

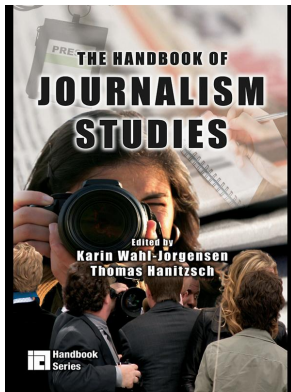
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Rethinking News and Myth as Storytelling

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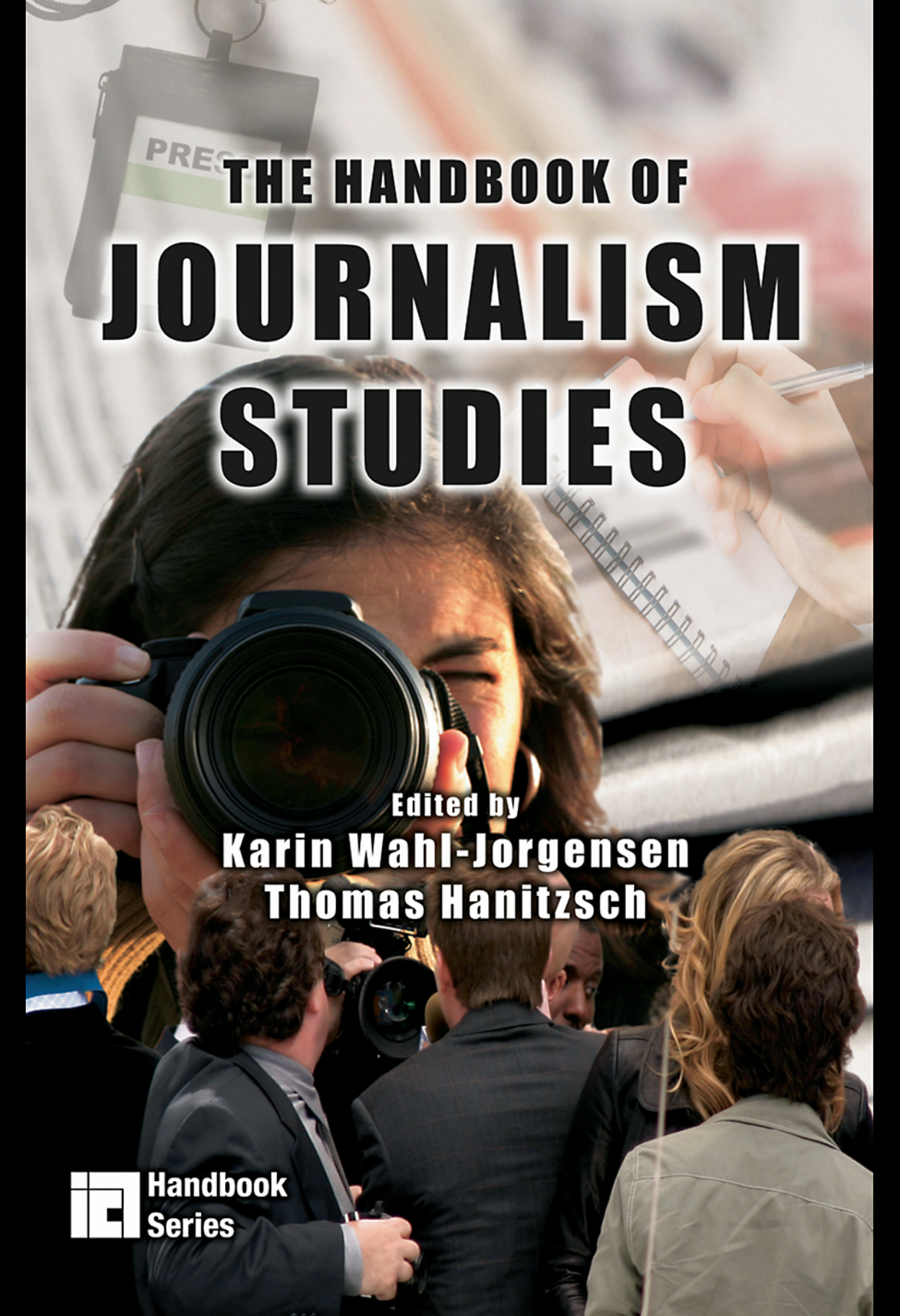
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STUDIES**

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**Karin Wahl-Jorgensen
Thomas Hanitzsch**

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Rethinking News and Myth as Storytelling

S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne

In 1988, we explored the idea that news is not merely objective reporting of fact, but also a form of storytelling that functions in a mythological way (Bird & Dardenne, 1988). We argued that journalists operate like traditional storytellers, using conventional structures to shape events into story—and in doing so define the world in particular ways that reflect and reinforce audiences' notions of reality. Journalism, more than myth, is part of rational discourse that facilitates informed citizenship; nevertheless, we argued that we must better understand the narrative construction and mythological function of news to fully comprehend the ideological way in which it operates in any culture. We built on earlier work by journalism scholars such as Schudson (1982), who interrogated the core journalistic concept of objectivity. Here, we trace the context of scholarly interest in journalism as myth and storytelling, address how it has been applied through the last several decades, and offer suggestions for future research. Such scholarship, it should be noted, has consistently applied an interpretive approach, following the tradition of anthropologists like Geertz (1973), rather than that of journalism scholars working in a social scientific tradition.

THE CONTEXT

Journalism scholars critique news in many ways, but a central thread involves questions around truth and accuracy. The ideal of objectivity holds that particular journalistic techniques can produce accurate, if not necessarily complete, accounts of events. News “bias” suggests that a “true” account potentially exists, but that various influences lead journalists to produce other than objective reports. Journalistic ideals of objectivity differ from those of positivistic social sciences, but the philosophical approach is similar. We see journalism studies operating within that larger context in the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s, which saw an increase in critiques of positivism and increased doubts about the possibility of reaching truth through empirical description. Berger and Luckmann (1967) popularized the concept that reality is socially constructed, a notion that spread through the social sciences and humanities. Historians such as Mink (1987) rejected the idea that history is “out there” waiting to be described, instead asserting that historians produce history through narrative art. White (1980) and Fisher (1987) suggested that the impulse to tell stories is a universal human characteristic, and the notion of *homo narrans*, or “man the storyteller,” permeated scholarship across disciplines (Mechling, 1991).

Clifford and Marcus (1986) integrated threads of a growing movement in anthropology that

became known as the “crisis of representation,” which argued that ethnography, rather than being a scientific account of culture, is another form of constructed narrative. In the 1980s and 90s, post-modernist theorists attempted to deconstruct the nature of truth and reality, and within this context journalism scholars seriously approached news as a form of constructed reality (although Lippmann [1922] had explored this idea earlier). Simultaneous with this ferment came increasing interest in the study of myth as a particular kind of narrative. The Jungian-inspired writings of Campbell (e.g., 1949), which focused on universal archetypes, spurred huge popular interest, manifested in such popular culture icons as *Star Wars*, video games, and countless other phenomena. Scholarly work on myth flourished in the prolific writing of Eliade (e.g., 1963) and Lévi-Strauss (e.g., 1968), while Barthes (1972), bridging popular and scholarly discourse, drew much-needed attention to myth’s ideological function.

NEWS AS MYTH

We distinguish between the two clearly related ideas of “news as myth” and “news as storytelling.” Myth has been defined in hundreds of ways, although all definitions address the functional role of myth in providing enduring narratives that help maintain a sense of continuity and order in the world, regardless of whether these narratives describe fantastical gods and creatures, or “real” people. Individual news stories don’t function like individual myths, but as a communication process, news as a body may function like myth. As we wrote in 1988, “Myth reassures by telling tales that explain [...] phenomena and provide acceptable answers; myth does not necessarily reflect an objective reality, but builds a world of its own” (p. 70). For example, one function of myth is to explain that which cannot be easily explained—the rise and fall of the stock market and the economy, or even the weather—as well as more intangible things, such as notions of morality, appropriateness, and fairness. This, we argued, was a function of people’s intolerance for randomness, inexplicability and ambiguity. The same impulses that drove the shaman to create stories to explain events, and people to need such stories, drive journalists and their audiences today. In the sense that myth comforts, news also comforts, and provides a sense of control.

In the 1980s, Knight and Dean (1982) looked at the mythical structure of news, and the seminal work of Carey (1975) established the need to view news as a whole, with significant ritual functions, rather than seeing each story as distinct. Later, Kitch (2000; 2003) demonstrated persuasively the role of news in “civil religion,” during which journalists and the public converge in ritualistic moments, such as mourning after September 11, 2001. Her analysis of post-September 11 news magazines suggests that the story assumed the three-stage structure of a funeral, in which millions of Americans participated through national news media, making it “an ‘American’ story in symbolic ways that went beyond the fact of war” (2003, p. 222).

Discussion of the mythological frame focuses on universalities, which helps advance an understanding of the communal, celebratory role of news. News plays a cultural role analogous to that of myth by using familiar, recurring narrative patterns that help explain why it seems simultaneously novel, yet soothingly predictable. Lule (2001) elaborately developed the idea by tracing a series of mythical archetypes in the *New York Times*. He argued (again) for understanding news as recurring myth, and made journalists’ role as “scribes” analogous to ancient bards: “The daily news is the primary vehicle for myth in our time” (p. 19). Like others (e.g., Langer, 1998; Corcoran, 1986) he describes how hero, trickster, good mother, and flood archetypes play out in news stories, couched in familiar and comfortable formulae. We agree that this is an important point, yet it has significant limitations.

At least in Lule’s case, we think one problem is the dependence on such popular thinkers as

Campbell. We agree with Levi-Strauss (1968) and others that near-universal themes in folklore and myth exist in different times and places throughout the world, as perusal of the folk tale type and motif indexes confirm (Aarne, 1928; Thompson, 1975). However, scholars, even those who study folklore, rarely use these indexes other than to note that a familiar theme has popped up in yet another narrative. This still interests, but theoretically, it no longer advances discussion, which we think can be accomplished by asking how a given narrative speaks to and about the specific circumstances in which we now find it. The “universalist” approach pays scant attention to differences in time and place that produce particular cultural moments and narratives, rooted in particular histories. As Scherr (2004) comments, Lule’s “mythic model often employs generalities that obscure as much as they explain” (p. 430). How does it help us, for example, to see Mike Tyson as an archetypal trickster (Lule, 2001), especially when, as Coman (2005) writes, he could as easily be seen as an archetypal scapegoat? We agree with Coman that while “the investigations into the relationship between myth and news story [...] are often persuasive and exciting [...] they have not generated a complete theory [...] or an intense and homogeneous current of research” (p. 119).

NEWS AS STORYTELLING

Appreciation of news as myth provides a framework to attain a deeper cultural understanding of news if we root analyses in the particular. The universal impulse toward story or storytelling seems as strong as ever in contemporary culture. Consider professional wrestling, which enhanced its popularity and involved fans in interactive debate by adding sometimes elaborate storylines to its conventional conflict between two simplistically “good” or “evil” protagonists (McBride & Bird, 2007). Video games, once mostly testing players’ abilities to search and destroy, and the hugely popular Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG’s), now allow players to participate in often complex storylines frequently drawn from cultural stocks of mythological themes. And in journalism, although the conventional inverted pyramid remains dominant, reporters make extensive use of story, especially with the ubiquitous anecdotal lead (Black, 2001) or in more consciously narrative writing that draws on the traditions of “new” or “literary” journalism and fiction (see Boyton, 2005; Kerrane & Yagoda, 1998). Reality television, which grew out of “tabloid TV” news, seeks to engage viewers by employing essentially a series of mini-stories, which, like news, bask in the aura of “truth.” A “story” is different from a simple chronological account, because it seeks coherence and meaning; a story has a point, and it exists within a cultural lexicon of understandable themes.

Scholars have long analyzed news as a form of storytelling. Several authors note that as a genre, news is indebted to oral traditions, popular ballads, broadsheets, and so on (Bird, 1992; Dardenne, 1990, 1998; Ettema & Glasser, 1988). Early attempts to explore these ideas included Hughes’ (1968) pioneering study of the human interest story, in which she noted that particular stories, such as that of “the lost child,” recur, each feeding into those that follow and determining perception and development of “the story.” In 1975, Darnton wrote an oft-cited essay of his experience in a *New York Times* newsroom showing how journalists used mythic themes and providing a personal example of how they obtained quotes for particular, standard stories: “When I needed such quotes I used to make them up, as did some of the others [...] for we knew what the bereaved mother and the mourning father should have said, and possibly even heard them speak what was in our minds rather than in theirs” (p. 190).

By the 1980s, many writers were exploring ideas of news as narrative, both in academic and professional publications. For example, Sibbison (1988) concluded that mainstream publications

like *Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Boston Globe* consistently cover medical stories according to the conventions of the “medical breakthrough story” even when not justified by the facts. Barkin (1984) sketched out the basic claim that journalists are bardic storytellers. Ettema and Glasser (1988, p. 11) applied the theories of Mink and White to conclude that

investigative journalism defends traditional virtue by telling stories of terrible vice [...] Investigative journalism maintains and sometimes updates consensual interpretations of right and wrong, innocence and guilt, by applying them to the case in hand, though it seldom analyzes or critiques such interpretations.

Ettema and Glasser’s work was important in underlining the idea that news is a “moralizing” form of discourse that can actually be damaging to rational and deliberative consideration of significant social issues. The same year, we attempted to bring together most of the current scholarship on news as narrative, offering what we hoped was a coherent theoretical framework for the understanding of news as storytelling, and suggesting, like Ettema and Glasser, that the impulse to tell stories may lead journalists to frame the world in conventional ways that often reinforce existing ideologies.

The “journalism as story” concept resonated across disciplines. In public health, Golden (2000) analyzed consequences of a news story about a bartender refusing to serve alcohol to a pregnant woman. A major public debate centered on the responsibilities of women and society over fetuses, with large narrative arcs developing about victims (women or fetuses?) and villains (women or repressive moralists?). She took myth and story beyond identification of over-arching themes into analyses of how those themes operate in specific cases, and how this affects people’s lives and public policy. Similarly, Bird (2003) looked at the life cycle of a story about a supposed mystery woman deliberately infecting men with AIDS. The story, which had huge impact at the peak of fear about AIDS in the mid-1990s, evoked archetypal themes that have surfaced throughout history—the exotic and dangerous woman, the power of the seductress. Much of its power derived from ancient stereotypes and fears; however, immediate circumstances of the early 1990s attributed just as significantly to its impact. It did active cultural work at that moment, in that place, speaking to that time period’s fears about race, gender, and sexual practices.

Cross-cultural comparisons benefit from close analysis of narrative technique when the question becomes: How are the stories of one culture different from one another, rather than the conventional: How are we all the same? Wardle (2003) compares numerous journalistic narratives about Theodore Kaczynski (the US “Unabomber”) and David Copeland (the UK “Nailbomber”)—both diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenics and tried for similar crimes in widely covered trials. Wardle concludes that British news coverage privileged the “story of the crime,” while US news focused on “the story of the trial,” with neither exploring significant issues of mental illness the cases raised. Wardle’s exemplary study moves from detailed analysis of individual stories to interpret “the story” of the events, but without asking the next logical question—*Why* the difference between the two cultural contexts? This area holds great potential for narrative analysis, which could explore central themes distinct to particular cultural contexts. However, scholars rarely analyze news across cultures, in part because of the daunting task of describing “news” in more than one culture and linking it to known cultural themes. Occasionally, anthropologists touch on these questions. Kottak (1990) contrasts Brazilian and US national television news, showing how each focuses on civics, the nation-state, and international affairs, but balances them differently. Brazilian news often plays up stories focusing on US technologies (reproductive, for example) that are viewed as hostile to traditional local values. He argues that this theme confirms for Brazilians “the stereotype of American society as developed but flawed

[...] American culture sometimes carries its know-how and inventiveness to inhumane extremes” (p. 92). Analyses like this could go further, linking identified themes to larger and more deep-rooted characteristics of specific cultures.

WHOSE STORY?

Whose story is being told? Archetypal, mythic analysis cannot answer that question because it assumes that at some level they are all “our stories.” Effective news speaks to the audience through story frames that resonate. News/myth, in invoking ancient characters and themes, clearly unifies people around shared values. Mythological analyses almost by definition affirm the status quo, because that is what myth does. And here lies the danger of journalists functioning like bards, who themselves served those in power. Ettema (2005) discusses journalistic accounts of a homeowner gunning down a trick-or-treating Japanese exchange student he thought was an intruder. The story resonated in Japan as a representation of horrific American violence, and in the United States as a gun rights issue. Eventually, Ettema argues, the US press and government effectively “normalized” the killing, fitting it within expected narratives of right and wrong.

Stories help construct the world, and those in power benefit from constructing the world in specific ways—engaging the audience, but also overshadowing or eliminating competing narratives. We don’t mean to suggest, along the lines of the Frankfurt School, that government deliberately provides “bread and circuses” to keep us from thinking about important issues. Nevertheless, some huge and arguably frivolous narratives that dominate the media could be said to serve that purpose. Stories about Anna Nicole Smith, the “runaway bride,” and the tribulations of Britney Spears or Paris Hilton produce massive amounts of attractively open-ended speculation that makes such tales gripping. And such stories sometimes interrogate morality, while evoking time-honored formulae (Bird 2003). Editors find these stories easy, cheap, and popular. It may not be a conspiracy, but in this competitive, digital environment in which news organizations struggle to maintain independence and profit levels, the cheap, easy, and popular story often wins out over the expensive, difficult, and less popular one.

Some stories, however, actively feed the agendas of those in power, and more acute danger comes from conscious manipulation by those who supply the motifs upon which journalists build those narratives. High profile narratives of terrorism and war provide dramatic examples. Those in power desperately need to define the story of the deeply contested Iraq war and their skill in framing it in familiar, resonant themes greatly increases their chances of success. The first Bush administration succeeded in the first Gulf War (e.g., Hallin & Gitlin, 1994) with widely repeated comparisons of Saddam Hussein to Hitler, for example, and with carefully crafted narratives of freedom, scientific mastery, and heroism. The US government succeeded in framing the Iraq War similarly, at least in the early stages (Compton, 2004; Kellner, 2005). “For American viewers [...] the portrait of the war offered by the networks was a sanitized one free of bloodshed, dissent, and diplomacy, but full of exciting weaponry, splashy graphics, and heroic soldiers (Aday, Livingston, & Hebert 2005, p. 18). In other countries, even when nations ostensibly supported the war, “the story” was framed differently. Ravi (2005) provides a telling comparison of news coverage in the United States, United Kingdom, India, and Pakistan, concluding that “newspaper coverage seems to reflect notions, values, and ideas that resonate within particular societies” (p. 59), a point echoed by Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005), comparing Sweden and the United States. News organizations in several countries used the US government frame of “shock and awe” in the initial bombings of Baghdad, but not in the same ways. For instance, after the first bombs dropped in Baghdad on March 22, 2003, the British press framed the attack as catastrophic, destructive, and essentially

outrageous. US media played up the awe-inspiring power the attack represented, and both TV and print journalists appeared to revel in the aesthetic spectacle. TV journalists described the scene with breathless stories of unabashed admiration, and used the pronoun “we” in their stories, directly inviting audience complicity (Aday et al., 2005; Compton, 2004).

After the initial bombardment, stories continued to diverge. US media stories—until the Abu Ghraib scandal—emphasized military competence and success (although some coverage highlighted increasing problems with the inability of Iraqi police and military to maintain order) and most human interest stories focused on soldiers and the families they leave behind. European stories and those of the Arab press consistently concentrated on civilian casualties, presenting powerful images of burned children and heartbreaking accounts of families torn apart. The US press showed few images of either Iraqi deaths or US casualties, following government directives (Aday et al., 2005). The European media often seemed to contest their governments’ stated support of the war, while in the United States, only one major news organization, Knight-Ridder (now McClatchy) consistently produced articles that questioned the reasons for going to war with Iraq (Ritea, 2004). Even the *New York Times* covered the lead-up to the war as the government presented it and, since then has apologized for not being more skeptical.

The US government’s success in providing terms and frames that journalists found compelling helped form the backbone of the “story” of the war. The press used them so consistently that they become “natural” and therefore “true.” The first was the incredibly successful “weapons of mass destruction,” an imprecise term that essentially created its own story of fear, not only that Iraq had such weapons, but that they could and would use them against the United States. The term (now part of our everyday language), and the stories it evoked, proved so compelling that virtually all mainstream news media used it repeatedly, essentially co-habiting with the administration to promote the war. The government’s equally successful term, “shock and awe,” populated countless news articles and television broadcasts and journalists built their accounts around it. This, along with government-supplied notions of “smart bombs” from the first war and the reluctance to provide images of “collateral damage” resulted in a particular and narrow “story” of a clean and successful war, established early in 2003 and built carefully since (Compton, 2004; Kellner, 2005).

Indeed, the press typically adopts government-defined story frames especially in times of war or after catastrophic events such as the September 11 attacks (Zelizer & Allan, 2002), where journalists feel intense pressure to “pull together” and repair familiar myths. Easy narratives of heroism immediately deploy. Not all are provided by government sources; they may materialize virtually out of thin air, as in the widely circulated stories of the firefighter who “rode” the rubble down through one of the Twin Towers as it collapsed (Bird, 2003). Everyone needed heroes, and the media eagerly anointed them, even if they did not exist. Conversely, we witnessed the later-discredited news stories of rape, mayhem, and social collapse that immediately followed the Hurricane Katrina disaster, which pulled from much older narratives of the out-of-control racial “other” (see Salkowe, Tobin, & Bird, 2006), and also seemed profoundly “natural.”

However, when those in power feed existing narrative impulses, the problem is compounded. For instance, it took some years for the truth to emerge about the “heroic” death in Afghanistan of former National Football League star Pat Tillman on April 22, 2004. Most stories relied on a military spokesman, who said that Tillman was killed “in a firefight at about 7 p.m. on a road near Sperah, about 25 miles southwest of a US base at Khost” (NBC, MSNBC News Services). Reports of Tillman’s patrol in a heroic battle were steeped in the American cultural resonance of football and war, and received eagerly. Later, the “story” unraveled into a tale of military bumbling and bureaucratic cover-up of a sorry “friendly fire” incident. A similar unraveling occurred in the Jessica Lynch story, originally presented as a tale of the teenage “girl soldier,” captured

while fighting “like a man,” only to be rescued by brave troops. Later, Lynch herself repudiated the heroic nature of the tale. Kumar (2004, p. 297) argues that “constructed as hero, Lynch became a symbol of the West’s “enlightened” attitude toward women, justifying the argument that the United States was “liberating” the people of Iraq. At the same time, the story evoked the cultural lexicon of “captivity narratives,” involving fair, lovely young women actually or potentially brutalized by dark, menacing savages. The story, in other words, was especially powerful (and dangerous) because it perfectly meshed existing, culturally resonant images with the needs of the US administration to create specific heroic tales, and, no doubt, the needs of the people to have such tales. These instances point to the danger of familiar story frames, which provide easy narrative structures to the uncritical journalist. Compton (2004) characterizes contemporary media coverage as “integrated spectacle,” and exhaustively describes how journalists enthusiastically jump on verbal and visual images provided for them by those in power.

Such frames exist outside war coverage. For instance, the history of US press coverage of China, at least from the early 1900s, consistently reflects official US policy toward China. Overall, news about China is mostly negative, but during periods when US-China relations are favorable, the US press writes more positively, and during periods when US-China relations are unfavorable, the press writes more negatively (Dardenne, 2005). The fundamental “reality” of China changes less than the stories created about China.

Story is compelling, not only for readers but also for the press. Any government administration finds it easier to frame stories to its advantage than to win over the press and the people with analysis and reason. This is politics, and it is what governments do. But this does not explain why the press often uncritically accepts those framings; after all, one might argue that the duty of the press is to resist them. But, the pull of “weapons of mass destruction,” or “shock and awe,” or “surge,” or a homespun hero is powerfully compelling and comforting for journalists and audiences alike.

Having said this, the press, usually in retrospect, may counteract the myths, or offer alternatives. The *Washington Post* uncovered the more truthful story of Pat Tillman, and many media dissected the story of Jessica Lynch, and the larger stories of weapons of mass destruction and the US entry into the second Iraq war. Government-provided stories and press reports aren’t always perfect fits. However, the power of the comforting narrative is clear in the way large sections of public opinion pillory the press for giving comfort to the enemy when newer narratives conflict with older ones. A newer story—of government ineptitude and dishonesty—also has cultural resonance, but by no means comforts.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Story, we have discovered after two decades, is not less complex. Scholars productively explored myriad texts to discover image, representation, mythic and traditional theme, and other qualities of myth and story. As Zelizer (2004, p. 132) points out, journalism scholars have found narrative approaches fruitful “in the mainstream press, on television news, and in the alternative journalistic forms of tabloids, reality television, and the internet.” This interesting and important work (only a fraction referenced here) can propel us toward further significant findings valuable to both news and society.

A better understanding of the future of journalism’s narrative role requires consideration of the greatly changed news environment. Even into the first decade of the 21st century, most people continue to get most of their news through mainstream corporate media, and those media appear to adopt official government narratives more than counter them. However, proliferation of cable

TV, the Internet, cell phones, citizens' news sites, and alternative and independent (indy) news sources drastically changed the media landscape, making Lule's picture of the *New York Times* setting the mythical agenda for the nation already seem quaint.

Robinson (2007) explores this change in her case study of the Spokane, Washington, *Spokesman Review's* coverage of a pedophilia scandal involving its mayor. She described a coherent, conventional story that fit many familiar narrative frames emerging over the course of a months-long investigation. However, simultaneous with the printed story, a "cyber newsroom" on the paper's own Web site made available interviews, documents, and multiple forms of information, and people dissected and analyzed the information, often offering their own sometimes radically different versions of the "official" stories. Readers, interacting with journalists, the news content, and other readers, helped form an online news narrative:

If readers took issue with the coverage, they had the newspaper's own space to criticize the journalism [...] Like reporters, readers utilized quotation marks and hyperlinks to source the material [...] This sharing of information production changed the dynamics of the journalism resulting in a re-negotiation of the news paradigm within cyberspace. (p. 34)

A cacophony of narratives increasingly compete with mainstream journalism to define the day's stories. News audiences pick and choose stories they want to attend to and believe, and choose from a seemingly endless supply of information to assemble their own stories. Further, they produce and disseminate those stories on blogs, wikis, and personal Web sites. Nolan (2003, p. 4) notes that connectivity means that journalists become "less of an authority and more of a guide" and that journalism hasn't come to terms with that change. Many news purveyors from CNN to Fox have simply shouted more loudly that they have the truth. From Cronkite's parting, "That's the way it was," to the *Tampa Tribune* slogan, "Life. Printed daily," to the *New York Times* slogan, "All the news that's fit to print," the press claims to have "all" people need to know, emphasizing the thoroughness and truthfulness of their reports and the compelling nature of their stories, but rarely acknowledging news is part of a conversation (Anderson, Dardenne, & Killenberg, 1994).

Some see the new news environment as threatening the basis of journalism (Henry, 2007). Scholars find news reception more difficult to handle ethnographically than reception of say, soap operas, as news is imprecisely defined and people attend to it sporadically and from multiple sources. News reception is about process, not text, as "the story" emerges in conversation with the news narrative as framing structure. In making sense of news, we involve others in the negotiation of meaning and its cultural significance emerges through everyday interaction (Bird, 2003). We believe this has always been the case, but the contemporary, interactive world accentuates it. Indeed, the audience role in news storytelling is under-researched. We know little about how journalism narratives enter daily life and consciousness. We may argue, for example, that the European press framed the Iraq War in terms of civilian tragedy rather than heroic military success, because scholars find it in the texts. But is that translated by those who use the media into everyday perceptions, and more important, into action? If so, how and with what result?

Hill's (2005) longitudinal work on response to factual and reality programming and other studies begin to reposition audience's role in both responding to and creating "the story" that plays out in everyday life. A preliminary but provocative study by Gray (2007) positions online news consumers as "fans" who bring news stories to life in lively discussions centering on hard, political news. Politics, Gray writes, "must matter to the individual and must be consumed emotively to some degree if it is to become meaningful to its viewers" (p. 80). Gray's study shows that audiences see "the story" as being about more than the specific "news" events, but also about

newscasters, politicians' appearances, and competing views of other audience members. Thus "the news fans showed the ability for fan-like engagement and civic duty to work together" (p. 85). Artificial separation of news as story and news as information hinders rather than clarifies our understanding of news (Bird & Dardenne, 1988, 1990) and the Gray study confirms the importance of realizing how news stories entwine emotional and informational functions.

A related topic ripe for renewed scholarly attention is audience interpretation and use of visual images, which always played key roles in defining journalistic narratives, from Matthew Brady's Civil War photos and those from Vietnam and Iraq, to the Rodney King video, images of Tiananmen Square defiance, the fireman holding a lifeless child in the Oklahoma City bombing, planes striking the twin towers, and the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein. In this evermore visual age, professionals as well as citizens easily create, manipulate, and instantaneously transport digital images across the world through various and ubiquitous technologies (Taylor, 2000). What story would have emerged from Abu Ghraib without digital snapshots taken by amused soldiers with cell phones? What are the consequences of "protecting" Americans from horrifying images, common elsewhere in the world, of mutilated Iraqi children? How did the YouTube video of presidential candidate John Edwards primping before a mirror combine with accounts of his \$400 haircuts result in a story that could have narrated him out of the running? Creation, manipulation, and dissemination of images; their combination with words; the public's interpretation of them; and their roles in the way "the story" gains ascendancy offer enormous potential for important, interesting, and necessary research.

Newer technologies, their incorporation of images, and the public's negotiation of meanings through them provide fresh perspectives on story and the mythic qualities of story. These technologies and the journalism they allow or even mandate develop and transform, and therefore reposition citizens who attend to the news and journalists who produce it. The digital environment embraces increasing numbers of people who participate and produce rather than just receive and consume. This changes definitions, interpretations, and consequences of news. Scholars therefore need to consider: What is the role of story and myth in such an environment? While these new developments in technology and news production have not overtaken traditional news media, they confront them. Bloggers and other online commentators supplement, dissect, question, analyze, and sometimes condemn mainstream news daily. Traditional journalists never exclusively owned "the truth," but now what they do own, that is, their story, rarely goes unchallenged.

Prior to blogging, wikis, and other newer technologies, citizens got opportunities to contribute to and even create stories when in the mid-1990s, some news organizations adopted "public" journalism, in which news media invited citizens to participate in defining potential news issues and themes. Whether formally for or against the concept, many news media embraced one or more public journalism approaches, including citizen forums, parties and other gatherings hosted by journalists, reader advocates, public members of editorial boards, news organizations' active civic engagement, and innovative ways to get public voices in the news. Among public journalism's passionate advocates and critics, some claimed that journalists maintained too much control over the creation of the final narrative (Woodstock, 2002) and others claimed journalists gave up too much (Merrill, Gade, & Blevens, 2001; Merritt, 1995). Parisi (1997, p. 682) feared that news in a public journalism environment would not move beyond "conversation," and that focusing on community resources "leaves established structures of political power and economic interest [...] unexamined." Keen (2007, p. 80) argued that the rise of the amateur, online journalist is disastrous, stripping journalists of authority to shape stories, which creates a relativistic world devoid of "the telling of common stories, the formation of communal myths, the shared sense of participating in the same daily narrative of life."

Journalists risk ceding their crucial role in "speaking truth to power." Leaving the powerful

unexamined abdicates journalism's major reason for existing. However, the greater danger lies not in giving more access to the public, but in the enormous access already provided to government. Further, with increasing merger and consolidation, corporate media are already themselves powerful economic institutions with less and less incentive to carefully examine the system that nourishes them. As their stories increasingly correspond to the powerful interests of which they are a part, citizens' news could contribute greatly to the alternative stories we think journalists are obligated to provide. Despite the more extreme postmodernist position that news has no claims on truth, a notion rightly critiqued by Windschuttle (1998), journalists remain obligated to make the best possible efforts to report and make sense of the world, an obligation that endures through all technological developments and academic interpretations. Journalists are obligated not to simply serve their corporate masters, by telling the government story, but to tell the most truthful story or stories that best serve citizens. Waisbord (1997, p. 191) notes the easy temptation to simply tell good stories; he shows how even an investigative story of government corruption in Brazil ended up conforming to standard narratives of personal morality, but "failed to address larger issues that could have helped to understand better the causes of corruption or to debate the ethical dimensions of Brazilian politics." Resende (2005), invoking Barthes and other narrative theorists, argues that a journalists' role must be to offer powerful "narratives of resistance" to counter and fundamentally interrogate the official ones.

Stories are powerful. That's why governments, corporations, and special interests employ legions of people to create the right ones and alter, or alter our perceptions of, all the others. And that's why so many people, including alternative and independent media activists, find the Internet so crucial. They see it as the best hope to get competing stories in circulation if journalists today do not have the will to do it, or if the corporate and other owners don't provide the resources to do it.

We don't accuse the press of never offering competing narratives. Resende (2005), for example, offers a Brazilian example in the highly personal story of a homeless street child, countering the official stories that erase the experience of such marginalized people. Leon Dash's 1994 *Washington Post* series about an African-American family on the fringes of American society, which later became a book (Dash, 1997), chronicles lives filled with drugs, abuse, AIDS, prostitution, crime and despair, and many letter writers criticized the *Post* for publishing it. But like the story of the Brazilian boy, it countered "official stories" in which such people are invisible or seen as less than human. While the story is at times ugly, Dash, by spending so much time with the family, learns enough to portray them as human beings rather than stereotypes, offers hope in showing how two sons escaped the poverty and crime, and provides a compelling story that most people never otherwise see. And, as both Lorenz (2005) and Clark (2000) discuss, literary, narrative writing techniques should not be dismissed as fake, but (if done with integrity) can be the tools that make the story real.

This kind of journalism underlies the philosophy of "new journalism," muckraking, and investigative reporting. These reporters use narrative journalism to tell stories of consequence that otherwise go untold and that resist government- and corporate-provided terms and themes. These stories require time, resources, and skills, but they help meet journalism's obligations to do more than narrate the increasingly inconsequential tide of amusement and diversion that pervades the news media. With newspaper readership and network news viewership in decline, the rise of Internet alternatives, and the domination of news by conglomerate interests, can authoritative journalistic narratives break through the media clutter, engage the reader to think, and perhaps even inspire action?

Exploring that is perhaps the greatest challenge both to journalism scholarship and to journalism itself.

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