WHY:
The Interpretive Turn in News

“All that dabble in the Ink, . . . can think, ¶ Conceive, express, and steer the Souls of Men, ¶ As with a Rudder, round thus, with their Pen. ¶ [Which] must be one that can instruct your Youth, ¶ And keep your Acme [mature age] in the state of Truth . . .
—Ben Jonson, “The Staple of News,” 1625

On a Wednesday afternoon, May 6, 2009, a U.S. Senate subcommittee on communications convened on the Future of Journalism. Sen. John Kerry began with a welcome to the brave new world of online news, where “newspapers look like an endangered species.” Sen. Ben Cardin of Maryland spoke in support of his Newspaper Revitalization bill, and Marissa Mayer, a vice president at Google, noted the traffic search engines send to news websites and hoped innovation would preserve “journalism and its vital function in our society.”

Practicing reporters could not testify and cover the hearings, and so David Simon, formerly of the Baltimore Sun, stepped forward. “High-end journalism is dying in America,” he said, not because of the internet but by abandoning its ambition “to explain an increasingly complex world.” Steve Coll, a former editor for the Washington Post, countered that technical and market changes were causing the “sudden loss of so much independent reporting.” Dallas Morning News CEO James Moroney, representing the Newspaper Association of America, said newspapers went into crisis not from losing readers but from “intense and growing competition” from the internet and other media. But online Huffington Post founding editor Arianna Huffington criticized the old system of journalism, saying it failed to explain “the run-up to the war in Iraq and the financial meltdown” but instead let “publishing pooh-bahs” dictate “what is important.” Those days “are over,” she said, “and thank goodness.”

After formal statements, Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson, the ranking minority subcommittee member, asked whether online organizations can produce reporting that explains events in depth, and Moroney said the Dallas Morning News online edition earns a fraction of the $30 million spent on newsgathering each year. Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill asked whether not-for-profits could fill the gap, and Knight Foundation President Alberto Ibargüen said that rural, poor, and aged citizens still lacked access despite the success of some online projects. Sen. Kerry closed by calling for a free flow of news, but worried that, despite having “more information available,” Americans find it “hard to separate fact and opinion.” All sides
agreed on the need to preserve a kind of in-depth reporting that goes into quality news.

Scholars usually complain that U.S. news falls short when it comes to making sense of events, especially compared to the press in Europe. An article on “the collapse of journalism” in *The Nation* argues that other countries spend more on informing the public through media, an investment that yields “dramatically more detailed and incisive” news. Another commentary points to the French press as an example of analysis and depth for American journalists to follow, and a study of the Finnish press found an increase since the 1990s in journalists commenting on the front page about events. But sociologists reported that U.S. local news “failed to produce reasonably unambiguous explanations”; and “answering the ‘why’ questions,” they conclude, “might have attracted” a larger audience.

Critics have called regularly for more interpretive news. The left worries about commercial and public relations influences, and the right about journalists’ biases, but both sides call for more complete news that gives more context. They say the press should do a better job of explaining where information comes from and worry that the internet may undermine the effort. “Just as television has all but eliminated observational reporting, the internet threatens interpretive and beat reporting,” says an online Washington, D.C., political group.

Journalists also want to supply more and better interpretations. In recent decades they have decried a growing tendency of science news reports to manipulate facts, called for more context that “makes the complex coherent and meaningful,” and warned against surrendering “their functions of analysis and explanation.” Pulitzer Prize-winner Jack Fuller argued as publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* that audiences find “perfectly neutral accounts” uninteresting and expect journalists to do “much of the analytic work for them,” but later wondered where the public would “find adequate explanation.”

The usual remedy scholars, critics, and journalists prescribe is for reporters to include more context and background in their stories, but not more judgment, which belongs on the editorial pages. The crisis of newspapers seemed to make a remedy urgent. But was the news failing to supply citizens with the fifth W, the *why* interpretations they need to understand events? Did the content of news stories lack explanations of *how* events occurred? A closer look shows a broad interpretive turn in news, with explanations along with judgments and opinions increasing in daily newspapers, network television, public radio, and mainstream news sites.
The Trend in Newspapers

Since emerging as a distinct occupation, journalism has had an explanatory urge. In the twentieth century, newspapers expanded their emphasis on interpretations overall and their references to how and why news occurs (Figure 6-1). Compared to a one-paragraph story on a factory adding jobs in 1894, a 2005 story on layoffs at IBM runs twenty paragraphs (about average for New York Times staff pieces that year) analyzing global markets where jobs migrate to places like India and using IBM as “a corporate laboratory that highlights the trend.” Reporting the event triggered the larger activity of interpretation.

The shift from a stenographic style also occurred in reporting on crime and accidents. In 1894, the Chicago Tribune summarized an incident of assault in a single paragraph: “James McCune of 319 South Green street, a
packer, is at the County hospital with a fractured skull. He was knocked down by William Warrington of 528 South Halstead street, a teamster. The men quarreled at West Congress and South Halsted streets. The police held Warrington without booking him.” The Times of the era published similar reports, but small items disappeared over the century, so that by the 1990s any accident reported had to have broader significance. In 2005 an article on a Manhattan building collapse reports the event from first response to clean up, but half of the twenty-four paragraphs explain the causes, including a history of developers who owned the empty structure and protesters who blocked future building on the lot.8

Events that journalists could not explain grew less common. Factual suicide reports were once ubiquitous. On April 17, 1894, the Times reported: “Louis Knorr, a theatrical man, whose home is at 1,101 Clark Avenue, St. Louis, fatally shot himself through the head in the Public Garden about 7:10 o’clock this evening.” The story gives the text of the suicide note, a list of the contents of the man’s pockets, and details of his arrival at the hotel in Boston, where he died. Stories without interpretations disappeared in the ensuing decades as newspapers faced competition from radio and the newly invented news magazine. Briton Hadden and Henry Luce founded Time in 1923, and the Mellon family and other investors in the 1930s backed a former Time foreign editor to found what became Newsweek.9 A third competitor, U.S. News & World Report, started as a newspaper in the 1930s, and all three provided something newspapers lacked: summaries that made sense of the week’s events. Radio news commentators had also begun drawing large audiences, creating pressure for the newspaper industry.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1933 resolved, “Editors should devote a larger amount of attention and space to explanatory and interpretive news, and to presenting a background of information which will enable the average reader more adequately to understand the movement and significance of events.”10 Journalism trade outlet The Quill then took up the cause.11 “The newspaper of tomorrow,” wrote Charles Poe, managing editor of the Chattanooga News, “will interpret in its news coverage.” And Mark Ethridge, publisher of the Richmond, Virginia, Times-Dispatch, wrote that readers demand “these days to know not only what is happening, but why it is happening.”

The founders of newsmagazines leaned to the right politically, but pressure to provide explanations also came from progressives. Lincoln Steffens, dean of muckraking journalists, had long “wanted to know about motives”—not just what individuals did in society “but why they did what they did.”12 After Raoul de Roussy de Sales departed the leftist Paris-Soir to work in America, U.S. publishers told him: “We believe in facts, . . . facts
and nothing else but facts.”  

But he thought, “When it comes to informing the public,” facts “are of less value than the analysis.” U.S. editors had begun experimenting, and he pointed to “the New York Times with their admirable Sunday summaries of the events of the week,” as evidence of a new tendency toward interpretation.

An exemplar of interpretation appeared in the British press during 1937. When the Germans bombed and strafed in a remote region of Spain, a then-anonymous correspondent for the Times of London filed an eyewitness report: “Guernica, the most ancient town of the Basques and the centre of their cultural tradition, was completely destroyed yesterday afternoon . . .”—a lead sentence conveying why the story about a far-away village mattered. Four paragraphs of graphic facts describe the massive bombardment, the machine-gunning of fleeing civilians, the collapse of ancient buildings “until the streets became long heaps of red impenetrable debris,” and the mass exodus as “survivors took the long trek from Guernica to Bilbao in antique solid-wheeled Basque farmcarts drawn by oxen. Carts piled high with . . . household possessions . . .” The next section, titled “Church Bell Alarm,” then expands the interpretation:

In the form of its execution and the scale of the destruction it wrought, no less than in the selection of its objective, the raid on Guernica is unparalleled in military history. Guernica was not a military objective. A factory producing war material lay outside the town and was untouched. So were two barracks some distance from the town. The town lay far behind the lines. The object of the bombardment was seemingly the demoralization of the civil population and the destruction of the cradle of the Basque race. Every fact bears out this appreciation, beginning with the day when the deed was done.

The classic story presents an intelligible account by laying out and making plain the events (ex means out and planare means level in Latin, the roots of the word explain), providing the careful, detailed, and illustrated facts (expounded with care, explicated with details, and elucidated with examples—three other synonyms for explain), and drawing them all together in the act of imagination and sympathy that goes below the surface to interpret the events. Although Webster’s dictionary defines explanation as the central term, interpretation gathers together all related senses into an overarching term. The interpretive move in modern journalism tells the meaning of events, construed in light of general beliefs and judgments and particular interests. To interpret is to “represent by means of art,” Webster says.

To support its interpretation of events at Guernica, the Times uses nine
paragraphs to describe the peaceful setting and chronicle—in a section titled “Rhythm of Death”—the systematic German dropping of grenades, bombs, and incendiaries to destroy the town and farmhouses within a five-mile radius. As hospital patients, women, and children died and others scattered, the Basque clergy worked to calm and protect the survivors. A section titled “A Call to Basques” concludes that the “effect here of the bombardment of Guernica, the Basques’ holy city, has been profound . . . .” The symbolism was accurate in the moment—more than one thousand civilians died—and in history. News of the event activated citizens around the world, including the Spaniard Pablo Picasso, who painted a masterwork of political protest, Guernica.

In the 1930s the so-called interpretative news seemed admirable for attracting audiences, making sense of events, and doing public good. By the 1939 edition of his handbook, *Interpretative Reporting*, Curtis D. MacDougall, a former editor in Evanston, Illinois, concluded, “The trend is unmistakably in the direction of combining the function of interpreter with that of reporter.” He called “the ability to interpret . . . a prerequisite” for “keeping the public informed.”15 In 1942 Henry Luce suggested that University of Chicago President Robert M. Hutchins look into the performance of the press, and five years later the Hutchins Commission called for more social responsibility.16 The report reasons that new technologies like radio and movies and more concentrated ownership had sparked a “communications revolution.” To represent faithfully the disconnected groups of modern America to each other and to societies abroad, a responsible press must reject the “isolated fact” in favor of reporting “the truth about the fact.” Press responsibility means acting in the public interest by interpreting events and placing them in context, but the existing interpreters—columnists and commentators—focused on entertainment, deviance, and violence in an effort to reach larger audiences. The report says big business biased press content and advertisers dictated radio programming. Instead of representing society to itself, communications industries provided a “miscellaneous succession of stories and images, which have no relation to the typical lives of real people anywhere.”

The Hutchins Commission focused attention on the need, and its ideal of social responsibility soon entered the college training of journalists. A 1949 textbook, *Exploring Journalism*, included a full chapter on Press Interpretation, where the two authors, a journalist and a professor, argue, “It is not enough for the public to have the facts, for it also must know the meaning of the facts,” and a majority of journalists act responsibly when they “stress interpretative reporting.”17 The ideal became entrenched in journalism education once the influential book *Four Theories of the Press*, a prod-
uct of the Cold War era, identified social responsibility as the norm in contrast to totalitarian journalism. But the American view of press theory assumed journalists were “deficient in performing” their task of “enlightening the public” and should do more so that the people can self-govern in democracy.¹⁸

Working reporters and news executives had qualms. In a 1954 collection, Newsmen Speak, journalists are unanimous about accuracy and about separating opinion from facts, but not about interpretations.¹⁹ Some say coverage “should go a step farther by explaining the news,” but Associated Press correspondent Relman Morin, the bureau chief in New York City, calls for a facts-only news story “so written that the reader will understand it easily and completely.” William Randolph Hearst, Jr., editor-in-chief of the family chain, is lukewarm, calling for news to interpret “if necessary.” But Publisher Oveta Gulp Hobby of the Houston Post says reporters had moved “from scoop to scope” and were writing “with deepened perspective and understanding.” The president of the International News Service says his agency provided “the best possible coverage” by reporting “news events themselves” along with “what the facts of a news story mean” to make them understandable “for the average citizen.”

Despite objections in the journalism trade press, “interpretative” news did grow from the 1930s to the 1950s in our data. The magazine American Journalism expressed concern in 1941 that interpreting events slides quickly into expressing opinion; an early issue of Nieman Reports criticized editors in 1949 for letting too much opinion enter into interpretive stories; and the monthly Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors continued the controversy later.²⁰ But the turn toward interpretation continued amid concerns that new communication technologies of the period threatened a press deficient in explanations.

New & Other Journalisms

By the 1960s mainstream newspapers began shifting toward “explanatory” news. The owners of the Wall Street Journal in 1962 founded The National Observer, a weekly newspaper of interpretation that pioneered “trend articles, analysis of current events, examinations of society’s foibles,” genres the daily press imitated, according to staffer John Morton.²¹ The New York Herald Tribune, despite its demise in 1966, provided another model of explanatory journalism under former Newsweek editor John Denison.²²

Movements from beyond American journalism and from its fringes pressed for more explanatory news. In the heady days of the 1960s, journalists and academics shared a faith in the potential for poor countries to ad-
vance through the miracles of agricultural innovation, development programs, and research. Journalism seemed useful to transform economic conditions, leading to greater individual knowledge, freedom, and democracy. In the Philippines, agriculture extension communicators ran a successful media campaign to inform small farmers about new rice varieties that the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) had developed. A press institute and later an academic program at the University of the Philippines at Los Banos founded development journalism, meant to boost national advancement through explaining the 1960s Green Revolution in agriculture and other economic news to the public. Similar efforts emerged in India and elsewhere, and seminars of the Press Foundation of Asia trained journalists to analyze and interpret the projects and policies for development, rather than merely passing on government press releases or quoting officials. U.S. journalists saw no ready application at home and raised objections when governments abroad co-opted development journalism to restrict press freedom, which the annual Associated Press survey found “seemed to lose more ground than it gained” around the globe in 1966.

Another movement to explain and interpret news in the 1960s, the alternative press, drew inspiration from an older model, the Village Voice. Arthur Kunkin, founder of Los Angeles Free Press, “liked the investigative articles, their length, the mixture of culture and community” in the Voice. Its journalism combined reviews of art, movies, and theatre with rambling personal stories about local events. The editors did no editing and paid writers little or nothing at all. Editor Dan Wolf called the Voice “a living, breathing attempt to demolish the notion that one needs to be a professional to accomplish something in a field as purportedly technical as journalism.” Alternative newspapers used methods from mainstream journalism to attack its pretensions and foster activist writing about the counterculture. But within a decade the mainstream press had co-opted radical weeklies by moving into covering and explaining youth culture. The surviving alternative papers in major U.S. cities followed mainstream business models, like the Voice, but continued to challenge impersonal and objective writing and pushed toward longer, explanatory articles.

The Village Voice was also a model for New Journalism, which had burst on the scene by the mid 1960s. Norman Mailer, who called objectivity “one of the great lies of all time,” wrote Village Voice columns “to poke his finger in the eye” of journalists. The Voice helped “create the romance of the journalistic vocation by making journalism seem a calling, a means of self-expression, a creative medium.” Reportage by Mailer and by Gay Talese for Esquire magazine inspired other writers to experiment with intensive, subjective reporting that adopted the techniques of narrative from fic-
tion. Truman Capote’s non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood* became a classic of the genre because internal evidence indicated that its interpretation followed facts. But Tom Wolfe’s improvisational riffs for *New York* magazine drew heavy fire from cultural conservative Dwight Macdonald, whose critique in the *New York Review of Books* accused Wolfe of “deducing his facts from his assumptions.” Macdonald challenged Wolfe’s facts about *The New Yorker*, where he worked, and raised alarums about what he called *para-journalism* spreading to the mainstream press on the pages of the *New York Herald Tribune*.

The reaction of the journalism profession was again equivocal. The *Quill* reported “hue and cry over activism in the news rooms,” but an article titled “The Authentic New Journalists” describes reporters in the daily press doing interpretive writing: Pulitzer Prize-winning reporting at United Press International and similar work at the Associated Press. Besides Wolfe at the *New York Herald Tribune*, Gay Talese wrote in a related style for the *New York Times*. The *Quill* concluded that American reporting and writing had changed “in the last decade.” An outspoken critic, former *New York Times* Sunday editor Lester Markel, issued a screed (his word) saying New Journalism was not new, not journalism, and “cannot and should not take the place of the misnamed ‘Old Journalism’” that critics scorned as the “who-what-when-where-how-and-why school.” New Journalism endangered the credibility of all journalism, he says, but journalism was changing: “Increasing accent is being put on interpretation—the effort to make the news clear and relevant for the reader; to provide for him [sic] the setting, the sequence and significance of events, and, whenever possible, an approximation of the truth.”

Tom Wicker, a *New York Times* reporter and editor in the period, observed that the changes occurred as the American right wing coalesced around Barry Goldwater and took up press bashing. During the Republican National Convention in the San Francisco Cow Palace in 1964, Dwight D. Eisenhower urged the party not to let outsiders from the press divide them, and the delegates directed “a deafening roar of boos at the press stands flanking the speakers’ platform and many on the convention floor jumped up and shook their fists at those in the glassed-in television booths.” Wicker was “within reach of the crowd” at his typewriter and says, “I can still see those shouting, livid delegates, rising almost as one man, pointing, cursing, in some cases shaking their fists, not just at the men in the glass booths but at me.” He feared the delegates would hurdle the press section railing to “attack the reporters gazing in astonishment at this sudden surge of hatred.” “Millions of Americans,” he concludes, had begun to see journalists not as mere transcribers of events but “as players in the game itself.” His paper,
the Times, could not report what happened, he says, because the account would have introduced subjective explanation. But the era had begun when conservatives saw the press as a powerful agent of “menacing, hateful, corrupt” interpretation.30

The mainstreaming of youth culture and protest reporting that culminated in the 1960s made major daily newspapers an easy target as the radical and liberal press went into decline. The advocacy weekly I. F. Stone founded in the 1950s, which predicted and then protested the Vietnam conflict, had 70,000 subscribers when it closed in 1971.31 But academic analysis at the time suggests how “all journalism will move” toward interpretation. A 1972 Bob Greene story for the Chicago Sun-Times on an American death in Vietnam combat and an AP article on child abuse from the same period illustrate the spreading influence of immersion reporting to explain subjective experiences and free-form, literary writing to interpret them. In the sixth edition of his textbook, MacDougall lists “activist, advocacy, participatory, . . . investigative,” and “reformist” among the kinds of new journalism expanding interpretation in the press.32 Looking back, scholars would identify New Journalism as part of a long history connecting American journalism with literature, as well as a new tradition in which journalism “conveys moments in time” and “explores how and why.” By the mid 1970s, when interpretation had become widespread in American news,33 our data show that mentions of how and why events occurred and emphasis on explanations reached a zenith in newspapers, just as movements to make news more explanatory pressed on mainstream journalism from all sides.

Interpretive Movements after Midcentury

Practitioners and academics pushed other interpretive reforms for journalism. Peace journalism had origins in the pacifist societies of the early nineteenth century, but sociologist Johan Galtung in the 1970s proposed that journalists in wars and conflicts promote reconciliation and focus more on peace initiatives than on ethnic or religious differences.34 Peace instruction entered U.S. colleges of the Vietnam War era, sometimes at the urging of students who had studied journalism. Academics argue that in the buildup to subsequent wars, the public could not form adequate opinions because news work routines failed to provide the context for judging events. Journalists in surveys agree that providing explanations is their greatest challenge.

Some reforms grew out of news practice, such as precision journalism, the application of data analysis to news. Long-time journalist and industry researcher Philip Meyer developed the idea at the Harvard Neiman Foundation and wrote the book Precision Journalism.35 By 1974 social science
techniques were “quickly becoming almost as much a part of journalism as the note pad,” and the New York Times reported that journalists had analyzed criminal cases to disprove election claims, court records to trace heroin traffic, and data on residents to track civic concerns among social groups. Journalists expressed “growing dissatisfaction . . . with the traditional tools of their trade,” that depended on “interviews, official statements, and plain intuition” to interpret events.

The practice of investigative journalism fired the imaginations of journalists and the public with how news explanations could change public affairs. Its early roots were in muckraking and crusading news, but the 1970s movement was mainstream. The Cleveland Plain Dealer, Miami Herald, and Newsday set up investigative beats, and the Boston Globe and other papers large and small followed suit. Investigative journalism gained national attention in 1969, when Seymour Hersh independently exposed atrocities of the U.S. Army in the Vietnam village of My Lai. Other prominent examples exposed crooked fundraising at Boys Town, a Nebraska orphanage and national icon, and documented the harsher sentences black and poor defendants were receiving in Philadelphia.

In the signal case, the Washington Post Watergate investigation of a burglary in Democratic Party offices “scored a string of scoops” and exclusives that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in August 1974. Other institutions intervened, but media coverage kept the scandal alive in public opinion. Skepticism grew toward government, and a romantic notion of journalism arose, spurred by the best-selling All the President’s Men and the hit film version. Schools soon produced a glut of journalism graduates whose interests had shifted from other ideals like the Peace Corps. The “new heroes” showed “that an individual newsman [sic], working all but alone, can have an impact.” A mainline Christian denomination then helped organize Investigative Reporters and Editors, with an acronym IRE expressing a moral stance.

Critics objected that investigative reporting tended not to focus on corporations, advertisers, or marginal groups and made journalism political, aiming to expand beyond social into moral responsibility that usurped “the functions of institutions.” The new power of journalism was open to abuse—reporters had sought illegal contact with Watergate grand jurors, for instance—and investigative work led to “indiscriminate mixing of fact and opinion” that supported “a thin democracy of spectators” aimed at “informing, by its own standards and lights, a passive public.” But the investigative movement gave a push to the long cultural project that had been elevating the status of news and news work. And in its heyday, even government officials criticized the press for not doing enough investigating.
Investigative, precision, and peace journalism were exceptional, a few reporters usually working on their own time and without much support from skeptical editors, but shouldering what the longest-running investigative team called “our highest responsibility”: “to make information meaningful.”40 Even in boom years, conditions always worked against interpretive journalism: news media ownership shifted to corporations, market competition eroded the shelter for news operations, government deregulated communications, society reconceived of information as a commodity, and newsrooms shifted resources from original reporting to official and public relations materials. Journalists in surveys consistently cite declines in explanatory news and the poor quality of what remained.

Journalism courses of the 1980s taught explanation as basic to news writing: “Often, these days, journalists are adding ‘why,’” says a widely used college textbook from the period.41 In surveys journalists said the interpretive role had become dominant, and in 1985 the Pulitzer Board adjusted to the “way newspapers were approaching their projects” by awarding a prize for explanatory journalism, later renamed explanatory reporting. In its first quarter century, the new award went to stories on medicine and science (about half), economics (a quarter), government policies, or complex systems such as air traffic. Besides their extended length, the most prominent feature of the winners (more than a third) was their explanation of human costs and consequences. By the end of the decade, even high-school journalism courses taught that “straight reporting of facts” had “given way to interpretive reporting” that “explains the significance of facts.”

Perceived problems with the explanatory pattern permeating American news from early training to the highest career recognition helped give rise to the civic or public journalism movement. Long-time Washington Post political reporter David Broder’s columns heralded a change, after reporters “had guilty consciences” for not countering political ads that manipulated voters in the 1986 and 1988 campaigns.42 In a campus lecture he indicted journalism for reporting facts using gamesmanship, an interpretation that failed to explain politics. While voter turnout was declining, confidence in politicians waning, and politics losing meaning for the public, the press continued covering elections as insider jockeying. Political consultants, “the new bosses of American politics,” shared with political reporters “a sense of superiority” to the candidates. Lacking meaningful campaign information, voters became disillusioned, said Broder, but the rise of ad-watch stories was a good sign that political journalists could let “voter concerns” drive campaign coverage by asking candidates the questions from citizens.

Experiments with public journalism emerged mostly in the heartland and at smaller newspapers, where a “heady, . . . wise, and eclectic group” of
reformers took the lead. Davis “Buzz” Merritt, editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, wrote that, to solve the problem of “withdrawn citizens . . . flooded with contextless information,” journalists needed to go “beyond telling the news.” Within a decade more than two hundred projects sprang up, many with funding from foundations. Early indicators suggested journalists held positive attitudes toward the movement, and some reporters absorbed public journalism norms into their practices. Journalists again felt restless with just-the-facts news and wanted to act as full-time citizens to help voters become “experts in public life.”

But heavy hitters from the elite press soon condemned the idea. Former Executive Editor Max Frankel issued an opening salvo in a *New York Times Magazine* column and then continued his attacks in the trade press. He disparaged lavish projects at smaller papers as opportunism among chain publishers, agreed with critics who said public journalism was doing only what journalists “should have been doing all along,” and warned that the movement could “distort the news agenda” and compromise press independence. The “elemental tasks of describing events and discerning their causes are already beyond the skills and budgets of many American newsrooms,” he wrote. Efforts to document the effectiveness of public journalism failed, buttressing Frankel’s assertion, and other critics joined in the contentious debate that ensued.

American news became more interpretive as waves of reform pushed for more: “interpretative” news of the 1930s; New Journalism of the 1960s; the burst of peace, precision, and investigative work in the 1970s; and public journalism arising in the late 1980s. The prominent rejection of each movement denied the changes underway, and interpretations and explanations dropped back somewhat after the 1980s in our data. Journalists worked under continual pressure to interpret more, but drew criticism for their explaining politics as a game or horse race. Over the next two decades the interpretive turn in newspaper rebounded in our data. Despite persistent complaints that the news explained too little, journalists on the ground were doing the opposite. They became interpreters of public life.

**Sidebar: The Interpretive Press in Action**

Deborah Lohse worked as a financial journalist for the *Wall Street Journal* and other publications, fulfilling a childhood dream of becoming a writer. For a project in the fourth grade she interviewed pupils about their sleep habits and found that eighth graders slept less than sixth graders. She wondered why, but “really wasn’t comfortable interpreting,” she said in our interview. The “idea of being a conduit” is what got her started in journalism, first in college as a research assistant for *Barron’s*, and then at her first
job at *Money* magazine, where she would “write, write, write,” and the editors would add the big picture but ask her to okay the interpretation. She started with brief items in 1989 and moved to longer articles under her own byline by 1991.49 Although she herself led a “simple tax life,” she said, her articles offered tax advice for others and began analyzing tax policy by 1993.

A story that stands out happened that summer, when Clinton’s tax proposal had reached Congress and conservatives reacted by renewing the claim that Clinton was proposing the biggest tax increase in history.50 *Money* editors wanted a story, and Lohse—by then a correspondent in the Washington bureau—got the assignment. “They thought the math would verify it, and the math did,” but only by including Clinton’s proposal, plus Medicare and increases “that would have come even further down the road.” She checked with sources she knew, the editors did their interpretive magic, and the story ran on the cover of the August issue.51

The article says taxpayers “have been tense and testy for months” (a photo shows a protester holding thumbs down at a Clinton speech) and goes on to question Democratic leaders’ claims to tax only the rich, pointing to taxes on seniors and bills affecting the middle class. The opening section concludes: “The prospect, then, is for the biggest tax hike in history.” Details dominate the piece, enumerating possible tax hikes in energy, Social Security, cigarettes and alcohol, and health care and offering tips for middle-class, high-income, self-employed, and senior households. A boxed sidebar lists metro areas most affected by “The Wealth Tax” and “The Seniors Tax.” Pages for high-income taxpayers provide investing advice and a “tax pro” sidebar.

When *Money* hit the newsstands, opponents in Congress began using the issue to decry Clinton. The “huge cover story” was a coup, but Lohse felt uncomfortable seeing what “anti-Clinton people” were doing with it and thought, “Oh, my God, I’ve just become really partisan here.” But her editors “liked that *Money* magazine was being held up on TV.” The experience taught her that “turning facts into a story” was “the essence of interpretation.” If she wrote an article without interpreting, her editor would ask, ‘Well, what does this mean? Why should I care? So what?’ or ‘Where’s the nut graph?’”—the interpretive paragraph connecting the new event to a trend, illustrating something with a larger or wider impact.

Referring to a tax increase as the biggest in history gives a partisan answer to the so-what question. Republicans used the phrase in the early 1980s to attack Democrats and renewed the charge against Bill Clinton for his tax proposals in 1993.52 The article in *Money* helped move the conservative slogan into the limelight. Republicans renewed the charge in the next
election cycle, when the phrase reached a high point in news coverage and spread to popular culture: In the “bear tax” episode of *The Simpsons*, Lisa says, “Actually, Dad, it’s the smallest tax increase in history.” In a U.S. Treasury Department analysis, the 1993 tax did not rank among the top increases since 1942 and tied for third among tax hikes since 1968. In 2001 Republicans labeled their temporary tax cuts the biggest, but Molly Ivins, in an aside, wrote, “All tax increases and cuts are ‘the biggest in history’ because the size of the economy keeps growing.” The theme continued in politics for another decade, with Republicans returning to the charge when the temporary tax cuts were to expire.

Lohse’s work in 1993 caught the attention of personal finance editors who hired her at the *Wall Street Journal*. Your Money Matters, a regular spot for her articles, noted the “emerging market meltdown” in 1995, and through 1999 her contributions to another feature, Small Stock Focus, tracked the technology bubble bursting. When writing about companies going public, attending tech conferences, and interviewing portfolio managers, she found “there wasn’t a lot of skepticism,” and she tried to “tell people what’s out there” as a reporter. Hindsight made her rethink along with investors, who “felt like they were in a twelve-step recovery group” after the bubble.

Major news organizations like the *Wall Street Journal*, Lohse said, want reporters to aim for Page 1. She recalls her work on General American Insurance Co., which began falling apart because of investing in risky bonds. She covered their last days in six stories during August 1999, when Metropolitan Life offered to buy out the company. All six under her byline and a seventh retrospective, “Too Little Coverage,” made Page 1 because they “really got the day-to-day detail.” From her in-depth reporting, she could describe how “employees worked late into the night, some canceling vacations to pitch in. Van drivers shuttled visitors to their hotels, while secretaries and mail clerks brought food and delivered documents around town.” She could also describe—like an insider—the CEO’s fateful meeting in Jefferson City, Missouri, where the state insurance commissioner put the company under supervision. Editors “want that” kind of reporting “for every story,” she said.

The “ten hour days” and pressure to produce even more interpretive stories made her rethink her job at the *Wall Street Journal*. In 2000 she moved to the *San Jose Mercury News* to find a better balance in life, but in her first year she published about a hundred stories, almost half on the front-page or first business-section page, continuing her coverage of the tech market bust. A top story on regulators investigating the “tech-stock mania” began a passage this way: “In late 1999, a New York securities law-
yer got a call from a worried attorney . . .”56 Lohse’s reporting continued to give an insider view of events, telling stories with details and connecting them to larger issues.

But she saw limits to mainstream explanation. What a story means depends on which sources reporters talk to, and in business news major companies can “shut off my access to information.” Outsiders doing serious work to question corporate actions can be shrill to get attention, but their lone-wolf status makes journalists nervous, keeping “fringe sources on the fringe.” She saw her job as giving “a full view of things,” rather than saying what they mean. But “some of the best” journalists she knew “are completely comfortable being the voice of authority.” The pattern held especially at major news media: “Everybody at the Wall Street Journal has to have that voice.” When powerful institutions “say something is news, everybody else will follow it,” but for a good reason. Her experience in Washington and New York showed her how much work goes into finding, reporting, and interpreting big stories.

*Television in Context*

Newspaper journalists said they had to make their stories more explanatory after “the nightly ‘front page’ on television” began beating them to current events and leaving them to write the follow-up coverage. TV images can show events without the delays of writing and publishing, and critics by the 1970s complained about the lack of interpretation on TV news. In a 1980 *New Yorker* essay, staff writer George W. S. Trow laments that television unravels events from their contexts. Twenty years later he said journalists were still failing to connect the dots between events: “television news people,” he says, “value and love the episodic”—events left to stand without interpretation. Critics since then agree that television fails to supply “the context and analysis necessary to turn facts into real understanding.” By 2010 another *New Yorker* critic, Ken Auletta, saw further declines in reporters “seeking context.”

The American public has tended to view problems as “concrete rather than abstract” and to rely increasingly on television for news, which simplifies “complex issues to the level of anecdotal evidence.”58 The episodic coverage on daily newscasts may lead the audience to ignore the social conditions and public policies behind problems. Social science research has for decades measured the low levels of political knowledge among Americans, and studies asking how democracy is possible anyway tend to accept public ignorance as a starting point and then look for answers from voters’ collective knowledge, mental shortcuts, or factual learning through the media. Television tends to fare poorly on tests of what citizens learn from the
new.

But did the interpretive turn spread to television? Our study tracking the changes in journalist speech on the national U.S. evening news found the interpretive turn expanding on television (Figure 6-2). After scooping newspapers on breaking stories, network newscasts themselves began shifting into interpretive styles instead of sticking with episodic coverage.

In 1968 political reports on national television gave a direct description of events, some with film segments of candidates talking. With each passing election, the journalists delivered more frequent and pointed commentary. In a 1972 news package, NBC Anchor John Chancellor lists facts (who was speaking where in the campaign) to introduce a story on George McGovern’s stump speech in Chicago. Reporter Richard Valeriani then ticks off more facts about the candidate endorsing “federal aid to parochial
and other non-public schools.” McGovern gives his reasons, and Valeriani adds a list of upcoming campaign events, describes McGovern’s strategy “to concentrate heavily on the big electoral vote states,” and explains that because “his image is still blurred among many regular Democrats,” McGovern may give “a nationwide television speech.” Chancellor’s opening is neutral and informational, as is Valeriani’s first voice-over. After McGovern’s sound bite, Valeriani adds a small, contextual interpretation.

Campaign coverage by 1988 shows a clear increase in interpretive journalism, mostly in the form of opinion. A report from ABC News explains that George H. W. Bush appears in shirtsleeves in an effort to portray himself “as a man in tune with rural America.” With a description of the candidate’s luxury tour bus, correspondent Brit Hume interprets the Bush image as misleading or cynical and complains that the Bush campaign controls the flow of information by making the press travel separately and refusing to answer questions. In 1988 coverage for NBC, correspondent Lisa Myers hammers the point that politicians are not talking to her. The explanations, interpretations, and judgments put journalists front and center, showing disdain for the managed images and words coming from the campaigns.61

At presidential news conferences, journalists became more-aggressive questioners during the latter half of the twentieth century by moving from simple questions to opinionated statements.62 Election night broadcasts abandoned the descriptive style of 1968, but the reporting “did not translate into higher-quality analysis.” After facing widespread criticism for calling the 2000 election winner too early (and incorrectly), television newscasters promised changes, but in 2004 they continued their “journalism of assertion,” despite some changes in their handling of exit poll data. Political research documents how journalists influence the public and policymakers by analyzing events, judging politicians and their proposals, and applying interpretive frames to events, activities that have grown in TV news coverage.

Newscasts use visual images less to document unfolding events than to show a background for reporters’ stories, providing only a tangential context. Journalists argue that because of technology—video cameras and satellite feeds—television in the 1980s began “spicing up stories with visual imagery.”63 Local news was especially vulnerable to the new video press releases or “wallpaper” that politicians, political parties, and lobbyists provided and stations used without citing sources. NBC Anchor Tom Brokaw worried that “context will be overrun,” and critic Walter Goodman called the new visual style of the network news divisions, “MTV journalism, images with little context.” After the 1960s, context gained broad currency for describing any kind of background, but the term has roots in linguistics and
literature, where a word or passage appears surrounded by language that helps explain its meaning.

Images did provide a particular kind of context. Our election-year examination of the visual side in network newscasts from 1968 to 1992 found that by 1984 newscasters showed more images at a much faster pace; video clips, graphics, and captions peaked; and the length of journalist shots reached a plateau as their frequency of appearing on-screen climaxed. By the 1992 elections, the measures for pacing had resumed their climb and reached all-time highs. Backgrounds became more varied, and for the first time journalists appeared on location more often than on any other backdrop. The TV news version of context is about grabbing viewers, keeping them watching, and focusing them on journalists as interpreters.

As television entered American politics, candidates and newscasters competed to capture voters’ imaginations through interpretive visual styles. By the 1970s television news had gained dominance by limiting politicians’ sound bites, by deferring less to campaigns on what to show, and by interpreting candidates’ appearances. In 1980 Ronald Reagan countered by issuing pithy made-for-television phrases on eye-catching backdrops that his opponents tried to emulate. The evening news responded by shortening sound bites further, being more selective about images, and trying to explain “the issues,” although the segments initiated on NBC fared poorly in the ratings. The candidates in 1984 tried to win more control. Walter Mondale presented documents on an un-filmable subject, the budget deficit, to which newscasters gave little play in a year when his most quoted phrase was “Where’s the beef?” Reagan took the opposite approach, refining the visual equivalent of “no comment”: “For television . . . couldn’t show something that wasn’t happening. And Reagan was not giving them anything to take a picture of . . . so television covered what Reagan was doing, rather than covering what he wasn’t.”

By 1988, image-consciousness held sway. George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis postured for cameras in media events designed to convey a message through images. Political handlers set up scenes for the media and distributed video press releases. The networks, hampered by declining audiences, staff, and budget, cut back on making their own visuals and treated with skepticism campaign images such as Dukakis riding a tank wearing an awkward-looking helmet. The candidates responded to the visual rhythms of television news: campaigns generated images in time for the evening broadcast and newscasters exposed the mechanics of political image making. In 1992 the candidates tried to circumvent the national networks. Bush worked through local news and satellite feeds to small groups and individual stations. Independent Ross Perot used “infomercials” and
went on *Larry King Live*. Bill Clinton found alternatives like *Saturday Night Live* and set a daily agenda to dominate the “media spin.”

Through the 1990s television required an ever-better show, and journalists showed their own images frequently and closer up in political reports, centering coverage more on journalism. Political parties were no longer the main focus in campaigns, and the new visual style of news reports treated the public as passive observers. Research showed that TV news images tended to work against learning. Although rich in information, the routine scenes could show little “about complex social and political problems” and instead reinforced stereotypes. The journalists’ voice-overs interpreted, but the “visual themes proved to be more memorable than verbal ones.” As context, visuals added variety to the public airwaves, but may have impeded careful thought or reflection among viewers.

To see how deeply the interpretive turn affected newscasts, we analyzed the most watched but lower status segment of local news, the weather. TV forecasters have long been the butt of jokes when not joking themselves, but when Boston hosted a political convention, the morning forecasts were serious about the national political ritual. The chitchat among announcers and other on-air personalities and the visuals during report segments on three network affiliates illustrate the relations between journalists and the public. Weathercasters acted as explainers, combining complex visual with narrative elements to heighten drama. They featured themselves at times—and surprisingly—as controllers of the capricious weather that might threaten the political convention. The public rarely figured in weather segments and only in passing during news team banter. The interpretive turn had reached the margins of TV journalism.

Television journalists expressed opinions more than print journalists did, but both media added opinions as critics feared. Journalists said they were responding to pressures from markets and new technologies, a pattern deserving a closer look. But the interpretive news of assertion shifted attention to journalism itself, especially on television. Was the stronger move toward opinion particular to television, with its reliance on imagery, or general to broadcasting?

*The Case of National Public Radio*

Radio seemed likely to give the answer because it uses only mental imagery. It also might have bucked the trends in newspapers and television. Radio had moved into commentary early in the twentieth century and had an honored tradition of mainstream explanatory news going back to Edward R. Murrow’s CBS radio reports from London during the German bombing blitz of World War II. “He was trying to explain” the British events to
Americans and “explain America to Britons.” By the 1980s, U.S. commercial radio had moved to narrower music formats with less news, but National Public Radio became a home for pieces interpreting events. Did Morning Edition and All Things Considered, the NPR news programs founded as outlets for extended audio reporting, follow the interpretive turn? And did they rely on opinions as television did?

Given the history of radio, it came as no surprise that reports on NPR in 1980—the first election year both programs were on the air—began with more interpretation than newspaper articles had. But contrary to expectation, NPR reports became even more interpretive (Figure 6-3). That emphasis peaked in 1996 and by 2000 was a third higher in than where it began. The changes also occurred over a relatively short period.

Figure 6-3

Radio Emphasis & Opinion

Percentage of times journalists gave information or opinion (left scale) and ratings (right scale) for their emphasis on occurrences vs. explanations.

Political stories on NPR illustrate what the numbers show. In 1980 re-
porter Linda Wertheimer opened her report on some Jimmy Carter hecklers by focusing on facts, and any terms expressing an opinion, such as *mincing* and *defect*, she attributed to the candidate. In 1996, the year when interpretive reporting reached a peak, Joanne Silberner opened a report on the presidential debate and health care with the big-picture interjection, “What a difference four years makes!” Then after an archival sound bite of Clinton she stated her judgment of his health care proposals, calling them “vaguer, less-ambitious” than in the past.

As the interpretive turn advanced on NPR, reporters began interviewing each other “to present their different points of view.” In a 1996 segment, Bob Edwards asks, “So, do you think—was [candidate Bob] Dole’s move into the ethics area too tepid? Should he have been—you know, should he have turned the heat up?” And Cokie Roberts responds, “I don’t know how he could have,” both journalists speaking from their own expertise. Similar examples became more common, with NPR journalists in the role of sense-makers. Asking questions, an archetypal task for journalists, declined sharply as journalists paraphrased their sources instead of airing questions and answers. The mainstay of giving information also seesawed down, so that by 2000 it no longer represented the largest share of speech, and journalists expressed opinions more than twice as often. In the hotly contested election that year, NPR journalists focused less on action. More than half the times they spoke, they were interpreting. As in network TV newscasts, how NPR journalists explained the meaning of events shifted, but not to providing more of the context; the share of times they gave background declined by more than half.

The trends on *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* quantify what historians observed, that National Public Radio moved into the mainstream, becoming more like the daily press and network television. As NPR programs grew prominent and attracted larger audiences, the programs expanded their political reporting, a premier beat for reporters and marker of authority. The reports became less neutral in tone and more polarized, making NPR news more dramatic for listeners but also a target for critics and for attacks on its public funding. Like television news, NPR relied on more opinions to interpret events, a tendency common to the interpretive turn in news but more pronounced in broadcasting. And NPR also faced charges that its reports failed to give enough of the context for events, especially in the 1990s after Congress cut the network budget amid charges that NPR lacked balance. As earlier elite journalists had feared, news came under fire as its interpretive style shifted the focus of news onto journalists as sense-makers.
Sidebar: Broadcast News and Explanation

Roberta Baskin started her journalism career at a local network affiliate in Chicago before going to Washington, where she moved between competing local and network news outlets during a long career. Most television journalists move from job to job to get into larger markets with better pay, but Baskin started in a big market and sometimes faced unpleasant consequences for trying to make sense of companies that advertise or products that succeed. Her reporting uses concrete examples from unfamiliar events. “I’m trying to present information that you otherwise wouldn’t have access to. I want you to see one of my reports and say, ‘Wow, I didn’t know that,’” she said in our interview in 2001, while she was on leave from ABC News as a Neiman Fellow at Harvard.

She developed one of her first big stories after reading in a trade journal, Brewer’s Digest, that German scientists had found nitrosamines in beer. The U.S. Department of Agriculture had begun regulating the cancer-causing agent in smoked foods and had shut down some plants for producing bacon with nitrosamines above permissible levels. It was the late 1970s, and she was in her first job as a journalist with WMAQ-TV in Chicago, an NBC-owned station. She wanted to get measurements for U.S. beer, a product advertised heavily in local markets. WMAQ managers objected to the story, refused her requests to pursue it, and then exercised their option not to renew her contract.

After a weekend in despondence, she wrote a one-page treatment to pitch the story to the competition, ABC-owned WLS-TV in Chicago. The station wanted the story and agreed to lab-testing beers and sending Baskin to interview scientists in Germany. Of the eighteen beers tested all but Coors contained nitrosamines. Drinking a bottle of Heineken delivered as much as eating more than fourteen-dozen slices of bacon produced at the maximum FDA level. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration knew of the problem, and so Baskin interviewed FDA officials. Her report says scientists found that nitrosamines resulted from a direct firing process during malting, but to avoid the problem brewers could shift to indirect firing while making beer.73

Once the story broke in 1980, Walter Cronkite cited it during the CBS Evening News, editorial cartoonists showed drinkers puzzling over the bacon content of their beer, and Johnny Carson made jokes in his monologues on the Tonight Show. Coors began advertising itself as “The Beer with No Nitrosamines.” Phil Donahue invited Baskin onto a segment of the Today Show, where he was a contributor, and so she returned to tell the story on NBC, in the studios of the employer that had let her go over the story. Within months the FDA set standards for nitrosamine content in beer, and media
attention helped change beer processing worldwide.

Baskin also reported on corruption in Illinois and among federal workers, setting a pattern of winning national recognition and building a network of contacts in Washington, D.C. In 1984 she moved to the ABC affiliate there, WJLA-TV, where her reporting reached regulators and elected officials, “getting them at home,” she said, “on the six and eleven o’clock news.” She is the reporter who made radon a national issue, and her coverage of drug testing led to national standards and accrediting for drug-testing labs and to the unseating of National Football League Commissioner Paul Tagliabue, who called her the “Molotov cocktail of journalists.” After CBS News lured her away with the opportunity to work at “the Tiffany network,” with its tradition of good journalism, the daily CBS Evening News with Dan Rather ran her stories on oil leaks, lead poisoning, consumer product dangers, corporate bid rigging, airport irregularities, and other topics. She won industry acclaim and moved quickly to an evening magazine program to do in-depth reporting with more time to explain her findings on the air.

Her biggest story, on sneaker manufacturers’ contracts for cheap labor in Asia, appeared on Street Stories with Ed Bradley in 1993, but the 1996 follow-up while she worked as chief investigative reporter for another magazine program, 48 Hours, received much more attention. “I’ve always wondered how things are made,” she said, and the price tags on athletic shoes got her asking what went into them. In the first story she visited a factory in Indonesia, where companies under contract with Nike were paying below minimum wage and workers lived in poverty. Her report three years later shows Niketown in Chicago selling shoes for $140 and then takes viewers to Vietnam, where Nike had moved to new contractors paying women below the legal minimum of $40 a month for working ten-hour days and six-day weeks. Baskin shows pay slips documenting the low wages, and her interviews on tape report the workers’ declining health and recount cases of physical abuse for talking on the factory line or for poor sewing.

After the story appeared, activists began distributing leaflets quoting from it outside of Niketown, a short distance from the CBS offices. Georgetown University students began protesting in Washington, and boycotts of Nike products spread. The Wall Street Journal published an op-ed piece saying that Baskin had “trashed Nike.” Following the usual procedure, she wrote a response, but CBS News President Andrew Heyward blocked its release. An internal audit Nike commissioned from Ernst & Young—leaked to the media—corroborated the report. CBS normally repeated stories that got attention and developed further after the first airing,
and Baskin was working on an update when its slot disappeared from the schedule for July 24, 1997. CBS blocked further coverage, and a few months later she could surmise why.

CBS had the contract to cover the games in Japan in early 1998, and Baskin noticed colleagues from *48 Hours* doing pre-Olympics coverage wearing jackets with Nike swooshes. Nike had provided CBS Sports and CBS News employees with wardrobes bearing prominent monograms of the logo, and Baskin objected to journalists wearing promotional material in violation of network ethics standards. The internal memo she sent to CBS News managers, along with Heyward’s angry “Dear Roberta” response, reached other media. CBS nominated her Nike coverage for the highest honor in television journalism, the Alfred I. du Pont–Columbia University Award, but the network moved her off *48 Hours* in 1999, demoting her to the morning news with assignments on soft-news shows. Later that year she resigned from CBS. Her next move, to senior producer for investigations at the news magazine *20/20*, allowed her to pursue serious work but took her off the air, which in television means a loss of pay and prestige.

Television journalists who cover the activities of corporations and advertisers test the boundary between the public service aims of interpretive journalism and the profitability aims of commercial broadcasting. The profession gave her ample recognition. In thirty years as a television journalist, she won other high honors for television journalism—National Press Club Awards, an Investigative Reporters and Editors Award, and an Edward R. Murrow Award from the Radio and Television News Directors Association. And the television industry gave her Peabody awards and a raft of Emmy awards. But advertisers and companies doing business with her employers and in “a cozy relationship with regulators” have called her “a vulture” and worse. The factual details typical of Baskin’s reporting shrunk in the data for network television news, as investigative news teams and their budgets declined over the period.

*News on the Internet*

Broadcast and other journalists say that, despite its benefits, the damage the internet has done to “news-gathering is too high.” The shift in news of the 1990s to online distribution raised the usual expressions of concern, and decade later journalists were still leery. One calls the internet “a seemingly bottomless well of data, with little of the much-needed contextual analysis” and another says that “the web as a source of ‘news’ comes with a credibility problem.” A former reporter is more specific: “The risk is that readers and viewers—voters—won’t be able to separate reported fact from fabricated fiction in what they see and hear.” In response, according to *Nieman Re-
ports, journalists are spending “more time looking for something to add to the existing news, usually interpretation.” Critics agree that the public can get “too much information” online and can find it hard to “sift fact from rumor or evaluate sources or gauge context.” Interpretive news shifts emphasis onto the context of ideas and background, and context has become a hot topic. During South by Southwest Interactive, a large annual new technology festival, critics at the 2010 Future of Context session reached consensus that journalism organizations online “should be using topics instead of stories as the atom of news.” Besides their utility for linking related content online, topics are interpretive concepts that pan away from events to encompass the context explaining how and why they happen. Social scientists had already noted the rise of interpretive news by the late 1980s and came to consensus two decades later that it is “one of the key concepts in research on the style and character” of journalism. As mainstream news became more interpretive, journalists became direct participants “no longer constrained by a need to place news-makers’ words and actions at the center of the story.” Context had become king.

To see whether news had grown more interpretive as it moved online, a series of studies tracked the same newspapers we had already analyzed from 1894 to 1994. By 2001 the tendency toward interpretation had increased, and then after dropping off through 2005, it reached a new peak in 2010, running in line with the historical trend (Figure 6-4). The reporting on the websites—still in the lower half of the scale—was approaching the tendencies in media known for news analysis, such as NPR.

In the studies, explanatory tendencies grew consistently at the Times, even while dipping temporarily at the other two news sites, especially at the Oregonian. The articles came from news columns, not the opinion or editorial pages, and rarely carried the label “News Analysis.” The four topics—politics, employment, crime, and accidents—aligned predictably, with stories about politics and employment including much more interpretation than those about crime and accidents. The topics also spread out, so that accidents ended up somewhat lower by 2010. As news stories became longer, they tended to be more interpretive.

Two examples, a political report from the Times and a crime report from the Chicago Tribune, illustrate the range from shortest and most factual to longest and most interpretive. The Tribune story says police are investigating the drive-by shooting of a twenty-four-year-old man who died in the Humboldt Park neighborhood. The story received the lowest score for interpretation and length in the 2010 sample, running five short sentences. At the other extreme, a print Times article describes a report that the United
States Conference of Mayors released in 2001. Rated high on the interpretive scale, it reviews the urban renaissance of the 1980s and the role of cities in creating jobs during the 1990s, talks about the problems of urban decay and suburban sprawl, and cites economic forecasts and authoritative sources, with links to census maps and interactive features. All this took space, and the story rated among the longest in the 2001 study. Political reports were the longest and most interpretative that year, and grew even more so by 2010.

Lisa Stone, the first online journalist awarded a Harvard Nieman fellowship, had noticed the interpretive move by 2001 and expected it to grow, she said in our interview. After working for print as a reporter at the Oakland Tribune and in broadcast news for CNN, she concluded that the “entrenched” older media were taking “fear-based baby steps” online. Layoffs
had already begun in the 1990s, stripping newsrooms of young, diverse, and women reporters and leaving traditional routines intact, including a “way of building a Rolodex of sources” instead of using interactive technology to expand participation in news. She later observed how newspapers like the San Jose Mercury News and Boston Globe and other print publishers like Time-Warner, as it developed its Pathfinder sites, separated their web and print operations. The strategy improved the creativity and profitability of online operations in the short term, but at the cost of trapping the print side in older ways of thinking. When print remains “a source of interpretation of events, political and others, you have to ask how you make that institution answerable,” she said. “I think that is one of the most important questions facing our industry today.” Websites build in audience feedback, but “how do we extend that into news media?”

To pursue her questions online, she joined first Web TV and then the startup Women.com, a group of integrated sites affiliated with Hearst magazines, where she became executive producer and then VP editor in chief developing news and sports content for women on contract partnerships with MSNBC, CNN, and PBS. For a project called Majority 2000, Women.com did a baseline and follow-up surveys with Harris Interactive and the Gallup organization on what American women were thinking that election year. Good Housekeeping promoted the survey, and Good Morning America reported the results on ABC-TV. When the survey found that “women care about guns—it’s a girl thing,” she said. “That’s when I knew we’d made a difference.” The New York Times covered the report, but ABC News had “a complete discomfort with the idea of an internet panel” that drew on audience participation along with traditional telephone surveying.

The internet could deliver a “payoff for context,” she said. Organizations like CNN had “a huge opportunity” to move their audiences “back and forth between the website and the broadcast because “the website is actually where the meat is.” In the older news operations she experienced in her career, only marketing departments had data about audiences, and editors were failing “to march across the hall, take the numbers,” and consider them from the perspective of “reaching peoples’ lives.” That was the goal, she said, and she expected that online news would do more “interpreting from the perspective of the audience.”

Stone was early to see the interpretive turn—journalists, critics, and social scientists in 2001 still considered the internet a source of confusion. A few years later, during the phase of experimentation found in our studies, the industry began to call for more interpretation as a way to counter online competition, and by 2010 the older trend in that direction had renewed and expanded. Like other venues for news, websites continued the
long-term growth in interpretive styles of reporting, but journalists continued thinking their work lacked context and enough explanation. The studies document the rift between journalists’ beliefs about their work and the content they produced, but what journalists believed to be true online had consequences, making news more interpretive in all venues as the industry adapted to the web.

**Explaining the Explainers**

How to explain what happened to the “why” of news? One way is to look for patterns. Insiders had a patterned way of describing changes in the industry. Audiences have been increasing recently for news content, but executives say they have fewer paying customers because competitors distribute news for free or below cost, a change that has recurred for a century. Cheap industrial newspapers of the 19th century, radio commentators of the early and television newscasts of the mid 20th century, and online news aggregators and blogs of the 21st century undercut older news outlets using newer technologies. The alternatives might seem less expensive or more convenient for the public, but journalists have argued that the shifts have debased news content. Newer outlets tended to reuse facts from existing media, add opinions, and pursue sensationalism. Editors in each period described the change as a crisis for public life. The cheap outlets using new techniques but leaching from or undermining the mainstream media, say industry insiders in times of change, threaten access to information citizens need in democracy.

As each new mode for transmitting news emerged, the content journalists produced followed a surprising pattern, responding to different pressures by doing more of the same. When news magazines and radio commentaries began supplying more interpretations, newspaper journalists of the era said they had to do the same if they wanted to compete. After mid century, television news supplied more breaking news of events, and print journalists saw themselves pushed to do the opposite of news flashes, that is, more of the same interpretive news they had already been adding, again to compete. In the new century, the internet began generating more interpretive opinions, and journalists at legacy media saw the need to do more of the same in a different version by sorting out and making even better sense of events, expanding interpretation. Across all periods, a perceived threat to mainstream news met with the same general response, a demand for more interpretive journalism and an expanded role for journalists as explainers.

In another pattern, prominent leaders in news organizations protested in each period, disparaging interpretative news of the 1930s, New Journalism of the 1960s, and public journalism of the 1990s. Whether or how much the
boundary shifted between an ideal of factual news and the slippery slope of comment and opinion diverts attention from the interpretive trends. The leaders who objected were themselves proposing forms of interpretation. Each new journalism since Pulitzer and his contemporaries aimed to tell the truth in ways that would protect the public and make for a better world. The journalists raising objections made fine distinctions without challenging the interpretive urge basic to American journalism. In the face of critics who complained of a deficient press, mainstream editors, publishers, and managers called for more context, more background, more depth, and better analysis while cautioning that judgments and opinions can erode the credibility of journalism. But interpretation is inherent in the finding, selecting, and laying out of facts—in careful, detailed, and lucid description. Going below the surface and presenting an insider account are acts of imaginative interpretation. The project to make the world intelligible to the public is interpretive to the core.

The debates over interpretive news spread beyond practitioners, but in a surprising pattern, the U.S. left and right swapped positions in the course of the past century. Reformers of the early 20th century saw fact-centered news as an antidote to the excesses of partisan journalism, but the ground had shifted after mid century, when delegates turned to jeer at the press boxes during the 1964 Republican National Convention. The political right since then has called for what progressives on the left had once proposed. The former editor of The American Scholar, a neoconservative, charges the New York Times with a “yawningly predictable” liberal point of view that treats “the facts . . . as so much tedious filler” in “so-called hard news . . .”82 After reciting the claim of a liberal bias among journalists, he calls for a return to “integrity and impartiality,” for facts based in reasoned argument about concrete reality.

Equally serious thought from the left about journalism tends to worry less about bias than about superficiality. Eric Alterman writes in The New Yorker that the loss of “professional expertise” as newspapers cut reporting jobs leaves the public without what it needs to know, a gap that cheap “aggregation and opinion” cannot fill.83 Online options lack the staff and resources to replace mainstream newspapers, and peddling the party line is shallow whether at the Huffington Post or Fox News. Liberals in The Nation magazine argue for government to shore up credible news analysis and insight by providing subsidies that would reverse the “lowering quality and . . . trivializing” of journalism. Ben Bagdikian for decades decried how corporate ownership either watered down of news content or replaced it with fluff. Its reliance on imagery makes television news especially vulnerable. The solution to the problem of superficiality, liberal critics say, is better
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explanations.

Reversing positions among left and right observers turned on questions of power. A bright line between news and opinion is difficult to draw at the fuzzy boundary where journalism moves beyond “superficial” facts into interpretive “bias.” Over the past century, each new technology produced a crisis by threatening the authority of mainstream journalism. The response from the press consistently pushed toward greater interpretation, an activity of those who wield cultural power. The journalism leaders who protested recognized the political risks of looking like interpreters instead of reporters, but their protestations also attempted to redraw the bright lines, a moving border that shifted polarities along with political positions on interpretive news.

Realism Found & Lost

The patterns in interpretive news grow from roots in twentieth-century realism. American realism responded to movements in Europe and took form in three spheres important to journalism, centered on the reality of objects, words, and images. In the sciences realism assumes a world exists independent of any observer, and humans can either take the measure of objects or come up with theories that succeed in describing other unobservable but solid dimensions of that world. Early in the twentieth century, when Albert Einstein won the Nobel Prize, his theory of relativity produced “a profound sensation,” and a few years later quantum theory reached wide public attention through physicist Nils Bohr’s series of lectures at Yale. The new science called into question commonplace ideas about a fixed reality at the macro, interplanetary scale, and also at the micro scale where atomic objects can at once behave as particles and as waves. Fundamentalist religious leaders of the era responded to the emerging view of science by reasserting direct or naïve realism, following a long tradition of common sense ideas in American history. In the sphere of objects, realist or objective views continued to pervade American culture, journalism, and even some fields of science for most of the twentieth century.

In the sphere of language, American literary realism expressed the progressive reform urges of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Growing industrial production, migration into urban areas, and distribution of goods for mass consumption produced a chaotic new world, and so writers tried to help manage the complexity and control the confusion of rapid social change. The new journalists of the time explained and interpreted conditions by presenting facts and narrating a closely observed reality, and novelists did something similar, using a common trope of claiming their accounts were factual. Novelist Henry James, in The Art of Fiction of 1884,
defended the emerging writing for its “air of reality” and “solidity of specification.” Looking back over the first half of the twentieth century, critic Alfred Kazin observed that “realism in America grew out of the bewilderment . . . of a generation suddenly brought face to face with . . . industrial capitalism,” but it also “engaged in . . . [the] labor of elementary truth-telling . . .” Realist writers hoped for progress against social injustice and pursued verifiable, objective truths using methods akin to science. In the realism of the period, journalists and novelists held out hope that the new world could be coherent, open, and democratic.

The sphere of the visual also turned to realism in the nineteenth century, with the rise of photography and then moving pictures in a culture saturated with realist ideals. Photographers of the Progressive Era aimed to document the emerging reality of modern mass-scale industrial life and, by making the downtrodden visible, spur reforms to improve the lives of immigrants, workers, and ghetto dwellers. Photographic images seemed to have the “ability to interpret the everyday world.” Lewis Hine, who documented three decades of immigration, exposed child labor, and recorded the building of the Empire State Building, said that the modern visual imagination could bring life “to facts, to science, and to common lives.” The rise of the picture press and entry of halftone photographs into daily newspapers seemed to make readers witness to current events. Philosopher John Dewey said the art of “presentation is fundamentally important.” Because “artists have always been the real purveyors of news,” democracy would flourish through “the art of full and moving communication.” Only art was powerful enough to match the world emerging in the twentieth century.

Visual realism, the idea that optical lenses and camera technology can take a true measure of the world, persisted through most of the twentieth century. In the 1960s Daniel Boorstin diagnosed the problem of newspapers—already declining in influence and closing down some editions—as a consequence of news focusing on entertainment instead of “real news” based on facts. His exposure of the pseudo image, “the making of our illusions—‘the news behind the news,’” aimed to “clear away the fog so we can face the world.” Boorstin’s critique was a reassertion of realism. Art historian and visual theorist E. H. Gombrich later called for an alternative that would accept the truth of the camera image as “an objective record” that “has to be interpreted.” His attempt to overturn commonsense realism—“copy theories” of representation—still proposed “a universal science” that excluded values, becoming again “just another realism.”

Only later in the century did the solidity of realism show signs of cracking. In the realm of objects, the theory of relativity and quantum theory became commonplace, as Newtonian ideas of science seemed less accurate
when new ways of living alongside electronic devices defied time and place. In the sphere of language, a less-sanguine view of realism emerged. Writer and literary editor Malcolm Cowley objected that the successors to realism simplified complex problems and reduced the social to the individual. In lectures during the early 1960s, essayist Mary McCarthy worried that a focus on facts, fairness, and fidelity—the “journalistic frame”—would ultimately condemn the modern novel, which “with its common sense, is of all forms the least adapted to encompass [a] world, whose leading characteristic is irreality” (the same term Gombrich employed). Critics implicated American realism in the rise of consumer culture. Reporting on everyday life put events on display for consumption and brought consumers under surveillance, but also alleviated their fears of powerlessness under the new industrial order. Instead of “a progressive force exposing social conditions,” realism acted as a force making consumer relations the norm. Mass circulation journalism—the new medium of the era—competed to do the same, promising “a coherent and a cohesive world” but delivering only insoluble problems. The “attempt to imagine and contain social change,” which made “the problems visible,” also made “their resolution impossible.” Little wonder political positions changed sides! The language of modern realism lingered in journalism and other literary genres, but could not cope with the growing irreality, in McCarthy’s term, that came to dominate U.S. American culture by the century’s end.

In the visual sphere, essayist Susan Sontag proposed in the 1970s that the camera and expert photography, far from motivating activism, made the public into passive onlookers. Art critic John Berger showed how science and government used photographs to monitor and control the public; media used them as evidence to support dominant ideas about nature and society; politicians, celebrities, and pornographers used them to make mythic icons of themselves; and advertisers and marketers used them to immerse the public in a “commodity dream” about products and tourism that promised an escape from the mundane, industrial world. The ensuing critique of positivism—a philosophy of that makes sensory experience the source of authoritative knowledge—accompanied the rise of digital picture manipulation, so that by the end of the twentieth century, objectivity seemed less neutral and solid as the public became aware of photojournalism manipulation and grew more skeptical or even cynical about visual images.

The Persistence of Realism

By the twenty-first century, public awareness had encompassed not just the solidity of things but the quarks and chaos of “postmodern science,” not just the realism of language but post-realist literature, and not only the spec-
ificity of images but new forms of manipulated irreality in the camera arts, a terrain of contradictions. But philosophers and thinkers in journalism had already planted the seeds of irrealism at the beginning of the twentieth century, just when realism established itself. Italian writer and political theorist Antonio Gramsci attacked the press for injecting the public with “ways of feeling and judging the facts” that would benefit the press itself and serve the dominant classes. American journalist and commentator Walter Lippmann after echoing Gramsci on coverage of the working classes, wrote that “immediate realities lie outside the direct experience both of the reporter, and of the . . . public,” making news is an “abstraction” of reality. The “reporter and reader see at first only . . . some catchwords” that “they invest . . . with their feelings,” which for them “are realities.” Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges imagined interpretation as “labyrinth of symbols” where humankind would become lost—in today’s terms a digital news site, massive online game, or hypertext novel that hosts a universe in contrast to the solidity of Newtonian physics.

U.S. journalism remained, at least nominally, in the realist mode. At mid-century journalist Warren Breed wrote a sociology dissertation at Columbia University that showed neither news workers nor readers saw “clear explanation to be news.” He found journalists ridiculing “the long report of current conditions in some area: the ‘think piece,’” calling the articles “thumb sucking,” and predicted that “press emphasis will continue to revolve around the immediate, the flash, the shock, the punch . . .” But event-centered, episodic news came under intellectual attack. Italian semiologist Roland Barthes wrote in a 1964 essay that fact-based items—what the French call Fait-Divers—were not news, which occurs within a context in history, but mere filler, trivial facts made interesting by a suspicious or astonishing cause or by a peculiar coincidence and not requiring knowledge beyond the item itself. By the 1990s, Fait-Divers still seemed the U.S. model, buttressed by the idea that staying oriented is possible for “the body in a geo-astronomical space,” in the words of semiologist Umberto Eco, because humans would “follow certain ‘directions’ [e]ven if the world were a labyrinth . . . .” But U.S. journalism was changing sub rosa, in the background. Historian Robert Darnton, in a memoir of his time at the New York Times in the 1960s, recalled one reporter telling him, “The game is to sneak some color or interpretation past” copyeditors, and over time the reporters succeeded.

Like a realist news story, the intellectual world as the twentieth century ended had two points of view. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who had proposed an ideal of thick description, observed the blurring of genres that once separated fact from theory, blurring “what goes on in the world.”
The growing sociology of news found complex and broad purposes in ordinary news work, which followed rituals, performed like a medieval bard, and built up cultural myths. Journalists abandoned the term *objectivity* in favor of terms like *fairness* and *balance*, which quickly became another interpretive quagmire. Social scientists wondered about “The Future of Fact,” but continued to push for a return to realism in the face of reform movements and critics. Regarding two sides to the story of realism, journalists had to choose, but whatever their choices, the world around them had changed dramatically.

One way to understand the change is to examine the ideas behind everyday realist practices. The changes documented in our studies reflect a century of shifting constraints within news organizations, how the news industry conceived of its purpose and its public. Picturing journalists as professionals with access to hard-to-reach and authoritative information leads to more analytical stories to explain events. If news professionals must provide knowledgeable interpretations, the audience must seem underinformed. If audiences are dependent or passive, others must judge what events mean on their behalf. The realist image of news relies on top-down authority and a one-to-many style of public information.

That picture of news and the public has led journalists, critics, citizens, and (until recently) researchers to perceive an absence of interpretive news, even as the practice of sense making in American news accelerated. The contradiction between that imagined world and the growing thematic bent of the news that journalists produce invokes a classic idea from sociology: that what societies define as real is real in its consequences. The perception of an urgent need for journalists to make sense of a world too complex for average citizens to understand led inexorably to the expansion of explanatory news.

But emerging interactive media upset the pattern, presenting news organizations with contradictory expectations. Instead of supplying what citizens cannot otherwise get, journalists seem like just another supplier among many competing on legacy media—cable outlets, talk radio, and comedy newscasts—and online (bloggers and aggregators). Instead of neutral observers in search of truth, journalists seem to play an on-stage role in manufacturing social knowledge. The new interactive world of news and its expectations are no better inherently. The realist perspective journalists prefer never quite reflected public intelligence or engagement with news media, and the new vision is also at odds with the conditions of public information: journalists working in legacy media continue to be primary suppliers of news, especially local political coverage. But the contradiction invokes another classic idea from sociology: that the social
“definition of the situation,” not some “nature” external to society, makes the world that people live into what it is.\textsuperscript{98}

In the emerging interactive order, citizens become part of making a sensible world. A once-hidden collective social endeavor seems to emerge: the public informing itself. Journalists may come to play a smaller—but imagineably freer—role in the new media arena.\textsuperscript{99} News as an interaction, despite its still-shaky economic status, may liberate journalists to experiment with new forms drawn from local knowledge and available technologies. Competition may move from the news organization to the individual news worker, an uncomfortable and neoliberal economic transformation. But in the past, competitive pressures were always a one-size-fits-all argument, aligning news content expectations with the industry bottom line. The new world of news might provide journalists with other options for pursuing professional aspirations.

Changing economic competition expresses something less apparent, a contest among ideas. The current crisis may strip journalists of the realism embedded in older definitions of news. Declining profitability for legacy news platforms may free the public from journalists as explainers. Both possibilities involve risk, but societies adjust rapidly. Changing news production and delivery techniques have continually unsettled the institutions entrusted with public information. If responsibility spreads across society, citizens may rise from being mere consumers and journalists may redefine themselves as independent news agents.

*What I saw startled me. I saw a man reach up into the sunshine and grasp a piece of truth. It was a little bit of a piece, but it was truth. No wonder the devil was interested.*

¶ I looked at him, expecting to see alarm on his countenance. There was none. He was so utterly untroubled that I couldn’t be sure he had either seen or understood what had happened. I sounded him. ¶ “Did you see that man get that piece of truth?” I asked. ¶ He nodded, but he made no reply. ¶

“You don’t seem to be disturbed by it.” ¶ “No,” he answered absently. ¶ “But you see how it would hurt business; don’t you?” I urged. ¶ “Yes.” He smiled. ¶ “It would ruin mine.” ¶ “Well, then,” I persisted impatiently, “why do you take it so easily?” ¶ “Because,” he answered patiently, “I know what to do about it.” ¶ “What will you do?” ¶ “Why,” he said, “I shall tempt them to organize it.”

—Journalist Lincoln Steffens, “The Devil’s Own Way, A Fable,” 1922\textsuperscript{100}

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Notes on Why Chapter  
7 Barnhurst and Mutz, 1997: 33 (figure); see the study for examples and quotations.  
8 Jennifer Bayot and Timothy Williams, “One-Story Building Collapses

9 For staff details and an examination of opinion in Time, see Wilner, 2006; Brinkley, 2010.


12 Winter and Shapiro, 1962: xiii.


16 Quotations are from Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947: 4, 16, 22, and 58.

17 Wolseley and Campbell, 1949: 359, 360. “Interpretative” comes from the noun interpretation, where interpretive comes from the verb interpret, a fine distinction little observed today.


19 Quotations are from Coblentz, 1954: 47, 139, 74, 191, and 148, respectively. Morin’s description is, oddly, the core definition of to explain in Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1951), based on the full-length second edition considered authoritative at the time.

20 See Landers, 2005, for citations.


22 Landers, 2005.


24 For a contemporary journalist’s account, see McAuliffe, 1978.

25 See Louis Menand, Critic at Large, “It Took a Village,” The New Yorker (January 5, 2009), pp. 37–45, for the quotations about the Village
Voice. [pp. 36–45]
29 Lester Markel, “So What’s New?” ASNE Bulletin, January 1972, quotations from pp. 6, 8, and 9 respectively. [1, 6–9]
29 Quotations are from Wicker, 1978: 1–4, 16.
33 Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman, 1976, identified two interpretive currents, libertarians favoring neutral roles and social responsibility advocates following participant roles.
38 Jan Schaffer, “Blame Woodward and Bernstein: Hard Fact—
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Deborah Lohse, “How to Beat the Biggest Tax Hike Ever,” *Money* magazine (vol. 22), August 1993: 58–63. A protest photo appears on p. 58, and quotations appear on pp. 59–61, 63. The sidebar is on p. 60. Photos with captions describe the family of a small-business owner (p. 61), an older couple (p. 62), and a “high income single” (p. 63).


Rep. Charles B. Rangel (Democrat of New York) argued that the tax cuts would produce the biggest increases when they expired in 2010


59 Steele and Barnhurst, 1996.

60 See Chapter 1. See Steele and Barnhurst, 1996, for examples and quotations that follow.

61 On disdain see Levy, 1981.

62 Clayman et al., 2010. The next quotation is from Patterson, 2003: 7.


64 See Barnhurst and Steele, 1997.


68 Doherty and Barnhurst, 2009.


73 Roberta Baskin, Senior Producer, ABC News 20/20, “Investigative Reporting: Making A Difference,” speech delivered to the News Media and Politics: Independent Journalism conference, Budapest, October 7, 2000, www.europatarsasag.hu. Her speech also recounts the outcomes such as the Coors advertisement and FDA regulation. Others are from our interview.


75 Roberta Baskin, “Just Do It; Nike Cheap-Labor Factories in Indonesia,” Street Stories, July 02, 1993; Roberta Baskin, “Controversy Surrounds Nike as Exclusive Investigation Reveals Abuse of Workers in Foreign Countries and Very Low Wages” and “Investigation into Nike's Overseas Operations Three Years Ago Brought about Change; Nike Expands by Moving to Vietnam and Paying Lower Wages,” 48 Hours, CBS News, October 17, 1996.


80 Allegra Goodman, “Lost in the Internet Age,” Boston Globe, August


85 For more on realism, see “Epistemological Problems of Perception” (2007), “The Problem of Induction” (2010), and related entries from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, plato.stanford.edu. On the fundamentalist movement, see Marsden, 2006, and on American “common sense” following the Baconian tradition, see Rosenfeld, 2011. A shift to a newer version of realism occurred by the 1950s, see, e.g., Rudner, 1953; .

86 See Kaplan, 1988, on views of social chaos and improvement of the era; Davis, 1983, on the trope of factuality; and Pizer, 1998, on social justice, objectivity, and science. The James and Kazin quotations are cited in Pizer, 1998: 11, 217.

see Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001.


96 See Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927.

97 See Goffman, 1959.

98 See Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927. The branch of sociology called symbolic interaction gives a alternative perspective on news explanation and interpretation.

99 See Blumer, 1969.

100 Lincoln Steffens, The Century, 104, no. 2 (June 1922): 185. [184–85]