

AMERICAN JOURNALISTS AND THE DEATH
OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD:
NARRATIVES OF SELF-LEGITIMATION

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LIKE ALL SPEAKERS in public discourse, journalists are skilled tellers of events who reconstruct and often displace the activities behind the news. For journalists, the reconstructive work of telling has particular bearing on the legitimacy of their authority as public speakers and their ability to exert social control through narrative. Unlike members of other professional groups, journalists lack recognizable external markers of their authority. Their legitimacy for providing authoritative perspectives on events is instead rhetorically based, with journalists primarily legitimating themselves through the rhetoric they use to tell news-stories.

The following pages discuss one case where journalists have effectively legitimated their positions as credible tellers of one event—the murder of John F. Kennedy's presumed killer, Lee Harvey Oswald. How journalists have shaped their retelling of the role they played in that event is seen here as an exercise in narrative reconstruction, by which journalists have recast the events of that November Sunday in accordance with ongoing discourses about the state of American journalism. More specifically, they have reconstructed the story of covering Oswald's murder as a narrative that celebrates them as professionals. This analysis is based on systematic examination of the public published discourse by which journalists have recollected their part in covering Oswald's murder since it occurred. Narratives were taken from the printed press, professional and trade reviews, television retrospectives, film documentaries, and books.¹ At focus here

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in Mumby, Dennis K. ed (1993)
Narrative and Social Control:
Critical Perspectives. London: Sage.

is a consideration of the cultural authority that American journalists have come to embody as authoritative spokespersons for events of the "real" world and the control this gives them over the American public in narratively determining preferred versions of those events.

NARRATIVE, AUTHORITY, AND RHETORICAL LEGITIMATION

Legitimation through rhetoric is an issue that has traditionally concerned analysts of public discourse. From Max Weber to Jurgen Habermas, theorists have long been concerned with the rational aims that speakers address through language. Habermas, in particular, maintained that speakers use language in order to effect various kinds of consensus about their activity:

Under the functional aspect of reaching understanding, communicative action serves the transmission and renewal of cultural knowledge; under the aspect of coordinating action, it serves social integration and the establishment of group solidarity; under the aspect of socialization, it serves the formation of personal identities. (Habermas, 1981, pp. xxiv-xxv)

Habermas contended that speakers often use language and discourse to achieve aims related to freedom and dependence, with aims such as social cohesion, group solidarity, or legitimation directly upheld or disavowed by what a speaker says (Habermas, quoted in Wuthnow et al., 1984, p. 190). The ability of communication to uphold consensus in the realization of these aims determines whether true, or effective, communication has been achieved.

Scholars have also argued that narrative provides an underlying logic for implementing more general communicative rules and conventions (Lucaites & Condit, 1985; White, 1981). Narrative is seen as an effective tool for accomplishing community and authority and a means of maintaining collective codes of knowledge. In this light, narrative functions as a meta-code, a point suggested nearly two decades ago by Roland Barthes. It offers speakers an underlying logic by which to implement more general communicative conventions and allows for the effective sharing and transmission of stories within culturally and socially explicit codes of meaning (Barthes, 1977; Lucaites & Condit, 1985; White, 1981). Within the meta-code of narrative, reality becomes accountable in view of the stories told about it. But it becomes accountable only to those who share the codes of knowledge it invokes.

This suggests that journalists, as speakers in discourse, have employed a broad range of stylistic and narrative devices to uphold parameters of their own authority. As Hayden White argues:

Once we note the presence of the theme of authority in the text, we also perceive the extent to which the truth claims of the narrative and indeed the very right to narrate hinges upon a certain relationship to authority per se. (White, 1981, p. 18)

With all public speakers, questions of narrative have thus come to be regarded as being at least partly entwined with questions of authority and legitimation.

Narrative's role in achieving authority becomes particularly relevant when considering the evolution of particular stories over time. Scholarship by White (1981), Kellner (1989), Canary and Kozicki (1978), and others has shown that, over time, speakers reposition themselves with regard to original events, thereby reconfiguring their authority. Aims having little to do with narrative activity become differentially embedded within narratives over time. In White's view, this has made historical inquiry less motivated by "the necessity to establish *that* certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might *mean* for a given group, society, or culture's conception of its present tasks and future prospects" (White, 1986, p. 487). Which narrators eventually emerge as authoritative voices of a given story thus reveals much about the practices by which they are rhetorically legitimated and the authority through which they are culturally constituted.

These premises are of direct relevance to journalism professionals, whose work has long been characterized as an entanglement of narrative, authority, and rhetorical legitimation (Carey, 1986; Schudson, 1982). Whereas nearly all professional groups have evolved in association with formalized bodies of knowledge, much of the professional authority of journalists has come to rest not in what they know but in how they represent their knowledge. This means that their rhetoric offers them an effective way of realizing their legitimation as public speakers.

The salience of journalistic legitimation through rhetoric is particularly foregrounded in a mass-mediated age, where media technologies have expanded the range and type of stages available to journalists as public speakers. Journalistic usage of television technology in particular has fostered their self-portrayal as ever-present, omniscient tellers of so-called objective events. The aura of rhetorical competence this implies makes analysis of journalistic narrative particularly valuable to our understanding

of why journalists are able to present their version of events as authoritative ones.

This suggests that the foundations of cultural authority are embedded within narrative. Through narrative, journalists have held themselves together not only as a profession—a group kept together by credentialing, licensing, and educational procedures—but as an interpretive community—a group kept together by its narratives, tales, and collective rhetoric. Journalistic narratives, in such a picture, offer analysts one example of what James Carey calls the “ritual” side of communication—the patterned activity that draws members of a community together in commonality and community, the stuff that group members use to keep themselves together (Carey, 1975). The notion that narrative promotes a shared lore among journalists thus becomes a focus through which to understand the workings of their rhetorical legitimation as a group. It displays how they work to legitimate their actions through the tales they tell.

All of this has particular bearing on stories of the Oswald murder. The story of John F. Kennedy's assassination, of which the Oswald murder was a part, is seen here as a critical incident among journalism professionals, which journalists have used to evaluate and reconsider consensual notions about professional practice and appropriate boundaries of journalistic authority. At the time, most professional forums, such as the American Society for Newspaper Editors or National Association of Broadcasters, and trade publications, such as *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Editor and Publisher*, or *Broadcasting*, independently evaluated how journalists covered the story. The Association for Education in Journalism emphasized coverage of the trial of Jack Ruby during a special 1964 plenary session (Official Minutes, 1965, p. 152). As time went on, certain aspects of the story were kept alive while others were dropped from collective memory. Today, approximately three decades later, the story of covering Oswald's homicide is still discussed, albeit in a highly constructed form. How journalists have rhetorically reconstructed the story of their coverage of Oswald's murder to uphold themselves as professionals is thus the topic of this chapter.

THE CONTEXT FOR RETELLING OSWALD'S MURDER

Retelling the more general story of John F. Kennedy's assassination provided a viable cornerstone against which the reconstructive work of

journalists could flourish. Retellings of the assassination produced a huge body of literature, including nearly 200 books within 36 months of his death, hundreds of periodical pieces, television retrospectives, and at least 12 newsletters (Donner, 1979, p. 658). Retelling the Kennedy assassination gave journalists a stage on which to spread tales and gain status for their telling.

To a large extent, the possibility of connecting oneself to the assassination narrative, in all its forms, reflected larger concerns among journalists about journalistic professionalism. During the 1960s, journalists sought to consolidate themselves as a recognized and legitimate profession. Although journalism had been a strong force for decades before Kennedy's assassination, a general movement toward professionalism during the 1960s encouraged journalists to put themselves in their chronicles both as subject and documenter. Reporters were called on to be reflexive about the standards of behavior with which they collected and presented the news. As *Esquire* magazine wrote: “Journalists were part of the problem, part of the solution and always part of the story” (Brackman, 1983, p. 197). Lingering questions about who would define news—the people in positions of power or the people in the streets—challenged journalists to experiment with new standards of professional behavior (Halberstam, 1979, p. 400). At the same time, the emerging validation of television news was creating a new force on the horizon, which was beginning to reshape many givens about journalistic performance. This was not to suggest that television was a recognized and legitimate form of reportage. In fact, a few months before Kennedy's death, television journalists were still denied membership in professional organizations, on the assumption that they did not constitute bona-fide reporters (International Press Institute, 1963, p. 52). Journalists themselves generally felt that the press was the better news medium, with television called a “journalistic frivolity” (Gates, 1978, p. 5).

At the same time, ongoing ties between the journalistic community and Kennedy's administration enhanced the authority of journalism as a profession. Their ties helped set up a framework by which journalists could effectively champion their position as primary spokespersons for events. As *Time* reporter Hugh Sidey observed:

Has there ever been a more succulent time for a young reporter? I doubt it. It was a golden time for scribes. He talked to us, listened to us, honored us, ridiculed us, played with us, and all the time lifted our trade to new heights of respect and importance. (quoted in Kunhardt, 1988, p. 6)

Everything Kennedy did for journalists, he did in exaggerated form for television journalists, and this solidified the latter's status. Kennedy was seen as having a particular affinity for television, a point suggested by his 1960 TV debates with Nixon, his introduction of the first televised news conferences, informal television interviews, or use of television to convey major political decisions—such as warnings to the Russians during the Cuban missile crisis. These activities gave him the label of “the first television president.” So to some extent, the background by which journalists were linked with the story of Kennedy's death already had its roots in ties between his administration and the news media.

The Oswald murder was part of this scenario. Retelling the events around it became a crucial part of establishing the role that journalists played not only in the murder itself but in the larger story of Kennedy's assassination. The rhetoric of journalistic self-legitimation, by which journalists sought to perpetuate versions of the story that cast their own activity as professional behavior, allowed them to conveniently link stories of Oswald's murder with ongoing discourses about journalism, particularly journalistic professionalism and the legitimation of television journalism. The fluctuating state surrounding many givens about what constituted journalism at the time of Kennedy's death worked to their advantage.

COVERING THE MURDER OF OSWALD

Coverage of Oswald's murder took the form of follow-up activity to coverage of Kennedy's death. It began on Friday night, when Dallas police attempted to hold a midnight photo opportunity with Kennedy's accused killer, Lee Harvey Oswald. At the time, over 100 persons filled the halls of the police station, whose conditions were “not too much unlike Grand Central Station at rush hour” (*Warren Report*, 1964, p. 202). Dallas was considered ill-equipped to handle the growing influx of reporters, and the police's attempts that night to address their mounting pressures for information were problematic:

Cameramen stood on the tables to take pictures and others pushed forward to get close-ups. . . . After Oswald had been in the room only a few minutes, Chief Curry intervened and directed that Oswald be taken back to jail because, he testified, the “newsmen tried to overrun him.” (*Warren Report*, 1964, p. 208)

Oswald was to be transferred from the city to the county jail on Sunday morning. Again, the press corps arrived in groups. By 10:00 a.m., an estimated 50 journalists were in attendance in the basement of the city jail, including still photographers, television camerapeople, and reporters from all media (*Warren Report*, 1964, p. 213). Conditions for coverage were among the best available to journalists during the larger assassination story.

The transfer began almost immediately. Reporters pushed and shoved to get a word with Oswald. As one participant recalls:

All the newsmen were poking their sound mikes across to [Oswald during the transfer] and asking questions, and they were everyone sticking their flashbulbs up and around and over him and in his face. (*Warren Report*, 1964, p. 216)

A few moments later, Jack Ruby stepped out from the group of reporters, drew a gun, pulled the trigger, and watched Oswald slump to the floor. The irony that he was hidden by the very group of journalists trying to record the transfer in collective memory was momentarily lost as the group shifted its focus to record the murder in sound, prose, still photographs, and live television.

How journalists covered the murder was appraised according to two perspectives: One viewed it as the activity of professionals; another cast it as unprofessional conduct. Within both appraisals were concerns for journalistic professionalism and the emerging legitimacy of television as a news-gathering medium.

UNPROFESSIONAL CONDUCT: THE NEGATIVE VIEW

Negative appraisals of journalists' coverage characterized it as professional misconduct. Two clusters of issues motivated this view: physical and legal-ethical. Physical issues—whether and in what way journalists actually facilitated Oswald's death—were uppermost in the mind of one detective, who told of how the “near-blinding television and motion picture lights allowed to shine upon the escort party increased the difficulty of observing unusual movements in the basement” (*Warren Report*, 1964, p. 227). As NBC's Tom Pettit recalled:

In that throng it was difficult for any reporter to sort out who was who. But for the television reporters the problem was compounded by the need for

simultaneous transmission. What was recorded by microphones and cameras (either film or live) would go on the air without much editing. What transpired in the hallway was broadcast without much opportunity for evaluation. And the television reporter could not move about freely, since his own movement was limited by the length of his microphone cable. (Petit, 1965, p. 63)

Journalistic practice was thus seen as being at odds with Oswald's problem-free transport.

When it became clear that Oswald has been shot at close range by Ruby, who emerged from the group of journalists, discussions centered on whether or not journalists had facilitated Oswald's death. The facts that journalists had not easily been identifiable to local police, had possessed intrusive equipment, and had arrived in numbers too large for the police to handle were cited in their disfavor. The *Warren Report* published a special section called "The Activity of Newsmen," where it traced the events leading up to Oswald's murder:

In the lobby of the third floor, television cameramen set up two large cameras and floodlights in strategic positions that gave them a sweep of the corridor in either direction. Technicians stretched their television cables into and out of offices. . . . Men with newsreel cameras, still cameras and microphones . . . moved back and forth seeking information and opportunities for interviews. Newsmen wandered into the offices of other bureaus located on the third floor, sat on desks and used police telephones; indeed, one reporter admits hiding a telephone behind a desk so that he would have exclusive access to it if something developed. . . . The corridor became so jammed that policemen and newsmen had to push and shove if they wanted to get through, stepping over cables, wires and tripods. (*Warren Report*, 1964, p. 202)

A detective was quoted as saying that "the press and television people just took over" (*Warren Report*, 1964, p. 204).

Similar concerns were voiced by journalists, who publicly questioned the viability of being present without interfering in events. Their discussions centered largely on the instruments of technology—the cables and camera equipment—amid concerns over whether television produced a more truthful and authoritative form of reportage. Marya Mannes penned her complaints at the time in *The Reporter*:

The clutter of newsmen and their microphones in the basement corridor. The milling and talking, and then those big fat men bringing the thin pasty prisoner, and then the back of a man with a hat, and then Oswald doubled, and then pandemonium, scuffles, shouts and young Tom Truitt and his microphone in and out of the picture trying to find out what happened.

Questions seethed through my mind: How in God's name could the police expose a President's assassin to this jumble of people at close range? (Mannes, 1963, pp. 16-17)

The fact that television was still an uncertain medium for news made many reporters unaccustomed to the cables and camera equipment that television journalists brought with them. As ASNE (American Society of Newspaper Editors) head Herbert Brucker maintained in a *Saturday Review* article, the murder was

related to police capitulation in the glare of publicity . . . to suit the convenience of the news media . . . (the problem grew) principally out of something new in journalism . . . the intrusion of the reporter himself in the news. (Brucker, 1964, pp. 75-76)²

On the other side of the continuum, television reporter Gabe Pressman came to TV's defense. He complained that his medium was being used as a scapegoat:

Because we have the capacity of telling a story efficiently, dramatically and with a maximum amount of impact—because we have the ability to satisfy the need of the American public for instantaneous journalism in this modern age—does it follow that we have to be paralyzed because people react badly? (Pressman et al., 1964, p. 17)

Published in *Television Quarterly* under the title "The Responsible Reporter," the article asked whether journalists could ever carry out their job without intruding on others. It mentioned that television's newness magnified the irritation that the journalistic community was attributing to television cameras: The camera, said Pressman, "is used as a newspaper-man uses his pad and pencil. And yet, the camera is the most faithful reporter we have. The video-tapes don't lie and the film doesn't lie" (Pressman et al., 1964, p. 15). Thus, at the heart of many comments about this newly evolving medium for news were questions about whether it produced a better journalism. Whether Ruby shot Oswald, for instance, was no longer debatable, for the camera had recorded it. What was unclear was the role it played in facilitating Oswald's death.

Yet another arena of criticism concerned journalistic interpretations of Oswald's guilt. The circulation of half-truths and premature establishment of his guilt were frequently mentioned. When *The New York Times* published a banner headline that read "President's Assassin Shot to Death" (*The New York Times*, November 25, 1963, p. 1), one observer lamented the disappearance of the term *alleged*:

Lee Harvey Oswald had not yet legally been indicted, much less convicted, of President Kennedy's assassination. *The New York Times* had no right whatever under American law or the standards of journalistic fair play to call the man the "President's assassin." . . . What did the *Times'* own banner line do if not prejudice without trial, jury or legal verdict? (Tobin, 1963, p. 54)

The headline prompted *Times* editor Turner Catledge to publish a letter where he admitted the paper had erred (Catledge, 1963, p. 36). As one journalist observed,

The central question is whether the best tradition of the press is good enough. . . . The lesson of Dallas is actually an old one in responsible journalism: Reporting is not democratic to the point that everything posing as fact has equal status. (Rivers, 1965, p. 59)

Active discussions along these lines prompted discourse about the legal-ethical standards by which journalists were expected to realize their trade.³ The *Warren Report* concluded that partial responsibility for Oswald's death "must be borne by the news media," and it called on journalists to implement a new code of ethics (*Warren Report*, 1964, p. 240). Journalistic coverage of Oswald's homicide was seen as making problematic the boundaries around journalistic obligations, rights, and privileges in covering criminal cases. There were plaintive calls for media curbs, which stated that "pressure from the press . . . had set the stage for [Oswald's killing, with] . . . little doubt that television and the press must bear a share of the blame" (Brucker, 1964, p. 76). Trade publications discussed what the *Columbia Journalism Review* labeled "judgment by television" (At Issue, 1964, p. 45). CBS President Frank Stanton offered monies to the Brookings Institute to establish a voluntary inter-media code of fair practices (At Issue, 1964, p. 47). In October of 1964, the ASNE convened a meeting of 17 top news organizations to discuss complaints about journalistic practice. Ten days later, the group issued a statement that warily conceded the influence of the news media over events:

If developing smaller TV cameras is beyond our control, we can certainly try by our own example to teach the electronic newsmen larger manners and a deeper understanding of the basic truth that freedom of information is not an unlimited license to trample on individual rights. (*Report of the Committee on Freedom*, 1964)

Although allowing for pooled coverage under certain circumstances, the statement stopped short of permitting codes or other external bars on media performance.

Thus the negative view of journalistic coverage of Oswald's death ranged from the minute and confined placement of cables to the more far-reaching ability of the media to determine and control reality. Journalistic behavior of both a physical, ethical, and legal dimension was seen as undercutting the professionalism of journalists. Television in particular was seen as changing many of the definitions then-current about the profession. At stake here was a larger discourse about the relationship between professionalism and technology that raised questions about whether journalists constituted "better" professionals by succumbing to technology or by mastering it.

JOURNALISTIC PROFESSIONALISM: THE POSITIVE VIEW

Positive appraisals of covering Oswald's murder provided similarly partial overviews of what had happened. For every violation cited by the negative view, there was an attribute provided by the positive view. The positive appraisal skimmed over the conditions that led up to Oswald's death and focused on what became, in the eyes of certain observers, "a first in television history" (*Broadcasting*, December 2, 1963, p. 46). The recording of Oswald's murder by reporters was cast as a professional triumph for American journalists.

Written accounts concentrated on the incredible fact that Oswald had been shot in full view of the television cameras. Still photographs of the homicide pushed the *Dallas Morning News* into a second edition: The photograph on its front page displayed Ruby clearly pointing a gun at Oswald. Robert Jackson of the *Dallas Times Herald* later won a Pulitzer Prize for his picture of Oswald crumpling under the bullet's impact (Payne, 1970, p. 12). One trade article, entitled "Pictures of Assassination Fail to Amateurs on Street," held that

the actual shooting down of the President was caught mainly through out-of-focus pictures taken by non-professional photographers. But the actual shooting of his accused assailant was recorded in full view of press photographers with their cameras trained right on him and this produced pictures that may rank with the greatest news shots of all time. (*Editor and Publisher*, November 30, 1963, p. 16)

The juxtaposition of the largely amateur photographic recording of Kennedy's shooting with the professional photographic recording of Oswald's

murder was played out in full. As *Editor and Publisher* noted in a moment of professional vindication, "if President Kennedy's death was left for the amateur photographers to record, the situation reversed itself on Sunday, November 24" (*Editor and Publisher*, November 30, 1963, p. 17). Photographic coverage of Oswald's death thus reinstated the somewhat shaky professionalism of news photographers.

Radio reporters called out the news of Oswald's shooting, with Radio Press International broadcasting the sound of the shot to its subscribers around the world (*Broadcasting*, December 22, 1963, p. 37). Ike Pappas was then a reporter for WNEW Radio in New York:

My job on that day was to get an interview with this guy, when nobody else was going to get an interview. And I was determined to do that . . . I went forward with my microphone and I said . . . "Do you have anything to say in your defense?" Just as I said "defense," I noted out of the corner of my eye, this black streak went right across my front and leaned in and, pop, there was an explosion. And I felt the impact of the air from the explosion of the gun on my body. . . . And then I said to myself, if you never say anything ever again into a microphone, you must say it now. This is history. And I heard people shouting in back of me "he's been shot." So I said the only thing which I could say, which was the story: "Oswald has been shot. A shot rang out. Oswald has been shot." (Pappas quoted in *On Trial*, London Weekend Television documentary, 1988)

But the story of Oswald's murder belonged largely to television:

For the first time in the history of television, a real-life homicide was carried nationally on live television when millions of NBC-TV viewers saw the November 24 fatal shooting in Dallas of the man accused of assassinating JFK two days earlier. (*Broadcasting*, December 2, 1963, p. 46)

The story played live on NBC. CBS recorded the event on a local camera, where they were able to replay immediate coverage from a videotape monitor. ABC, whose cameraperson had moved to the county jail, had to compensate with non-film accounts of the story (Gates, 1978, p. 254).

A special section of *Broadcasting* magazine, issued a week after the assassination, carried the following description of Oswald's murder:

Oswald, flanked by detectives, stepped onto a garage ramp in the basement of the Dallas city jail and was taken toward an armored truck that was to take him to the county jail. Suddenly, out of the lower right hand corner of the TV screen, came the back of a man. A shot rang out, and Oswald gasped as he started to fall, clutching his side. (Gates, 1978, p. 46)

A telling feature about this narrative rested in its second sentence, which was repeated verbatim in numerous prose accounts by journalists: "Suddenly, out of the lower right hand corner of the TV screen, came the back of a man." The juxtaposition of reality and televised image, by which Oswald's killer was seen coming out of the television screen, rather than a corner of the basement, paid the ultimate compliment to television's coverage of the event. In the case of Oswald's death, television was featured as offering a reality that seemed momentarily preferable to the real-life situation on which it was based.

More than perhaps other events within the larger assassination story, the presence of journalists was made an integral part of Oswald's murder. A caption under the news-photograph of Oswald sinking to the floor read "Dallas detectives struggle with Ruby as newsmen and others watch" (*Broadcasting*, December 2, 1963, p. 46). Reporters recounted the cries of NBC correspondent Tom Pettit and other reporters on the scene. Replays of Pettit shouting "He's been shot, he's been shot, Lee Oswald has been shot!" legitimated the journalist as eyewitness. It also referenced the presence of news organizations at the event.

The casting of journalistic coverage of Oswald's murder as a professional triumph was also reinforced by professional forums. The *Columbia Journalism Review* hailed the performance of journalists, saying, "Like no other events before, the occurrences of November 22 to 25, 1963, belonged to journalism, and specifically to the national organs of journalism" (*The Assassination*, 1964, p. 5).

An editorial in *Editor and Publisher* called coverage "the most amazing performance by newspapers, radio and television that the world has ever witnessed" (*Editor and Publisher*, November 30, 1963, p. 6). Broadcast media received special attention. *Broadcasting* magazine claimed that "in those four terrible days, television came of age and radio reasserted its capacity to move to history where it happens" (*Broadcasting*, December 2, 1963, p. 108). The radio-television industry received a special Peabody Award.

At stake in many of these appraisals was the awareness that a new form of news coverage had been born. An editorial in *Television Quarterly* hailed the "full emergence of a televised documentary form (in which) the conditions which define the role and function of the artist and reporter in television journalism have begun to take shape" (Pressman et al., 1964, p. 86).

Positive appraisals of coverage of Oswald's murder were thereby important because such coverage reinstated the uncertain eyewitness status

of reporters and photographers in other aspects of the assassination story. It also upheld the ultimate functioning ability of television journalists. Adjunct technologies authenticated journalists as eyewitnesses. The event, now camera-witnessed, emphasized their presence and brought it into chronicles of the event. Reporters replayed the murder across media with the assistance of tapes, recordings, and photographs, their reactions becoming embedded through technology in the murder's retelling. It was within these parameters that telling the tale as a story of professional triumph made sense.

RHETORICAL LEGITIMATION AND THE ENDURANCE OF NARRATIVE

The fact that there existed two active different readings of coverage of Oswald's murder reflected existing tensions within the journalistic community over what constituted the most appropriate and professionally correct way of covering an event such as Oswald's death. To an extent, ambivalence over journalists' reportorial roles emerged from the story's complex nature, coupled with the uncertain but growing legitimacy of television news. As one observer said, the event "gave rise to some of the darker hours, as well as some of the most remarkable accomplishments, of news coverage in Dallas" (Schramm, 1965, p. 12). This displayed the extent to which the acceptable parameters of journalistic professionalism were being debated at the time.

One, personified by the negative view, emphasized the foibles of television. It advanced the perspective that journalistic coverage had overextended itself and that the technological base which television journalists used to ground their struggles for legitimation was more of a hindrance than help. By emphasizing the negative aspects of television technology, the imbroglia about Oswald threatened to upset the shaky legitimacy of practitioners within the new medium. For journalists to agree with the points raised by the Oswald controversy would have invalidated the very qualities that distinguished television journalism from print.

That is why this specific discourse—about journalists facilitating Oswald's death—has simply disappeared over time. The cables, the microphones, the cameras—and the discourse it generated about the appropriateness of television journalism and journalistic professionalism—are no longer referenced in contemporary discussions of the Oswald case. The fact that the technology of television was hailed for producing live

coverage of Oswald's murder (by one view) meant that its instruments—the cables, microphones, and cameras—could not be held responsible for facilitating his death (by another view). In other words, it was unfeasible for both positive and negative views of coverage to persist over time, because the same attributes of television were being simultaneously used to both condemn and hail journalism.

At stake was thereby a larger discourse about the relationship between professionalism and technology: Whether journalists constituted better professionals by succumbing to technology or by mastering it inflected debates not only about coverage of the Oswald homicide but also more general discussions about the coverage of Kennedy's assassination. Being a professional meant controlling instruments of technology in an effective fashion. The fact that issues raised by the Oswald homicide about journalistic claims of authority raised questions about television technology and the practices of television journalists meant that it was necessary to recast journalistic memories as narratives legitimating the professionalism of journalists. Because the specific events of Kennedy's death embedded problems of journalistic authority in much of the assassination coverage, retelling the journalists' part in covering the story called for reconstructions of their performances as effective professional triumphs or understandable—but salvageable—professional mishaps on the part of journalistic performers. It was thus necessary for contemporary renditions of the Oswald story to recast it as the professional triumph that was implicit in the scoop of having caught the murder on live camera.

Thus, over time most journalists have preferred the positive view of the Oswald story, which emphasized the attributes of television. That perspective held that journalists had acted professionally in covering the murder. It also, significantly, allowed reporters to generate a narrative that told of their successful adaptation to the new technology of television.

It is fitting to quote from one critic of the time, who held that "broadcasting resembles the little girl in the nursery rhyme. When it is bad, it is horrid. But when it is good, it is very very good" (Brucker, 1964, p. 77). Although the strength of the difference between assessments played a part in generating discourse about covering Oswald's murder, it is the thrust for rhetorical legitimation that gave one assessment an early death. Habermas's suggestion that speakers in public discourse use "street wisdom" as false but effective rationale to exercise their authority makes sense here. Journalists created a sense of their own street wisdom through their reconstructions of the Oswald homicide. Particularly in narratives that persisted over time, speakers reconfigured their versions of the tale in a

way that effectively allowed them to present themselves as professionals for having covered the event. They portrayed themselves as having covered Oswald's murder in ways that upheld—rather than detracted from—their own professional positioning inside it, with a special place of esteem reserved for television journalism.

This was not accomplished in an incidental fashion, for narratives about Oswald's murder were linked by journalists with two larger discourses about journalism. One was the authorization of television technology, to the near exclusion of other news-gathering technologies. The other was a regard for the original coverage as professional behavior, by which reporters were seen to act in exemplary fashion. The fact that both discourses—about journalistic professionalism and television journalism—consolidated the more general position of journalists as authoritative spokespeople for events was not incidental. It shed light on how, in the particular case of covering the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, journalists emerged as more professional through their narratives than warranted by their behavior at the time. Their retellings of the original tale upheld their positioning as professionals through links to larger discourses that were themselves invested in legitimating journalists—and particularly television journalists.

CONCLUSION

What does this tell us about narrative and social control? This discussion raises fundamental questions about the operative modes of social control, as exerted through the narratives of public discourse. The way American journalists have sought and succeeded to shape their own self-image through retellings of Oswald's murder suggests that narrative plays an instrumental role in setting forth preferred constructions of reality. In an age where so few people are able to accomplish primary experience of public events and must instead depend on some degree of mediated experience, the use of narrative to alter realities and construct new ones that better fit the narrator's agenda is a practice with problematic implications. For the success of such a practice is predicated on the acquiescence of publics, publics who accept such preferred constructions as "real" and accurate. The preferred construction of the Oswald tale has become not only an embedded part of histories of American television journalism but a recognized chapter in general American histories as well. In construc-

ting their version of the Oswald tale, then, the media have used narratives of self-legitimation to shape America's collective sense of itself.

Journalists are not the only ones who are capable of exerting social control through narrative. Politicians, lawyers, the clergy, and other public speakers may engage in similar rhetorical practices of self-legitimation. This suggests that retelling is rarely an innocuous activity. If, as suggested here, speakers retell their stories to legitimate their own status and authority no less than to convey content, there is need to more closely explore the workings of such rhetoric in a wide range of discursive arenas. Narratives in public discourse may have as much to do with the self-legitimation of their narrators as with the relay of the information such narratives contain.

NOTES

1. This discussion is taken from Zeitler (1992).
2. Brucker held broadcasting equipment responsible for creating the sense of intrusion, paralleling it with an earlier incident that had surrounded the introduction of radio—the 1937 trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann for the kidnap-murder of the Lindbergh baby: "The new medium of radio, together with news photographers' flashbulbs made a circus of the trial" (1964, p. 77). Interestingly, new media are often legitimated through discussion of changing borders between private and public space.
3. It is worth noting that legal quarters picked up the controversy about journalistic performance and condemned the press's insistence on the right to know. They claimed that it had seriously interfered with Oswald's right to a free and private trial and had hampered police efforts to transfer the accused.

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Chapter 9

OPPOSITIONAL VOICES IN CHINA BEACH: NARRATIVE CONFIGURATIONS OF GENDER AND WAR

A. Susan Owen

NARRATIVES ABOUT THE Vietnam war long have been a site of ideological struggle in American culture (Ehrenhaus, Chapter 3 of this book; Haines, 1986). In this war more than any other previous to it, American ideographs of "duty, honor, country" failed to maintain hegemony over the experiences of citizen soldiers and civilians alike. As Edelman (1990) put it, "Vietnam" is not simply an historical experience that yielded a legacy. Vietnam is a condensation symbol epitomizing sets of conflicting values that polarize late 20th-century America" (p. 6).

The full extent of this ideological crisis can be understood, in part, through an examination of the struggle over representations of the war in American popular culture. Although critics disagree about the aesthetic and political significance of a wide range of literary, filmic, and televisual representations, two points generally are agreed on. First, the most unpopular American war in the 20th century captured public imagination in the years after the war as a genre of popular entertainment. Second, no American cultural forum seems fully adequate to capture the experiences of participants and witnesses.

Two critics in particular focus attention on these taken-for-granted, and their insights are useful here. Rick Berg (1990) uses the work of Walter Benjamin to explain the apparent contradiction wherein fragmented "remains" of the Vietnam experience—which stubbornly "remain" in American public consciousness—cannot be "textualized" satisfactorily (read: once and for all) through available technological and cultural modes of representation. Describing the war that will not go away, he writes: