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# Journalism’s “Crazy Old Aunt”: Helen Thomas and Paradigm Repair

Elizabeth Blanks Hindman<sup>1</sup>  
and Ryan J. Thomas<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas abruptly retired in summer 2010 after she gave unscripted remarks widely perceived to be anti-Semitic. This case study applies paradigm repair and attribution theories to explore how mainstream journalists repaired the damage to their profession’s reputation. It concludes that they (1) situated Thomas’s remark against a backdrop of journalistic excellence, subtly reinforcing the point that her career should now come to an end; (2) suggested Thomas’s remarks were caused by senility; (3) condemned her remarks as racist; and (4) raised the norm of objectivity.

## Keywords

ethics, paradigm repair, attribution, objectivity

On June 7, 2010, the career of veteran journalist Helen Thomas, who had covered the White House since the days of President Dwight Eisenhower, came to an abrupt and ignominious end. The previous month, she had been interviewed on camera by New York rabbi David Nesenoff, who asked if she had any “comments on Israel,” to which Thomas responded, “tell them to get the hell out of Palestine.” When Nesenoff asked if she had “any better comments on Israel,” Thomas replied that “they” (Jews) should “go home” to “Poland, Germany . . . and America and everywhere else.”<sup>1</sup> The

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interview was posted to the rabbi's website, RabbiLive.com, on June 3 and quickly attracted media attention and comment. Thomas's speakers agency, Nine Speakers, Inc., dropped her,<sup>2</sup> and her comments were condemned by the White House Correspondents' Association,<sup>3</sup> the Society of Professional Journalists,<sup>4</sup> and President Barack Obama, who said her comments were "offensive" and "out of line."<sup>5</sup> On June 7, Thomas announced her resignation from her position as an opinion columnist with Hearst Newspapers and her retirement from journalism effective immediately.<sup>6</sup> In her statement, she apologized for her comments, saying they did "not reflect [her] heartfelt belief that peace will come to the Middle East only when all parties recognize the need for mutual respect and tolerance."<sup>7</sup> However, her sixty-year career covering presidential politics was officially over.

Thomas's comments and the ensuing controversy provide an opportunity for investigating the roles and responsibilities of contemporary journalists in democratic societies, through examination of comments and critiques raised by other news media professionals (i.e., journalists, columnists, and editors). Understanding how members of the journalistic community work to repair the reputation of their profession and attribute blame during an ethical crisis can help media scholars and practitioners sharpen their comprehension of what constitutes an ethical media system and what roles the mass media and the individual actors in this institution must play in contemporary society when the mass media landscape is in a state of flux.

This study examines the editorial and op-ed column response to Helen Thomas's remarks, using theories of paradigm repair and attribution to understand that response. Paradigm repair has its roots in the cultural approach to mass communication research and provides insight into *why* mainstream media react the way they do when faced with an ethical crisis. Alternately, attribution theory, hailing from psychology, provides an understanding of *how* paradigm repair is accomplished.

## Paradigm Repair

For physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn, paradigms are systems that shape how one thinks and acts, creating discursive boundaries for what is and is not possible within a given field, profession, or collective.<sup>8</sup> Paradigms are not necessarily explicit; they often exist as unwritten codes of conduct that one learns through working within them. A paradigm can be said to be

a set of broadly shared assumptions about how to gather and interpret information relevant to a particular sphere of activity. . . . When a group acquires near-universal faith in the validity of a system representing and applying information, that system attains paradigmatic status.<sup>9</sup>

To retain good standing within "a group with systematic relations,"<sup>10</sup> members must function in accordance with the normative behaviors and standards of the paradigm. Furthermore, such behaviors become unassailable, for the paradigm "restrict[s] the range of questions deemed appropriate for study," rendering paradigms as hegemonic.<sup>11</sup> However, they are not impervious; for Kuhn, a paradigm "fails" when the fundamental assumptions on which it is built come into question and are found to be inadequate.<sup>12</sup>

As members of the journalistic paradigm, journalists can be said to be an “interpretive community,” policing their profession and defining, shaping, and reinforcing its norms, values, standards, and practices.<sup>13</sup> There is a rich body of sociological literature examining such phenomena that helps us comprehend

how certain journalistic or ethical standards [came to be] taken for granted, including that “both” sides of a story were represented, that the journalist had no personal interest in the story, that the information was an accurate representation of what had occurred, and that the editing process had caught most errors.<sup>14</sup>

For example, news workers become socialized into the profession through reward and punishment<sup>15</sup> and adapt to such practices as using official sources<sup>16</sup> and juxtaposing opposing perspectives<sup>17</sup> to retain credibility as members of the interpretive community. Such practices become routines or “strategic rituals”<sup>18</sup> underpinning a “context of shared values.”<sup>19</sup> However, these shared values and the journalistic paradigm have frequently come under assault, often from outside journalism’s borders, such as through new communication technologies<sup>20</sup> and the emergence of “infotainment.”<sup>21</sup> However, the paradigm has also come under threat from the *inside*, by way of ethical crises that destabilize it.<sup>22</sup> It is precisely this kind of “paradigm assault” that we are concerned with here.

An interpretive community exists through norms and values rather than a more formal structure. As noted, it is the norms of journalism that shape what journalism is (and is not) and who a journalist is (and who is not). When analyzing the responses of journalists to an ethical crisis, journalism as an institution does not speak univocally; rather, it exists as a cacophony of voices through which common themes emerge. Scholars have examined paradigm repair in response to acts as diverse as a man immolating himself on the arrival of a television crew,<sup>23</sup> the admission by a longtime *Wall Street Journal* reporter that he was a socialist and had placed left-wing messages in his reports,<sup>24</sup> the death of seven-year-old pilot Jessica Dubroff in a flight heavily promoted by broadcast media,<sup>25</sup> the death of Princess Diana after her car was chased by members of the paparazzi,<sup>26</sup> and the revelation that *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair committed plagiarism and fabrication.<sup>27</sup> Each unique case presented the journalistic paradigm with a fundamental challenge to its unwritten assumptions and prompted it to engage in paradigm repair.

When a paradigm is threatened, its members have four options: ignore the threat, acknowledge the paradigm’s shortcomings, change the paradigm, or repair the paradigm.<sup>28</sup> The scholarly literature indicates that media institutions have thus far overwhelmingly opted for paradigm repair, “to bind together the interpretive community of journalists during times of stress.”<sup>29</sup> According to Berkowitz and Eko,

In times of crises when journalistic paradigms are challenged, abused or misused, journalists re-present these paradigms anew to readers and audiences, in an attempt to re-acquaint these news consumers with what journalism really is and what role it plays in society. This is done by drawing express or implied boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable, legal and illegal, ethical and unethical journalistic practice.<sup>30</sup>

Paradigm repair is achieved through editorials and opinion pieces that acknowledge an ethical violation and set about identifying who is responsible, why they behaved the way they did, and how the violation occurred:

Editorial commentary will be devoted to those stories that have been flagged as examples of bad journalism. The standard repair work at this level will be to point out that the offending story would not have developed if proper reporting methods had been observed.<sup>31</sup>

Repair workers engage in three discursive strategies: “disengaging and distancing these threatening values from the wayward reporter’s work; reasserting the ability of journalistic routines to prevent threatening values from ‘distorting’ the news; and marginalizing the [errant journalist] and [his or her] message, making both appear ineffectual.”<sup>32</sup> The latter strategy ostracizes the offender as unrepresentative of the values of the community, the proverbial “bad apple” that does not belong.<sup>33</sup>

Engaging in these strategies helps “maintain a social group’s solidarity”<sup>34</sup> by asserting the boundaries of acceptable practice and defining who belongs within the interpretive community.<sup>35</sup> More fundamentally, however, it protects the paradigm, which remains whole—fractured and a little more brittle, perhaps, but not broken. The threat to the legitimacy of the media as an institution and of the individual actors that compose the community is nullified and the paradigm continues as before. In doing so, the news media justify their existence and normative standards of practice.<sup>36</sup> Were this act of repair not to occur, the paradigm would flounder and the foundations on which contemporary news institutions are constructed would crumble. Paradigm repair thus functions to remind readers that “while individuals might have strayed, the institution itself has remained intact.”<sup>37</sup> However, this means that ethical assumptions that undergird journalistic practice go unquestioned, as “ambiguous or problematic stories slip through the reporting gates and invite interpretations that, if left unchallenged, would raise questions about who or what in the world is normal, credible, and authentic.”<sup>38</sup>

Recent scholarship on paradigm repair has focused on the deaths of prominent journalists as events that allow the journalistic community to pause and reflect on journalism as an institution and its fiduciary role within a democratic society.<sup>39</sup> This study deals with the retirement, rather than death, of a well-known journalist, and looks at how the journalistic community responds not only to an ethical crisis, but one perpetrated by a heretofore highly regarded journalistic star.

While paradigm repair offers a theory for why news media react the way they do to ethical crises in their interpretive community, attribution theory provides insight into the mechanics of how paradigm repair is accomplished.

## **Attribution Theory**

Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals “understand, predict, and control the world around them.”<sup>40</sup> It posits that human actors constantly attempt to find cognitive security and balance by seeking out explanations for why they and others behave the way they do.<sup>41</sup> Attribution theory is concerned with perceptions of causality and

how people apportion responsibility and/or blame as a means to resolve multiple potential causes of a certain effect.<sup>42</sup> People may use probable causes and logic to mentally sort out what are more likely causes behind a certain behavior than others,<sup>43</sup> but as these characteristics are unobservable, people may also resort to stereotypes, biases, prior knowledge, or cultural norms as heuristic shortcuts.<sup>44</sup>

Central to attribution theory is the notion of internal versus external attribution. Internal attribution “occurs when people attribute the causes of actions to internal, controllable characteristics of the actor, while external attribution involves attributing the causes of actions to situations external to—and likely uncontrollable by—the actor.”<sup>45</sup> Scholars have determined that individuals tend to use external explanations to justify their own behaviors and internal explanations when assessing behavior in others.<sup>46</sup> This tendency leads to observers looking to individual characteristics or actions as explanations for undesirable behaviors or outcomes; in other words, a “blame the victim” mentality.<sup>47</sup> By looking to internal explanations, observers are able to distance themselves from the situation and the “guilty party.”

The process of distancing oneself from the actor is influenced by the similarity between the pair, as “identification or perceived similarity with the harmdoer reduces blaming responses by observers.”<sup>48</sup> In effect, the more similar one is to the harmdoer, the harder it is to attribute the harm to characteristics unique to the harmdoer:

When observers . . . perceive themselves as similar to an actor, they are more likely to attribute negative outcomes or behavior to external, and therefore uncontrollable, characteristics or situations. . . . [But] when observers. . . perceive themselves as different from an actor, they are more likely to attribute negative outcomes or behavior to internal characteristics or actors or situations controllable by actors.<sup>49</sup>

Internal and external attribution are important because of how they shape human response behavior, for “how one responds to a favorable or unfavorable outcome to oneself or to another depends on whether one attributes this outcome to an internal or external force.”<sup>50</sup>

Attribution theory has been used to explain rape victim blame,<sup>51</sup> perceptions of Arabs during the Gulf War,<sup>52</sup> how organizations manage their image in the face of crisis,<sup>53</sup> and college students’ perceptions of teachers’ misbehaviors.<sup>54</sup> It has been paired with paradigm repair in analyses of media coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial<sup>55</sup> and the death of Diana, Princess of Wales.<sup>56</sup> Attribution theory provides scholars a useful tool for pinpointing strategies that members of the journalistic paradigm use in the context of ethical crises that threaten to rupture the paradigm. When such a crisis occurs, it is important to understand whether fellow members of the journalistic community—namely, editors and opinion writers—believe that the principal cause of the problem is internal (a flaw of the paradigm) or external (a flaw of the errant journalist), as this is where the mechanics of paradigm repair are enacted. In other words, it is through texts like editorials and opinion columns where the interpretive community can exercise judgment and cast blame (where needed) when an ethical crisis threatens the integrity of the community.



## Method

To ascertain U.S. news media views on the Helen Thomas controversy, we focused on newspaper editorials and op-eds, which, in addition to letters pages, are “the only pages of the paper where the ideal of objectivity does not apply.”<sup>57</sup> Editorials are “as close as is possible to being an institutional voice of each newspaper.”<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, op-eds serve to “highlight the important issues”<sup>59</sup> and “broaden the spectrum of public debate.”<sup>60</sup> While op-eds are not the institutional voice of the newspaper, they are nonetheless *of* the newspaper and a place where reflection by media professionals on media practices can take place. Thus op-eds, written by members of the journalistic community, may provide views of media professionals on issues pertaining to media norms, values, and responsibilities.

Using LexisNexis, we retrieved U.S. newspaper editorials and op-eds pertaining to the controversy surrounding Helen Thomas’s comments and subsequent retirement in the period between the day her comments were first reported (June 7, 2010) and two weeks after that date (June 21, 2010). Doing so enabled us to examine both instant, “knee-jerk” reaction as well as more residual, reflective comment. The total of thirty-three articles was analyzed, of which sixteen were editorials and seventeen were op-eds. Syndicated columns that appeared in more than one publication were only counted once.

The articles were analyzed using ethnographic content analysis (ECA),<sup>61</sup> a form of qualitative content analysis. Scholars using ECA approach media texts with no pre-conceived schema of themes and instead work inductively to elucidate emergent themes through intense scrutiny of “modes of information exchange, format . . . and style . . . as well as in the context of the report itself, and other nuances.”<sup>62</sup> This method is designed to be “systematic and analytic, but not rigid . . . embedded in constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances.”<sup>63</sup> Scholars have used ECA to examine newspaper coverage of topics ranging from child abuse<sup>64</sup> to homelessness<sup>65</sup> to the 1979-81 Iran hostage crisis.<sup>66</sup> Of particular relevance, it has also been used in analyses of media responses to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales,<sup>67</sup> plagiarism at the *New York Times*,<sup>68</sup> and the CBS News airing of inauthentic documents pertaining to President George W. Bush’s military service.<sup>69</sup>

A “long preliminary soak”<sup>70</sup> in the data helped establish familiarity and context, with each article examined chronologically and in its entirety. We then identified the portions of the texts that specifically discussed Helen Thomas’s remarks and began to identify the discursive strategies used to engage in paradigm repair and attribution. Open coding was used throughout, as this approach does not predetermine “the range of categories or how the categories [are] defined”<sup>71</sup> and is thus complementary to ECA. We then used axial coding to refine these preliminary themes and bring “previously separate categories together under a principle of integration.”<sup>72</sup>

## Findings

The news media engaged in paradigm repair by (1) situating Thomas's remark against a backdrop of journalistic excellence, which subtly reinforced the point that her career should now come to an end; (2) suggesting Thomas's remarks were caused by senility; (3) condemning her remarks as racist and intimating that she had privately held these views for a long time; and (4) pointing to confusion between fact and opinion that blurred the lines between acceptable and unacceptable speech. Some editorials and op-eds defended Thomas; our analysis of these articles comes at the end of this section.

### *An Icon No Longer*

Editorials and op-eds engaged in paradigm repair by portraying Helen Thomas as a maverick and errant outsider, unrepresentative of "mainstream" journalism. The articles referred to Thomas's storied journalism career, which contextualized the narratives offered but also indicated that this career was now over, with Thomas positioned as a figure within journalism once worthy of praise but whose wayward values meant it was time for her to step down from her position.

While references to Thomas's career and achievements may, at first glance, appear to be celebratory, they also help to bring the curtain down on her career and reassert traditional journalistic norms and values. The following lede was representative of this narrative: "Helen Thomas, the trailblazing journalist who covered presidents for almost half a century, was forced into retirement Monday, after video surfaced of an appalling slur in which she made remarks that appeared tasteless and stupid, if not openly anti-Semitic."<sup>73</sup> Thomas was described as someone with "journalistic moxie and courage,"<sup>74</sup> a "trailblazer . . . who pulled no punches,"<sup>75</sup> who had a "noteworthy career."<sup>76</sup> Such retrospectives reinforced the point that Thomas was no longer the esteemed journalist she once was; she had erred, and "a career spanning 10 presidencies and nearly half a century has come to an end over her own terrible answer to a question about Israeli-Palestinian relations."<sup>77</sup> One columnist said that it was precisely because of her experience that she "should have known better."<sup>78</sup> According to one editorial, "brashness was her trademark, but she descended into eccentricity in recent years."<sup>79</sup> These remarks indicate that Thomas *formerly* demonstrated traditional journalistic values, but with this comment has demonstrated that she no longer possessed such values and was thus unrepresentative of the journalistic community. Her comments indicated she "no longer belong[s] in the modern White House press corps."<sup>80</sup> The notion of "belonging" is, of course, important to the notion of a paradigm, and this columnist created boundaries of what is and is not acceptable conduct for a member of the "modern White House press corps." Demarcating the field in such a fashion helps bind the field together<sup>81</sup> and subtly reinforces "what journalism really is,"<sup>82</sup> and, by extension, what it is not. Thomas belonged to another era, she was not "modern," and her services thus were no longer required.

Editorials and columnists used Thomas's long career and age to indicate that she had acted inexcusably and that neither her career nor her age was reason to be uncritical of her remarks. Discussing how Thomas had long been the target of journalistic ire because her career allowed her to say and do things that a less prolific journalist would not dare, one columnist stated,

So apparently, she's already received the old-person pass. And the icon-of-journalism pass too, no doubt. But if you consider bigotry a cancer of the human spirit, then at some point, you have to call people on their garbage. Even when they are old. Even when they are beloved. Even when they are legendary. The spirit of diversity demands no less.<sup>83</sup>

Here we see articulation of traditional values and policing of the field by media insiders, members of this interpretive community. Pitts's comments (echoed throughout the data) suggest that Thomas had long been an unwelcome outsider within the group who had failed to act in accordance with the norms and values of journalism, but whose conduct had thus far been overlooked because of her age and status. However, the time had come when "you have to call people on their garbage." In accordance with attribution theory's notion that errant actors are in control of, and therefore responsible for, their own conduct, we see Thomas blamed for conduct that not even her stellar reputation could excuse. With her career established, columnists and editors set about repairing the paradigm and depicting Thomas as unrepresentative of the journalistic mainstream. Her remarks were described as "offensive and bigoted,"<sup>84</sup> "unforgivingly ignorant, inappropriate, and insensitive,"<sup>85</sup> "morally and intellectually bankrupt,"<sup>86</sup> "hateful,"<sup>87</sup> and a "rant."<sup>88</sup> These terms reinforce the values of the field and assert who belongs and who does not.

One journalist suggested that she (the journalist) was "seething, largely about being part of a profession that was too willing to give a break to someone who—no matter how storied a career—dishonors our work."<sup>89</sup> For this columnist, "[t]his is a sad end to [Thomas'] life's work, but even sadder is how the rest of the media were willing to go along for the ride."<sup>90</sup> A strongly worded editorial by the *Washington Times* made the case for swift and immediate condemnation:

Ms. Thomas's comments embodied contempt and intolerance. They were a stark message of hatred from the dean of the White House Press corps, the kind of toxic speech that disqualifies someone from a position of public trust. She now enters her long-overdue retirement, tainting a half-century of White House reporting with the memory of a vile 30-second rant.<sup>91</sup>

This narrative, and others like it, suggested that Thomas had had a glorious career that allowed her to do as she pleased for many years, but that she had become a liability to the journalistic profession. As a result, the wagons were circled, norms were vigorously enforced, and the boundaries of the profession were actively policed.

### *The Ravages of Age*

In trying to explain Thomas's comments, editorials and columnists made frequent references to her age, suggesting that perhaps Thomas was the victim of senility.

Attribution theory posits that wrongdoers' actions can be explained through characteristics inherent to the perpetrator (internal attribution) or through broader, communal factors (external attribution). By positioning Thomas as a veteran journalist of declining faculties, commentators engaged in internal attribution, indicating that Thomas was solely—though perhaps not willfully—responsible for her conduct.

Paradigm repair was demonstrated by a fellow member of the White House press corps who suggested that many among this community-within-a-community, so to speak, had grown tired of Thomas, and argued privately for her retirement, believing she was an embarrassment to the institution. Consider this example: "Nature, we told ourselves, would take care of the problem. In 2008, health issues kept Helen off the job for months. Many of us hoped she would fully recover and fully retire. She did and she didn't."<sup>92</sup> The community here came together against a common enemy.

Writers suggested that "the ravages of age . . . [have] loosened her tongue to utter some pretty deplorable thoughts,"<sup>93</sup> indicating that Thomas was simply too old to be in the industry. One editorial, ominously titled "Helen goes home," reinforced this idea, arguing that "[u]nliberal columnist Helen Thomas has long been American journalism's crazy old aunt in the attic,"<sup>94</sup> a dangerous figure with a tenuous grip on sanity. But, readers were cautioned, they would dismiss this figure at their peril:

If this were your crazy old aunt, she'd be a harmless eccentric. A bigot and a hater, certainly. But harmless. Not so with Helen Thomas, White House correspondent for Hearst Newspapers, and whose concise and precise denunciation of Israel's existence has already been parlayed into a public relations coup in radical Muslim circles.<sup>95</sup>

With the power she wielded as a journalist, she was not "harmless," and as a result, she needed to be shuffled off the scene where her "crazy" views could no longer do harm.

### *The Mask Has Slipped?*

Other articles raised doubts about Thomas's personal feelings, suggesting that the norm of journalistic objectivity had long masked a darker side to Helen Thomas. Unlike the articles that referenced her age and senility, these articles alluded to more sinister forces. "Perhaps," suggested one columnist,

given her career-ending remarks that Israelis should "get the hell out of Palestine" and go home to America—or to Poland and Germany, two lands renowned for their histories of persecuting Jews—she has harbored uglier feelings that she kept from the public, as the code of her profession required.<sup>96</sup>

Another columnist stated plainly that Thomas had "revealed her true feelings."<sup>97</sup> This commentator suggested that the mask had slipped, and only now was Thomas articulating opinions she had long held but had kept private in accord with the norm of objectivity. However, at this point in her career Thomas was no longer constrained by objectivity, as she was a columnist for Hearst Newspapers, paid for her opinions. This

is a point we will develop further shortly, as it speaks to the complexities of ethics in contemporary journalism.

Other commentators argued that this was “a stunning display of anti-Semitism”<sup>98</sup> that “[put] a nasty edge on [an] anti-Israel sentiment she long has expressed.”<sup>99</sup> Her views on Israel were depicted as something of an open secret within the media: “Not that her virulent views have ever been a secret from those who’ve followed her tantrums over the years, whether in her columns or during presidential press conferences.”<sup>100</sup> One editorial suggested that Thomas was adding to a wave of sentiment intended to “promote Israel’s destruction,” which “cannot be tolerated.”<sup>101</sup> The *Washington Times* argued that what Thomas said “is an extremist view more commonly associated with representatives of Hamas, Iran, and al Qaeda.”<sup>102</sup> Here, Thomas was portrayed as somebody who not only no longer holds true to the values of U.S. journalism, but also no longer holds true to the values of the United States as a nation.

A more sympathetic writer suggested that “Helen Thomas has now shown that most dreaded of vulnerabilities—she is human” and asked “who among us does not have strong feelings about the endless warfare in the Middle East? Who among us has not said something we have come to regret?”<sup>103</sup> However, such sentiments were not representative of the broader discourse, which was better reflected by the words of syndicated columnist Cal Thomas, engaging in paradigm repair when he stated, “Most employers would not want to be associated with a prejudiced employee. Now Hearst Corporation won’t have to.”<sup>104</sup> A similar editorial posited, “Her slurs against Israel and the Jewish people against the historical record, really were indefensible, and nobody in the mainstream was going to try to rationalize them.”<sup>105</sup> From this perspective, Helen Thomas and her “prejudiced” views would no longer be part of the journalistic mainstream, and the industry could then set about reasserting its values rather than attempting to “rationalize” Thomas’s remarks.

### *Objectivity and Opinion*

As shown, the norm of journalistic objectivity was raised in a number of articles, even though at the time of her resignation Thomas was no longer a “hard news” reporter but a columnist “paid to express opinions,”<sup>106</sup> and, in fact, the opinion that caused the trouble did not appear in her column at all, but in a short interview given as a private citizen. One columnist wrote that Thomas was guilty of “blurr[ing] the line between reporting and opinion.”<sup>107</sup> However, no such blurring occurred: Thomas had retired from traditional news reporting a full decade before her career-ending remarks; for ten years she had been paid to provide her opinions. Simply put, however distasteful Thomas’s opinion may have been, her role within the journalistic community was to offer opinions. What we see here is members of the journalistic community reasserting traditional and familiar values of what is acceptable and unacceptable conduct, a traditional practice when the journalistic paradigm is under assault.<sup>108</sup> However, the norm of objectivity was invoked here despite its irrelevance.

The same columnist who argued that Thomas had “blurred” the lines quoted ABC News reporter Ann Compton as saying “about a decade ago, when she shed her role as reporter and began a career at Hearst as an opinion columnist, Helen’s questions began

to cross the line into advocacy,”<sup>109</sup> a sentiment echoed in another editorial that suggested that “until Thomas’s self-destruction, too many dismissed her growing public bias that signaled a shift from journalism to activism.”<sup>110</sup> Another writer noted that “[h]er critics included colleagues in journalism who felt Thomas violated the basic tenets of objectivity. Her critics asked: Could her writing ever be taken seriously if she harbors such prejudices?”<sup>111</sup> The same columnist continued,

Journalists, like elected leaders, have opinions, which they work desperately to keep out of their stories—and out of other journalists’ stories. Thomas failed. That she resigned over her mistake shows that this profession still values objectivity—although this won’t endure as the trade is passed to the next generation of communicators.<sup>112</sup>

These remarks ignore the fact that Thomas was at that point an opinion columnist, where the norm of objectivity has *never* applied, and raise questions about the line between information and opinion. That writers referred to how Thomas “could not have continued in a journalistic role”<sup>113</sup> after making this comment illustrates the confusion of the borderlines between journalism and advocacy, questioning, in a fundamental way, the way we define journalism at a time when such definitions are very much in flux. The “journalistic role” referred to had been nonexistent for some ten years prior to Thomas’s remarks. It could be that members of the journalistic community were grasping for familiar schemas in times of flux, attempting to reassert traditional values as the world around them is changing, and the paradigm that has provided them with comfort is being reshaped.

Some commentators acknowledged Thomas’s “new” position. One columnist acknowledged differentiation between hard news and opinion, referencing how Thomas’s move from UPI to Hearst “permitted her a freedom of expression prohibited throughout most of her career by the dictates of wire service journalism,” but then suggested that this move “probably was not a good idea for her considering the growing frustration over the plight of those with similar heritage.”<sup>114</sup> Thomas, said another columnist, “was an anomaly because after a long career as a UPI reporter restrained from injecting opinion, she had become a Hearst Newspapers columnist, unfettered by objectivity.”<sup>115</sup> A *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial posited, “As a columnist, she was entitled to her opinion. But not a selective use of the facts. Or a front-row perch in the White House from which to spread bigotry.”<sup>116</sup> Confusion over the boundaries between information and opinion, and between journalism and advocacy is evident in these commentaries, a confusion summarized neatly in one editorial:

In an age of blurring media boundaries, when some see no need to separate fact from fiction, or objectivity from opinion, that is a sad but perhaps necessary and useful reminder that principles, good taste, and a respect for historical reality still matter.<sup>117</sup>

Again, the boundaries of the profession were being actively policed here, with clear demarcation of the customary behaviors of a journalist. This suggests that despite the fluidity of contemporary journalism, there is something deeper than just practices, journalistic tools, or modes of expression that anchors the field.

## In Defense

Not all of the articles analyzed were critical of Thomas; a small minority defended her against a barrage of criticism. When Thomas was defended from “hysterical”<sup>118</sup> attacks, it was usually on free speech grounds. One columnist opined, “I kept expecting her colleagues to rise in defense of free speech rights. Alas, I waited in vain.”<sup>119</sup> The same columnist noted that “it didn’t take long for the Fourth Estate to abandon this champion of liberty.”<sup>120</sup> These comments reveal the paradigm repair process at work, with the columnist exemplifying the tactic of discursively positioning those who break the fundamental values of the field—even “champions of liberty” like Thomas—as errant outsiders, unrepresentative of the field as a whole.

Decrying the “political correctness” of Thomas’s critics, the columnist argued that it “would have been more virtuous for her colleagues to speak up for Thomas, just as she had done for them over the decades. Apparently, journalists are now only willing to defend free speech when it is safe.”<sup>121</sup> Another columnist mourned the fact that “the word and thought police finally got Helen Thomas,”<sup>122</sup> while the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* branded the criticism of Thomas as “more fit for a totalitarian than a free society.”<sup>123</sup>

Others used Thomas’s resignation to raise the broader issue of journalistic integrity and the ability to speak truth to power: “As zany and obvious as Thomas’s journalism-turned-advocacy had become, is there something the White House press corps could learn from her attitude? In particular, are we too deferential to the Obama White House and press secretary Robert Gibbs?”<sup>124</sup> This columnist quoted Thomas’s final question to President Barack Obama as representative of the “adversarial mentality”<sup>125</sup> that he felt journalism has lost:

Mr. President, when are you going to get out of Afghanistan? Why are we continuing to kill and die there? What is the real excuse? And don’t give us this Bushism, [that] if we don’t go there, they’ll all come here.<sup>126</sup>

One columnist wrote that Thomas was indeed unrepresentative of the White House press corps, for the very reason that she was not part of “an echo chamber for the White House.”<sup>127</sup> Other writers turned this praise on its head, with one editorial stating frankly: “In her later years, her questioning of presidents and their spokespeople didn’t reflect a kind of praiseworthy skepticism. She was mean, violating journalistic values that some in the press still hold.”<sup>128</sup> The value reinforced here is “praiseworthy skepticism,” suggesting that the more hostile, aggressive tone that Thomas championed as a White House correspondent is passé.

Other articles pointed to hypocrisy in the criticisms of Thomas. One columnist praised how Thomas’s comments “spoke to the ugly history of colonialism, racism, usurpation and denial that are at the heart of the question of Palestine,” asking “[a]re we seriously to accept the idea that some people have more rights than others? Or that some people’s sensibilities should be respected while others’ are trampled with total indifference, if not outright contempt?”<sup>129</sup> This columnist suggested that criticisms of Thomas mask deeper hypocrisy in the media and political system:

An endless deluge of statements of support for the actual, calculated, methodical dehumanization of Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular goes without comment; whereas a single offhand comment by an 89-year-old journalist, whose long and distinguished record of principled commitment and challenges to state power entitles her to respect—and the benefit of the doubt—causes her to be publicly pilloried. To accept this appalling hypocrisy is to be complicit in the racism of our age.<sup>130</sup>

## Conclusions

The media system and the attendant responsibilities of the news media are in flux, particularly in relation to the blurring of lines between news and commentary, while at the same time news media professionals invoke traditional norms and values to castigate Thomas as an errant outsider unrepresentative of the journalistic profession. Such findings are important as scholars work toward a nuanced understanding of the complexities of media ethics during rapid change.

This study indicates that the news media still engage in paradigm repair to “circle the wagons” to protect the profession and cast aside an errant outsider. Helen Thomas was marginalized alternately as a “great journalist gone bad,” a senile, elderly woman with a tenuous grip on reality, and a holder of extreme viewpoints. This research supports existing scholarship that shows how the media seek to repair a damaged paradigm by singling out the perpetrator as unrepresentative of the field.<sup>131</sup> Using internal attribution, the news media work to assert the dominant values of the institution and cast the miscreants as solely responsible for their actions and unrepresentative of the mainstream. Despite Thomas’s storied and lengthy career covering presidential politics, her lapse of judgment in conversation with Rabbi Nesenoff meant that the curtains were swiftly brought down on her career and the interpretive community positioned her outside the journalistic mainstream. Unlike in other cases, where the death of a journalistic icon led to eulogizing about the storied career of a member of the interpretive community,<sup>132</sup> in this case Thomas’s reputation was used against her, the collective memory of her storied career thoroughly revised to fit its ignominious end.

This case study raises important questions about the freedom journalists have to speak their opinions, particularly opinions that cause discomfort. What are the limits of political comment? Clearly, Thomas’s comments touched on sensitive racial and religious issues. However, her job was to provide comment, analysis, and opinion, not to report the news objectively and dispassionately. Given a professional role to provide opinions, if she was asked a question and provided an honest response, however distasteful, how do the industry and audiences determine what is and is not acceptable? While the norms, customs, and practices for working journalists are mapped out by codes of ethics at the institutional (e.g., the Society for Professional Journalists) and local levels, the expectations that the audience has of paid commentators have always been diffuse at best. If there are no such guidelines, how can the field police itself? Furthermore, how can the public know when a commentator has behaved unethically? Some investigation into the roles and responsibilities of commentators and analysts needs to be undertaken to answer these questions.



Responses to Helen Thomas's comments are indicative of the somewhat confusing state of contemporary media, where multiple platforms exist and vie for public attention and where the line between fact and opinion has become increasingly tenuous. This is particularly relevant to the concept of objectivity, which emerged as a norm in the twentieth century and imagined journalists as capable of cool, rational detachment from the situation they were observing and reporting without bias or favor.<sup>133</sup> While opinion in the news media dates back to the op-ed itself, it was the advent of 24/7 news broadcasting that the line between news and opinion became tenuous: "In the 1980s the mantle of the most famous and most influential moved to those members of the press corps who sat around in TV studios and officered quick opinions—high practitioners on the art of assertion."<sup>134</sup> "Cultures of entertainment, infotainment, argument, analysis, tabloid, and mainstream press not only work side by side but intermingle and merge."<sup>135</sup> This scenario that has been heightened yet further in the twenty-first century, with new media platforms<sup>136</sup> and the emergence of Fox News as a major media player, with its juxtaposition of prominent and controversial commentators against the artifice of traditional news reportage.<sup>137</sup> That style has been imitated by rivals MSNBC and CNN.<sup>138</sup> The boundaries between fact and opinion are fluid, and this case illustrates the problems of this fluidity; ethical crises require invocation of particular norms and values, and how can scholars, practitioners, and audiences assess media responsibilities without an appropriate normative framework? Helen Thomas was criticized for offering her opinion—however unsavory it may have been—on a matter of public interest pertaining to U.S. foreign policy. Yet this criticism obscures the fact that Thomas was paid to offer her opinion as a commentator, having "retired" as a news journalist some years prior. Perhaps what we saw was journalists grasping for the familiar in a time of flux.

This case raises fundamental questions about the norm of objectivity and its relevance in an age of media platforms that have fragmented traditional power structures and collapsed the boundary between news and opinion. Perhaps the issues raised by this case are indicative of a sea change in the field and a move toward a more opinionated style of news. The examples from contemporary media of the decline of objectivity are numerous; to name but one, the BBC's director-general, Mark Thompson, recently spoke in favor of a more opinionated style of news, claiming that such a shift was necessary for journalism to remain relevant in the Internet era.<sup>139</sup> Meanwhile, in the United States prominent commentators such as Bill O'Reilly, Glenn Beck, and Rachel Maddow occupy significant airtime and dominate the ratings. What are their responsibilities? What, for that matter, were Helen Thomas's? This question has no obvious answer, which is both unsatisfactory and problematic.

It is perhaps natural that, given the bleed of opinion into news, we see the norm of objectivity brought into question. Whether objectivity facilitates or hinders good journalism is, of course, an age-old question,<sup>140</sup> yet the rise of both the "commentariat" alluded to above and the new technologies that allow for citizen journalism, audiences responses to news reports and commentaries, and the like, necessarily entail rethinking of this particular norm. The articles analyzed here offer a sense of objectivity under threat. From this evidence, we would argue that the media need to undergo a deep and

thoroughly self-reflexive process of determining what are the appropriate norms and customs for the journalism field in age when technology, the economy, and societal values have changed from when objectivity first emerged. This does not necessarily entail a rejection of the objectivity norm, but does suggest that a rethinking of priorities is needed to adapt journalism to a changing world. For journalism to fulfill its social responsibilities, let alone survive, such a self-scrutiny is surely necessary.

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