

**Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity**



Gaye Tuchman

*The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 77, No. 4. (Jan., 1972), pp. 660-679.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9602%28197201%2977%3A4%3C660%3AOASRAE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6>

*The American Journal of Sociology* is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity<sup>1</sup>

Gaye Tuchman

*State University of New York at Stony Brook*

The newspapermen studied believe they may mitigate such continual pressures as deadlines, possible libel suits, and anticipated reprimands of superiors by being able to claim that their work is "objective." This article examines three factors which help a newsman to define an "objective fact": form, content, and interorganizational relationships. It shows that in discussing content and interorganizational relationships, the newsman can only invoke his news judgment; however, he can claim objectivity by citing procedures he has followed which exemplify the formal attributes of a news story or a newspaper. For instance, the newsman can suggest that he quoted other people instead of offering his own opinions. The article suggests that "objectivity" may be seen as a strategic ritual protecting newspapermen from the risks of their trade. It asks whether other professions might not also use the term "objectivity" in the same way.

To a sociologist, the word "objectivity" is fraught with meaning. It invokes philosophy, notions of science, and ideas of professionalism. It conjures up the ghosts of Durkheim and Weber, recalling disputes in scholarly journals concerning the nature of a "social fact" and the term "value free."

The social scientist's frequent insistence upon objectivity is not peculiar to his profession. Doctors and lawyers declare objectivity to be the appropriate stance toward clients. To journalists, like social scientists,<sup>2</sup> the term "objectivity" stands as a bulwark between themselves and critics. Attacked for a controversial presentation of "facts," newspapermen invoke their objectivity almost the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits.

Newspapermen must be able to invoke some concept of objectivity in

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the 1971 American Sociological Associated meetings. I benefited from the comments of Charles Perrow, Kenneth A. Feldman, Rose L. Coser, and Florence Levinsohn helped me edit.

<sup>2</sup> Jacobs (1970) challenges comparisons between newsmen and sociologists, pointing out that sociologists gather more data for a different purpose. She notes that her editor's first rule was "Get the facts" and his second, "Don't let the facts interfere with the story." Contemporary newspapers, including those for which Jacobs worked, have cast aside this second dictum. The quantity and purpose of gathered information do not detract from my argument.

order to process facts about social reality. This paper will examine three factors which influence the newsman's notion of objectivity: form, interorganizational relationships, and content. By form, I mean those attributes of news stories and newspapers which exemplify news procedures, such as the use of quotation marks. By content, I mean those notions of social reality which the newspaperman takes for granted. Content is also related to the newsman's interorganizational relationships, for his experiences with those organizations lead him to take for granted certain things about them. Finally, I shall suggest that the correct handling of a story, that is, the use of certain procedures discernible to the news consumer, protects the newspaperman from the risks of his trade, including critics.

Everett Hughes (1964) suggests that procedures that serve this purpose may be seen as "rituals." A ritual is discussed here as a routine procedure which has relatively little or only tangential relevance to the end sought. Adherence to the procedure is frequently compulsive. That such a procedure may be the best known means of attaining the sought end does not detract from its characterization as a ritual. For instance, the eighteenth-century practice of bleeding patients to "cure" fever may be viewed as a ritual.<sup>3</sup> Inasmuch as newspapermen invoke ritualistic procedures in order to deflect potential criticism and to follow routines bounded by the "cognitive limits of rationality," they are also performance "strategies" (March and Simon 1967, pp. 137, 142). The term "strategy" denotes tactics used offensively to anticipate attack or defensively to deflect criticism.<sup>4</sup> Objectivity as strategic ritual may be used by other professionals to defend themselves from critical onslaught.

This article cites ten news stories. Nine are taken from field notes gathered as a participant observer at a daily metropolitan newspaper with a circulation of about 250,000.<sup>5</sup> The tenth is from a book on news practices (Rivers 1967). In six stories, newsmen criticize the work of colleagues; in one, a newsman criticizes a reporter from another newspaper. The emphasis upon criticism is partly a result of the methods used. As a participant observer, I tried to ask as few questions as possible.

<sup>3</sup> Nor are procedures favored by twentieth-century physicians necessarily immune from characterization as rituals (Everett Hughes, personal communication, 1971). Indeed, the reluctance of many to view medical procedures as rituals is probably a reflection of doctors' high occupational prestige.

<sup>4</sup> Weinstein (1966) speaks of "credibility enhancing tactics" and suggests (personal communication, 1971) tactics connoting "objectivity," such as quoting others or presenting alternative possibilities by citing negative evidence or conflicting opinion, may be used to enhance credibility in interpersonal communication.

<sup>5</sup> All informants knew that I was a sociologist engaged in research. Many tended to define my activities in terms of their own work. Their volunteered interpretations of my activities provided clues concerning their own strategies of newswork.

This was especially important when observing the top editors who spent much of the evening buried under news copy. When they praised an article to one another, they did not state their reasons. When they disliked a story, they gave many reasons for rejecting it. Such reasons were carefully recorded, and these records are necessarily more accurate than imputations concerning what was "right" about a "good" story. Not many stories were criticized; lengthy expositions of a story's flaws, while readily categorized, were few and far between. However, the categories of negative evaluations they generated provided insights into the assessment of "good" or well-done stories. The discussion of the "presentation of conflicting possibilities" is constructed from such negative categories as well as "positive" statements of the informants.

I

Unlike social scientists, newsmen have a limited repertoire with which to define and defend their objectivity. In Radin's terms (1957, 1960), the social scientist is a "thinker"; the newsman, a "man of action." That is, the social scientist may engage in reflexive epistemological examination (Schutz 1962, pp. 245 ff.); the newsman cannot. He must make immediate decisions concerning validity, reliability, and "truth" in order to meet the problems imposed by the nature of his task—processing information called news, a depletable consumer product made every day. Processing news leaves no time for reflexive epistemological examination. Nonetheless, the newsmen need some working notion of objectivity to minimize the risks imposed by deadlines, libel suits, and superiors' reprimands.

Unless a reporter has drawn an extended investigatory assignment, he generally has less than one working day to familiarize himself with a story's background, to gather information, and to write his assignment.<sup>6</sup> The reporter knows that his written work will pass through an organizational chain consisting of hierarchically arranged editors and their assistants. As newsmen readily explain, processing a story involves "second guessing." The reporter "second guesses" the city editor and his assistants; the city editors, the news editors; the news editors, the managing editor and the editor-in-chief; these editors, the publisher. The manag-

<sup>6</sup> The reporter has less than one working day because he may also be asked to accomplish such routine tasks as writing obituaries and rewriting accounts of events telephoned to the city room by the newspaper's correspondents. Also, a reporter may not be assigned a story, such as a fire, until after a considerable portion of his working day has already passed. The task is somewhat different for the "beat" reporter, since he already has some background information at his disposal. However, he will be asked to write more than one story a day, and he must keep up routine contacts with his news sources.

ing editor, the editor-in-chief, and the publisher will criticize a story after it has been printed.

At the observed newspaper, the assistant managing editor was in charge of making the final news judgment about written copy. If he disliked a story, he might criticize the local news editor for passing it on. The local editor would make some type of comment to the city editor, and the "scolding" would be passed down the hierarchical chain. At other times, the top editor might simply "blue pencil" or alter a "bad story," grumbling because subordinates had done a poor job and had created more work for the editors. In this case, subordinates would realize their work had been inadequate when they read the newspaper and saw that the printed copy differed from the written copy. Scoldings and "blue penciling" are part of a system of social control (Breed 1955) potentially affecting promotions, keeping one's job, and drawing good assignments.

Two factors stand out in this process of hierarchical examination and potential criticism. The newspaper is a collection of many stories. If too many stories must be rewritten, the newspaper cannot meet its deadlines, and profits will suffer. Trucks carrying the newspaper to outlying regions will leave late; their drivers may merit overtime pay. If one edition is late, the scheduling of the following editions will be affected; printers may claim overtime. Moreover, if the late morning editions do not arrive at newsstands on schedule, consumers may buy the available competing newspaper, thus decreasing company profits. The newsmen fear future sales may then be jeopardized. Reading the competing newspaper, the news consumer may decide it is a "superior" newspaper and change his newspaper buying habits.

Each newspaper story is a collection of "facts" assessed and structured by newsmen. The newsmen may be held accountable for the accuracy of any and all of these "facts." The "facts" are read by both the general news consumer and the "concerned" news consumer (the person whom the story quotes, describes, and/or reports). If the concerned news consumer feels he can prove damage to his business, reputation, etc., he may sue for libel. While libel suits are relatively rare, when they do occur, they place news organizations in financial jeopardy. Endangering a newspaper's reputation, a libel suit may also affect the general news consumer's proclivity to buy the newspaper. Then, too, a libel suit disrupts newsroom routine, requiring some staff members to appear in court.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, every story entails dangers for news personnel and for the

<sup>7</sup> Newsmen also grumble about subpoenas to appear in court when trials involve events they have witnessed or reported. Not only do they object to revealing their news sources, but court appearances keep them from their daily routine.

news organization. Each story potentially affects the newsmen's ability to accomplish their daily tasks, affects their standing in the eyes of their superiors, and affects the ability of the news organization to make a profit. Inasmuch as the newspaper is made of many stories, these dangers are multiplied and omnipresent.

## II

The newsmen cope with these pressures by emphasizing "objectivity," arguing that dangers can be minimized if newsmen follow strategies of newswork which they identify with "objective stories." They assume that, if every reporter gathers and structures "facts" in a detached, unbiased, impersonal manner, deadlines will be met and libel suits avoided. The newsmen think most people understand the importance of deadlines, if only through the Hollywood stereotypes of news procedures; they stress the dangers of libel suits to outsiders.<sup>8</sup> Discussing their own experiences with libel suits, newsmen claimed they had been objective but had made an unavoidable mistake. Condensed, their comments asserted: the newsman must question facts by going to the source, but some alleged facts must simply be accepted as "true." Viewing everything as questionable leads to such absurdities as the following: "Robert Jones and his alleged wife, Fay Smith Jones, yesterday held what they described as a cocktail party at their supposed home, 187 Grant Street, City, purportedly in honor of a woman claiming to be Mrs. John Smith, commonly thought to be the aunt of the self-described hostess."

The newsman navigates between libel and absurdity by identifying "objectivity" with "facts" which he or other newsmen observed or which may be verified. Verification entails the use of, or the possibility of using, appropriate procedures, such as telephoning a marriage license bureau to determine whether Robert Jones had married Fay Smith. If verification

<sup>8</sup> In my first interview with a newsman (in this case, the vice-president in charge of news at the television station I observed for a year), I was given a text on libel law to study. In discussions, editors and reporters from both the newspaper and television station mentioned libel immediately when asked about problems confronting news organization. They also volunteered information about libel suits when asked about difficulties they had encountered in their careers. There are basically two kinds of libel: general libel and libel with malicious intent. Let us assume that two men named John Black live in Central City. One is an alleged mobster and the other owns and manages Central City Bar and Grill. Writing a story about John Black, the alleged mobster, a reporter states he owns and manages Central City Bar and Grill. John Black, the restaurateur, may sue for general libel. If he can prove the reporter knew there were two John Blacks and that he willfully misstated the facts, he may sue for libel with malicious intent. Higher damages are awarded in cases involving malicious intent, but general libel suits arising from carelessness, etc., are an occupational hazard. General libel suits are more frequent in England than in the United States. In this country, libel suits tend to be sensational.

is necessary but cannot be obtained, the newsmen may follow other strategies.

### III

Besides verifying "facts," the following four strategic procedures, exemplified as the formal attributes of a news story, enable the newsman to claim objectivity.

1. *Presentation of conflicting possibilities.*—Newspapermen must be able to identify "facts," even though some truth-claims are not readily verifiable. For instance, a U.S. senator may claim that America lags behind the Soviet Union in the development of a specific type of missile. A reporter certainly cannot check that claim in time to meet his deadline, and it is even possible that he could never locate adequate information with which to assess the extent to which the claim is a "fact." The reporter can only determine that the senator stated "A." Newspapermen regard the statement "X said A" as a "fact," even if "A" is false.

This creates problems for both the reporter and the news organization. First, the news consumer supposedly wants to know whether statement "A" is a "fact," and one function of news is to tell the news consumer what he wants and needs to know. Second, since the senator's claim to truth cannot be verified, the news consumer may accuse both the reporter and the news organization of bias (or of "favoring" the senator) if an opposing opinion is not presented. For instance, if the senator is a Democrat and the president is a Republican, the news consumer might accuse the newspaper of bias favoring the Democrats, because the only "fact" reported was that the Democratic senator said "A." The newsman would feel his ability to claim "objectivity" in the face of anticipated criticism had been endangered.

Although the reporter cannot himself confirm the truth of the senator's charge, he can contact someone who can. For instance, he can ask the Republican secretary of defense whether the senator's charge is true. If the secretary of defense states the charge is "false," the reporter cannot prove that the secretary's assessment is "factual." He can, however, write that the secretary of defense stated "B." Presenting both truth-claim "A" attributed to the senator and truth-claim "B" attributed to the secretary of defense, the newsman may then claim he is "objective" because he has presented "both sides of the story" without favoring either man or political party.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, by presenting both truth-

<sup>9</sup> Speaking of television practices, Benet (1970, p. 113), an advocate of first-person or interpretive journalism, points out that, if one statement is filmed, the rebuttal must also be filmed, not spoken by the television reporter. TV and "ink" newsmen recognize one problem with presenting conflicting possibilities. Since news concerns

claims, the "objective" reporter supposedly permits the news consumer to decide whether the senator or the secretary is "telling the truth."

Calling this practice a procedure fostering objectivity is problematic. In this simple example, it could equally well be labeled "providing a sufficient number of data for the news consumer to make up his mind." The procedure may grow increasingly complex. For instance, while asserting truth-claim "B," the secretary of defense may charge the senator is playing politics with national defense. The chairman of the House Arms Committee, a Democrat, may then counter the secretary's charge, stating that the Republican administration is endangering national safety through inadequate intelligence and cavalier treatment of the military budget for arms development. The next day, the national chairman of a peace group may call a press conference to accuse all parties to the controversy of militarism, overemphasizing weapons development to the detriment of a determined exploration of a diplomatic search for world peace and security. A spokesman for the president may then condemn the leader of the peace group as a communist sympathizer trying to undermine the American political process.

At this point, there are five persons (the senator, the secretary, the committee chairman, the peace group leader, the presidential spokesman) making nonverifiable truth-claims, each representing one possible reality. Analyzing the marijuana controversy, Goode (1970, pp. 50-68) refers to such a morass of opinions purporting to be facts as the "politics of reality." While this notion is sociologically relevant, it is useless to newsmen faced with the dilemma of identifying and verifying "facts." However, by pairing truth-claims or printing them as they occur on sequential days, the newsmen claim "objectivity." As the newsmen put it, the news consumer may not be presented with all sides of a story on any one day, but he will receive a diversity of views over a period of time.

As a forum airing the "politics of reality," the newspapermen's definition of the situation goes beyond the presentation of sufficient data for the news consumer to reach a conclusion. A morass of conflicting truth-claims, such as those hypothetically introduced, might more profitably be viewed as an invitation for the news consumers to exercise selective perception, a characteristic reaction to news. Indeed, the invitation to selective perception is most insistent, for each version of reality claims equal potential validity. Inasmuch as "objectivity" may be defined as "intentness on objects external to the mind," and "objective" as "be-

---

conflict (Rovere 1960), a charge is more newsworthy than a denial. Thus, the charge placed at the beginning of a story (because it is more newsworthy, important, etc.) might receive more attention from the news consumer than the denial placed toward the bottom of the story. Rovere (1960) reports Joseph McCarthy's skill at using this rule to maximize his own news exposure.

longing to the object of thought rather than the thinking subject" (both dictionary definitions), it would appear difficult to claim—as newspapermen do—that presenting conflicting possibilities fosters objectivity.

2. *Presentation of supporting evidence.*—Of course, there are occasions when the newspapermen can obtain evidence to support a truth-claim. Supporting evidence consists of locating and citing additional "facts," which are *commonly accepted as "truth."* This insistence upon supporting "facts" is pervasive, running throughout the editors' criticisms of reporters as well as the reporters' criticisms of editors.

For instance, one evening the assistant managing editor asked for "more objective obits" after reading an obituary which described the deceased as a "master musician." He asked, "How do we know" the deceased was a "master musician" as opposed to a "two-bit musician" playing with the town band? He was told that, several paragraphs into the story, one learns the deceased had played with John Philip Sousa. The additional "fact," the editor agreed, justified the term "master musician."

Similarly, a reporter criticized the news editors for "bad" nonobjective editing, when a published story referred to "Communist propaganda" seen at a specific location. He claimed the article should have included more "facts," such as the titles of specific observed works. While recognizing that the label "Communist propaganda" might not be an accurate characterization of each individual piece of literature, he insisted that such a presentation would be more "objective." It would offer "facts" (titles) supporting the initial truth-claim. Furthermore, the titles would presumably enable the reader to assess the degree to which the description "Communist propaganda" was accurate and thus "factual," just as noting the deceased musician's association with Sousa would enable the reader to decide for himself whether the label "master musician" was warranted.<sup>10</sup>

The newsmen's assertion that "the facts speak for themselves" is instructive. This saying implies an everyday distinction between the "speaking facts" and the reporter (speechmaker, gossipier, etc.) speaking for the "facts." If the reporter were to speak for the "facts," he could

<sup>10</sup> One might quite properly object that "piling fact upon fact" presupposed a sophisticated news consumer conversant with diversified fields. On the one hand, newsmen assume that presenting supporting evidence enables the news consumer to decide for himself whether an allegation or description is "factual." On the other hand, newsmen occasionally complain about and denigrate the intelligence of their readers. In fact, on several occasions, editors made a special point of teaching me to read between the lines of newspaper accounts so that I could assess the "facts" correctly. These contradictory assumptions might explain Ellul's insistence (1966, p. 76) that the man who believes himself to be knowledgeable and hungers for news is readily propagandized, especially if he adheres to the myths dominant in technological societies.

not claim to be objective, "impersonal," "without bias." Of course, it is sociological commonplace that "facts" do not speak for themselves. For instance, Shibutani (1966) demonstrates that the assessment and acceptance of "facts" is highly dependent upon social processes.

3. *The judicious use of quotation marks.*—The newsmen view quotations of other people's opinions as a form of supporting evidence. By interjecting someone else's opinion, they believe they are removing themselves from participation in the story, and they are letting the "facts" speak, as shown in the editors' discussion of the following incident.

A slum building, owned by an absentee landlord, had been without heat for several days in a near-zero degree temperature. The landlord claimed someone was fixing the furnace at that moment. When Smith, the local news editor, called the building, no one was working on the heating unit, a "fact" Smith added to the reporter's story. Checking the story, Jones, the assistant managing editor, told his subordinate Smith to contact more tenants of the building and to increase the number of names mentioned in the story.

Jones says, "If you can get me more [quotations from tenants] we'll [print] it." [After a while] Jones repeated that he wants more people quoted, because "I've had too much trouble." Without supporting evidence, the story may be libelous.

Adding more names and quotations, the reporter may remove his opinions from the story by getting others to say what he himself thinks. For instance, covering a concerned group's visit to a U.S. attorney to request action on the massacre of black students in Orangeburg, South Carolina, a reporter asked a minister for his reaction to the federal attorney's behavior.

The minister answered, "We have a great deal of concern for what is going on. It's unfortunate that our concern was responded to in a way that really didn't recognize that when people have been killed, a great deal of emotion evolves which is not taken care of by telling people to hurry along." . . . The reporter then asked, "To put it briefly, are you dissatisfied?" The minister replies, "I think there was unnecessary harshness." He looks at a friend and continues, "Rudeness is the word."

As we left, the reporter explained that he interviewed the minister specifically to get those statements so that he would not have to editorialize and call the U.S. attorney rude himself.

The use of quotations to remove the reporter's presence from the story extends to the use of quotation marks as a signaling device. They may be used, as discussed, to signal "This is a statement belonging to someone other than the reporter." They also may be used to indicate "so-called." For instance, the New Left (without quotation marks) names a group.

The "New Left" (with quotation marks) indicates a group calling itself the New Left; in this case, the legitimacy of the group is questioned.

Impressed by a draft-resistance demonstration, a reporter used quotation marks in all possible ways to appease his editors whom he knew to be opposed to the demonstration. He wrote:

Some [thousands of] persons swarmed to a sunny [City] Park yesterday where an "incredibly successful" anti-draft, anti-war rally was climaxed when more than . . . youths turned in their draft cards.

The tenor of the 2½ hour demonstration was that a "New Left" movement is growing and must be enlarged to erase present American policy and "build an America we won't be ashamed to live in."

The Park protest was the [City] segment of coast-to-coast demonstrations in 60 cities called National Resistance Day. The two-day event concludes today with "political workshops" in the [City] area.

The [City] Park rally was relatively free from violence considering the huge throng, mostly young people. City Deputy Supt. John Smith, in charge of the police detachment, said, "Only two or three fights, quickly broken up, marred an otherwise perfect day."

(Quotations in the first three paragraphs were taken from speeches given at the rally, although their source was not identified in the story.)

Although the reporter personally agreed with all the statements and terms enclosed in quotation marks, the quotation marks enabled the reporter to claim he had not interjected his opinions into the story. They made the story "objective" and protected him from his superiors. This reporter received most of the demonstration assignments, although he was sympathetic to the demonstrators, and his editors were not. Had his sympathies been perceived, he would not have been sent to future demonstrations. Furthermore, his stories would have been substantially altered, and they were not. Indeed, among themselves, the editors praised this reporter's work. In sum, the reporter manipulated his superiors, interjecting his own views, by following a procedure they associated with objectivity.<sup>11</sup>

4. *Structuring information in an appropriate sequence.*—Structuring

<sup>11</sup> Both the age distribution and the use of shifts at the observed newspaper facilitated the editors' misperception of this reporter. The top editors were aged between 45 and 65. The reporter was in his early thirties. The editors came to work at 6:00 P.M. The reporter left work at 6:00 P.M. Although the editors and reporters might be in the newsroom at the same time, the editors tended to socialize with older reporters with whom they maintained long-standing friendships as they exchanged gossip before sitting down to work. Furthermore, since the young reporter under discussion sported short hair and conservative clothes, the editors had few cues to his political beliefs. The reporter's ability to mask his views is of some importance because superiors tend to identify "objectivity" with the particular "slant" or news policy of their organization (see Breed 1955).

information in an appropriate sequence is also a procedure to denote objectivity which is exemplified as a formal attribute of news stories. The most important information concerning an event is supposed to be presented in the first paragraph, and each succeeding paragraph should contain information of decreasing importance. The structure of a news story theoretically resembles an inverted pyramid.

This is the most problematic formal aspect of objectivity for the newsman. Discussing the other three formal attributes, the newsman may state that he presented conflicting truth-claims; that the supplementary evidence existed, and he merely collected it; that quotations and items in quotation marks represent the opinions of others, not his opinions. However, even though a reporter may unconsciously second guess his editors as he chooses a lead paragraph, and so bow to company policies, he is the person responsible for the story's lead. He cannot claim the choice belongs to someone else. The reporter can only invoke professionalism and claim the lead is validated by his news judgment.

Invoking news judgment (professional acumen) is an inherently defensive stance, for "news judgment" is the ability to choose "objectively" between and among competing "facts," to decide which "facts" are more "important" or "interesting." "Important" and "interesting" denote content. In other words, discussing the structuring of information, the newsman must relate his notions of "important" or "interesting" content.

To some extent the newsman's difficulties are mitigated by the familiar formula that news concerns "who, what, when, where, why, and how." These "five *w*'s" are called the most "material facts" about a story. Thus, if the newsman can claim he has led with the "most material things," he can claim he has been "objective." For example, explaining how he would write the story about the anti-war, anti-draft demonstration, the reporter said,

First I'll lead with the most material things. . . . How many people were there—that's the story . . . the number of draft cards turned in. . . . In the second [paragraph], I'll set the tone. Then I'll go into the speeches. The hard facts go first.

Yet newspapers and reporters may not concur on the identification of material facts. This same reporter had skimmed an account of the demonstration in another paper and had called it "biased." He complained that "there were thousands of people [at the demonstration], and maybe all but a few were peaceful, yet the afternoon paper led with an incident about violence." Obviously, the reporter from the afternoon newspaper would counter that his account was "objective," that the violence was "the most material thing," the "who, what, where, when, why, and how" of the story. As amply demonstrated in the literature, newspapers differ in

their choice of material "facts," their news policies,<sup>12</sup> but all claim to be "objective."

If the newsmen have trouble identifying "material facts" even within the bounds of their newspaper's policy, they may practice another option. Instead of discussing the formal attributes of an individual news story, they may describe the formal attributes of a newspaper.

#### IV

A newspaper is divided into section and pages. The first pages contain "straight objective" general stories. Specialized news, such as sports, women's and financial news, appear on clearly delineated pages placed together in a section. General stories which are not "objective" are placed on either the editorial page or the "Op Ed" (the page opposite the editorial page). There are only two exceptions to this rule. One is the feature story. Despite telling arguments that the feature story is a news story (H. Hughes 1940), newsmen insistently distinguish between the two forms (e.g., Mott 1962). On some newspapers this distinction is formalized. For instance, the *New York Times* runs features on the first page of the second section. The other exception is "news analysis" which may be published on the "straight objective" general pages if it is accompanied by the distinct<sup>13</sup> formal label "news analysis."

The newsmen use the label "news analysis" to place a barrier between the problematic story and the other stories on the general pages. Just as quotation marks theoretically establish a distance between the reporter and a story and signal that the materials enclosed may be problematic, "news analysis" indicates that accompanying materials neither represent the opinions of the management nor are necessarily "true." These materials are the reporter's interpretation of the "facts." Readers should trust and accept the reporter's information according to their assessment of his qualifications and attitudes as revealed in his general work and previous news analyses.

Yet, the invocation of news analysis to suggest objectivity also presents difficulties. The question "How is objective reporting different from news analysis?" turned out to be the most difficult for respondents to answer of all the questions asked during two years of research.<sup>14</sup> One editor had

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the best comparison of two newspapers is to be found in Matthews (1959).

<sup>13</sup> The words "news analysis" are printed in a distinct type, different from those used in the headline, by-line, lead paragraph, and body of the article.

<sup>14</sup> Several reporters and an assistant city editor said they did not know. The managing editor of the Sunday paper smiled and patted the local news editor on the back

this to say after he had rambled for 10 minutes without being able to focus on the subject:

News analysis implies value judgments. Straight news has no value judgments whatsoever. . . . You can't eliminate the label "news analysis" and say anything. No, I'd say an alarm goes off in the editor's mind who thinks this is loaded and I want to get off the hook. [Although] the reader thinks the label . . . [is] weighty and ponderous, the key point is the number and degree of value judgments undocumented at the time.

Although the editor delineated a formal technique to alert the reader, he could not say what determines the "number and degree of value judgments undocumented at the time." Furthermore, the editor recognizes the discrepancy between the reason for his action and the news consumer's interpretation of that action. Faced with this dilemma, the newsman again invokes his professional news judgment—meaning his experience and common sense which enable him to assess "important" and "interesting" "facts."

v

It would appear that news judgment is the sacred knowledge, the secret ability of the newsman which differentiates him from other people. The newsman's experience with interorganization relationships, his dealings with his own and other organizations enables him to claim this news judgment as well as "objectivity." He makes three generalizations:

1. Most individuals, as news sources, have an axe to grind. To be believed, an individual must prove his reliability as a news source through a process of trial and error.<sup>15</sup>

2. Some individuals, such as committee chairmen, are in a position to know more than other people in an organization. Although they may have an axe to grind, their information is probably more "accurate" because they have more "facts" at their disposal.

3. Institutions and organizations have procedures designed to protect both the institution and the people who come into contact with it. The significance of either a statement or a "no comment" must be assessed according to the newsman's knowledge of institutional procedures.

The newsmen tend to lump these three generalizations together by speaking of the extent to which "something makes sense." Two examples, each involving statements the top editors refused to print, illustrate this.

---

when he heard me ask the latter this question. For a text on the topic, see MacDougall (1968).

<sup>15</sup> Shibutani (1966) notes that two reporters missed exclusive stories concerning Marshall Goering's suicide because the news source—a prison guard—had not proven his reliability.

One concerns the legal system; the other, the political system. Both are institutions with which the newsmen claim familiarity based upon experience.

*Example 1.*—A father who might be accused of child neglect resulting in the death of his daughter from cystic fibrosis visited the city room to protest his innocence. A story concerning the father's tale of woe was approved by the suburban news editor but rejected by the local news editor and the assistant managing editor who insisted that the suburban news editor should have known not to have approved the story. These two editors based their rejection on two factors: the story contained too many unanswered questions, and the editors imputed meaning to police behavior. As one put it, "When the police and district attorney put up a flap, you know something is wrong." The editors insisted:

Newspapers have to follow the legal steps as they appear in a normal arrest-indictment-trial sequence, unless the newspapers are convinced there has been a miscarriage of justice. . . . Then newspapers can pull out all the stops and crusade for the accused.

This case was not a clearcut miscarriage of justice because there were too many unanswered questions. For instance, the submitted story did not say whether the child was under medical treatment. The editors wondered, "Could the child have died without neglect?" More importantly, when the local news editor phoned the police seeking additional information about the father, the police "clammed up." Based upon their experience with police procedure, the editors assumed the police were considering indicting the man. Since the "police would not indict" without the legal proof required to prove a case in court, they concluded "there's something fishy about this." To run the story, the newsmen felt they had to get "more facts" which counter a logical assessment of police procedure. Presenting supplementary evidence (a formal attribute of objectivity), the newspapers could claim it had been objective. As one editor put it,

The story is similar to one about a man whose wife had been murdered, and the man has not been arrested, but he has been told not to leave town. The man goes to all the newspapers and tries to clear himself of an accusation not yet made. If a week later the man is indicted for murder and we have printed his story, *how do we, the newspapers, look?*

*Example 2.*—White, the top political reporter, covered the 1968 McCarthy-Johnson New Hampshire primary. He wanted McCarthy to win. Comparatively, many of White's statements were deleted from his stories because the editors felt he was engaging in unwarranted news analysis. According to the newsmen's experience with politics, the leader of a political party (e.g., the president) controls it, and party members

support the man in power because of his institutionalized office, even though they might personally disagree with him.

One of the statements cut from an article White had written claimed President Johnson was "running scared" in the New Hampshire primary. The assistant managing editor deleted this statement because it goes against any political experience to assume that a president controlling all the power in his party would have difficulties against a little-known maverick junior senator. As the local news editor who also favored McCarthy explained, "White is supposed to be a political expert, and his sentences were not warranted by the facts. White was writing bull a lot of the time." To emphasize his point, the editor noted White had even bet him Johnson would not be a candidate in the November election. The editor described this as "political hogwash" and "wishful thinking." After all, he noted, every twentieth-century president had run for a second term, had sufficient power to insure his party's nomination, and politicians love power.

One might conclude that the newsman's organizational experience prejudices him against possibilities which counter his preexisting expectations. From the point of view of the newsmen, though, their experiences with other organizations over a period of time validate their news judgments and may be reduced to common sense. By "common sense" the newsmen mean what most newsmen hold to be true or take for granted.

## VI

Common sense plays a central role in the assessment of news content, since the content of a news story is multitudinous "facts," and common sense may determine whether a piece of information may be accepted as a "fact." For instance, consider the supporting evidence accepted as a "fact" in the objective description of "Communist propaganda." If the disputed article had listed *Das Kapital* as a publication seen at the scene of the story, the term "Communist" would supposedly have been justified. *Das Kapital* is commonly associated with communism and is not generally viewed as a text concerning the theory of economics.

Undocumented "facts" which the newsmen accept as proven reveal the extent to which news judgments may be based upon common sense. For instance, when discussing news analysis, the local news editor had noted, "Everyone says Gene McCarthy appeals to the intellectual element. That's in news stories, but there's no documentation. There's no time and space for documentation, so you make it a flat statement. I don't know if it's true. Is it statistically accurate?"

Newsmen will not print as "fact" statements which contradict common

sense. Rivers (1967, p. 187) reports John F. Kennedy's experience as a cub reporter working for Hearst International News Service after World War II. Since Kennedy had lived in England before the war and "had written a book on Britain's awkward military stance, [he] was sent to . . . report the upcoming election. One of his first stories predicted that Winston Churchill's Conservatives would lose the elections. . . . 'No sooner did that story hit New York,' Kennedy recalled later, 'than I got a rocket from Hearst practically charging me with being out of my mind.'" Kennedy's story contradicted the American common sense assessment by insisting that a popular politician who had successfully led his country through a war would not be reelected. His challenged "expert" opinion contradicted what "everyone knew" and "took for granted." So it was not "factual."

As Schutz (1962, p. 75) so aptly put it, "It must suffice to point out that all knowledge taken for granted has a highly socialized structure, that is, it is assumed to be taken for granted, not only by me, but by us, by *everyone* (meaning 'everyone who belongs to us')." It would be interesting to explore more deeply the sorts of information newsmen view as "facts," statements whose accuracy can be taken for granted. I have suggested elsewhere (1969) that notions the newsman takes for granted are actually a picture of his view of social and political reality. While such an observation demands a reexamination of a news organization's interorganizational relationships, an intensive exploration of this topic goes beyond the scope of this paper. Here it must suffice that (1) some contents may be accepted as "facts" if they make sense, and (2) the news judgment which justifies "sense" seems to be sacred professional knowledge. But special professional knowledge is an inadequate defense against criticism, since critics are frequently attacking that very knowledge.

## VII

Exploring the newsman's notion of objectivity, I have thus far examined (1) news procedures as formal attributes of news stories and newspapers, (2) judgments based upon interorganizational relationships, and (3) common sense as the basis for assessing news content. Although the formal attributes of news stories and newspapers may present problems to the newsman, they enable him to claim objectivity, and his claims may be assessed by the reader.

Because of the diverse pressures to which the newsman is subject, he feels that he must be able to protect himself, to state, "I am an objective professional." He must be able to develop strategies which enable him to state, "This story is objective, impersonal, detached." Similarly, the editors and newspaper management feel that they must be able to state

that the news columns are "objective" and that news policy and editorial policy are distinct from one another. Because readers do not have news judgment and, when challenging newsmen, tend to act as though they do,<sup>16</sup> claiming objectivity based upon news judgment may not satisfy critics.

However, citing formal attributes of news stories and of newspapers, including those which may be problematic (such as *Das Kapital* justifying the term "Communist propaganda"), the newsmen can point to proof that they have distinguished between what they think and what they report. They may claim to have (1) presented conflicting possibilities related to truth-claims, (2) presented supplementary evidence to support a "fact," (3) used quotation marks to indicate that the reporter is not making a truth-claim, (4) presented the most "material facts" first, and (5) carefully separated "facts" from opinions by using the label "news analysis." It would appear that *news procedures exemplified as formal attributes* of news stories and newspapers are *actually strategies through which newsmen protect themselves from critics and lay professional claim to objectivity*, especially since their special professional knowledge is not sufficiently respected by news consumers and may indeed even be the basis of critical attack. Although such procedures may provide demonstrable evidence of an attempt to obtain objectivity, they cannot be said to provide objectivity. Indeed, it has been suggested that such procedures (1) constitute an invitation to selective perception, (2) mistakenly insist the "facts speak for themselves," (3) are a discrediting device and a means of introducing the reporter's opinion, (4) are bounded by the editorial policy of a particular news organization, and (5) mislead the news consumer by suggesting that "news analysis" is weighty, ponderous, or definitive. In sum, there is a distinct discrepancy between the ends sought and those achieved. Nor is there a clear relationship between the ends sought (objectivity) and the means used (the described news procedures).

This interpretation has several interesting theoretical implications. First, it supports Everett Hughes's contention (1964, pp. 94-98) that occupations develop ritualized procedures to protect themselves from blame. He notes, "In teaching," an occupation like journalism, "where ends are very ill-defined—and consequently mistakes are equally so—where the lay world is quick to criticize and to blame, correct handling becomes ritual as much as or even more than an art. If a teacher can

<sup>16</sup>Since newsmen are not surrounded by a technical mystique, it looks as though almost anyone could do the newsmen's job. After all, almost everyone gossips. For a comparison of news and gossip, see Shibutani (1966) and Parks and Burgess (1967).

prove that he has followed the ritual, blame is shifted from himself to the miserable child or student; and failure can be and is put upon them" (pp. 96, 97). Examining the ritualistic behavior of such second-rank professionals as pharmacists and nurses, Hughes continues, "We get a hint of what may be the deeper function of the art, cult and ritual of various occupations. *They may provide a set of emotional and even organizational checks and balances against both the subjective and objective risks of the trade*" (p. 197; emphasis added). From this point of view, the formal attributes of news stories and of newspapers would appear to entail strategic rituals justifying a claim to objectivity. They enable a newsman to say, pointing to his evidence, "I am objective because I have used quotation marks."

Second, these findings may have bearing on notions of objectivity used by other professionals. As previously suggested, social scientists distinguish between themselves and others by noting their own proclivity toward reflexive examination of philosophic assumptions. Yet Gouldner (1970, p. 249), joining C. Wright Mills in speaking of "transpersonal replicability," suggests, "In this notion, objectivity simply means that a sociologist has described his procedures with such explicitness that others employing them on the same problem will come to the same conclusions. In effect, then, this is a notion of objectivity as technical routinization and rests, at bottom, on the codification of the research procedures that were employed. At most, however, this is an *operational* definition of objectivity which presumably tells us what we must *do* in order to justify an assertion that some particular finding is objective. It does not, however, tell us very much about what objectivity *means* conceptually and connotatively." In sum, Gouldner accuses sociologists of ducking epistemological problems by hiding behind formal techniques. He paints a picture of sociological objectivity as *strategic ritual*.<sup>17</sup>

Other professions and occupations equate objectivity with the ability to remain sufficiently impersonal to follow routine *procedures* appropriate to a specific case. For instance, the lawyer's objective stance provides the everyday saying, "The lawyer who has himself for a client is employed by a fool." The rule that doctors cannot operate on family members supposedly protects both the doctor and patients from his mistakes. Involved

<sup>17</sup> Other statements by sociologists seem to support this charge. Speaking of sociologists' reactions to studies of premarital behavior, Udry (1967) claims (although he does not offer supporting evidence) that sociologists quote studies with conclusions they approve, but challenge the methodology of articles whose findings offend their own values. Reynolds (1970) challenges footnoted scientific facts by tracing the natural history of a perpetuated "scientific" fiction. Goode (1970) discusses research on marijuana in the context of the "politics of reality." Gouldner feels (1970, p. 254) "the realm of objectivity is the realm of the *sacred* in social science."

emotionally, it is felt, the doctor might not follow appropriate medical procedures.<sup>18</sup>

In all these examples, objectivity refers to routine procedures which may be exemplified as formal attributes (quotation marks, levels of significance, legal precedents, X-rays) and which protect the professional from mistakes and from his critics. It appears the word "objectivity" is being used defensively as a strategic ritual. However, while my findings substantiate this conclusion concerning the newsman's use of the word "objectivity," generalizations to other professions and occupations must await a systematic examination of their use of the word "objectivity" in the context of their work.<sup>19</sup>

#### REFERENCES

- Benet, James. 1970. "Interpretation and Objectivity in Journalism." In *Academics on the Line*, edited by Arlene K. Daniels and Rachel Kahn-Hut. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Breed, Warren. 1955. "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis." *Social Forces* 33:326-35.
- Ellul, Jacques. 1966. *Propaganda*. New York: Knopf.
- Emerson, Joan. 1970. "Behavior in Private Places: Sustaining Definitions of Reality in Gynecological Examination." In *Recent Sociology No. 2*, edited by Hans P. Dreitzel. New York: Macmillan.
- Goode, Erich. 1970. *The Marijuana Smokers*. New York: Basic.
- Gouldner, Alvin. 1970. "The Sociologist as Partisan: Sociology and the Welfare State." In *The Sociology of Sociology*, edited by Larry T. Reynolds and Janice M. Reynolds. New York: David McKay.
- Hughes, Everett C. 1964. *Men and Their Work*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.
- Hughes, Helen M. 1940. *News and the Human Interest Story*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobs, Ruth. 1970. "The Journalistic and Sociological Enterprises as Ideal Types." *American Sociologist* 5:348-50.
- Klapper, Joseph. 1960. *The Effects of Mass Communication*. New York: Free Press.
- MacDougall, C. D. 1968. *Interpretive Reporting*. New York: Macmillan.
- March, James G., and Herbert A. Simon. 1967. *Organizations*. New York: Wiley.

<sup>18</sup> Doctors insist their attitude is "objective" or "medical" when dealing with procedures fraught with more personal meaning, such as gynecological examinations. Although Emerson (1970) does not report that doctors use the word "objectivity," she does state (1970, p. 78), an "implication of the medical definition is that the patient is a technical object to the staff. It is as if the staff worked on an assembly line for repairing bodies; similar body parts roll by and the staff have a particular job to do on them." In other words, the medical staff emphasizes an impersonal procedure.

<sup>19</sup> The recognition of objectivity as a strategic ritual also raises other problems pertinent to the study of mass media, particularly to the study of their effects. Do strategic rituals enhance the credibility of news reports? Does their use modify individuals' predilections to behave in one way or another? What is the interaction, if any, between these strategies and content? If there is an interaction, does it affect the audience's reaction? Such questions have both political and sociological significance, but except for studies of the effect of presenting opposing views (reviewed by Klapper 1960, pp. 113-17), they have yet to be explored.

## Objectivity as Strategic Ritual

- Matthews, T. S. 1959. *The Sugar Pill*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Mott, Frank L. 1962. *The News in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Park, Robert, and Ernest Burgess. 1967. *The City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Radin, Paul. 1957. *Primitive Man as Philosopher*. New York: Dover.
- . 1960. *The World of Primitive Man*. New York: Grove.
- Reynolds, Larry T. 1970. "A Note on the Perpetuation of a Scientific Fiction." In *The Sociology of Sociology*, edited by Larry T. Reynolds and Janice M. Reynolds. New York: David McKay.
- Rivers, William. 1967. *The Opinionmakers*. Boston: Beacon.
- Rovere, Richard. 1960. *Senator Joe McCarthy*. New York: Meridian.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1962. *Collected Papers I*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Shibutani, Tamotsu. 1966. *Improvised News*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Tuchman, Gaye. 1969. "News, the Newsman's Reality." Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University.
- Udry, J. Richard. 1967. *Social Context of Marriage*. New York: Lippincott.
- Weinstein, Eugene. 1966. "Toward a Theory of Interpersonal Tactics." In *Problems in Social Psychology*, edited by Carl Backman and Paul Secord. New York: McGraw-Hill.