

Craft-related habits of mind, such as a dependence on "instinct," the logic of the concrete, a present time orientation, and an emphasis on contingent events rather than structural necessities, serve to bias the presentation of daily news. Externally imposed constraints (e.g., regularly scheduled telecasts) and organizational pressures to routinize work combine with the journalist's tendency to view the day's events as discrete, unrelated facts to produce the news mosaic of surface reality. Ambiguities, developments in flux, and contradictions tend to be non-news. Linkages between events are not suggested. In general, the news gives the feeling that there is novelty without change.

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What is News?

Telling Stories

by Gaye Tuchman

Frame analysis may help in the study of the principles of organization that underlie the selection and definition of news events.

Reports of new events are stories—no more, but no less. As Robert Park (6) noted several decades ago, the newspaper story is a form of popular literature, a reincarnation of the still popular short story presented in another form. More recently, citing Park's student Helen Hughes (5), Robert Darnton (2) has made much the same point: Reporters discover events (or are presented with events) in which they can locate themes and conflicts of a particular society. These events get retold as essentially the same story from year to year or even decade to decade. For example, Darnton relates that while he was a police reporter, searching for a "good story" on a particular day, he learned that a boy's bicycle had been stolen. He wrote and had published a touching story emphasizing the human drama of the lad's loss of property and subsequently learned that essentially the same story had been printed in his newspaper several years earlier.

Implicit in Darnton's essay is the notion that newsmen learn forms of stories that they use as professional equipment, mechanisms that they may apply to transform encountered events into their occupational product—accounts of events or news stories. However, Darnton does not provide a technique for analyzing this supposed "transformation." In this article I would like to introduce a technique by applying Goffman's (4) concepts of "frame" and "strip" to news stories and news events. As will be shown, Goffman's concepts

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are particularly useful because they do not assume that a transformation occurs as news event becomes news story. Nor do they assume that there is necessarily a correspondence between event and story.

As Goffman (4, pp. 10, 11) defines it, a "frame" is the "principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them." Frames organize "strips" of the everyday world, a strip being "an arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of on-going activity" (4, p. 10). In addition, they may also govern the on-going social organization of events themselves. Thus they may constitute loose happenings or amorphous talk as a discernible event whereas without the frame they would be mere happenings or mere talk. It follows that using the conventions of news story as frame, reporters do more than make an event public; they define what an event is and which amorphous happenings are part of the event (cf. 7). As frames, news stories offer definitions of social reality.

An example may clarify the application of the concept of "frame" to news stories. Consider the following exchange, taken from field notes:

- A: How was it?  
 B: Not much.  
 A: Six graphs?  
 B: Okay.

By itself, the exchange is senseless. Additional information provides a social context and lends meaning to this strip of conversation:

*A reporter returns to the city room from the scene of a fire, his story assignment for the day. Before going to his desk, he speaks with the City Editor. Looking up, the editor asks, "How was it?" The reporter replies, "Not much." The editor asks, "Six graphs?" implying "Is that enough space in the paper to cover this event?" The reporter answers "Okay" and goes to his typewriter, later filing a story about the fire that is six paragraphs long (9).*

*It is clear that framing devices (such as noticing and adding particular information) identify happenings.*

In this example, providing a beginning and an end (a context)<sup>1</sup> for the conversation gives it attributes of a structured anecdote and "reveals" that the conversation is an editorial conference. More important, this editorial conference constitutes the fire as an event. Although the "minor fire" may have wreaked havoc with the lives of people whose home had been demolished, its public character has been formed by the nature of the story—a not very interesting "six graph fire," apparently lacking human drama.

For reporters, that "six graph fire" has yet another characteristic. It is neither a conflagration that destroyed their home (as it might have been to the destroyed building's residents), nor only a "minor fire apparently lacking hu-

<sup>1</sup>The use of contexts in identifying meaning is discussed in new sociological theories, including works by Garfinkel (3), Zimmerman and Pollner (11), and Smith (7).

man drama" (as it might appear to the newspaper's readers). Rather, it is a story, one of a series of stories, that is the product of days and years of routine newswork.

The emphasis upon stories suggests that, at least in part, reporters may speak of stories among themselves rather than about events. They may see the everyday world and its supporting documents in terms of the product they are to manufacture—a news story. The following summaries of conversations, taken from field observations (10), illustrate this phenomenon:

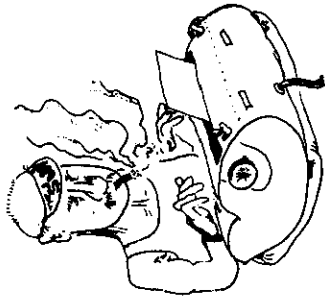
*A court reporter chats with a lawyer who has brought him the complaint of two suspended Housing Authority cops. After they have talked about the case, the lawyer states that he knows the newspaper's star feature writer. The lawyer summarizes the event he had discussed with the star writer. The reporter replies, "I remember the story."*

That there are abstract notions of stories is seen more clearly by reporters' negative references. Reporter B clearly had a notion of a type of story in his mind during the following exchange:

*Three reporters sat at neighboring desks, conversing during a lull in the day. They started chatting about the legal requirements for holding political office, including which offices require a politician to live in the area he/she represents. Reporter A, assigned to the City Hall Bureau for the day, said that Assemblyman X did not live in the legally required district, and it might be a good story. (Reporters appear to give one another tips for stories as tokens of friendliness.) Reporter B, the political reporter who might be expected to cover such matters, ended the conversation by saying, "I don't go for that shit."*

Inasmuch as Reporter B refused to recognize the assemblyman's residence as a "valid story," he was not constituting the residence as a public event.

To be sure, the importance of stories as frames is implicit in the communications literature concerning the socialization of reporters. At a minimum, learning to cover stories includes learning to identify a story's lead, to distinguish between a first- and a second-day lead, to write copy with a graceful transition between potentially disjunctive paragraphs, and to arrange paragraphs so that they fall "naturally" into an inverted pyramid. However, the literature does not note that such elements as these identify events and their component particulars. Again, a negative example, a story that did not get written (10), provides a key to understanding the process of identification and definition: A reporter sat at his desk, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, his hands poised over his typewriter's keys, a pose characteristic of reporters "looking for a lead." A colleague stated, "If you're having trouble finding a lead, why don't you tell Gaye about it." The reporter summarized the story he wanted to write. It concerned his visit to a city prison at which inmates had recently rioted. He and other reporters had accompanied a committee from the City Council for a tour of the prison and a question and answer period with inmates. The inmates complained that they



were being held before their trials because they could not raise the high bail that had been set and that this procedure violated provisions of the American Constitution. Council members had expected to receive complaints about the food and other living conditions; they could not hear the arguments about the Constitution although those arguments were presented. The constitutional argument is the story, the reporter said, but his paper, like the Council members, expected the story about living conditions. The reporter could not find a lead that suited both "his story" and his understanding of the traditional story about prison conditions that his paper expected to receive. Finally, he pulled the blank sheets out of his typewriter, said he refused to write "the story" that was expected, and turned to another matter.

*Arguing that news reports are stories and that stories are frames for identifying and defining events may appear to imply that news stories are not factual and that they are not objective.*

This inference may be particularly compelling because some of the examples presented here have involved phenomena, such as the visit to the prison, that researchers frequently discuss under the rubrics of objectivity and bias, including the reporter's knowledge of his own newspaper's particular slant (1). However, that reporters as professionals are supposed to adhere to a norm of facticity and objectivity may identify the extent to which story-telling is a compelling aspect of a reporter's work and may also demonstrate that the story makes demands upon the reporter as story-teller. Norms may be said to identify issues pertinent to activities at hand. If there were no issues, there would be no need for a norm.

Being a reporter who deals in facts and being a story-teller who produces tales are not antithetical activities. Indeed, it is quite probable that some events can never "make the news" because the catalogue of past story-frames does not include a particular frame that can be made to apply to them. Elsewhere (8), I have suggested that this may have been the case during some phases of reportage about the women's movement. To quote a reporter on her inability to write stories about that movement's activities:

*There were a lot of interesting things going on, but I couldn't nail things down. There was formless kind of talk. I could see things changing, but it was hard to put my finger on it and say to the metropolitan desk, "This is what's happening" (8).*

To paraphrase this reporter, while recalling the editor and reporter's four-line exchange about the "six graph fire," without a frame, the talk within the women's movement was formless; without a story as a frame, the talk could not be perceived as a viable news event.

*One may compare a philosophic notion to a "frame."*

Just as stories as frames permit some amorphous happenings to be defined as components of an event, so too ideas as frames permit the researcher to notice some phenomena but not others.<sup>2</sup> As presented in this paper, frame analysis encourages researchers to examine the ways in which reporters' notions of stories encourage the identification of some particulars as "facts belonging to an event." It also enables researchers to avoid the thorny problem of "what really happened" and to continue to examine organizational and professional considerations that are part and parcel of reportage. After all, the notion of a news story and its formal characteristics are, to cite Goffman's definition of frame, "principles of organization." And, principles of organization are social phenomena accessible to social research, as Goffman demonstrates.

To say that a news report is a story, no more, but no less, is not to demean news, nor to accuse it of being fictitious. Rather, it alerts us that news, like all public documents, is a constructed reality possessing its own internal validity. A selective reality, rather than a synthetic reality as in literature, news reports exist in and of themselves. They are public documents that lay a world before us.

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<sup>2</sup> Smith (7) outlines the sociological approaches to this problem in order to discuss the social construction of documentary reality.