errors, Biases That Can Affect Journalists," *Journalism Educator*, 43(1): 4-11 (Spring 1989).

⁸The priest, Bernard T. Pagano, died in 2006 at the age of 81. Alas, the lead on his obituary cited the mistaken identity. No doubt Father Pagano would have preferred something else.

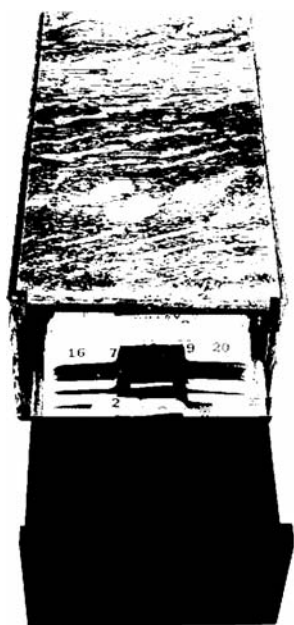
when the anecdotes and the statistics disagree. If the anecdote doesn't fit, don't use it.

Journalists need to be cautious when seeking out sources to test a theory. They shouldn't discount sources that refute the theory. There is nothing wrong with a journalist researching a story from a particular hypothesis, but the journalist needs to work as hard at disproving the hypothesis as proving it. Some journalists, Stocking and Gross note, will discount as shoddy the sources that contradict their hypothesis.

As suggested earlier, sources need to be evaluated for their biases. A group of Republicans will most likely respond positively to a speech by a Republican president than a Democratic one. Generalizing their response to the population as a whole fails to take into account the biased nature of the source.

Correlation problems occur when, for example, a characteristic and an event are associated in meaning by someone. Stocking and Gross cite the example of associating men with long hair and demonstrations, noting that once that correlation is made journalists covering a demonstration may overestimate the number of long-haired men at an event. A reporter could also associate a long-haired man with a certain political leaning and then assume all long-haired men have the same politics. Likewise, there's the assumption that all college professors are liberals. They aren't. (Although research shows that they, like journalists, are more likely to be liberal.)

Reporting requires journalists to be aware of themselves and their sources. Good reporters are curious; they want to know everything. They examine many sources. The next chapter continues to examine the techniques reporters use and some of the sources.



GATHERING INFORMATION

News comes from a variety of sources, and reporters mine those sources using a variety of techniques. Three major sources of information are interviews, reporter observation and documents.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews can range from a quick question after a town council meeting to a scheduled rendezvous. Whatever the level, a reporter needs to be prepared. The preparation can range from just thinking about the questions that need to be asked to delving into the newspaper's library or electronic database and doing extensive research on the person to be interviewed. Even Google might yield information worth having, but make sure the person uncovered in Google is the same person you're going to interview.

The best interviews often are conducted in person rather than over the telephone, via fax or e-mail. The in-person interview gives a reporter a chance to meet the subject face to face, to see the subject as the subject responds to particular questions and to observe the interview subject in his or her environment. Other technologies can be useful as reporting tools, but none is a substitute for being there in person.

The face-to-face interview suggests a greater commitment on part of the source and the journalist, and it gives the journalist the opportunity to try several approaches to getting answers to questions. The face-to-face interview sometimes means the journalist goes to the source's office, which also provides the opportunity for a journalist to learn something by chance.

Interviews also provide reporters with the possibility of getting some useful direct quotations. They allow

- people to tell the story in their own words, which can sometimes be better than the reporter's,

- reporters to gather anecdotes, which enable them to put abstract ideas into human terms,
- a reporter the opportunity to get the subject of the interview to reveal herself or himself.

Never go into an interview without having done as much research as possible about the person and the subject matter. Granted, the purpose of the interview is to learn something, but in many cases, reporters who have done their homework use interviews to confirm what they already know.

Furthermore, a source will have a difficult time toying with the facts if the reporter has prepared in advance. And how does the source know? By the questions asked. The questions are evidence that a reporter has prepared herself. And if that isn't enough — if a source answers a question that is inconsistent with the reporter's research — she can always say: "According to what I've read ..." and go on to correct the record.

In preparing for an interview, a reporter will come up with a series of questions. An unskilled interviewer makes the mistake of asking only prepared questions rather than picking up cues that may lead to different questions. Listen for the unexpected and follow the trail from there. Don't stick to a script when a better story is unexpectedly unfolding.

Be careful not to interrupt someone in the middle of an answer. That could sidetrack the person and destroy the response. If, during an answer, a good question comes up, jot it down in the margin of your notepad, highlight it, and get back to it later.

Related to this advice is the saying "dumb is smart." Don't assume anything. If the subject of an interview starts to explain something you think you already understand, don't say, "Oh, I know what you mean. Here's my next question." Let the person explain, because the person may end up saying something you don't know. He or she may give you the unexpected.

Frequently, the best questions in an interview come after the formal interview is over and the reporter has put the notebook away. During the chit-chat that follows, the reporter may ask a question that catches the source off guard and results in a candid answer.

The master of this was a television detective named "Lieutenant Columbo." Played by Peter Falk, Columbo was adept at seemingly having ended an interview and being on his way out the door when he would turn around and catch the unaware suspect with this: "Just one more question, if you don't mind." Caught off guard, the respondent (who was also the murderer and had rehearsed his answers) would say something he had not planned on saying, and it provided Columbo with the insight

he needed to solve the crime.

If at all possible, conduct more than one interview, especially when you don't know the subject. Stranger to stranger does not make for the best of interview conditions. Once the interview subject knows the reporter, he or she probably will be looser the next time and provide a better interview. This is especially crucial in profiles, where a reporter is trying to capture the essence of someone. If more than one interview is impossible, a reporter would do well to begin the interview with casual conversation just to set the subject at ease. Remember: Most people are not adept at dealing with the news media.

The reporter should begin the interview by stating its purpose. "I'm writing a story on the parking situation in town, Mayor Bailey, and I want to get your feelings on the matter." This is a focusing statement, both for you and for the mayor. It functions just like a headline on a story and can be useful should the subject start to stray from the topic. The reporter can always restate the opening statement as a polite way of bringing the interviewee back to the topic.

What you're saying is interesting, Mayor Bailey, but I want to get back to the purpose of the interview — the parking situation — because your time is valuable.

The reporter sets the tone for the interview, and the wrong tone from the outset can destroy the interview. For that reason, don't ask touchy questions first. Starting off with soft questions not only relaxes the interview subject but also allows the reporter to establish a set of answers against which later answers can be compared. It is the same approach an attorney uses in court when questioning a hostile witness.

When the tough questions need to be asked, the reporter should make every effort not to antagonize the subject by acting as though the questions originated with the reporter. The reporter is not an advocate for a particular cause and should not sound like one. When tough questions need to be asked, the reporter can deflect antagonism by casting them in a way that does not offend the subject. In other words, don't put the subject of an interview on the defensive.

For example, let's say you're interviewing a controversial local politician who has not cooperated with the news media and, in fact, has been hostile. Furthermore, she doesn't like your newspaper because your newspaper has criticized her in editorials. She doesn't understand the separation between the newsroom and the editorial page, between news and commentary on the news. She thinks you're out to get her, period.

You need to preface the touchy questions in a way that makes someone else the source of the questions. Try this:

Mayor Bailey, let me play devil's advocate¹ on this parking issue. I want to outline some different approaches to solving the parking problem and see what you think of them.

With this approach, the mayor's position is being challenged, but not by you. The mayor may react negatively, but not toward you. If that approach doesn't work, wait a few questions and then come back.

Mayor Bailey, some people would say that the better way to solve the parking problem is not by building a new garage but by instituting a park-and-ride program. How do you feel about that?

What the reporter is trying to do is distance herself from the parking issue. The reporter is trying to get a variety of views on the issue, including the mayor's, but the reporter should not imply through her questions how she feels about the issue.

Most questions should be cast as neutrally as possible. Remember some of the comments in the last chapter about reporter bias? Imagine the reporter whose question leads the interview subject to an answer.

Tell us about the terrible parking situation in your city, Mayor Bailey.

That question presumes the parking situation is terrible. It may be, but let the mayor tell you that. You've done your homework and you know the facts.

Mayor Bailey, how would you describe the parking situation?

Not bad.

But, Mayor, people are complaining that there's no place to park.

It's their imagination.

But, Mayor, I checked with the police department the other day and they tell me that they've issued 50 percent more tickets for illegal parking

¹In journalism, someone who politely asks questions that challenge the beliefs of the person being interviewed. In the Catholic Church, the devil's advocate was a priest who was called upon to report — warts and all — on someone who had been nominated for beatification or canonization. The position was abolished in the late 20th century.

this year than for the same period last year.

Fifty percent?

Yes.

That sounds pretty bad to me.

The tone of questions needs to fluctuate. If all of your questions are neutral, the person being interviewed will be given a platform to say anything. As the previous example shows, when the neutral question elicits an answer that doesn't square with the facts, the reporter can change the tone of the questions. Avoid questions that can be answered "yes" or "no," but when they can't be avoided, follow up with: "Can you elaborate on that?" or "Why did you say that?"

In another approach, the reporter keeps repeating the question "Why?" after every answer. You see, answers are like the descending rings to hell in Dante's *Inferno*, and if you keep asking "Why?" the subject of the interview will keep digging deeper to answer the question. A variation of "Why?" is "Why's that?" The repetition approach suggests that people answer questions superficially. They're not trying to deceive; they believe they have answered the question. When a reporter keeps asking "Why?" the person being questioned works a little harder on the answer and a better answer usually results. The repeated question suggests that the reporter is looking for a precise answer. The source appreciates that. After all, imprecision reflects badly on the source.

Make sure that the subject of an interview labels fact, opinion and second-hand observation. Mayor Bailey may say that the police have issued 25 percent more parking tickets this year, and while that sounds like a fact, the reporter should confirm the figure with the police. Trust but verify. Just as a matter of routine, a reporter should attempt to verify all facts or, as the legendary advice from a Chicago newsroom goes: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out."

Make sure that you understand the answer to a question, and if you don't, tell the subject of the interview that you don't. The person should be willing to recast the answer so it's clear to you. If it isn't clear to you, you're not going to explain it well in your story. Furthermore, if you get an answer that doesn't seem to fit, ask how the answer relates to the situation being discussed. This can be done agreeably simply by saying: "I don't see how that fits. Would you tie it in for me, please?"

During the interview, if at all possible, don't tip your hand. Don't tell anyone your interview schedule. Let the subjects of interviews infer where you've been and where you're going, but never confirm unless you need to challenge a statement. For example, a banker once said to a reporter during an interview: "Well, you'll see this in the court documents

anyway.” The reporter, who was new to the job, didn’t let on that he hadn’t thought of looking at the court documents, but you can be sure that he was in the courthouse at 8 a.m. the next day. By acting dumb, he was led to a gold mine.

A reporter can lead the subject of an interview in more ways than one. Neutral questions, of course, are one way of avoiding this problem. Reporters must also be aware of other signals they send – signals that could be misinterpreted by the subject of an interview. For example, reporters should be consistent in their note-taking. Don’t convey to someone that what he is saying isn’t important by suddenly stopping the note-taking process. Even if you’re writing down trivia, write it down. Besides, it may not be trivia later.

Also, reporters can use various cues to keep the subject of an interview talking. Saying “uh-huh” or “OK” or nodding your head reinforces the person being interviewed and he wants to keep talking. Broadcast journalists frequently nod their heads to keep someone talking and reduce the necessity of cutting into an interview to keep it going. This technique aids the videographer, but it has practical advantages for the print journalist as well.

Another effective approach is silence. Most people abhor a verbal vacuum and will keep talking to fill it. As long as they stay on the topic, let them talk. Who knows what they’ll say?

OBSERVATION

Here is the beginning of the first of seven stories on people who were discharged from mental asylums under the guise of social reform. The series was written by Donald C. Drake and published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.²

Dawn was just beginning to brighten the eastern sky. It was a sunrise that went unnoticed by the man asleep on the steam grate opposite Rittenhouse Square, folded up between a concrete trash receptacle and a newspaper vending machine.

An electric digital display in a nearby bank window gave the time: 5:54.

The sleeping man was wearing baggy corduroy pants, a wool hat, a shirt and a dirty blanket worn over his shoulders like a shawl.

²Donald C. Drake, “The Forsaken: How America Has Abandoned Thousands in the Name of Social Progress,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (July 18, 1982), p. 1.

His eyes still closed, the man reached into his open shirt to scratch at the lice, as he had been doing all night. A bread truck roared by on Walnut Street, followed a few minutes later by a milk truck. Then it was quiet again.

The sidewalk, which in two hours would be crowded with people hurrying to their jobs, was deserted now. The only signs of life were the man and a lone car that waited obediently at an empty intersection for the light to change.

The man started to stir and, still without opening his eyes, pushed himself up to a sitting position, leaning back against the concrete trash receptacle. Joggers began to appear across the street, resolutely circling the park, too intent on their exercise to notice the solitary man.

It took a long time, maybe 15 or 20 minutes, for the man to wake up fully, but by 6:15 his eyes were open wide, staring down the elegant street that had been his home for three years. At first he did nothing but sit, stare and scratch.

Another day was beginning for Jim Logue Crawford, 69, former mental hospital patient.

How do you suppose Drake captured that vignette? Do you think that perhaps he awoke at 7 a.m. and went to his office, then walked to Rittenhouse Square, found Jim Crawford and interviewed him? Or do you think he was in Rittenhouse Square observing Crawford when he awoke?

You're right. Drake was in Rittenhouse Square on his 18-month tracking of released mental patients in Philadelphia. He wanted to know how they lived, so he observed them. It is part of Drake's approach to be, in his words, "more than a facts and figure reporter."

Reporters should use observation in all manner of stories, from the most basic to the most extensive. Take a fire, for example. Is the account of a fire all facts and figures? Well, it can be. Somewhere the time of the alarm is recorded and the number of trucks and firefighters dispatched is known. It's often not hard to find the owners of the property. The insurance company, among others, can give an estimate of the damage. Those are facts and figures, and should be reported. But what about the reporter's observations? They're valid also and can be made part of the story.

Here, for example, is a story about a fire. (The complete story is in Chapter 4.). The reporter's observations are *italicized*:

A quick-burning fire roared through the body and parts shop of D&M Chrysler Plymouth Inc. Sunday morning, destroying seven cars and reducing the concrete-block building to a blackened shell.

Fire officials are estimating the loss to the business at \$800,000. The

owners of the dealership, Daniel and Michael Faretta, had only \$290,000 insurance on the building and its contents, according to City Fire Chief Reynold D. Santone. ...

Good reporters include in their notes not only what they heard and read, but also what they saw. Good reporters draw heavily on all of their senses. Not only does a journalist record what he sees, but what he hears and smells.

Recording observations requires a reporter to function more like a vacuum cleaner than an editor. Throw out your biases, your stereotypes, your predispositions. Keep an open mind. Rather than making a judgment that an observation is not worth recording, a reporter should include it in his notes. Later, especially when working with a writing coach, the reporter may discover in his notebook the telling observation that binds the story.

What should a reporter observe?

Tom Wolfe suggests paying attention to people's status in life.³ Look at their furniture, how they decorate their house, what color scheme they used. Others suggest reporting body language. In one memorable political campaign, two opponents sat next to each other during a candidates' night. One was running a dirty campaign. Throughout the night, the other, a woman, sat legs crossed and knees pointing almost at a right angle away from her opponent. It was clear she did not like the person.

Also report physical characteristics. You don't have to say someone is big. You might say that when the person sits, he fills a chair with no room to spare. Look for touching. Some people touch others unconsciously. Other people abhor touching and recoil if touched. Touching can also suggest intimacy between two people, an intimacy they may be trying to keep private. Look for the way people interact — how something is said rather than what is said.

How people dress is worth observing. But, as with any observation, don't make judgments; merely report. Let the reader make the judgments. Let the reader decide if the person with a green shirt and red tie and argyle socks and gray suit is badly dressed. (Find out first if the person isn't color blind. "Excuse me, Mayor, but I can't help noticing the color scheme you chose today.")

Also remember that your observations are exactly that — yours — and that any event comes with multiple perspectives. The observations of

³Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, with an anthology edited by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

others are worth getting because they can reinforce yours or help fill out the picture you are trying to draw.

Just as a notepad and recorder have been useful for journalists, so has the camera. Film cameras, however, were clumsy to use because the journalist needed to get film developed and prints made. But the contents of a digital camera can be transferred to a computer for instant viewing and review by the writer. An inexpensive digital camera is a great reporting tool.

Observation requires the reporter to behave like a fly on the wall — unnoticed and unobtrusive. Don't annoy anyone. Just watch. Take it all in, and then use it to be more than a facts and figures reporter.

DOCUMENTS

Documents are a great source of information. A valuable document can be something as simple as a one-page memo to an annual budget or an income report by a nonprofit group to the federal government. A document, assuming it is not a forgery, is proof of something. It may prove a past action, or it may suggest a future action. Journalists love documents in any form — parchment, paper, film, digital.

One of the most basic of all documents is the telephone book. There a reporter can find a name, an address, verify a spelling, check an area or zip code, or locate a business. Another useful directory is a city directory in which the town is divided block by block. Such a directory tells who lives side by side and who lives across the street. Such a directory gives the phone numbers of each person, and it also has a cross listing that allows a reporter to locate someone by address or alphabetically. One reporter covered a fire by telephone in a town 40 miles away merely by finding people who lived near the scene of the fire, calling them on the telephone and interviewing them.

Still another standard document is the map. Good maps are divided into grids and list street names and grid coordinates. Maps help people see relationships. Some maps show physical characteristics, such as forests and mountains and the highways and byways. Roads are designated by ownership and responsibility, so it's useful to have a quick source to figure out if a particular road is a U.S. route, a state route or a municipal street.

Government offices are repositories of documents. On the local level are planning and zoning documents, official correspondence, contracts, the results of health and code inspections, and so on. Courthouses offer, in addition to court decisions, copies of wills and deeds, listings of property ownership and the assessed value of the property. Many legal

transactions must be recorded with some office in the courthouse, and with the possible exception of sealed court decisions or court actions regarding juveniles, these transactions are available for public consumption.

One immediate source of documents is the newspaper's library. A good newspaper, even a small one, attempts to have on hand certain local documents that are referred to from time to time. Within this category are the newspaper's own clip and computer files. What the reporter can glean from the library is whether or not the story has already been done or what related stories might have been done locally. Checking other newspaper Web sites to see what they've done on a particular subject is useful.

Good reporters, by the way, are not lulled into believing that what they retrieve from an electronic database is gospel. Information in many databases is only as good as the sources it was derived from. Just because Google provides a link to a search term doesn't mean the link is accurate. The digital age has allowed anyone to create a Web site.

Good sources are those that are overseen by experts. A good example would be the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which has been compiled by experts known for their depth of knowledge about a particular subject. A good example of a source to stay away from is Wikipedia, which bills itself as a free encyclopedia. It's an encyclopedia in name only. Anything free should be automatically suspect. Wikipedia is problematic because just about anyone can edit any entry and instances of erroneous information appearing have been noted in the news media from time to time.⁴

A library that is a repository for state and federal documents — known as a Federal Depository Library — is an excellent place to do research, especially if the topic is national and the reporter is adapting it to the local situation. Such a library holds copies of congressional hearings, which offer not only a great deal of background but also the names of people the reporter can call. Market and corporate information is probably available in such a library. Also available are thousands of reference books, magazines and reviews. And while a particular book may not focus directly on the issue being researched, its index and bibliography might allow the reporter to find more specific sources. One of the best resources

⁴In what is perhaps the most egregious case, someone edited an entry about a respected journalist to suggest he had been involved in the assassination of President Kennedy and his brother Bobby. The entry also said the journalist had been a Nazi and lived in the Soviet Union for a period. One can imagine the lead on the journalist's obituary based on the false entry in Wikipedia. Fortunately he was able to get it corrected.

in any library is the librarian himself. Librarians are experts at finding credible information or knowing how to find such information and being able to distinguish between credible sources and questionable sources.

NOTE-TAKING

Taking accurate notes is a critical part of good reporting. The best reporting effort in the world can be undermined by inaccurate or illegible notes.

The computer and the photocopying machine have reduced the chance for error, simply because no human hand intercedes in the note-taking process. But when covering a meeting or interviewing someone, a reporter relies on a notebook and a pencil or pen.

Note-taking is an individual art, and as long as the notes are clear and accurate when the reporter sits down to write, the particular approach to taking notes does not matter. One reporter's methods may not work for another reporter.

Unless you have learned shorthand, you will need to make up your own. Look for words that readily lend themselves to abbreviation or a short form and develop a standardized shorthand. For example:

Shorthand	Meaning	Shorthand	Meaning
/w	with	gov	government
/wo	without	fed	federal
thru	through	demo	demonstration
&	and	rel	related
devel	develop	bus	business
devels	developers	orig	original
b4	before	alt	alternate
hier	higher	pt	point
hi	high	st	state
½	one-half	pop	population
rec	recommendation	est	estimate
appx	approximate	acc	according to

So if someone said: "We need an estimate of the state and federal populations before we can make a recommendation on development," the reporter's shorthand might produce: "we need est st-fed pops b4 make rec on devel."

Each reporting situation presents unique opportunities for shorthand. For example, a reporter usually abbreviates the names of speakers at a meeting, being careful not to shorten anyone's name to a single letter so

that the reporter doesn't confuse the person with someone else whose last name begins with the same letter.

Also make sure a question ends with a question mark. That may sound silly, unless you realize that note taking is not the art of writing down every word, but usually just the key words of an interview or meeting. So if City Council Member Beverly Jones asks if taxes are going to increase next year, the reporter's notebook might look like this: *J: taxes up?*

Verbatim note-taking has its drawbacks. It's more important for a reporter to understand what is being said before writing anything down. Not everything said is worth recording. Listen for stage directions and rhetorical throat-clearing that really mean nothing, except as facilitators in a meeting. If the chairman of a meeting says, "OK, what do we do next?" why write it down? And if someone says, "Let's do parking," why write it down until everyone has spoken and the group had decided what to discuss next?

Rhetorical throat-clearing may be worth getting into your notes, but not at first sound. Rhetorical throat-clearing includes words and phrases that a speaker begins a statement with as he or she gropes mentally for the right words to make the salient point he or she wants to make. For example:

"After careful thought and in my considered opinion, I say we don't raise taxes."

The salient point is the speaker's statement not to raise taxes. That's what the reporter must get in his notes. The throat-clearing is unnecessary.

Elsewhere in a notepad are the reporter's checkmarks. They indicate items in the notebook that — after the meeting — the reporter has to check back with someone to clarify a fact or a statement. Such checking is laudatory and professional. It enables a journalist to write an accurate story and also develop credibility with sources. Some journalists might use a question mark to signal an ambiguous line in his notes, but a question mark could be read as indicating a question. The check mark says "check."

Some other tricks come to mind. One journalist uses a grid when covering some multiple-speaker events as a way of cataloguing their positions. For example, in the coverage of a candidate's night, she set up a grid with the names of the six candidates across the top and the issues, as they arose, down the left hand side. She still took thorough notes, but she used the grid to develop an instant summary of where the candidates stood on the issues. The grid became a story-organizing device, since she

could organize her story by lumping together the candidates who agreed on the issues. It also enabled her to contrast statements and positions.

One favorite notebook is a 6-by-9-inch pad with a rule down the center. The center rule enables reporters, such as sportswriters, to use halves of the page to record actions by the opposing teams. For a football game, a sportswriter can go down the left side for one team's offensive drive and then switch to the other half after a score or a punt or a fumble and record the other team on that half of the page. The sportswriter can use the blank space opposite her notes to put asterisks to signify key plays that she wants to get into her story. Such an approach doubles as an outline and enables the writer to begin writing as the game is ending.

Some beginning journalists use digital recorders for the most routine events. A digital recorder is useful as a back-up in a long interview and can be played back to check a quote or a fact. But a recorder is not infallible, and its use should never supersede a notebook and several sharp pencils or fresh pens.

One of the country's best nonfiction writers, Tracy Kidder, seldom uses a tape-recorder. He doesn't like them because the tapes must be transcribed, the recorders are unwieldy and they miss subtleties. "Also," Kidder once said, "a tape-recorder tends to make me lazy, so I might stop taking notes and miss a lot."⁵

Gathering information requires journalists to explore a variety of sources and use a variety of techniques, all aimed at producing accurate stories. The best stories come from the best research.

⁵Michael Schumacher, "How Tracy Kidder Writes His Books," *Writer's Digest* (November 1990), p. 33.