

Chapter 6

Inside the Profession: Objectivity and Political Authority

"Objectivity" demanded more discipline of reporters and editors because it expected every item to be attributed to some authority. No traffic accident could be reported without quoting a police sergeant. No wartime incident was recounted without confirmation from government officials.

"Objectivity" placed overwhelming emphasis on established, official voices and tended to leave unreported large areas of genuine relevance that authorities chose not to talk about. . . . It widened the chasm that is a constant threat to democracy—the difference between the realities of private power and the illusions of public imagery.

Ben Bagdikian

Can the news be objective? Should it be? If you ask most people what's wrong with the press, the common answer is that journalists fail in their obligation to be fair or objective. (Recall the discussion in Chapter 1.) The bias question is confounded by the fact that most people view the world through their own political biases and think that perspectives deviating from their views are unbalanced. Because there are so many different views operating in the public on almost any issue, the quest for news coverage that strikes a majority as fair, balanced, or objective appears to be an impossible dream. However, the paradox of converting something as value-driven as politics into generic news does not stop people from demanding this of journalists. As explained in Chapter 1, it is commonly assumed that the problem of news bias involves journalists abandoning their professional norms and practices to insert their personal prejudices into their reporting. In this chapter, we will consider the disturbing possibility that the

most serious biases in the news occur not when journalists abandon their professional standards, but when they cling most responsibly to them.

JOURNALISTS AND THEIR PROFESSION

Some things have changed and other things have stayed much the same in the ways journalists view their jobs. For example, the speed of communication has increased greatly in the past quarter century, and journalists correspondingly sense the importance of getting the news out quickly. In the early 1970s, 56 percent of journalists surveyed regarded getting information to the public quickly as extremely important. By the 1990s, 69 percent felt that news speed was a top priority. Perhaps due to the pressures to produce news quickly, the perceived need to provide analysis of complex problems in the news dropped from 61 percent to 48 percent. The avoidance of complex stories may, in turn, account for a somewhat diminished sense of the importance of investigating government claims—long the hallmark of journalism's contribution to democracy. The perceived importance of investigative reporting dropped from 76 percent to 67 percent from the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s.¹ Perhaps the soul searching of the profession in recent years accounts for a bit of a rebound to over 70 percent in a 2002 survey.²

Yet for all the change, one feature of the profession that has remained nearly constant since the rise of a professional press in the 1920s to the present day is the overriding commitment to objectivity—the idea that there is some essential reality that can be reported and that it should be reported through the words and facts offered by authoritative sources.³ The irony is that this notion of objectivity is not easy to defend: officials are known to have biases, facts are easily disputed, and the news can never include all the viewpoints that may be important to understanding events. As charges of press bias have become more intense in recent years, many journalists backed away from the term *objectivity* and used words such as *balance* and *fairness*. Whatever its name, there is a broad, exceptionally American, cultural ideal to cast politics in broad public-interest terms and essential procedures that are free of, well, "politics." Journalists are both the carriers of this ideal and its major casualties.

Some observers have claimed that journalists are not so much committed to objectivity as they are to a scientific approach to reporting the world as a defense mechanism that protects them against criticism in a nearly impossible job. Sociologist Gaye Tuchman called objectivity a "strategic ritual" that offers a defense against career-threatening moments in which a risky report might receive the brunt of official or other public condemnation.⁴ The curious result of seeking a common reality is perhaps the most standardized reporting system in the free world—a system that blurs the lines between objectivity and political authority, and between fact and political spin.

THE PARADOX OF OBJECTIVE REPORTING

"If only the press would be more objective. . . ." Every embattled politician since George Washington has accused the press of adversarial coverage, and most members of the public seem convinced that the news, at worst, has a liberal, rather than an

establishment, slant.⁵ Nowhere in this popular view is there much room for the idea that the news follows the lead of powerful elites and well-organized interest groups, while underreporting the interests of large numbers of silent Americans.

This chapter confronts the paradox of objective journalism by showing that the news is biased not in spite of, but precisely because of, the professional journalism standards intended to prevent bias. The central idea is that the professional practices embodying journalism norms of independence and objectivity also create conditions that systematically favor the reporting of official perspectives. At the same time, the postures of independence and objectivity created by the use of these professional practices give the impression that the resulting news is the best available representation of reality. In short, professional journalism standards introduce a distorted political perspective into the news yet legitimize that perspective as broad and realistic.

DEFINING OBJECTIVITY: FAIRNESS, BALANCE, AND TRUTH

Journalists sometimes substitute terms such as *accuracy*, *fairness*, *balance*, or *truth* in place of *objectivity* to describe the prime goal that guides their reporting. Objectivity is a tough standard to achieve, particularly with so many critics and citizens charging that journalists today do not even come close to achieving it. Accuracy, balance, and fairness are softer. They seem to be more reasonable reporting goals in light of all the obstacles to objectivity:

- The values inherent in political events
- The deceptions of newsmakers
- The difficulty of achieving a wholly neutral point of view
- The impossibility of covering all the sides and gathering all the facts
- The rush to meet unreasonably short deadlines

Because of these difficulties, the press is sure to come under fire no matter how hard it tries to present the facts. To many embattled journalists, accuracy, balance, or fairness sound like more defensible goals. One sign of the times is that the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics dropped the word *objectivity* in 1996 after many years of featuring it as the core principle. However, journalist and historian David Mindich notes that *objectivity* was replaced in the code with terms such as *truth*, *accuracy*, and *comprehensiveness*. In his view, the decision to replace *objectivity* with these synonyms signals that many journalists are tired of defending an embattled word, yet remain committed to its meaning and guiding spirit.⁶ There is strong evidence that no matter which name it goes by, the vast majority of journalists subscribe to an ideal of objectivity. For example, in a 1999 national survey conducted by the Pew Center, three-quarters of journalists polled agreed that their ideal standard is to report the "true, accurate, and widely agreed upon account of an event."⁷

Changing the names of reporting ideals might be more laudable if there were also changes in the actual practices that create the news information biases discussed in Chapter 2. The new terms, however, refer to much the same journalistic practices that once passed under the lofty claim of objectivity. Moreover, fairness, accuracy, or

balance may be even more misleading than objectivity as a description of news content. At least objectivity stands in sharp contrast to the reality of personalized, dramatized, fragmented, and authority-oriented (whether normalized or chaotic) news. *Fairness* or *accuracy* are fuzzier terms that invite rationalizing these information bias as the best we can hope for given the limits within which well-meaning journalists operate.

Consider, for example, the case for the term *fairness*. One may say, isn't presenting the facts offered by both sides and giving them equal time about as close to accuracy as we can get? Isn't *fair* a better description of this approach than *objective*? Consider the number of dubious assumptions on which the term *fairness* rests. First, there is the problem of limiting complex, multisided issues to two sides. Then there is the question of which two sides to admit through the news gate. The two sides that appear in most stories are anything but a broad sample of possible viewpoints. For example, fairness in reporting presidential addresses means that the opposition party will be given an opportunity to reply. Fair enough, right? But this definition is based on the poorly examined, commonsense notion that the two political parties are the two most legitimate other sides in American politics. This assumption is reinforced every time journalists build a story upon it, yet the gradual weakening of ties to parties by both voters and candidates in recent years raises serious doubts about this premise.

A second hallmark of fairness is equal time (as in allowing both sides to present their positions). Given equal time, the information edge goes to the most predictable, stereotypical, official pronouncements in almost every case. New ideas take more time and effort to communicate intelligibly than old, familiar ideas. The press could devote extra time to make new ideas accessible to people, but that would seem unfair to the dominant actors and their supporters. It is safer to stick with an easy idea of fairness that involves granting equal time to the statements of the two most vocal—and often most stereotypical—sides.

All this raises the possibility that seemingly simple ideas such as balance and equal time are not as simple as they may appear. To raise just one more troublesome issue, should balance be achieved in every news story or over a period of time? That is easy, you say. Indeed, most people look for balance in every story, meaning that they cry foul if a report emphasizes one point of view over another. However, as noted above, what if one point of view is seldom heard, and it is more complicated than the already established positions? Why not give new perspectives more time, without interruption from a perspective that is heard every day? Recall the example from Chapter 1 in which CNN's reports of civilian casualties in the war in Afghanistan had to be balanced with constant reminders of American deaths in the terror attacks of 9/11.

When people encounter new ideas alongside familiar ones, the psychological tendency is to discount the new and to embrace the old. When we look at fairness this way, the attempt to achieve balance within every story between new ideas and familiar political formulas hardly seems fair at all. If the goal of the news is to present information so that new perspectives can be grasped along with the old, then a new conception of information balance over time might replace the currently popular assumption that balance within each story is the ideal.

THE ORIGINS OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM STANDARDS

Because the ideas of accuracy, balance, truth, and fairness have their roots in what was originally called objective reporting, the following discussion will use the term *objectivity* to preserve historical continuity. If the reader prefers the alternate terms, feel free to substitute them, but bear in mind that the words may change, but the underlying practices remain much the same.

A review of journalism texts by David Mindich finds a common set of perspectives and practices that reporters are taught and that bring objectivity into their daily work. These defining ingredients of objectivity include: *detachment, nonpartisanship, reliance on "facts," balance, and the use of the inverted pyramid writing style* (which puts the most important facts in the lead paragraph).⁸ The following discussion shows how the ideal of objectivity is embedded in these defining journalistic methods, and thus remains a key to understanding the general workings of news organizations. The standards and practices that embody objective journalism include the following:⁹

1. The professional journalist assumes *the role of a politically neutral adversary*, critically examining both sides of an issue and thereby assuring impartial coverage. Journalists see adversarialism as an important counterpoint to becoming too close to their sources, assuring detachment and balance in their reporting. As discussed in the last chapter, the adversarial role has been corrupted by "gotcha" journalism in recent years, but many journalists and scholars continue to think of this as adversarialism.
2. The journalist resists the temptation to discuss the seamy sensationalistic side of the news by *observing prevailing social standards of decency and good taste*. Standards of taste establish boundaries as a story makes its way toward becoming "objectified." Like adversarialism, this norm has also become strained with the increase of sex scandals and tabloid coverage in the mainstream press. Many critics wonder if news organizations are losing their commitment to sticking to important issues and avoiding rumor and gossip.
3. The truthfulness and factuality of the news is guaranteed by *the use of documentary reporting practices* that permit reporters to transmit to the public "just the facts" that can be observed or supported with credible sources.
4. News objectivity is also established by *the use of a standardized format for reporting the news: the story*. Stories serve as implicit checks on news content by requiring reporters to gather all the facts (who, what, when, where, how, etc.) needed to construct a consistent and plausible account of an incident. Because stories are also the most common means of everyday communication about events, they enable the public to judge the consistency and plausibility of news accounts. Within the story format, journalists use other conventions, such as writing in an inverted pyramid style, meaning, as noted earlier, that the most important elements of the story appear in the lead paragraph.
5. Because they share the above methods, news organizations often favor the idea that reporters should be generalists, not specialists. The use of standardized reporting formats enables any reporter to cover any kind of story, further separating reporters from personal bias vis-à-vis the subject matter of the news. The

practice of training reporters as generalists, as opposed to specialists, also helps to minimize undesirable interpretive tendencies in news reporting.¹⁰ In recent years, specialization has appeared in areas such as the environment, health, science, and technology, but many key areas such as business and politics still favor generalists.

6. The above practices are regulated and enforced by the important practice of *editorial review*, which is a check against violations of the practices and norms of the profession.

These reporting standards are so familiar and sensible that they seem to have been put there to serve obvious and laudable purposes. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any other function for adversarial roles or documentary reporting or standards of good taste than improving the quality and objectivity of the news. Yet the accompanying case study suggests that the evolution of norms such as objectivity, fairness, and balance had more to do with the somewhat haphazard course of the developing news business than with the rational or determined pursuit of truth. In short, practices were dictated more by historical, technological, or business circumstances than by rational human design. The resulting reporting practices later became rationalized as good and even noble things.

The historical story of these modern reporting standards involves a radical shift over the course of the nineteenth century from a press supported largely by political parties to one supported by business models based on the sale of advertising. Journalism historian Gerald Baldasty describes this transformation in these terms: "In the early nineteenth century, editors defined news as a political instrument intended to promote party interests. By century's end, editors defined news within a business context to ensure or increase revenues. News had become commercialized."¹¹ From this commercialization and its continuing evolution to this day, come what we now understand to be sensible and proper ways to report on the world we live in.

Case Study: The Curious Origins of Objective Journalism

It is tempting to think that modern journalism practices derive logically from the norm of objective journalism. However, there is considerable evidence that the practices preceded the norm. The first modern journalism practices can be traced to mid-nineteenth-century economic and social conditions surrounding the rise of mass-market news.¹² According to David Mindich's historical analysis, various components of objective journalism emerged at very different points in time and often under odd circumstances. For example, the "inverted pyramid" style may have originated with a nonjournalist, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who wrote a series of important communiqués about the Civil War.¹³

Mindich claims that the foundations for all the practices that go into objective reporting were established, one at a time, by the end of the 1800s.¹⁴ However, the idea that what many reporters were already doing might be called "objective

journalism" did not appear until after the turn of the century. In many ways, this retrospective ideal of objectivity can be viewed as both an ennobling claim on the part of a journalism trade looking to become a profession, and as a rhetorical appeal to an increasingly educated middle-class news audience who responded favorably to those claims about professionalism.

In the early days of the American republic, the news was anything but objective. Most newspapers were either funded by, or otherwise sympathetic to, particular political parties, interests, or ideologies. Reporting involved the political interpretation of events. People bought a newspaper knowing what its political perspective was and knowing that political events would be filtered through that perspective. In many respects, this is a sensible way to approach the news about politics. If one knows the biases of a reporter, it is possible to control for them in interpreting the account of events. Moreover, if reporting is explicitly politically oriented, different reporters can look at the same event from different points of view. The idea was that people would encounter different points of view and bring them into face-to-face debates about what the best course of action might be—an idea that came directly from some of the nation's founders such as Jefferson.

The commitment to political analysis in news reporting began to fade as the nature of politics itself changed after the age of Jackson from the late 1830s on. As Baldasty notes, politicians became less dependent on party papers to communicate with voters as, among other things, strict norms against candidates campaigning directly in public began to change.¹⁵ With these changes, party financial support for papers began to dry up. The early papers were modest operations with small local readerships. These small and increasingly impoverished newspapers could not compete for large audiences as the nation and its communication system grew.

As the country grew, the economics of the news business changed. For example, the population began to move to the cities, creating mass audiences for the news. Also, the expansion of the American territory during the nineteenth century created a need for the rapid and large-scale distribution of national news. Breakthroughs in printing and communication technologies made possible the production of cheap mass media news that could be gathered in the morning on the East Coast and distributed by evening on the West Coast.

These and other patterns in the development of the nation produced dramatic changes in the news. By 1848, a group of newspapers made the first great step toward standardized news by forming the Associated Press (AP).¹⁶ Pooling reporters and selling the same story to hundreds, and eventually thousands, of subscribing newspapers meant that the news had become a profitable mass-market commodity. Of course, the broad marketability of the news meant that it had to be stripped of its overt political messages so that it would be appealing to news organizations of all political persuasions. An early prototype of objective reporting was born. Moreover,

the need to send short messages through an overloaded mail system was followed by the transmission of national news over telegraph wires that also dictated a simplified, standardized reporting format. The *who, what, where, when, and why* of an event could be transmitted economically and reconstructed and embellished easily on the other end.

As the market for mass media news grew, the demand for reporters grew along with it. Whereas writing a persuasive political essay required skill in argumentation and political analysis, it was far easier to compose stories, which are the basic media for communicating about everyday events. The *use of stories* also guaranteed that the news would be intelligible to the growing mass news audience.

In this manner, the overlapping effects of communication technology, economic development, and social change gave rise to large-scale news-gathering and news-marketing organizations. Along with these organizations came a standardized set of reporting practices. As mentioned previously, news services like the AP ushered in the *documentary report*. The use of wire transmission, along with untrained reporters, promoted the shift to *the story form*. The discovery that drama sold newspapers promoted the first *adversarial reporting*. Early reporters were rather like agents provocateurs, stirring up controversy and conflict in order to generate dramatic material for their stories.

As news bureaucracies grew in response to the papers' economic success, editorial review practices became expedient means of processing the huge flow of news. *Standards of good taste* guaranteed that a news product would be inoffensive to the mass market. Much of today's news format in the mainstream establishment press evolved at the turn of the century with the growth of a large educated middle class of affluent consumers who wanted serious reporting and bought the household products that were advertised along with the news. There was initially stiff competition between this highbrow press and the tabloids or "scandal sheets" (also known as the yellow press) at the turn of the twentieth century. These highly sensationalized versions of news were marketed to a less-educated working-class population seeking escape as much as information from the media.

By the 1920s, urban life and local politics became dominated by an affluent middle class of business and professional people with formal educations. Representing the news as objective, nonpartisan, and tasteful was an effective marketing ploy geared to the lifestyle of this group. Consider, for example, the early slogans of the *New York Times*, "All the News That's Fit to Print" and "It Will not Soil the Breakfast Cloth."¹⁷ This professional image dressed existing practices in a new style. This image also became a convenient means to discredit the muckrakers on the journalistic left and the sensationalistic scandal sheets on the political right.¹⁸

Finally, there was a growing expectation among intellectuals following World War I that democracy was in trouble and could be saved by a professional press dedicated to the mission of providing objective information to the public.¹⁹ This

noble purpose helped define a movement for a professional press and a code of objective journalism. Led by persuasive spokesmen like Walter Lippmann,²⁰ journalists began to regard objective reporting as both a description of their existing work practices and as a high moral imperative.

In these ways, journalism, like most professions, developed a set of business practices first, and then endowed those practices with an impressive professional rationale. Successive generations of reporters began to regard their work as a skilled occupation that should demand higher status and better wages. The move toward a professional status both enhanced the social image of reporting and paved the way for higher wages by restricting the entry of newcomers off the street into the journalism ranks. Professionalism meant that formal training and screening could be required for skills that had been acquired formerly on the job.²¹ As a result, journalism programs emerged at universities and began to formalize and refine the received practices as professional standards.

Perhaps the best capsule summary of this curious transition of journalism from a business into a profession is Lou Cannon's observation that what began "as a technique became a value."²²

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES AND NEWS BIAS

Each of the defining elements of objective journalism makes a direct contribution to news bias. Each component of news objectivity creates conditions favorable to the reporting of news filtered by Washington officialdom. This should not be surprising in light of the previous capsule history of the news profession. The basic practices that later became known as professional journalism were developed to sell mainstream social and political values to a mass audience. As diverse political perspectives gradually disappeared from the news or became discredited as not objective, it became easier to convince people that the officiated political perspective that remained was somehow objective. The logic of such a claim is simple: As one reality comes to dominate all others, that dominant reality begins to seem objective. The absence of credible competition supports the illusion of objectivity. The following discussion shows how each element of objective journalism actively promotes narrow political messages in the news.

THE ADVERSARIAL ROLE OF THE PRESS

If the media were truly adversarial in their dealings with politicians, they would face a serious dilemma: The news could end up discrediting the institutions and values on which it depends for credibility. To a remarkable degree, then, maintaining the illusion of news objectivity depends on the heavy reliance on official views to certify reports as credible and valid. As sociologist Gaye Tuchman put it:

Challenging the legitimacy of offices holding centralized information dismantles the news net. If all of officialdom is corrupt, all its facts and occurrences must be viewed as alleged facts and alleged occurrences. Accordingly, to fill the news columns and air time of the news product, news organizations would have to find an alternative and economical method of locating occurrences and constituent facts acceptable as news. For example, if the institutions of everyday life are delegitimated, the facts tendered by the Bureau of Marriage Licenses would be suspect. One could no longer call the bureau to learn whether Robert Jones and Fay Smith had married. In sum, amassing mutually self-validating facts simultaneously accomplishes the doing of newswork and reconstitutes the everyday world of offices and factories, of politics and bureaucrats, of bus schedules and class rosters as historically given.²³

It is equally true, of course, that the news would also lose its image of objectivity if reporters openly catered to the propaganda interests of public officials and government institutions. If neither extreme adversarialism nor its polar opposite support the illusion of news objectivity, then there is an obvious implication: most adversarial behavior on the part of the press should reveal itself as ritualistic, and in keeping within the cooperative interests of reporters and officials. A ritualistic posture of antagonism between press and government creates the appearance of mutual independence while keeping most news content to political perspectives certified by authorities. Such ritualistic posturing dramatizes the myths of a free press and an open government that have long defined American democracy. It is the nature of rituals to evoke such myths and beliefs without challenging them.²⁴

Adversarialism as Ritual

If the adversarial relationship is a ritual that both mystifies and legitimizes the reporting of narrow political messages, then the following characteristics should be observed: (1) The incidence of criticism and confrontation should occur regularly, as a matter of everyday reporting orientation, as opposed to just when there is a serious political issue at stake; (2) challenges and charges will aim to provoke personal mistakes or political confrontations between politicians rather than deeper investigations of issues, (3) charges against officials will be restricted to them personally and generally separated from their institutions and offices, and finally, (4) these characteristics should pertain equally to routine news coverage (e.g., reporters' beats) and nonroutine coverage (e.g., crises and scandals).

As illustration of these points, consider C. Jack Orr's study of earlier presidential press conferences.²⁵ Analyzing data from a sample of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon press conferences, Orr found that the proportion of hostile or critical questions was virtually constant across presidents, conferences, issue categories, and political contexts.²⁶ Not only did the incidence of confrontational questions fall into a routine pattern, but nearly all hostile questions were personal in nature. Many of those personal questions signaled clear deference to office and institution. Moreover, questions that could have been phrased as strong issue concerns often contained open invitations to

the president to redefine the issue or dismiss the entire question. Based on these patterns, Orr concluded that the adversarial postures of press and president create a dramatic image of journalistic aggressiveness while communicating a subtle message of institutional deference.

In an age in which personal image and public approval are key elements of political power, politicians increasingly avoid even ritualistic skirmishes with the press pack. As a result, fewer press conferences have been held in recent decades, indicating that presidents prefer to deliver their messages to the public in more controlled settings. With news organizations increasingly keying on the most personal and dramatic aspects of politicians' lives, stepping in front of the pack can prove challenging to a president. For example, George H. W. Bush stepped to the podium with a world leader to announce the results of important talks (part of the politician's ritual) only to be asked about whether he had had a love affair a few years earlier. When Bill Clinton introduced Supreme Court nominee Ruth Bader Ginsberg to the press, she told a moving story about her difficulties as a woman in a male-dominated world. After her statement, the opening question from the press pack challenged the president's political motives for her appointment and so angered Clinton that he lectured the journalists on their common decency.

Broad ritualistic elements have also been observed in the reporting of less routine events such as scandals and crises—to the extent that a number of observers have argued that crises and scandals are becoming routine news events, complete with standard reporting formulas.²⁷ For example, Altheide and Snow showed how a scandal involving an aide to Jimmy Carter was cast quickly into a standard reporting formula that emphasized political damage to the president while offering little measure of the importance of the issue itself.²⁸ Similar patterns ran through the Whitewater scandal involving Bill and Hillary Clinton, as they were subjected to guilt by association with a number of shady dealings. Despite saturation coverage implying the possibility of serious wrongdoing, few members of the public ever understood what the scandal was about.

Tag Team Journalism

The format of virtually every news interview and talk program is designed to promote adversarial displays, from the stage settings that place press and politicians in confrontational poses, to the tag team question-and-answer formats, to tone of voice and terms of address. Programs such as *Hardball* with Chris Matthews (MSNBC) are examples of frenzied adversarialism. The journalists on these TV shows not only display little respect for politicians, but they seem to delight in being rude to each other as well.

For their part, politicians contribute to the enduring antagonism by routinely attacking the press as liberal, biased, or hostile. Such attacks frequently appear in elite publications and occupy the agendas of business, government, and journalism symposia.²⁹ Occasionally, such charges are dramatized through formal political attacks, such as the ones during the McCarthy era and the Nixon administration. One analyst found the Nixon-Agnew attacks on the press so ritualized that he interpreted them in terms of ethological concepts of animal aggression and territorial defense.³⁰

None of this means that politicians or the press take their often antagonistic relations lightly. Indeed, the mark of a good ritual is that those involved are deeply moved by it. For example, Bill Clinton raged in a *Rolling Stone* interview with William Greider that he was the most poorly treated and misrepresented of presidents.³¹ Clinton was hardly alone. The list of presidents claiming this distinction is a long one dating from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Few have taken their press treatment as personally as Nixon, who kept a personal enemies list, which included a good number of journalists who were singled out for wiretaps, IRS audits, and other special punishments.³² Although the press ritual can be quite animated and engrossing, both for those who play it and for the audiences who watch it, this should not distract us from understanding what this ritual accomplishes: narrowing the focus of human attention to convincingly exclude large categories of experience from public discourse.

The Uneasy Partnership Between Reporters and Officials

For all of the structure and routine that define the news, there are still times when the press provides a fairly wide range of critical information to the American people. As explained in Chapter 1, some information diversity enters the news through journalistic routines such as *indexing* content to the degree of conflict among actors whom journalists regard as having potential impact on the course of a story. All the same, narrating the state of society and politics is a delicate business, and journalists have considerable choice over how to build up and how to end these stories. This means that press-government rituals still have an edge to them. Indeed, both sides have enough to gain and lose to make the displays of aggression genuine.³³

The ritual works as long as neither side undermines its credibility by raising questions about the system that legitimizes their roles. Even Watergate, long regarded as the model of modern investigative reporting, stopped short of challenging the authority of government or pushing too far into institutional failings, such as flaws in the secrecy and espionage systems that may have contributed to presidential abuses of power. For the most part, the press pack settled for the limits established by congressional investigations. The press ultimately pronounced the normalizing conclusion that “the system worked.”

Watergate: The System Worked!

The Watergate scandal is a classic example of a watchdog press in action. Watergate involved nearly two years of intensive press scrutiny of President Richard Nixon and his aides. The core issues at stake were whether the White House illegally spied on the Democratic Party during the 1972 election campaign and whether the president knew about it and subsequently tried to cover it up (another illegal activity). Although the situation contained major questions about the potential for official misuse of the huge national security system that has evolved since World War II, the press deflected these issues in favor of asking whether Nixon had personally remained pure and uncorrupt in his use of the state security apparatus. Curiously absent from the barrage of coverage was the simple question of whether anyone should be expected to remain pure

when given the chance to wield such great power with so little public accountability. In short, little attention was paid to the institutional flaws that might tempt a president to use CIA personnel to spy on his domestic opposition and then obstruct subsequent FBI investigations of those illegal activities. When, over a dozen years later, even more shocking institutional angles were opened up, the press was uninterested in pursuing them. Evidence from mysteriously sealed FBI files pointed to the possibility that the CIA may have abused its own institutional cover of legal secrecy by running a double-agent operation, spying on both the Republicans and the Democrats.³⁴ This important lead raised the additional possibility that the mysterious leaks from the anonymous informant Deep Throat (who fed investigative reporters Woodward and Bernstein key information) were the result of this CIA operation. This, in turn, signals the important possibility of institutional power struggles between the CIA and the president—power struggles that would never be revealed to the American people in the absence of media scrutiny.

Despite these rich possibilities for a story that might go well beyond the personal failings of one flawed president, the press avoided them all in favor of reporting the steady stream of leaks from Deep Throat along with the activities of various congressional investigations at work on the case. This brand of investigative reporting ignored questions about institutional problems or abnormalities in favor of dramatizing the personal culpability of the most publicly visible actors involved.³⁵ Whereas all institutional paths led to questions of change and reform (questions the press chose largely to avoid), the personal drama held out the promise of returning the political system to normal as soon as the individuals were accused, charged, and removed from office. True to the chosen normalizing plot, when Nixon resigned from office under threat of impeachment, NBC correspondent Roger Mudd led the nation in the cheer “The System Worked!”

The melodramatic resolution—a tearful Nixon saying goodbye to the White House staff and an upbeat ending of good news for the system—seemed to make sense at the time. In retrospect, however, it seems that the news exonerated a system containing the institutional weaknesses that permitted the abuses of power to occur in the first place. Even at the level of personal melodrama, “The System Works” seems an ironic ending. After all, the system pardoned the worst offender, gave light sentences to most of the others, and turned many criminals into millionaires and media celebrities in the process.

In the more than quarter century since Watergate, a kind of balance between deference to authority and adversarialism still exists, but it has been thrown off by a loss of perspective on how to strike that balance. With the increase in “gotcha” journalism, authorities are routinely challenged on personal grounds involving their morality, their gamesmanship, or their credibility. Whether this is more a cause or a consequence of lowered public trust in government is a good question. What is clear is that news audiences see journalists as less objective than at any point since polling has tracked this issue. Popular objections to journalists advancing stories with sensationalism and negativity also challenge another tenet of the modern-day journalism profession: the commitment to standards of decency and good taste.

STANDARDS OF DECENCY AND GOOD TASTE

Standards of decency and taste seem designed to keep the focus of news on important issues and away from the seamy, sensationalistic aspects of political life. These standards have clearly changed in recent years. The sex-drenched coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair suggests a tabloid trend in the press. During that scandal, audiences learned of oral sex in the Oval Office, presidential semen stains on a blue dress, and graphic sexual accounts published in the report of special prosecutor Kenneth Starr. Such a media spectacle would be hard to imagine even ten years earlier.

While an earlier era of media morality would have avoided such things, current moral standards seem to involve publicizing them with expressions of shock and disapproval. Even as they drag up seamy details, journalists are also quick to pronounce moralistic judgments. It would have been useful during the Lewinsky affair to do a count of the number of raised eyebrows on the Sunday morning news shows or the numbers of shocked and disdainful expressions uttered by Sam, Cokie, and George. Whereas an earlier generation of journalistic morality police may not have published such material in the first place, a later generation driven to sensationalism will publish first and then decry its sorry content.

Although the media seem to have become obsessed with the private lives of politicians and other public figures, there are other areas that are avoided with great consistency. For example, graphic images of gruesome death, profane language, erotic art, or depictions of the human anatomy seldom appear in the news. (And when they do, they often cause a stir, as illustrated by the live coverage of the freeway chase-suicide described earlier in the book.) When such material is publicized, it is generally preceded by disclaimers such as, “The following video contains images that may be disturbing to some viewers. Viewer discretion is advised.”

Even as it evolves, there remains a curious strain of middle American morality and taste that the mainstream press long ago adopted as part of its professional code. Even coverage of scandals generally carries the moral message of family values and the enduring obligation of politicians to uphold them. As for the collection of things regarded as too tasteless, offensive, or obscene to include in the news, excluding them legitimizes the middle-class values that may often be at odds with the actual events that reporters witness. To put it bluntly, reporters and editors may censor their coverage to bring news images in line with social values and sensitivities. The practical application of standards of good taste creates two paradoxes for news content. First, standards of taste have a bias in favor of precisely those status quo values that the bulk of political propaganda promotes.³⁶ Moreover, the avoidance of offensive ideas removes from public awareness many undesirable but true aspects of the real world. As a result, the definitions of and the solutions for the problems represented in the news, however artificial, may appeal to the ideals of the middle-class, church-going public.

The Morality Police

Censoring news according to standards of taste runs counter to a key feature of politics. Politics is the primary social activity through which widely divergent values and

morals come together in struggles for dominance and legitimacy. The selective attention to preferred morals not only passively promotes the work of propagandists, as mentioned previously, but it actively distorts the values and issues at stake in many situations. In this latter role, standards of taste may lead to overt censorship of some aspects of news events, thereby making journalists active agents in shaping the definitions of political situations. Should journalists join forces with society's morality police? Consider the following cases and decide for yourself.

A classic example of how standards of taste can affect the definition of political events is illustrated by the news coverage of a statement made by Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz during the 1976 presidential campaign. While flying between campaign appearances, Butz made a blatantly racist remark to a group of reporters. This remark was not only significant on its own merits due to its appalling racist content, but it was also pertinent to the campaign because it was offered in response to a question about Republican election strategies. Although the statement contains offensive language of the sort not often found in scholarly writing (not to mention news stories), its political magnitude can be conveyed only by quoting it directly. When asked about the efforts of the Republican party to mobilize the black vote, Butz remarked that it was pointless to worry about the black vote because blacks were unconcerned about politics. He then summarized his view of the concerns of blacks as follows: "I'll tell you what coloreds want. It's three things: first, a tight pussy; second, loose shoes; and third, a warm place to shit."³⁷

It is arguably in the public interest to publicize a racist remark uttered by a U.S. cabinet officer while campaigning for the president who appointed him. However, the professional press regarded Butz's offense to good taste as a higher consideration than his offense to political sensibilities. The pervasive commitment to the decency code was reflected in a simple fact: Not one major news outlet ran the Butz remark at the time it was made. Only when the statement was quoted later at the end of a rambling article on the campaign in the (then) underground magazine *Rolling Stone* did the respectable press have to acknowledge that the incident had in fact happened. Even when major press and broadcast outlets ran the story, only one major daily paper (the Madison, Wisconsin, *Capitol Times*) used the verbatim language. In defense of their use of inoffensive euphemisms in place of the real language, editors and news producers pronounced the litany of the decency code. An editor at the *New York Times* put it this way: ". . . we recognized that if we used this series of filthy obscenities then we'll probably use the next." The editor of the *Des Moines Register* said he found the remark so offensive and so atrocious that "I couldn't bring myself to give it to people with their breakfast." The editor of the *Washington Post* produced a tortured chain of logic leading to the conclusion that only if the president himself had uttered the remarks would he have printed them, but lesser officials did not merit such a violation of the journalism code.³⁸

The impact of the statement was lost when euphemisms were substituted for the actual language. As a result, the Ford campaign was spared the painful embarrassment of this rare lapse from its agenda of carefully staged and scripted performances. When the national press finally acknowledged the incident, Ford had little choice but to fire Butz.

However, one suspects that Butz's desire to exit the situation gracefully and Ford's wish to minimize his political losses could not have been satisfied any better than through the delicate treatment accorded to the episode by the journalistic community.

Sex, Death, and Censorship

The decency code is so entrenched that it even applies to coverage of important health and biological issues. For example, it took over two years for the mainstream media to explain that one way in which the dreaded disease AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is spread is through anal intercourse. The threat posed by a large-scale, life-threatening AIDS epidemic would seem to call for rapid delivery of as much explicit information as possible to the public. Yet in the early, panicky years of the disease, the decency code governed information content about AIDS. Early stories suggested that the disease was transmitted "not through casual contact," and through the "exchange of bodily fluids." As one editor put it, "We would make the reader guess what was going on rather than use the term 'anal intercourse' . . . We wouldn't spell it out." A television reporter recalls receiving pressure from her producer to refrain from using explicit language in response to a few phone calls from morally offended viewers. It took years for consensus to emerge in the media that informing the public about health risks was more important than censoring offensive language from the news.³⁹

What is the obligation of the press to communicate information that people may not want to hear, read, or see? Imagine, for a moment, that you were an editor for a news organization covering the Gulf War in 1991. The United States just routed the Iraqi army from Kuwait City, and the fleeing army has been attacked by American airpower, creating a scene that was widely described as "the highway of death." The carnage was so distressing that some of the American pilots involved asked the commanders to stop it. Behind the scenes, a high-level debate was raging about whether to go on with the war, knowing that it would produce a massacre of the enemy's disorganized army, or whether to stop it and leave the enemy with a substantial portion of its fighting force intact for the future. A photojournalist visited the highway of death and took a terrifying picture of the remains of an Iraqi soldier burned alive with a hideous expression on his face, his arms raised in the macabre position in which he died while trying to climb out of his flaming vehicle. It was an image right out of a horror movie.

Would you run the picture? Why not run a picture in the news that is no worse than an image that millions of people might pay money to see in a horror movie? More to the point, why not run a photo that appeared in leading English and French newspapers on the grounds that it brought home the fact that at least 100,000 Iraqis died in the war, and people should be forced to consider the human consequences of decisions to go to war? However, the newspaper and magazine editors of America never even had the chance to struggle with these issues because the leading photo wire service that had the option to buy and distribute the picture censored it at the source. The picture never even went out over the wires.

The AP editor explained that he did not buy and distribute the photo because he already knew what the reaction of newspaper editors would be: "Newspapers will tell us, 'We can't present pictures like that for people to look at over breakfast.'"⁴⁰ The

picture editor at *Time* magazine later said this about the picture: "It's dramatic. It's horrific. It says it all about war." However, he admitted that even if he had seen it in time, *Time* probably would not have printed it because, "Whenever we run a picture like that, we're heavily criticized. We get a lot of reader mail."⁴¹

Should such images be part of the news? Are they worse than images commonly shown in movies? How should the news limit its representations of reality? The case of the photo of the Iraqi soldier and many similar episodes from the Gulf War raise the troublesome question of whether people in a country at war should see comforting images of war as they prefer to think about it, or whether they should be stimulated, even shocked, into thinking about the consequences of the political decision to go to war.

Notice that the decisions of both the wire service editor and the picture editor at *Time* magazine hint at the economic costs of running the photo. The wire editor in effect said that nobody would buy it anyway, so there was no point in wasting the money to acquire and distribute it. The *Time* editor noted that subscribers would object to it. Their reasoning suggests that, as with the grand principle of objectivity, the moralism of the press also has economic roots. As explained in the case study, a key part of the market strategy of the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century press was to appeal to the moral sensibilities of the most affluent, rapidly growing, and untapped mass news market: the middle class. Since that time, the news has continued to present a restricted picture of American society in two ways: First, by representing the world through middle-class values, the news became an implicit model for social propriety; second, by introducing selective moral perspectives into news coverage, the press tacitly became the legitimator of the same values it helped to promote.

The strength of middle-class moralism in the news business is formidable. For example, even a tabloid paper like the *New York Daily News* did not print the word *syphilis* until 1931, long after it had become a major social problem. Similarly, the prototype of the highbrow family newspaper, the *New York Times*, refused to review Kinsey's landmark study of sexual behavior until years later when it had been certified by the academic community as a serious scholarly work. One also suspects that human sexual behavior was a significant and widely practiced phenomenon long before the *Times* endorsed it as a subject worthy of discussion.⁴²

As the frenzied coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky sexual activities indicate, the standards for reporting on the private lives of public figures are clearly changing. Yet many other areas of moral standard-bearing are still protected by mainstream journalism. As with other reporting codes and practices discussed in this chapter, filtering the real world through the value lenses of middle America lends the news a familiar, safe quality. This morality filter contributes to the illusion of objectivity not because the resulting news content mirrors the diversity of the social world, but because it reflects the values of the news audience.

DOCUMENTARY REPORTING PRACTICES

Objective reporting assumes that journalists do not embellish their stories, advocate particular interpretations of ambiguous events, or otherwise make up the news. These principles define the practice of documentary reporting. Reporters trained in the docu-

mentary method report only the information that they have witnessed and only the facts that credible sources have confirmed. Although the goals of documentary reporting are hard to fault, in practice the method creates a trap for journalists confronted with staged political performances. Only in rare cases when performances are flawed or when behind-the-scenes staging is revealed, can reporters document in good professional fashion what they know otherwise to be the case: The news event in question was staged for propaganda purposes. The problem, as Daniel Boorstin has pointed out, is that manufactured news events, or pseudo-events, contain their own self-supporting and self-fulfilling documentation. Thus the documentary method highlights the very aspects of events that were designed to be reported, blurring the underlying reality of the situation.⁴³ The paradox of the documentary method is clear: The more perfectly an event is staged, the more documentable and hence reportable it becomes.

In response to this dilemma, news organizations have begun to expose some of these planned media events.⁴⁴ However, the proportion of stories exposing media events is minuscule in relation to those based on media events. This imbalance between reported and actual occurrences of staged events has a distorting effect similar to adversarialism. However, by exposing even a fraction of the political manipulation in the news, journalists may reassure the public that they are monitoring such manipulation and alerting the public when it occurs.

A more common practice reflecting the "new cynicism" that seems to characterize the press in recent times is to frame political situations as games between manipulative actors. This tendency has been described by various scholars, including Kathleen Jamieson and Thomas Patterson, as noted in Chapter 1. The focus on political motives and maneuvers may or may not capture the essence of contemporary politics, but it conveys an essence of politics that seems both to ring true for many disillusioned citizens, who, perhaps correctly, see the press as part of the game. As a result, the documentary method has bent in ways that reflect the odd changes that have resulted in "gotcha" adversarialism and steamy moralism. Reporting the political game, rather than the institutional safeguards or social values at stake in it, may continue to look like objective reporting to journalists, but it may undermine the sense of news authority on the part of audiences.

THE USE OF STORIES AS STANDARDIZED NEWS FORMATS

Although adopting the story as the basic news unit also had economic roots, stories quickly became justified under the norm of objective journalism. Stories can be defended as standardized and mechanical means of communicating information. This representation gives journalists a claim to a universal methodology of objective reporting. The problem with this definition is that it is a very selective rendition of what storytelling is all about. Telling a story requires choices about what information to include, what words to assign to the included information, and how to tie together all the chosen symbols into a coherent whole. These choices in turn depend on assessing the audience, deciding what point to make to that audience, and choosing what plot techniques (flashbacks, sequencing, character development, climax, etc.) will best make that point. In short, stories are not mirrors of events.⁴⁵

A well-constructed story may be plausible, but plausibility and truth in the world of storytelling have little necessary connection.⁴⁶ An obvious implication of these features of storytelling is that they give reporters room to emphasize dramatic and narrative aspects of events.⁴⁷ Epstein suggests that the use of artistic (i.e., literary and dramatic) forms in news construction is encouraged by editors, one of whom even issued a memo containing formal instructions about how to incorporate dramatic structure into stories.⁴⁸ Gans notes the frequency with which reporters “restage” aspects of stories to heighten their dramatic qualities.⁴⁹

The dramatic license in storytelling creates a tension: The wholesale invention of news plots would place enormous strains on the norm of objective reporting. This tension between the value of dramatic news and the commitment to documentary reporting helps explain the receptivity of news organizations to events that are staged dramatically by news sources. Staged events are designed to be documented, and their dramatic features are built in. So important is the dramatic element in political performances that they are often judged for newsworthiness on this criterion. Gans observed that

an exciting story boosts morale; and when there is a long drought of exciting stories, they [reporters] become restless. . . . Some magazine writers, left “crabby” by a drought of dramatic domestic news, joked about their readiness to be more critical of the President and other public officials for their failure to supply news that would “make adrenalin flow.”⁵⁰

The Limited Stock of News Plots

The use of stories further constrains news content by promoting the use of standardized plots in news reporting. Any communication network based on stories will become biased toward particular themes. For example, criminal trials are dominated by such familiar plots as mistaken identity, victim of circumstances, and others relevant to the legal judgment of cases.⁵¹ The national obsession with the O. J. Simpson murder case in 1994 and 1995 can be explained in part by the rich set of plots and subplots that ran through the developing story: murder, circumstantial evidence, allegations of framing, the fallen hero, the abusive relationship, sex, and celebrity. Add to these dramatic ingredients the element of race, and an already big human-interest story became even richer with political plot possibilities. One newspaper headline even proclaimed: “Modern Shakespearean Tragedy Rivets Nation.”⁵²

When a unique event engages familiar dramatic themes, the stage is set for an interesting story. This principle of communication holds true whether in a conversation between friends or in a journalistic account about lofty national issues. Storytelling between friends frequently centers on recurring themes that define the relationship and express the identities that the individuals have created in it. In politics, consensus and legitimacy can be promoted through the frequent use of dominant values, beliefs, and myths of the political culture.⁵³ Gans has noted the news is dominated by a remarkably small number of recurring themes. These plot devices include ethnocentrism (America first, America-the-generous, America-the-embattled, etc.), altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, and individualism, among others.⁵⁴

Political performances scripted around routine themes legitimize the status quo at the price of severely limiting the range of political discourse.⁵⁵ The formula-story syndrome enables reporters to use plots to screen and organize facts so that few details are left dangling, and the resulting story can be viewed as an exhaustive representation of reality. This naive approach to objectivity gives news writing a mystical quality described by Robert Darnton:

Big stories develop in special patterns and have an archaic flavor, as if they were metamorphoses or *Ur*-stories that have been lost in the depths of time. . . . News writing is heavily influenced by stereotypes and by preconceptions of what “the story” should be. Without preestablished categories of what constitutes “news,” it is impossible to sort out experience.⁵⁶

Just as stories lock in the narrow political messages of routine news events, they can introduce distortions into investigative reporting. Stories, by definition, encapsulate events, making them seem self-contained and independent of external forces. Yet the tips provided by inside sources to investigative reporters are often (one suspects, usually) motivated by the source’s own political considerations. These motives are seldom included in the stories fashioned by reporters. Recall, for example, the earlier discussion that the Watergate story based on the investigative reporting of Woodward and Bernstein may have been only part of a much larger political scandal (see Chapter 2). The source of the inside information necessary to keep the story unfolding seemed to provide only information that would turn the story toward the Oval Office. Epstein noted that there might have been other political actors, perhaps inside the CIA, who could have been caught up in the Watergate scandal had the reporters not encapsulated the issues in a story centered on the president and his men.⁵⁷

We will probably never know who provided the information that trapped Nixon within the damaging Watergate story. It is ironic that the reporting practices involved prevent our finding out who did it or why. The obvious need to protect the confidentiality of sources is not the only, or even, the most important reason why the political contexts of news stories are seldom disclosed. The elevation of the story form to a professional practice places an even more subtle prohibition on revealing the politics behind political news. It would be devastating to the simple view of news reality to show that behind every story lies another story that comes much closer to revealing the true politics of the situation. As Epstein explained, the story-behind-the-story approach to news reporting would blow the cover off the normative claim that objective reality can be encapsulated somehow in stories.

REPORTERS AS GENERALISTS

Stories play another role in journalism as a universal reporting methodology employed by all reporters whether of politics, sports, or business. Reporters are trained as generalists who are able to write stories on any subject. Although a small percentage end up reporting in a specialized area such as science or fashion, the majority change beats periodically and pride themselves on their ability to cover any news story.⁵⁸

The emphasis in the profession on training reporters as generalists has obvious origins and payoffs. As Gans noted,

. . . the news is still gathered mostly by generalists. One reason is economic, for general reporters earn less and are more productive. Beat reporters can rarely produce more than one story per television program or magazine issue, while general reporters can be asked, when necessary, to complete two or more assignments within the same period.⁵⁹

Despite these obvious economic advantages, generalism is justified almost exclusively in normative terms. A key element of the journalism code is informing the average citizen. The use of generalists who tell simple stories is justified as the best means of presenting comprehensible information to the average person.

Keeping It Simple

If a reporter has any special expertise on a topic, he or she may run the risk of complicating a story or violating the story form altogether by lapsing into technical analysis. Editors and news producers seem to widely believe that the general public cannot follow news produced by specialized reporters. For example, Epstein reported this response by an NBC News executive to a Justice Department suggestion that the TV networks use correspondents with special knowledge of ghetto problems to cover urban riots: "Any good journalist should be able to cover a riot in an unfamiliar setting. . . . A veneer of knowledgeable ability in a situation like this could be less than useless."⁶⁰ In another case, Gans reported a comment by an executive producer to his economics reporter following a good story on a complicated subject. "You scare me with your information; I think we'll put you on another beat."⁶¹ Gans also noted that many specialists shared a general anxiety that they were becoming too knowledgeable for the tastes of their audiences or their superiors.

Although generalism is justified normatively as a necessary concession to a mass audience, the audience may pay a high political price in exchange for the alleged gains in news comprehension. Generalist reporters are often at the mercy of the news source. In technical areas, they are seldom qualified to ask critical questions.⁶² As a result, reporters may have to ask news sources for guidelines about appropriate questions. Even when generalists are assigned to fairly straightforward political stories, they may have to fashion their stories almost entirely from official pronouncements and the story angles pursued by other reporters.⁶³ Because generalists are more dependent on their sources than are specialists, the odds are even greater that they will report fabricated events. Moreover, generalists may be less likely than specialists to spot flaws in performances that would make it possible to expose the contrived nature of an event. For example, Gans noted of generalists:

Not knowing their sources well enough to discount self-serving information, they may report an opinion or a hopeful guess—for example, the size of an organization's membership—as a statistical fact. In this way, enterprising politicians sometimes get inflated estimates of their support into the news. . . . Occasion-

ally, general reporters may cover only one side of a story without ever knowing that there are other sides.⁶⁴

This generalization about generalism applies even to areas in which we might expect more perspective and sophistication. For example, business reporting reflects news values that seriously neglect the political or social impacts (or the inner politics) of corporations in modern life. Instead, business news tends to be a mix of shallow reports of mergers and profit analyses, alongside personality profiles of corporate celebrities such as Donald Trump or Bill Gates. As noted by Diana Henriques of the *New York Times*, one of the relatively few investigative business reporters in the mainstream news business, even business editors at prestige news organizations, often have little sense of big business as a social or political force. Indeed, because these editors often parachute into the business desks as generalists with little understanding of economics or the inner workings of corporations, their news assignments and decisions about what to run reinforce the tendency to report a shallow mix of profit and loss and profiles of companies and executives. Lacking much depth or perspective, such business news implicitly promotes the myths of business virtue and the superior rationality of free markets.⁶⁵

When the giant Enron Corporation went bankrupt in 2001 and the unbelievable story of its shady pyramid schemes and corrupt accounting practices came to light, there was little in the business press to prepare the public for the spectacle. Even the *Wall Street Journal* investigation of Enron the year before stopped short of blowing the whistle on the company because the journalist assigned to the story could not understand how the company actually worked. Similarly, the political story of Enron's involvement in shaping Bush administration energy policy was not even hinted at until after the collapse of the company in a cloud of deception and corruption.

THE PRACTICE OF EDITORIAL REVIEW

It is hard to imagine that the practice of editors' reviewing, checking, and approving reporters' preliminary accounts of events could be criticized. The review policies of most news organizations are represented as ensuring that the professional practices discussed earlier will be used in reporting the news. In a sense, editorial review does serve this function, thereby also ensuring the news distortion produced by these journalistic practices. Editorial review exerts its own influence on the political content of the news as well. Editors are not just the overseers of news production; they are accountable to management for the competitive position of their news product in the marketplace. As a result, editors and owners (or managers) typically develop guidelines that their reporters must follow in order to be successful and professionally respectable in their eyes. Studies of the internal workings of news organizations make it clear that these often subtle editorial pressures are major influences on reporters and on the political content of news.⁶⁶

These editorial pressures would not be so worrisome if they were idiosyncratic, giving each news organization its own perspective and encouraging reporters to be different. However, the safest editorial course is often to cover the same stories in the

same ways as other organizations but to package them differently, using concerned anchors, catchy theme music, or bold headlines to attract the audience. It is no secret that most editors take their leads from the wire services and the prestige papers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and, increasingly, the *Wall Street Journal*. The reliance on the wire services and the prestige papers as implicit standardizing mechanisms applies to both print and broadcast media.⁶⁷ In addition, editors tend to standardize their product further by comparing it to the competition. It is easier for them to justify similarities in the coverage of stories than to account for differences between organizations. To put it simply, the transparency of the objectivity or fairness claim becomes most evident when the coverage of one organization differs from the others and, as a result, journalists must defend it against queries by publishers, politicians, and the public. The best defense of objectivity is contained in the implicit standardization of editorial review practices.

The obvious political consequence of standardized editorial policies was captured nicely by Edwin Diamond, who noted that editorial practices reinforce the worst tendency in the news business to stereotype stories. News stereotypes conform to the major plot outlines of fabricated news performances and give the news its obvious status quo bias. As Diamond notes, none of this bias can be attributed directly to political motives on the part of reporters. To the contrary, the professional standards of journalists cleanse the news of such motives; yet, somehow, the resulting product does seem to display a particular slant:

The press isn't "racist," though as the skins of the participants become darker, the lengths of the stories shrink. The press isn't "pro-Israeli," though it is very sensitive to Jewish-American feelings. The press isn't afraid of the "vested interests," though it makes sure Mobil's or Senator Scott's denials appear right along with the charges. The paranoids are wrong: there is no news conspiracy. Instead there are a lot of editors and executives making decisions about what is "the news" while constrained by lack of time, space, money, talent, and understanding, from doing the difficult and/or hidden stories.⁶⁸

In short, the editorial review standards pointed to as the fail-safe mechanism for preventing news distortion are, paradoxically, the very things that guarantee it.

OBJECTIVITY RECONSIDERED

A number of observers (including many journalists when they are not being pressured by critical academics) have argued persuasively that whatever the news is, it is not a spontaneous and objective mirror of the world. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to leap from this to the conclusion that neither the ideal of objectivity nor professional reporting practices matters. Professional standards still work in several ways that are worth noting. For example, high-minded norms such as objectivity, even if they are not clear themselves, hide the connection between the news and its economic, organizational, and political contexts. Above all, the objectivity norm gives the press the look of an independent social institution. Moreover, even though actual reporting practices distort the political content of the news, they can be rationalized and de-

fended conveniently under the objectivity code, thereby obscuring their political effects. In this fashion, journalistic norms and reporting practices operate together to create the aforementioned information biases in the news—biases that are well hidden behind the facade of independent journalism.

As explained earlier, claims about "objective" reporting rest on very shaky foundations. For every source included, another is excluded. With each tightening of the plot line, meaningful connections to other issues and events become weakened. Every familiar theme or metaphor used in writing about an event obscures a potentially unique feature of the event. Even though it is impossible for the news to be objective, it is important that it seem objective or, in the terms of the trade, "believable." Perhaps most important of all, the practices and perspectives that go into it, the appearance of objectivity or believability depends heavily on striking the right balance between adversarialism and deference toward official sources. It is this balance that seems most in danger of tipping in ways that damage the credibility of news.

How the "New News" May Undermine the Credibility of Journalism Itself

The interesting question is, Why has the news focus shifted in recent times from generally authority-affirming accounts that paint a picture of a normal, orderly world, to more often authority-challenging accounts that describe a world plagued with disorder, intrigue, and mayhem? As explained in Chapter 2, even though representations of authority and social order appear to have tipped toward the negative in recent years, the reason may have little to do with whether officials are really more venal, government is more corrupt, or levels of social disorder are objectively higher. Instead, the increasingly negative images of public authorities and social disorder can be traced at least partly to commercial news pressures for more sensationalism, emotion, and drama and to generate new story developments to feed the twenty-four-hour news cycle.

Recall the argument by sociologist Gaye Tuchman from earlier in this chapter: The illusion of news objectivity depends on journalists treating the world of officialdom as authoritative. If this is true, then "gotcha" journalism may have the effect of undermining the very essence of news objectivity. No matter how much journalists dedicate themselves to the ideal (by whatever name it goes), the legitimacy of the news may suffer under the burden of "gotcha" adversarialism. This is not to imply that achieving credibility by blindly reporting the pronouncements of officials is a good idea either. It is simply to say that the ideal of objectivity may be flawed, no matter how journalists try to pursue it in a given era. What matters is not debunking objectivity but understanding that the endless debate about it may keep people from seeing that the underlying biases in the news are created by the very efforts of journalists to achieve it.

It is also important to understand that just as the basic practices that define objectivity evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, and just as the idea of objectivity became a solid foundation of American journalism in the twentieth century, the pace of change in the news business will surely continue to affect both the ideal and the practice of objective journalism in the twenty-first century. Changes such as the twenty-four-hour news cycle or the introduction of marketing people into the editorial

offices of news organizations are characteristic of kinds of changes that have spurred the historical evolution of reporting practices and news values discussed throughout this chapter. In short, what accounts for any particular change in the news may be a combination of economic, technological, and social conditions. The results of such change may appear far from rational or coherent. Yet journalism, as much as any profession, continues to try to make sense of its practices and even glorify them with such sobriquets as objective reporting.

When journalists and their audiences grow as far apart in their perceptions of whether a defining concept like objectivity is really being practiced properly, we know that serious tensions exist among the different elements of the news system. Those who produce news and those who consume it appear to have different understandings of what they are doing. In the process, they may have lost an important measure of respect and understanding for each other. Is objectivity possible, or even desirable? That is a question for the reader now to decide. One thing, however, is sure: We live in a time where there is little consensus on just what good reporting might be.

NOTES

1. Trends of surveys of American journalists taken in 1971, 1982–1983, and 1992, reported in David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 1990s* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996).
2. Indiana University, Knight survey reported by the Poynter Institute. www.poynter.org/dg/its/id.28823/content.view.htm.
3. John W. C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski, and William W. Bowman, *The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976). Also, Charles J. Brown, Trevor R. Brown, and William L. Rivers, *The Media and People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978); and Stephen Hess, *The Washington Reporters* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1981).
4. Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity," *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (1972): 660–79.
5. See, for example, Edith Efron, *The News Twisters* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971); and Doris Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980), chapter 10.
6. David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 5–6.
7. Pew Center survey, March 1999, www.people-press.org/press99sec1.htm.
8. Mindich, *Just the Facts*, 8.
9. For a review of these professional norms, see John Tebbell, *The Media in America* (New York: Mentor, 1974); Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman, *The News People*; Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978); and Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).
10. In recent years, the much-touted specialist has entered the reporting ranks. However, the use of specialists continues to be restricted to a few subject areas like science and economics. Also, specialists are employed by a relatively small number of big news organizations. Because the bulk of political reporting continues to be done by generalists who rotate assignments periodically and who refrain from introducing technical or theoretical perspectives in their reports, the practice of generalism merits inclusion here.
11. Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).
12. For supporting evidence for this claim, see, among others, Meyer Berger, *The Story of the New York Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1951); Frank L. Mott, *The News in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952); Edwin Emery and Henry Ladd Smith, *The Press in America* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954); Tebbell, *The Media in America*; and Schudson, *Discovering the News*.
13. See Mindich, *Just the Facts*.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century*, chapter 2.
16. For discussions of the origins and impact of the wire services, see Bernard Roscho, *Newsmaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Mott, *The News in America*; and Emery and Smith, *The Press in America*.
17. Schudson, *Discovering the News*, chapter 3.
18. Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check* (Pasadena, CA: Author, 1920). Also, Berger, *The Story of the New York Times*; and Tebbell, *The Media in America*.
19. For a history of this period and its ideas, see, among others, Harold J. Laski, "The Present Position of Representative Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 26 (August 1932): 629–41; John Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972); and Schudson, *Discovering the News*.
20. See the following books by Walter Lippmann: *Drift and Mastery* (New York: Kennerly, 1914); *Liberty and the News* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1920); *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1922); and *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925).
21. Tebbell, *The Media in America*, chapter 12.
22. Lou Cannon, *Reporting: An Inside View* (Sacramento, CA: California Journal Press, 1977), 35.
23. Tuchman, *Making News*, 87.
24. See, for example, Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964); Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor, 1966); and W. Lance Bennett, *Public Opinion in American Politics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), chapters 13 and 14.
25. C. Jack Orr, "Reporters Confront the President: Sustaining a Counterpoised Situation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (February 1980): 17–32.
26. *Ibid.*, 22.
27. See, for example, Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester, "Accidents, Scandals, and Routines: Resources for Insurgent Methodology," *Insurgent Sociologist* 3 (1973): 1–12; Molotch and Lester, "News as Purposive Behavior: On the Strategic Use of Routine Events, Accidents, and Scandals," *American Sociological Review* 39 (February 1974): 101–12; Murray Edelman, *Political Language* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), chapter 3; Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), chapters 2 and 7; Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, chapter 8.
28. David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow, *Media Logic* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979), chapters 3 and 4.
29. See, for example, Howard Simmons and Joseph A. Califano, Jr. eds., *The Media and Business* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
30. Henry Beck, "Attentional Struggles and Silencing Strategies in a Human Political Conflict: The Case of the Vietnam Moratoria," *The Structure of Social Attention: Ethological Studies*, eds. M. R. A. Chance and R. R. Larson (New York: Wiley, 1976).

31. Jan S. Wenner and William Greider interview with Bill Clinton in *Rolling Stone* (December 9, 1993): 40–45.
32. For a fascinating look at Richard Nixon's ins and outs with the press, see Marvin Kalb, *The Nixon Memo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
33. It is not hard to understand why politicians often become personally embittered over their treatment by the press. Although it often seems that politicians adopt a sour-grapes attitude about the adversarial norm itself, the politician's typical complaints that news coverage is arbitrary, gratuitous, and unpredictable may be reasonable and valid perceptions of journalists' ritualistic behaviors.
34. See, for example, Phil Stanford, "Watergate Revisited: Did the Press—and the Courts—Really Get to the Bottom of History's Most Famous Burglary?" *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April 1986): 46–49.
35. For a more detailed analysis of the spoon-fed aspects of Watergate investigative reporting, see Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press, and the Polls during Watergate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). The Langs also provide extensive documentation on the overwhelming emphasis, both in the White House and among the press, on Nixon's personal image and popularity during the Watergate saga.
36. See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda* (New York: Vintage, 1973).
37. Quoted in *Rolling Stone* (October 7, 1976): 57.
38. For these and other editors' responses, see Priscilla S. Meyer, "Hello, Rolling Stone? What Did Butz Say?" *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 1976, 18.
39. "AIDS and the Family Paper," *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April 1986): 11.
40. Quoted in David Walker, "The War Photo That Nobody Wanted to See," *Photo District News* (August 1991): 16.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Tebbell, *The Media in America*, 141.
43. Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Atheneum, 1961).
44. See Edwin Diamond, *Good News, Bad News* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).
45. See W. Lance Bennett, "Storytelling in Criminal Trials: A Model of Social Judgment," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (February 1978, pp. 1–22); and W. Lance Bennett and Martha S. Feldman, *Reconstructing Reality in the Courtroom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1981).
46. Bennett and Feldman, *Reconstructing Reality in the Courtroom*, chapter 4.
47. James David Barber, "Characters in the Campaign: The Literary Problem," in *Race for the Presidency: The Media and the Nominating Process*, ed., John Barber (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978).
48. Edward Jay Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 4–5.
49. Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 173.
50. *Ibid.*, 171.
51. Bennett, "Storytelling in Criminal Trials," and Bennett and Feldman, *Reconstructing Reality in the Courtroom*.
52. *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (June 18, 1994), 1.
53. See Murray Edelman, *Political Language* (New York: Academic Press, 1977); and W. Lance Bennett, *Public Opinion in American Politics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).
54. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, chapter 2.
55. See Tuchman, *Making News*; and Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).
56. Robert Darnton, "Writing News and Telling Stories," *Daedalus* 104 (Spring 1975): 189.
57. Edward Jay Epstein, "The Grand Cover-Up," *Wall Street Journal*, April 19, 1976, 10.
58. Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman, *News People*.
59. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 143.
60. Epstein, *News from Nowhere*, 137.
61. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 143.
62. *Ibid.*
63. *Ibid.*; also Crouse, *Boys on the Bus*.
64. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 142.
65. A summary of remarks by Diana Henriques at a seminar on "Corporate Power: You Can Run, but You Can't Hide," Shorestein Center, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, October 12, 1999.
66. See, for example, Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom," *Social Forces* 33 (May 1955): 326–35; Walter Geiber, "Across the Desk: A Study of 16 Telegraph Editors," *Journalism Quarterly* 33 (Fall 1956): 423–32; Epstein, *News from Nowhere*; Crouse, *Boys on the Bus*; and Gans, *Deciding What's News*.
67. For discussion of the impact of wire services on newspaper coverage, see Crouse, *Boys on the Bus*; and Sigal, *Reporters and Officials*. The impact of the "wires" on television news is discussed extensively in Epstein, *News from Nowhere*; and Gans, *Deciding What's News*.
68. Diamond, *Good News, Bad News*, 228.