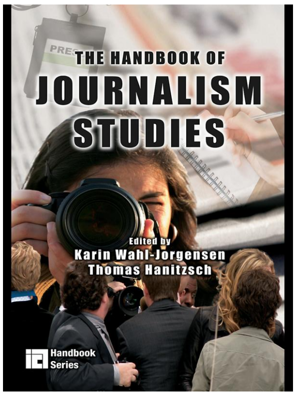

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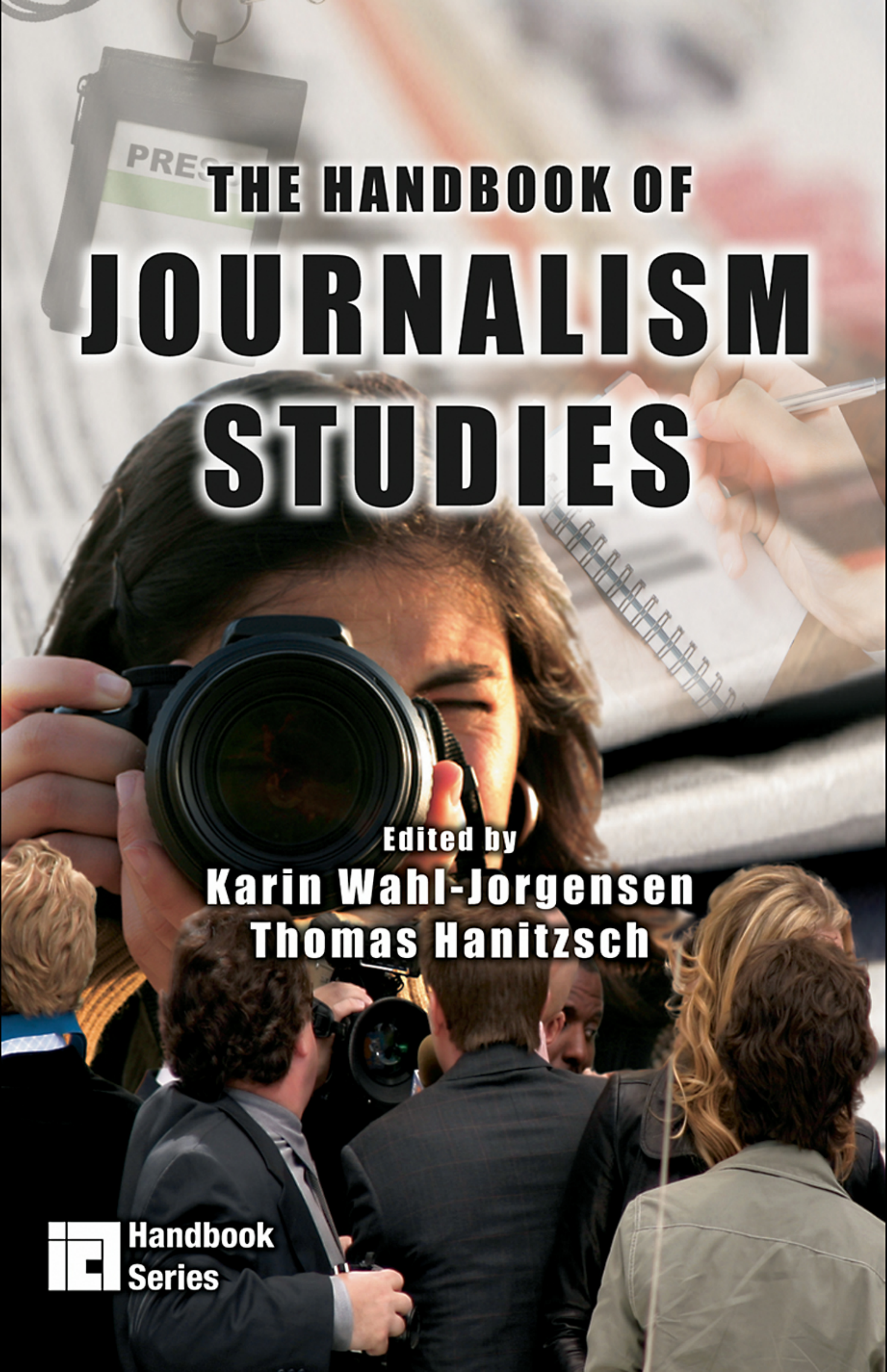

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Reporters and Their Sources

Daniel A. Berkowitz

The study of reporters and their news sources draws its roots from questions about bias, power, and influence. Couched in an atmosphere of adversarial conditions, a key question in the early literature concerned whether reporters or sources exert greater influence in shaping the news. One extension of this question asks how journalists' use of news sources leads toward a particular news agenda that either favors or excludes some issues over others. A second extension asks if source power provides the ability to subsidize the time and effort required for reporting.

In essence, the relationship between reporters and their sources has long been depicted as a battle for power over public opinion and public consent (Anderson, Peterson, & David, 2005; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981; McQuail, 2000; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). Journalists end up in a role of protecting society from corruption, while officials in government and business take on the task of protecting their own interests at all costs. But these kinds of power only represent something ephemeral, that is, the ability to shape the outcome of specific issues and policies. Once the outcome is resolved, the power battle begins anew.

This chapter argues that more is at stake between journalists and their sources than the short-term power to sway public opinion. Instead, the interaction between these two parties represents a long-term, yet dynamic influence on society: the ability to shape ongoing meanings in a culture. Also called into question is the Western grounding for much of this research. In particular, press systems and political systems both vary across regions and countries, as does the social status of journalists, so what might appear to a Western perspective as co-optation, just as likely reflects the pragmatics of journalistic and, more broadly, cultural realities.

It is important to mention here that the term "source" is used only to refer to the people who reporters turn to for their information, often officials and experts connected to society's central institutions. Another use of the term is applied to news agencies (see, for example, Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2004), organizations such as the Associated Press that provide news content to newspapers, broadcast outlets and websites: that second use of the term is not part of the scope of this discussion.

The chapter begins with a sociological perspective for the relationship between reporters and their sources, providing a framework for understanding the positions of their interaction. It then embarks from an initial depiction of an adversarial relationship, grounded in attempts to influence public opinion, to a more neutral exchange between two parties who each have something to gain, and finally, to a negotiation over long-term cultural meanings and ideological power. With these elements in place, the chapter then takes what is essentially a Western research discourse and begins to place it into broader global settings. The question of voice and empowerment—of both reporters and sources—is then introduced as a key mediating factor. Finally, the chapter gains closure on the overall argument, briefly touching on the role of evolving media technologies in reshaping the nature of journalist-source interaction.

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE REPORTER-SOURCE RELATIONSHIP

The shape of the reporter-source relationship grows from core tenets of journalism's professional ideology (Deuze, 2005; Hackett, 1984; Roshco, 1975; Schudson, 2002). To understand the relationship, then, requires stripping away—at least temporarily—this ideology to see what lies within. Two dimensions need to be addressed: First, the basic demands of the ideology, and second, the procedures that journalists apply to accomplish their work and produce their product.

The ideology of the profession represents a paradigm, a method for accomplishing a task in a prescribed way. If journalists adhere to this paradigm, the desired result is expected to follow (Ericson, 1999). Essentially, journalism's paradigm follows a science-like model, where reporters gather authoritative data and then present it without explicitly taking a side in the discourse. Experts and officials—as sources—become the providers of this data, so that reporters become beholden to them for the raw materials of news (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). On their own, reporters are not allowed to provide an opinion—even when reporting on an event—so that interpretation is limited to such things as crowd-size estimates, descriptions of settings, depictions of how people appeared, and what those people said. By following this source-driven process, reporters become society's scientists and the news they produce becomes their "scientific report"—their truth (Ericson, 1999).

On the face of it, this paradigm would seem to work effectively, but that ignores the fact that news sources usually have a vested interest in journalists' reports, linking news content to public opinion, and ultimately, their own success (Griffin & Dunwoody, 1995; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Reich, 2006). For authority figures, keeping public opinion in their favor enhances the ability to remain in that position of authority. For elected authority figures, the imperative to favorably influence public beliefs becomes even stronger: at stake is their ability to remain in office and implement their desired policies. For leaders of organizations and businesses, what news says about them helps maintain social permission to continue their current course of doing business: losing public favor can require a change of course.

In all, both reporters and sources have a lot at stake. Reporters put their credibility and believability on the line with each news item they write. Likewise, sources regularly risk their career success. Putting both parts of this equation together suggests that the interaction between reporters and their sources is a delicately negotiated relationship, with each party hoping to achieve their goals and maintain their organizational and societal status. As Sigal (1986, p. 29) asserted:

> News is, after all, not what journalists think, but what their sources say, and is mediated by news organizations, journalistic routines and conventions, which screen out many of the personal predilections of individual journalists.

This depiction of news and the reporter-source relationship highlights the second dimension that journalists face, that news is a product with organizational expectations, and that reporters must develop strategies and procedures to help ensure they will produce their product on time and in a form that their peers will judge as "good" (Tuchman, 1973). News becomes a construction, and the interaction of reporters and sources is how that construction comes to be (Ericson, 1999).

Nearly every vocation and profession faces that same challenge, at least in the abstract: a business must hire a workforce, workers need to apply their skills strategically to meet production quotas given their available resources, and ultimately, consumers must be satisfied with the product they receive, both in terms of timeliness and quality (McManus, 1994).

In practical terms, reporters manage their organizational limitations by routinizing their tasks (Ericson, 1999). Although they need to contact multiple sources for writing stories, their reconnaissance process needs boundaries. Sources are not always instantly available, so that scheduling of interviews becomes a task that demands time to accomplish and cuts into total working time until deadline. A basic collection of known sources helps make this task easier, but sometimes new sources must be found (Berkowitz, 1987; Berkowitz & Adams, 1990; Brown, Bybee, Wearden, & Straughan, 1987; Gant & Dimmick, 2000; Roshco, 1975). Adding to complications, some sources might not be cooperative for some stories or might not be available when needed. Some sources, too, might want to jump into the fray unexpectedly and reporters must deal with their input. Making things more complicated yet, unspoken, socially-learned organizational "policy" can sometimes dictate the routes that reporters must take and the sources and topics that are off limits.

Once reporters meet up with their sources, whether face-to-face or electronically, a second negotiation process takes place (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; Reich, 2006). There, reporters attempt to glean the maximum amount of information from their sources, taking their conversation in directions that a source might not always want to go (Awad, 2006). Sources, in turn, attempt to maintain the information-gathering effort in line with the information they are willing to provide, generally details that are neutral, that can further their own cause, or in some cases, that can damage the cause of an opponent (Gans, 1980). But reporters do not always lead the way, because sources often proactively try to influence what becomes news through news releases, news conferences, planned events, and leaks that can jump-start the reporting process. Sources can even attempt to promote their cause by bringing attention to occurrences that may have happened naturally, such as crises and disasters involving others (Gandy, 1982; Molotch & Lester, 1974). A very large proportion of news originates from sources' efforts, and sources who can provide reporters with easily assembled news have a greater chance of making their voices heard (Curtin, 1999; Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1985). Over time, much of the news originates from savvy sources who understand reporters' needs and can deliver information regularly; paradoxically, much of what sources deliver overall tends to miss the mark and lose a place in the news (Berkowitz, 1992).

In sum, the work of a journalist becomes an everyday task of scheduling: sources are what must be scheduled. For some stories, scheduling becomes more complicated, either because of limited deadline time or source availability. Reporters learn how to find sources that can readily be scheduled and who will provide the kinds of information they seek in a concise and manageable way. Once the scheduling of sources and their interviews has taken place, reporters can then shift to a new work mode, interpreting the information they have received, privileging some sources' information over others, and crafting a news story that corresponds to the rules of the paradigm.

FROM A POWER PERSPECTIVE TO A FOCUS ON CULTURAL MEANING-MAKING

If a central element of journalistic ideology is the media's watchdog role over government and big business, then reporters' struggles to gather important information from sources become crucial. This could be characterized as a power struggle, with reporters constantly digging for information and sources working to prevent what could be perceived as overzealous journalistic inquiry (Kaniss, 1991). If a source has a high level of power, reporters' efforts to gather information can be thwarted. Conversely, high power reporters have the ability to gather more information from more sources (Reese, 1991). Part of the question, then, is "What determines the power of journalists and sources?" A related question asks, "What does this power affect?"

Turning to the first question, "What determines power?" offers different answers for reporters and their sources. For reporters, the question comes down to attributes of the reporter and attributes of the reporter's organization (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Regarding the reporter, three aspects stand out. The first is experience, so that a reporter with longevity in the profession gains status over the years. Longevity alone does not equate with power, however. For example, a long-time society reporter would have little power in relation to national, state, or even local news sources. A second factor shaping a reporter's power, then, is his or her track record for writing stories of impact, an impact known by the news sources that reporter encounters on the job. A third factor is intra-organizational power: if a reporter has more autonomy within an organization, then deadline pressure can be lessened and there will be more opportunity to develop a story.

The reporter's organization also influences power, although this is not an absolute designation. For example, news organizations with a broader scope of operation—nationally or internationally—generally have greater power when they face news sources. Previous reputations for publishing or airing influential news stories enhance and solidify that power. For example, a quality broadsheet newspaper and a popular tabloid would have different levels of power within the same range of sources and audience: here, the influence they wield closely links to their power differential (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999). However, when a news organization from a larger sphere covers news in a smaller sphere, that large-scale power might be irrelevant. For example, a national media organization covering news that mainly impacts a small geographic community would not necessarily have much power if the local residents in that area were not part of the media organization's audience. There, the local media organization might turn out to have more influence in the outcome of an issue or event.

Source power is somewhat simpler to assess. Sources located within a power structure, who have both authority of knowledge and autonomy to speak about that knowledge, tend to be most powerful (Ericson, 1999). Sources with the ability to promote an occurrence to the media under certain circumstances could have temporary power, such as promoting an environmentalist position to the media after an oil spill (Molotch & Lester, 1974). Reese (1991) suggests that the perceived power levels that reporters and their sources bring to a specific interaction have an important impact on the news outcome. This balance can also shape the nature of the relationship, making interactions more symbiotic and cooperative when power levels between journalists and sources are approximately equal but more adversarial when one of the two parties is perceived to have the upper hand.

Altogether, this discussion suggests that the relationship between reporters and their sources is a dynamic phenomenon, depending on the context of a specific occurrence as well as the perceived power that each party brings to the relationship. This power balance also shapes how interactions between reporters and sources unfold and which party can lead the negotiation for information that turns into news reports. That brings up the second question: "What does this power affect?"

Conventionally, the answer to this question has been cast in terms of power over public opinion and influence over the news agenda (Kaniss, 1991; Curtin, 1999). For public officials and business leaders, daily life is a matter of maintaining positive public opinion. Thus, at the simplest level, power for a source translates to the ability to have a voice in an ongoing debate in the news agenda (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999). A somewhat more powerful position for sources is not only to be able to speak to an issue on the news agenda, but to be able to influence the shape of an issue that gains a place on the agenda and then form the initial discussion about that issue. More powerful yet is the ability to influence whether an issue will reach the news agenda and gain public discussion: keeping something away from the public eye amounts to the ability to make decisions impacting society without having to gain public consent.

For journalists, power translates to a mirror image of these levels. Being able to gain source information that broadens public debate represents a basic level of power. Being able to draw attention to issues and begin public dialogue among news sources becomes a more powerful position. There is no clear analog to the third level of power, however, because reporters would rarely want to hide a story from public view.

But the power of journalists and sources to control an ongoing news agenda is ephemeral, depending on the fluctuating tides of those who are in charge and the social world in which they interact (Fico & Balog, 2003). When a new administration gains power, the lasting ability of the news agenda becomes up for grabs. Some issues would linger, while others would disappear. Public opinion for an out-of-office official becomes largely irrelevant unless it has some impact on those who have moved in. In sum, focusing only on public opinion when considering the relationship between reporters and their sources is to overlook some of the more long-term, lasting impact. It thus becomes important to shift the discussion to culture and the meanings it contains.

The concept of framing is one way to consider the impact of reporters and their sources on meanings (Pan & Kosicki, 2001). Thinking of news meanings like this suggests that issues can be discussed in specific ways, with specific boundaries applied to which meanings are included in the discussion and which are beyond its scope. When reporters or their sources rein in an issue this way, certain depictions become the dominant way of thinking as the issue runs its course. A weakness of the approach, however, is that the larger implications of framing often do not get considered. That is, to say that an issue, an event, or a social group was "framed" in such-and-such way mainly plays off of specific norms. From a journalism studies perspective, it is always easy to find how news framing misses a norm and therefore can be considered an "unfair" depiction. But the implications can be taken much deeper, from an argument about whether reporters or their sources have more power in the relationship, to the more macro-level perspective of what long-term societal impact this framing has for the political power of certain groups, administrations, or interests over others. Thus when the interface between reporters and their sources produces and reproduces a specific frame, a specific vantage point on the social order is propagated and maintained: the meaning of occurrences and issues is one of the implications of the reporter-source relationship that impacts ideology itself (Coman, 2005).

Another perspective on meanings connected to the reporter-source relationship comes from sources' responsiveness to their *interpretive community* (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Zelizer, 1993). An interpretive community represents a cultural location where meanings are constructed, shared, and reconstructed during the course of everyday life. Interpretive groups can be formed by a physical place, an organization, a virtual online gathering and other social collectives. Members of an interpretive community interact by internalizing taken-for-granted shared meanings and draw on those meanings as a guide to their values and interpretations of issues and occurrences.

Reporters find themselves in a duality of meanings, from both their professional interpretive community and the interpretive community of their sources (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999). There are four main dimensions of reporters' professional interpretive community. First, reporters are guided by their professional ideology, taking professional ideals into consideration, such as objectivity, independence, fairness, and a watchdog role. Second, reporters keep in mind the interpretive community of their media organization, the "policy" that they have socially learned through everyday life on the job. This second interpretive community might conflict with the first, providing subtle guidance about favoring certain sources and organizations over others, going easy on some sources while reporting aggressively on others. The third and fourth interpretive communities appear through Zelizer's concept of *double time*, where reporters consider both present-day localized meanings for occurrences and issues, and a broader historical reference point that provides constant comparison between what has happened in the past and what is happening in the present (Zelizer, 1993).

Sources' interpretive communities face up against these four reporter dimensions. When an event occurs, when an issue is raised, sources have a goal of bringing forward one dominant meaning from among the possible interpretations. For corporate, government, and special interest sectors, the ultimate objective is to protect and strengthen their social position and power through interpretations that facilitate acceptance of the meanings they prefer (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999). For both reporters and their sources, adoption of these meanings does not necessarily become a conscious or purposively strategic act. Instead, they turn into tacit understandings, with meanings growing from group (and cross-group) interactions over time. In addition, although these meanings generally have short-term consistency, they are gently dynamic as well.

In sum, these two sites of meaning making—journalistic practice and source communities—show how news content is not shaped by the classic vision of socially autonomous journalists acting as watchdogs or by short-term battles between reporters and their sources. Instead, journalists are beholden to four dimensions of their interpretive community. Likewise, news sources live within their own competing interpretive communities, responding to the preferred meanings that they have learned.

PLACING THE REPORTER-SOURCE RELATIONSHIP INTO A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Much of the research about reporters and their sources has been based on Western press systems and even more specifically, on how the relationship surfaces in the United States (Josephi, 2005). A question needs to be addressed, however: How far can we take this knowledge in order to understand other press systems? Two extensions of the basic question go to opposite poles (Reese, 2001). One extended question asks how differences *between* press systems should be weighed into our understandings; a second question asks how much attention should be paid to differences *within* a single press system (Hanitzsch, 2006).

These are not easy questions to answer, and yet, it would be equally difficult to assert that there is a *global* journalism that blurs many of the long-standing distinctions between nations and their press systems. Many anecdotal examples are available to show how one system's norms become another system's aberrations (Schudson, 2003, pp. 134–153). An appropriate level of analysis for understanding these examples is not obvious. Although the extra-media or societal levels stand out as most likely, care must be taken to avoid over-reducing a single system's homogeneity (Hanitzsch, 2006; Reese, 2001). In the end, we are left with that same big question: How does the reporter-source relationship influence the news? We are, however, left floundering for precise answers once leaving the comfort of a single home base for study.

Examples of a Portable Relationship

The basic relationship between reporters and their sources can thus be seen as "portable," that is, the relationship exists in all press systems, from the most authoritarian to the most libertarian, if in different forms (Josephi, 2005). Even when examining the same situation, what might be seen as an element of freedom through one lens of journalistic professionalism might be viewed as rather constrained through another. In every case, a fundamental belief of journalists is that they cannot simply make up news but instead must rely on what they have been told by somebody holding a perceived level of authority (Hanitzsch, 2006).

For example, the relationship between reporters and officials is highly controlled at Japanese Kisha clubs, while foreign affairs reporters in the Netherlands enjoy a high degree of freedom from official sources because they face little imperative to produce news (Schudson, 2003, pp. 138–139; Zelizer, 2004, p. 152). In the Japanese case, news becomes largely what officials say, while in the Netherlands, reporters are essentially in charge, with subjective output as an accepted norm. In other systems, sources pay reporters for coverage, an extremely unethical situation for American reporters, but taken as part of the "envelope journalism" system by Mexican reporters (and those in several other countries) to subsidize their low wages in a way similar to restaurant waiters (Schudson, 2003, pp. 149–150; Zelizer, 2004, p. 152).

Other comparisons highlight differences that emerge from a combination of professional and societal cultures. For example, when comparing American and Israeli reporters through their responses to a set of hypothetical scenarios, those from the United States were much less likely to negotiate with a source, although both groups expressed similar views about protecting source confidentiality (Berkowitz, Limor, & Singer, 2004). In Korea, several studies have found that the relationship becomes more personal than is typical in the West, yet sources are not attempting to co-opt reporters through friendly interactions: this kind of close friendship is instead a key element of Korean culture overall (Berkowitz & Lee, 2004; Kim & Bae, 2006; Shin & Cameron, 2003). In a study of Swedish/Danish media, a high degree of symbiosis was found between political-economic elites and journalists working for regional media (Falkheimer, 2005). This contrasts with the situation found in Russia, where autonomous sources have emerged only recently, so that conflict underlies an ongoing battle, with sources vying to promote their vested interests and journalists working to maximize their new-found power (Koltsova, 2001). In New Zealand, the situation appears more congenial, yet sources still tend to dominate, serving in a role closer to what Schudson (2003) called the para-journalist who provides "favourable facts" rather than a more neutral representation of information (Rupar, 2006). A study of journalists in Britain and Spain found that the element of crisis created a special case for the journalist-source relationship, with sources attempting to gain journalists' favor in order further their agendas and damage their opponents, through what has been called "ventriloquist journalism" (Sanders & Canel, 2006).

Learning from the Global Base of Research

These examples suggest some commonalties for the reporter-source relationship across countries, with both subtle and significant variations appearing in the extra-media and societal levels. The clearest commonalties link within similar locations on the authoritarian-libertarian continuum, where similar degrees of reporters' autonomy shape the boundaries of the relationship. Altschull's (1995) vision of press systems recasts the situation yet again, so that reporters facing constraints from a pro-development stance become self-limiting in their demands on official sources in the name of national growth.

One position to take in applying research from one system to another would be to argue that findings from one cannot be generalized to another, no matter how similar they appear. A second, more productive position would be to adopt the concept of transferability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) that identifies contextual and structural similarities and contrasts between two cases, and then adjusts the findings from one to better inform the other. This second stance avoids a reductionist approach that overlooks key differences, while also avoiding an absolutist view suggesting that very little can be moved from one situation to the next.

An advantage of transferability and comparison is that the contrasting cases can more clearly highlight the salient characteristics of each. For example, contrasts between cultures' interpersonal relationships in general can be used as a basis for understanding differences in synergistic or conflictual levels between reporters and officials across systems. Similarly, considering cultures' gender equity positions, especially in relation to the gender makeup of the journalistic workforce, can highlight subtle- and not-so-subtle nuances of the power that officials wield over reporters (Lachover, 2005; Robins, 2001).

Overall, the key point for global understanding is to stay alert to the context of research about reporters and their sources when developing a conceptual framework for new research, and to maintain an awareness of the boundaries of interpretation when that existing lens is then applied.

WHO GETS A VOICE?—GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND THE JOURNALIST-SOURCE RELATIONSHIP

A central point of concern for the relationship between reporters and sources is that, if the journalistic paradigm calls for turning to authoritative news sources, then those believed to possess authority will have a better chance of getting a voice in the news. When high prestige official sources appear in the news, the reporter-source relationship tends to legitimate or even reify the power structure of society (Manning, 2001; Sigal, 1973; Soloski, 1989). This occurs because the job of journalists is to produce news content that bears the aura of factuality: the statements of credible sources can be taken as fact, certifying the news without the need to research the veracity of that "fact" (Ericson, 1999). In most societies, fact bearers live in the ideologically dominant mainstream, representing that mainstream's dominant ideological institutions and presenting their dominant frame (Hertog & McLeod, 2001). Most often, sources tend to be male authority figures and do not belong to one of their society's minority groups (Allan, 1998; Kitzinger, 1998; Ross, 2007).

In relation to the reporter-source relationship, then, an important question asks, "Who gets a voice?" That is, to what degree do dominant mainstream voices control the information that journalists get and how much opportunity do women and minorities have to appear in the news and shape its meanings? Of course, the answers do not literally have fixed quantitative parameters, but they nonetheless can be addressed from that perspective. A second—and less obvious—question must also be raised: How does the gender and ethnicity of *reporters* shape the kinds and quantities of "facts" that can be obtained?

If reporters' choice of news sources tends to be male officials from the mainstream, it is useful to consider the circumstances where women gain voice and take an active role in the relationship. One central question that has been studied involves the interaction between female reporters and female news sources (Armstrong, 2004; Freedman & Fico, 2005; Van Zoonen, 1998; Zeldes & Fico, 2005). The main direction of inquiry in this vein asks whether female reporters are more likely to draw on female news sources when the opportunity arises. The logic here is that female reporters will be less ingrained in the male power structure and they will feel more comfortable interviewing female sources, a sort of gender-based camaraderie that would not exist with male sources, who might also have the upper hand in terms of socio-political power.

Zeldes and Fico (2005) explored this notion through a study of gender and race of reporters and sources appearing on network newscasts during the 2000 presidential election. They found that stories by women and minority reporters were indeed linked to more diverse source use. This finding also appeared in several other studies, but to a lesser degree. Freedman and Fico (2005) examined sources—particularly source expertise—in news coverage of a state governor race and found that stories with the byline of a female reporter had a greater tendency to cite female non-partisan sources. However, the overwhelming majority of non-partisan sources were still male, and female non-expert sources appeared far less often than their proportion in the overall population. A study by Armstrong (2004) had a similar result, finding that male sources received more mention and were placed more prominently. Again, female reporter bylines were a predictor of more frequent use of female news sources. Ross (2007) addressed the gender question within the context of local British newspapers and found the same patterns held true, with male sources still dominating the news, even when the reporters were women.

In part, the degree of difference in these findings is tempered by broader organizational and professional expectations, with newsroom norms and practices operating as a conformity mechanism, especially at larger newspapers (Rogers & Thorson, 2003). These expectations from newsroom colleagues would rein in female reporters' boundaries for broadening the news, particularly where newsrooms are dominated by male leadership (Weaver et al., 2007). It is possible, however, that for certain genres of news, female sources are somewhat more likely to appear (Armstrong, 2006). And as a counter-force, some news organizations have established formal policy encouraging a greater use of diverse news sources (Mohamed & Fleming-Rife, 2002).

Research related to source gender also informs the use of news sources from ethnicities and races outside the mainstream. In the United States, for example, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans rarely serve as news sources. African Americans appear somewhat more frequently, especially when another source appears in a news item (Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003). Even in cases with explicit organizational policy for drawing on minority news sources, the mix of news sources appears much the same (Mohamed & Fleming-Rife, 2002).

Extending the concept of source diversity further, some news organizations see themselves as alternative or oppositional: an expectation for their news would be to include a greater proportion of ordinary citizens as sources. Surprisingly, oppositional news also emphasizes elites rather than citizens, although these elites come from outside the dominant mainstream. This was found in a study of an activist newspaper in the UK (Atton & Wickenden, 2005) as well as in an oppositional radio station in the US (Eliasoph, 1988). In either case, the answer is simple: reporters need to gather their information from authoritative sources whom audiences will view as legitimate bearers of "facts." The real difference in these cases is that alternative media draw on authoritative sources more closely aligned with their own ideological positions. In contrast, a mainstream news organization faced with choosing between a mainstream official source or an expert located in an oppositional camp will choose the mainstream official source as a means of producing ideological consistency (Coleman, 1995).

Switching the Power Relationship: Female Reporters and Male Sources

The preceding discussion has shown how mainstream sources tend to dominate the news and how the majority of those sources tend to be male officials. This situation gives sources a socially powerful position. The US newsroom gender balance includes approximately one-third women overall, and slightly more than one-half of new journalists are women. This gender balance tapers off significantly when power, expertise and authority are taken into account (Weaver et al., 2007). Among those with at least fifteen years of experience in the journalistic workforce, only about one-quarter are women. In sum, female reporters enter the journalist-source relationship in a lower status position and often do not increase their status as much over time as do their male counterparts.

A study of female journalists and male sources in Israel bears out this imbalance, identifying the gendered tone of reporter-source interactions (Lachover, 2005). There, male sources were sometimes found to draw on the power imbalance to sway a female reporter, yet sometimes male sources became more cooperative than usual in order to impress a female reporter. Women reporters, aware of the sexualized relationship with their male sources, admitted, though, that they sometimes took advantage of the situation by flirting or feigning weakness to gain more from their sources. A similar situation was found in a study of female reporters in Tanzania (Robins, 2001), even though male sources were often guilty of sexual harassment.

In all, this discussion suggests some clear imbalances in the reporter-source relationship, constructing a gendered and ideological representation of society and its voices. Although much of the literature discussed here is drawn from US-based studies, there are clear implications for understanding the power balance and meaning-making implications that are involved. Most simply, not all sources are equal in their relationships with reporters, with women and minorities tending to have the weaker position, whether as a journalist or as a source.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter began with the premise that the study of reporters and their sources has been cast in terms of two polar dimensions: the adversarial position, with journalist as watchdog, and the symbiotic position, where both reporters and their sources give up something and gain something in return. Both positions have been drawn from a Western perspective, often an American one.

Three problems underlie these positions. First, the situation is not an either/or outcome. Instead, the elements of adversarial and symbiotic interaction appear on a continuum, with the perceived power of each party constantly shifting. The reporter-source relationship, then, is a constantly negotiated one. Second, the relationship is context dependent. Its nature depends on the context of the times, of course, but also on the issues under consideration, the press system where journalists and sources meet, and even the gender and ethnicity of each party involved. Third, much of the research has overlooked the “So what?” question. That is, why do we care which party is in charge? The short-term answer is easier: controlling the face of the news provides shape over public opinion and the ability to exert power over social issues and social debate.

But the short-term answer is not enough: the ability to influence the news also equates to long-term control over cultural meanings. Although meanings are dynamic, they do not move nearly as quickly as public opinion. When a reporter or a source can influence a long-term news discourse over meanings, they have influence over dominant ideological positions, those “common sense” understandings about individuals, institutions, and occurrences. Key terms at the center of discussion also load up with ideological meaning, turning into ideographs with essentially uncontested attributes. Ideographs then become the tools of everyday conversation, with meanings taken for granted when they are drawn into use. For example, “terrorism” after events in the United States, England, Spain, and Russia began to automatically include specific social groups, specific political positions, specific issues, and even specific regions of the world. As further social dialog continued, the meanings became more-and-more natural and the separation between “us” and “the other” became taken for granted. The term “democracy” lands in a similar position.

Related to this influence over meanings, two mediating factors were introduced: the influence of culture and the role of identity. The country where reporters interact with their sources does make a difference, partly because of press system differences, but also partly because of the role that media play in a specific culture. Similarly, gender and ethnicity bring attributes of social meaning to journalists and sources that both limit and enable the extent of their roles. Female sources often have less ability to access journalists and less ascribed power to influence the direction of their interactions once they do gain access. The case is much the same for sources outside a culture's dominant ethnicities. Female reporters end up in a similar role problem, too, with less power and influence than male reporters.

One other factor—technology—comes into play as well. Television news, for example, has become "more opinionated and less densely sourced," so that it can be considered a "soft discourse" that allows journalists to distance themselves from source-based facts (Schudson & Dokoupil, 2007). Convergence, likewise, has changed the situation, with less face-to-face or voice-to-voice communication between reporters and their sources, and email filling the gap. Even further, blogs have begun to blur the line about who is a journalist and who is a source, and the role of sourcing has become equally ambiguous as a result (Pavlik, 2004). Finally, the practice of obtaining sources second-hand from the Internet has complicated questions about which sources count and what degree of sourcing is sufficient (Ruggiero, 2004).

Regardless of these mediating factors, sourcing in some form or another will remain a crucial tenet of the strategic ritual of "doing journalism." As long as reporters need to write beyond their opinions alone, as long as they see themselves as conveyers of information rather than interpreters of issues and occurrences, they will need to rely on sources. Sources, although usually deemed authoritative, speak from vested positions in their organizations and from ideological positions in their cultural worlds. In the short-term balance hangs ephemeral social power, while in the long-term, the interaction between reporters and their sources—and the media accounts that result—have the potential to shape people's taken-for-granted assumptions about how their world revolves.

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