

The Journalist as Storyteller: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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George Ball, the former U.S. under secretary of state, charged in 1980 that television had treated the Iranian hostage crisis as a "soap opera." In a published interview, Ball said the network coverage had transformed the event, influencing American foreign policy by turning the hostage seizure into "one of the great events of our time":

The idea of television cameras taking pictures of people who shake their fists on direction every night became an absurdity. The networks were used. They were used for the simple reason that they were there, and there was nothing the mob wanted better than this kind of recognition. . . . CBS counts the days. It's absolutely childish.¹

The manipulation of the networks may have been transparent, but the reasons for their vulnerability are probably not as simple as Ball suggested. After all, both broadcast and print journalists found a good deal to like in the hostage story: an Ayatollah who for editorial cartoonists became the embodiment of evil; a U.S. President, staking his political career on a resolution of the crisis; hostage wives and children, seemingly never far from the journalists' reach; a global story that could be focused on 52 more-or-less average Americans; and, for the benefit of television, visuals, from chanting mobs to Christmas messages.

Few media critics said then or later that the hostage crisis was not a good story. Indeed, implicit in the criticism of media performance was the suggestion that the dramatic aspects of the hostage-taking were seductive and that the media, thoroughly seduced, became unwitting agents of the Iranian mob. Ball's "soap opera" argument is allied to the presumption that when the journalist becomes a "storyteller" (which may extend to the labels "dramatist" or "entertainer"), objectivity is necessarily compromised and the journalist no longer serves the truth. In the resulting formulation, the journalist must make a choice between telling stories and reporting facts. It is assumed that those who choose to tell stories are involved primarily in

staging dramas for the enjoyment of an audience. This essay suggests that journalists have a more important cultural function to perform in their role as storytellers.

Storytelling is one of the oldest art forms in the world. The first story-tellers, progenitors of troubadours and minstrels, were perhaps the first

conscious literary communicators.² Even today, in relatively primitive soci-

eties, the storyteller has a vital social function. In a study based on field

work in northern Alaska, Rooth found that storytellers in that culture

linked people together by stressing that which was common to all.³ To the

extent that news is frequently defined by the number of people affected,

journalists perform a similar function. For example, the subject of inflation

becomes in this context more than an economic topic; it is a story with

universal applications. As giant corporation, small businessman, and

welfare recipient struggle with the impersonal force of rising prices, the

nature possible by personalizing the news. When stories are told in human

terms, they become more accessible.

The news magazine cover story, pioneered by Henry Luce at *Time*, per-

sonalized the news in such a manner that individuals were brought into the

context of events. Just as significant, rarely in the news magazines are those

individuals the passive victims of uncontrollable forces or institutions.

People are important precisely because they are forces within themselves,

with the power to affect events. Individuals are capable of taking hold of

their environment, and, if not molding it, at least battling with its abstract

and impersonal forces—for instance, "inflation" and "recession." As

Halberstam wrote, Luce was sensitive at the outset to the process of involv-

ing readers with the news:

[Luce] had a powerful sense of what people should read, what was good for them to read, and an essential belief worthy of the best journalist, that any subject of importance could be made interesting. Thus the cover story, the personalizing of issues so that a lay reader could become more interested and more involved in serious reading matter. The cover story alone had a major impact on the journalism of our age.⁴

The emphasis on individual newsmakers was also evident in *Time*'s "Man of the Year," identified as the most influential or significant individual in the news of the past twelve months.

Historically, the news magazine cover story has functioned as scenario, a dramatic device for juxtaposing personalities and encompassing themes ("Carter vs. Inflation"). Warner, examining the mass media generally, observed that journalists, almost by definition, are dramatists:

[The newsmans] tale must arouse and hold the interest of his readers. . . . There must be villains and heroes in every paper, and the story lines must conform to the usage of suspense, conflict, the defeat of evil, and the triumph of good that have guided the good sense and artistry of past storytellers and controlled their audience's ability to respond.⁵

The *dramatis personae* in the journalists' "company" act in such a way as to evoke themes and their implications; but act they must, even if

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the empirical facts of an event for those who write and read [are] no more than a passing illustration of the deeper evocative "truths" of the nonlogical symbols of our culture.⁶

Storytellers make sense of the world. They organize phenomena into scenarios, which imply that there are reasons for what has happened. Journalists compartmentalize human activity by placement (in sports or finance or "Lifestyle"); by tone (hard news, editorial, news analysis, feature); and by narrative structure. Further, events which may seem accidentally or casually related are often interpreted thematically in the news. A bungled U.S. vote in the United Nations, terrorism in Colombia, and internal unrest in Iran are thus conjoined as manifestations of the general failure of diplomacy in the world.⁷

The significance of the individual is not lost on the storyteller or the journalist. One *Newsweek* editor says a principal attribute of the stories his magazine considers is "resonance," the extent to which the events and personalities being reported upon speak to a larger, thematic story.⁸ For the newsmagazines, the death of Elvis Presley was an especially "resonant" story: The singer was treated as an individual who "galvanized the unstated yearnings of an age."⁹

While storytellers perform an explanatory function (in many cultures, stories told how certain features came into being, such as why the raven is black or why the bear has a short tail), they also stress the importance of the inexplicable. There has always been a place in storytelling for the magical—the unexplained cure, the intervention of forces or spirits. The point of such stories is to illustrate that whatever our knowledge, it is ultimately not enough to explain the mysteries of the natural environment.

On first examination, there seems to be very little magic in the practice of journalism. Reporters are trained in cause-and-effect reasoning. Facts that cannot be attributed are unlikely to appear in print or on the air. Yet some stories may resist explanation. Tuchman writes that news "sometimes uses symbols as the representation of reality and presents them as the product of forces outside human control."¹⁰ Tornadoes, riots, hurricanes—these may become "alien, reified" forces outside the realm of human control.¹¹

When Pope John Paul II visited the United States, many journalists took the opportunity to infuse their reportage with a dose of the magical. Garry Wills, writing in *Columbia Journalism Review*, noted that "miracles abounded, crowds surged, the pope glowed, and the press swooned."¹² A passage from the *New York Post* conveyed the tone of much of the coverage: "For 29 hours and 34 minutes this Pope, this Polish priest, this common man sent shimmers of magic through cathedral and arenas and along 58 miles of New York streets."¹³

Although defending such rhetorical excess may be difficult, journalists did play a similar role in covering the return of the hostages in Iran and the Bicentennial of 1976, confirming those events as moments for celebration and sometimes evoking wonder in the process. From a sociological perspective, journalists constitute these events as national celebrations. In so doing, they sustain their particular culture by reinforcing its beliefs and values. The news value of certain ceremonial stories, as John Chancellor and Walter R. Mears have suggested in *The News Business*, may be a function of the primal, emotional associations made by readers and viewers in responding to such events.

In that sense the marriage of Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer was not only a story about a monarch-to-be, nor a story about the pomp and pageantry of the wedding ceremony:

It was a world-wide audience of people [drawn to the story] who grew up on princes and princesses, on the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. She was Cinderella and maybe he used to be a frog. . . . It was a news story about childhood tales shared the over.¹⁴

As Chancellor and Mears noted, the story of Prince Charles and Lady Diana was essentially a "shared fairy tale." Its narrative structure and widespread appeal were related to the structure and universal appeal of an archetypal story form, the fairy tale.

Traditionally, storytellers have served a pedagogical function. Stories provide lessons to be drawn and, through the force of example, present guidelines for socially acceptable behavior. Journalistic stories of crime and punishment, of guilt and retribution, affirm the social order by demonstrating that lawbreakers eventually do not go unpunished. The most compelling and elaborate guilt-and-retribution scenario in recent years, the Watergate scandal, was repeatedly cited as evidence that "the system worked." In serving the "system" by providing reassurance that even the president was not above the law, the Watergate story again sustained the culture by reinforcing its beliefs and values and by dramatically purging individuals who did not share them.

Throughout history, storytellers have sustained the bond between humankind and the natural environment or the cosmos. Every culture has its winter and summer stories, harvest and hunting tales. Journalists rarely look to the cosmos, but there is a cyclical component to much of what they write about. Seasonal stories are staples of American journalism, whether tied to holidays and vacations, the beginning of the weekend or the school year, or the sports calendar. National political stories, meanwhile, are part of a quadrennial cultural rite: the presidential election. In *The Pulse of Politics*, James David Barber offered a cyclical interpretation of American politics.¹⁵ Elections, he said, are dominated by three recurring themes—conflict, conscience, and conciliation. In an election characterized by conflict, the emphasis is on the campaign as a battle for power between fighting politicians. Four years later, reactions have set it, and the campaign of conscience has a moralistic, anti-political tone, focusing on personal character. The cycle is completed after another four years in a campaign of conciliation, the politics of bringing us together.

Barber conceded that the 12-year scenario was an over-simplification, but the premises of his argument have particular utility in this discussion. Namely, the role of the journalist as storyteller is central to the narrative view of political campaigns.

His [the journalist's] attention is attuned to notice, in the flux of facts, just those features that lend themselves to interesting, novel narrative. . . . Reporters are sentient beings and thus selective perceivers. Whatever their political leanings or personal biases, their professional interest is strongly focused on extracting stories from events. They look in order to tell. As historians of the

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present, they look for the significant—that is, news that may affect their readers' future for good or ill. So any strung-out sequence of connected events with fateful implications is grist for the journalistic mill. The story must persuade the reader—from paragraph one—that the events reported *will* make a difference.¹⁶

The media, Barber contended, have been instrumental in transforming campaign event into campaign saga. That dramatization is part of the journalistic imperative to make the world comprehensible. Journalists are impelled to drama, "not as mere decoration, but as a skill essential to the craft of communication."¹⁷

In the case of political journalism, storytelling may be shrouded by a cloak of neutrality and objectivity. The new journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, was the practice of self-conscious storytelling. As described by Tom Wolfe, new journalism involved the use of fictional techniques (scene-setting, point of view, status detail, extended dialogue) to tell a non-fictional story.¹⁸ Moreover, for the practitioner of new journalism, technique suggests purpose. The adoption of fictional techniques signals an explicit return to the storyteller's emotional function.

Storytellers have in their tales evoked fear, pity, and wonder, allowing the oral medium to transport us out of ourselves. Literary style may differ from oral style, but the emotional product of storytelling is not bound to the genre employed. Jette's description of vocal technique conveys the narrative art:

The storyteller speaks slowly, in a sort of mysterious undertone, which contributes, together with the darkness and the wonderful character of the fact presented, to cast a sort of awe on the audience. As the story develops, the interest increases: peals of laughter, exclamations of commiseration or disgust, reflections on the characters and actions described, conjectures as to what is going to follow, soon cross each other from all quarters. The intense interest and excitement then displayed I cannot better compare than to the impressions manifested by the audience in our theatres.¹⁹

Contemporary journalism offers many examples of storytelling at this emotional level. One is presented here. Jon Franklin of the Baltimore *Evening Sun* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for a series of feature articles describing an unsuccessful operation on a patient with a brain aneurysm. The series was titled "Tales from the Gray Frontier."

The going becomes steadily more difficult and bloody. Millimeter, millimeter, treacherous millimeter the tweezers burrow a tunnel through Mrs. Kelly's mind. Blood flows, the tweezers buzz, the suction slurps. Push and probe. Cauterize. Suction. Push and probe. More blood. Then the tweezers lie quiet.

"I don't recognize anything," the surgeon says. He pushes farther and finds a landmark.

Then, exhausted, Dr. Ducker disengages himself, backs away, sits down on a stool and stares straight ahead for a long moment. The brainstem is close, close.

"This is a frightening place to be," whispers the doctor.

In the background the heart monitor goes pop, pop, pop, pop. 70 beats a minute steady. The smell of ozone and burnt flesh hangs thick in the air.

It is 11:05 a.m.²⁰

Barber says the idea of the reporter as blotter, passively soaking in information, is "trivial and naive."²¹ Even so, acceptance of the journalist's storyteller function is resisted by media critics and some scholars. A dramaturgical metaphor has been applied frequently to human communication, but journalism is still not generally regarded as an institutionalized form of symbolic action.²²

If it were, such a view would be predicated on these assumptions, derived from Burke and articulated by Gronbeck:

(1) "*Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal*"; (2) symbols—and the society which invents, promulgates, and sanctions them—are determinative of any individual's perception or apprehension of the world, attitudes, values, and behaviors, i.e. that human beings find "meanings" and "meaningfulness" only in symbolic processes; (3) humans are born into, nurtured by, and in large measure controlled through a series of symbolic environments . . . a web of meanings habitually associated with particular symbols in particular arenas-of-discourse.²³

Journalism is such a symbolic environment, where institutional constraints, including competition, division of labor, deadline, and technology, influence the character of stories presented. But a story itself is a symbolic process. Journalists define their activities—and thus their products—as they meet the storytelling imperative. As Gans and Tuchman have pointed out in recent studies, journalists trade not only in events, but in values.²⁴ By their nature, journalistic stories reinforce a particular view of social reality. The newsmagazine cover story speaks to the potency of individual action. The premise of investigative reporting is that society is redeemable. Political reporting rests on the assumption that the contest matters, that there is something worth winning. Acting as storytellers, journalists play an important role in affirming and maintaining the social order.

Notes

¹ "The Hostages as 'Soap Opera,'" *Newsweek*, 17 November 1980, p. 57.

² See Marie L. Shedlock, *The Art of the Story-Teller* (New York: Dover, 1951), p. xvii.

³ Anna Birgitta Rooth, *The Importance of Storytelling: A Study Based on Field Work in Northern Alaska* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1976).

⁴ David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 48.

⁵ W. Lloyd Warner, "Mass Media: The Transformation of a Political Hero" in James E. Combs and Michael W. Mansfield (eds.), *Drama in Life: The Uses of Communication in Society* (New York: Hastings House, 1976), p. 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

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⁷ The individual topics were treated in a *Time* cover story on the failure of diplomacy, March 17, 1980.

⁸ Henry W. Hubbard of *Newsweek's* Washington staff made the comment at the University of Maryland College of Journalism in a lecture on October 3, 1979.

⁹ "All Shook Up," *Newsweek*, August 29, 1977, p. 56.

¹⁰ Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 213.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹² Garry Wills, "The Greatest Story Ever Told," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 18:25-33 (January-February 1980), p. 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ John Chancellor and Walter R. Mears, *The News Business* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 104.

¹⁵ James David Barber, *The Pulse of Politics: Electing Presidents in the Media Age* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1980).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 3-52.

¹⁹ J. Jette, "On Ten'a Folk-Lore," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 38 (1908). Cited by Rooth, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

²⁰ Jon Franklin, "Tales from the Gray Frontier: Terrifying Journey Through Tunnels of the Brain," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, December 12, 1978, p. A-3.

²¹ Barber, *op. cit.*

²² For an introduction to the dramaturgical perspective, see Combs and Mansfield, *op. cit.* Key discussions of symbolic action are found in Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), and Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

²³ Bruce E. Gronbeck, "The Rhetoric of Political Corruption: Sociolinguistic, Dialectical, and Ceremonial Processes," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64 (Spring 1978), p. 158. Point number one is quoted from Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 16.

²⁴ Tuchman, *op. cit.*; and Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon, 1979).