CHAPTER 2

Why the News Is the Way It Is

REPORTING THE NEWS IS A TOUGH JOB. One day, you might be covering a Supreme Court decision for the morning paper that affects the long-term rights of a traditionally marginalized group while in the next you might post a story on your news organization's website about the internal workings of a presidential campaign before filing an update to yesterday's Supreme Court story before finally recording a podcast that sifts through the details of a dense budget proposal. A dizzying array of responsibilities increasingly fills a reporter's day—a reporter for an online-first newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin, told a class of ours that she typically writes four stories a day while working on a cover story and a weekly podcast. Despite this variety, the news we use tends to be produced in a predictable, replicable structure no matter the format and platform. Why is this the case? Why is the news the way it is?

Some of the reasons are structural. For example, journalists must meet unbending deadlines. After all, if you have been assigned the lead story at the local TV station you work for, and the newscast starts at 5:30 p.m., it's either you or dead air that awaits the viewer who tunes in to learn what happened in her community that day. Viewers do not care if your sources did not call you back, but you can be sure that some will call to complain if you only report a quote from one major political party and not any others—no matter who returned your calls. If all you get in response to a request for an interview is an emailed statement and you quote that statement, you are sure to hear from the other side that you are a shill for their political opponents, uncritically regurgitating their talking points.

Some of the reasons relate to professional concerns. Journalists worry about fairness. As compared to everything else that is going on, is the story newsworthy? Have they given the major players in a story a chance to express themselves? How should reporters frame claims sources make that do not match the verifiable truth?

Some of the reasons are market based. Journalists, and their bosses, think about their audience. Who reads the paper? Are they generally aware of this story

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or do they need some background to understand what is going on? Who watches the 4 o'clock local news? What interests them? Who tunes into the 11 o'clock news? What will they already know about the story by the time they flip on the Nightside news? What percentage of the audience are reading updates on their phones? What do they need to know? What will people click on? What will they share on social media?

Due to these and other considerations journalists sift and winnow through when doing their jobs, a great deal of news coverage fits into fairly predictable patterns in terms of the topics covered, people quoted, and perspectives shared. In this chapter, we describe the major conclusions from research examining why the news is the way that it is. We'll find that the structure and content of the news is guided by journalists' routines, constraints, and models; the systematic indexing of elite opinion; how journalists perceive themselves, those they cover, and the audience they serve; market forces; and changes to the contemporary communication ecology.

Journalistic Models, Routines, and Professional Norms

Models of Making the News

In Chapter 1, we described Amber Boydstun's alarm/patrol hybrid model, which describes the news media as it is, not how we might wish it was. Recall that news coverage can operate in a pure alarm mode, with a short explosion of coverage around an issue or event. It can engage in a pure patrol mode, with extended, regularized coverage of an issue. It can engage in neither an alarm nor patrol mode and it can operate in the alarm/patrol mode with short bursts of alarm reporting followed by continuing the surge of coverage for sustained periods of time.

Boydstun's model does a good job describing how news coverage works. Other models of newsmaking offer more normatively oriented views of what journalism might look like. The *mirror model*'s advocates argue that journalism should work like a mirror does and reflect what is happening back to the world. As such, the news should dispassionately and fairly report the important things that happen on a given day. Described in this way, the mirror model sounds a bit like the surveillance function of the media described in Chapter 1. Critics of the mirror model point out that journalists are gatekeepers, regardless of how hard they might try to simply reflect the important stuff back to the audience. With 7.5 billion people on planet Earth, it is impossible for the news to cover every important thing

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that happens, let alone do it well. Beyond what makes it onto the agenda, stories get framed (see the interpretation function of the media described in Chapter 1 and the research on framing described in Chapter 6) in ways that are not pure reflections of what happened. Moreover, it is worth asking whose reflections are most likely to be reported upon. If reporters are mostly white and well educated (which, as you will see below, they are), should we expect them to do as good of a job reflecting what is happening in communities they are not as familiar with? In practice, it should not come as a surprise that the mirror model falls short of wholly reflecting reality.

A second model is the organizational model. Supporters of this perspective argue that news is influenced by the organizational processes and objectives that exist between reporters and their sources, ideals of the organization they work for, and practical considerations. We will unpack some of these factors later in the chapter. Other organizational features that influence how journalism is practiced include the publication schedule (daily or weekly newspaper or newscasts) and the population size and demographic features served by the news organization.

The professional model considers making the news to be something that is done by skilled professionals who curate important and exciting stories for their audience. As Doris Graber and Johanna Dunaway point out, "There is no pretense that the end product mirrors the world."[1] Some call this model the economic model of news as considerations of the audience are centrally important to determining what gets covered.

The political model assumes that media organizations cover the news in accordance to their political views. As such, the news is a reflection of the partisan and ideological biases of reporters and the political environment in which the coverage is occurring. Indexing, which we describe below, has roots in this model of news coverage.

The mirror, organizational, professional, and politics models of coverage comprehensively account for how the news is made. An interesting exercise is to see how each of these models might fit into the alarm/patrol hybrid model of news coverage. Regardless of the model guiding how the news gets made for the audience, another set of important factors influencing why the news is the way it is are journalistic routines and professional norms.

Journalistic Routines and Professional Norms

Journalistic routines are the rules and behaviors that reporters are trained to follow by people like the authors of this book along with editors and news organization executives that affect what is covered and how it is reported. These routines are designed to help prevent bias from creeping

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into practice of news gathering and writing, but organizational routines can bias the news even without intending to.

In order to climb the professional ladder, reporters quickly learn what kinds of stories earn clicks, approval from editors, and compliments from their colleagues. Producing a lot of clickable content, fast, is prized in the contemporary media ecology.

Even though the digital environment has increased the number of organizations providing news to various publics, it is still the case that news organizations pay close attention to what major east coast newspapers in the United States choose to cover. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* continue to drive a nontrivial portion of what other news organizations cover. As such, the potential sources, ways of framing a story, and possibilities for follow-ups are often driven by what the most elite news organizations choose to do. Lance Bennett outlines three major incentives that reporters face that have the consequence of homogenizing their reporting habits: 1) cooperating with and responding to pressure from their sources; 2) the rhythms and pressures of their own organization; and 3) their regular working relationships with other reporters.[2]

Cooperation(?) with Sources

Theoretically, reporters have an adversarial relationship with official sources. However, many interactions that reporters have with politicians and other civic leaders follow reliable formats. Journalists are trained to incorporate the 5Ws and an H (who, what, when, where, why, and how) into the leads of their stories. For example, when President Trump kicked off his reelection campaign on June 18th, the *New York Times* story began (our emphases in the parentheses):

> President Trump (who) delivered a fierce denunciation of the news media, the political establishment and what he called his radical opponents (what) on Tuesday (when) as he opened his re-election campaign (why) in front of a huge crowd of raucous supporters (where) by evoking the dark messaging and personal grievances that animated his 2016 victory (how).[3]

These *pseudo-events*, to use Lance Bennett's term, come with formulaic scripts that do not provide much in the way of hard information to the public. Rather, easy-to-understand images tend to be what people recall. Of course, later in the book we will discuss how voters can make reasonable democratic decisions with fairly limited information, but we will also review how uninformed most folks are about most things more of the time.

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It is certainly the case that journalists can and do ask tough questions of politicians while covering these kinds of events. It is also true that it is newsworthy that the president of the United States is going to run for reelection. While journalists and politicians do not share the same goals, they need each other. An example of how all of these things can happen at once took place in June 2019 when ABC's George Stephanopoulos was grilling President Trump in the Oval Office about whether Trump would accept an offer of information about a political rival from a foreign government and if Trump would tell the FBI about the offer. Trump said that he would certainly want to listen to the information and that he might tell the FBI even though he thought the FBI director was wrong when he said that presidential candidates should always tell the FBI if a foreign government or national is trying to affect an American election. ABC's chief political correspondent was factual, firm, and direct in his questioning of the president, an example of the adversarial relationship. During the tense back-and-forth, Trump's chief of staff coughed. Trump, annoyed, stopped the interview and offered to go back and do an answer again so that the cough would not get picked up on camera and be heard in a soundbite, an example of cooperation. Stephanopoulos agreed and the chief of staff was kicked out of the Oval!

Organizational Pressures

Reporters also face pressures from their own news organizations to standardize their work. Since editors at newspapers and online outlets and assignment editors and news directors at television stations hold the keys to professional advancement, their preferences for how stories should be covered can greatly influence how journalists do their jobs. Standardized news has benefits for the news organization, the most important being that it is safe. When news organizations take risks to do original or risky work, they know that they will have to explain to the higher-ups why their coverage looks so different from their competitors'. While one might think that originality would be prized in the mainstream media environment, pack journalism—the tendency for reporters at different organizations to cover issues in similar ways—often wins out.[4]

Perhaps the most important standard is the size of the news hole itself. A thirty-minute local television newscast has between eight to twelve minutes of commercials. The remaining time is divided between local news, national news, weather, sports, and feature stories. This means that many of the decisions about a reporter's story are made before the reporter has conducted their first interview. These include the length of the story, its likely placement in the newscast, and who the sources will probably be.

Most news organizations operate on a beat system, where a reporter is assigned to cover a particular topic, like education, city government, or

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arts and entertainment. The reporter then cultivates sources in that area, responding to events (e.g., a city council meeting, a presidential candidate visit, or an upcoming concert) and generating their own stories based upon their knowledge of the beat, their sense of what is newsworthy, and what their editors and audience might respond to. The officials who the reporter regularly sees as part of their work on the beat—at meetings, hearings, press conferences, and public events—are the people who reporters are most likely to end up calling for comment.

The Reporters in the Pack

The organizational routines described above often result in journalists covering the same beat moving in packs throughout each workday. Statehouse reporters tend to congregate in the state capitol's pressroom, campaign reporters travel together on a bus or plane, and education reporters see each other at school board meetings. Because they spend so much time together—chasing breaking news, waiting (and waiting) for events to start, and covering the same meetings and key players—they often feel very close to each other. As Alexandra Pelosi documented in the 2000 presidential campaign film *Journeys with George*, reporters endure the same turkey sandwiches, same campaign speeches, and same travel problems at every campaign stop.[5] Certainly, reporters work independently to get scoops, original quotes, and unique stories, but they also compare notes, corroborate evidence, and bounce ideas off of each other. Many become good friends. Some become romantic partners. These behaviors foster some homogeneity in news coverage.

In his famous book chronicling the 1972 presidential campaign called *The Boys on the Bus*, Timothy Crouse called this tendency toward sameness in coverage *pack journalism*.[6] The increasing consolidation in media ownership of local television stations and newspapers has created a second kind of pack journalism—one that seems to be driven by the preferences of management. Sinclair Broadcast Group, the nation's largest local television station owner, requires their stations to carry some opinion pieces from Boris Epshteyn, who the *PBS NewsHour* called a "surrogate for [President] Trump on their station's air,"[7] even famously requiring their anchors to read the same script that accused the national news media of spreading fake news. Media scholar Lewis Friedland noted the dangers that accompany the fact that the "most trusted news source of most Americans (local TV news) is going to be allowed to be turned into an opinion organization."

Feeding Frenzies

Packs also attack. We might be able to predict with some accuracy how most issues will be covered most of the time, but it is not hard to find

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a politician who will tell you that they do not receive the coverage they would prefer. Political scientist Larry Sabato has dubbed pack attacks on accusations of politicians' personal failings, malfeasance, and the like *feeding frenzies*.[8] Like sharks sensing chum in the water, reporters have a nose for when politicians are in trouble. Frenzies can expose corruption, leading to resignations and prison time and they can be overdrawn soap operas that help cable television stations fill the hours with talking heads who speculate about what might happen next.

An example of a textbook feeding frenzy began in March 2016 during the American presidential race. It was revealed that Democratic candidate for president and former secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton used a private email server to conduct official government business when she was serving in President Barack Obama's cabinet. Previous holders of her office, like Republican Colin Powell, had done the same, but Clinton's behavior was deeply criticized by the then-director of the FBI, James Comey. In an extraordinary news conference, Comey said,

> Although we did not find clear evidence that Secretary Clinton or her colleagues intended to violate laws governing the handling of classified information, there is evidence that they were extremely careless in their handling of very sensitive, highly classified information.[9]

One of the issues was whether Clinton had not taken proper care of classified documents on her private email server. Another was the possibility that she could avoid sharing with the public the contents of her private emails, making her service as secretary of state less transparent. While most of the emails that were released were innocuous (details about scheduling, emails about family life), the fact that some emails were not shared gave reporters and Clinton's political opponents something to talk about—framing Clinton as untrustworthy and incompetent.

Reporters asked Clinton about her emails several times a day on the campaign trail. Even her major primary opponent, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, grew tired of the questions about the controversy, exclaiming in a primary debate with Clinton, "The American people are sick and tired of hearing about your damn emails," though in a later debate, he said it was a serious issue.[10]

Fox News' Chris Wallace asked Clinton about her emails in one of her general election debates with Donald Trump. Trump and his supporters hammered Clinton's use of a private email server relentlessly. In an unprecedented campaign moment, Trump literally asked Russia to find Clinton's missing emails, saying, "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing, I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press."[11] This had the effect of starting another frenzy—this

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one aimed at Trump—for asking a foreign government to involve itself in the US presidential election.

Clinton's own supporters tried to turn the issue on its head on social media using hashtags like #ButHerEmails. This was used to mock people who showed support for Donald Trump. When Trump was revealed to have told *Access Hollywood*'s Billy Bush that he felt empowered by his celebrity to sexually assault women, Clinton supporters shared the story with the #ButHerEmails hashtag.

A feeding frenzy more directly involving the twenty-first-century communication ecology began in 2011. New York congressman Anthony Weiner was reported by conservative media baron Andrew Breitbart to have sent a lewd and sexually suggestive photograph to a 21-year-old woman. Weiner denied that he sent the photo, saying that while the photo might be a doctored photo of him, he did not send it. A few days later, another photo surfaced and Weiner held a news conference to admit that he had taken and sent the pictures. He claimed to have engaged in sexually inappropriate conversations on social media with several women over the previous few years. The press coverage was intense, the ridicule from late-night hosts was abundant, and Weiner faced calls to resign from Republican and Democratic leadership. Less than a month later, he resigned.

Later, when he tried for a comeback—this time in the race to be mayor of New York—he sexted women under the moniker Carlos Danger. The frenzy began anew and uncovered that Weiner sent lewd photos to young women while lying in bed next to his toddler son. Weiner pled guilty to a charge of transporting pornographic material to a minor. His wife, top Hillary Clinton aid Huma Abedin, filed for divorce. However, Weiner's relationship with Abedin led FBI investigators to discover emails on Weiner's laptop that were deemed pertinent to Clinton's email controversy, opening that case back up in the months right before the 2016 presidential election, something Clinton blamed for her loss to Trump.

The reporters in the pack covered these controversies relentlessly. However, most of their work is outside of the frenzy-zone. Reporters covering politics tend to follow the routines and norms described above in ways that shape how the public thinks about the level of conflict between elected officials and between elected officials and the news media itself.

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Indexing

The most prominent explanation of the relationship between the news media and the government—and how that relationship affects the content of the news in the United States—is W. Lance Bennett's indexing hypothesis. The indexing hypothesis maintains that news coverage of political issues tends to be dominated by official sources and the views expressed

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in mainstream government debate.[12] This gatekeeping behavior effectively opens or closes admission to being reported on in the news media for citizens, activists, and the like in a way that is based upon how well their perspectives fit into the conflict between elected officials and well-heeled organized interests. Research provides a fair amount of evidence supporting the idea of indexing, but there is also plenty of evidence that reporters can and do more than cover the news as indexing stenographers, more closely fulfilling the democratic requirement that a free press provides a variety of critical perspectives on issues,[13] though, of course, journalists often fall short of this ideal.[14]

Reporting based on official or authoritative views tends to index those views in ways commensurate with the magnitude and content of conflict. Stories about abortion policy tend to provide one reliably *pro-choice* perspective and one equally ardent *pro-life* perspective. Opinion about abortion is far more complicated than the *life/choice* framing that dominated news coverage for decades. Most Americans support some version of abortion rights—from always supporting them to supporting them to favoring the right to an abortion when the life of the mother is at risk or when a woman became pregnant after rape or incest. These nuances are indexed when elites, like the Supreme Court, rely upon those nuances, but they are often absent from coverage otherwise. Stories detailing other important issues relating to abortion, such as what a person seeking one must go through (government-mandated counseling, an unwanted ultrasound, driving hundreds of miles to the nearest clinic), are far less common.

Even so, deviations from indexing are plentiful during times when there is conflict between official sources within the same party or conflict between official domestic sources and the preferences of foreign voices.[15] When neither inter- or intra-partisan conflict is present, criticism of government activity need not come from other official sources to be recognized by the media. Research exploring this idea often focuses on a crisis, often a foreign policy issue such as the 2003 US-led war in Iraq.[16] Indexing is more difficult when it comes to reporting on foreign policy issues, as the government is in greater control of information flows on these issues. More sources are typically available for comment on domestic issues, making indexing—and two-way flows of information—easier.

As new media outlets apply their own interpretations to events, traditional outlets follow suit.[17] Danish political communication scholar Claes de Vreese argues that this is an indicator of the *mediatization* of politics, wherein the autonomy of politics as primarily the domain of political elites has given way to a politics with media as central players.[18]

Indexing has even found a way to survive in the era of infotainment. Even as event-centered reporting declines, reporters often find issues that fit within their conceptions of political conflict and, as Bennett argues,

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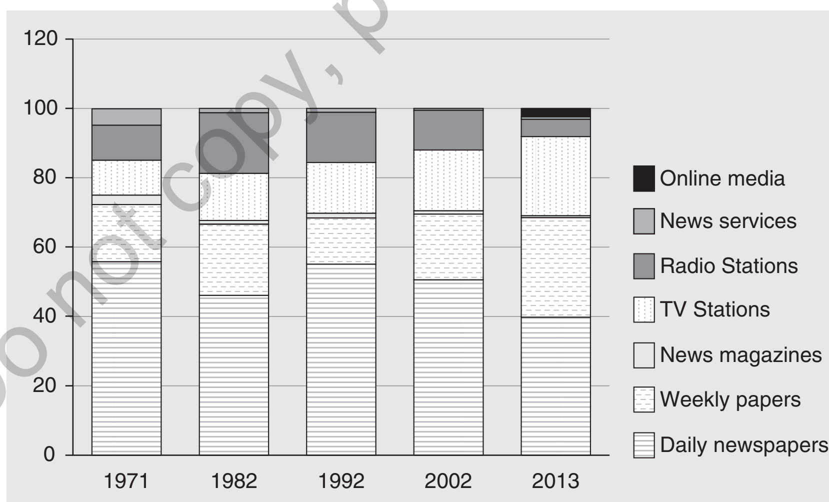
"create their own issues and recycling past developments" to fill the news space until real issues emerge.[19]

Journalists' Perceptions of Themselves and Their Jobs

In 2019, newsrooms in the United States had nearly forty thousand reporters fewer in them as compared to 2000.[20] Researchers David Weaver, Lars Wilnat, and Cleveland Wilhoit investigated whether these changes have affected reporters' demographic characteristics, political and professional attitudes, and professional behaviors.[21] Their survey of more than one thousand US journalists interviewed print, broadcast, and online journalists in 2013. Figure 2.1 shows that the percentage of journalists working for daily newspapers dropped about 16 percent from 1971 to 2013. The percentage of reporters working for weekly newspapers rose by 12 percent over the same time period. Television news has been a growth industry for journalists while radio is about half as large as it was when Richard Nixon

Figure 2.1 Estimated Full-Time Workforce in the US News Media, 1971–2013



Source: David H. Weaver, Lars Wilnat, G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "The American Journalist in the Digital Age: Another Look at U.S. News People," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 96*(1): 101–130.

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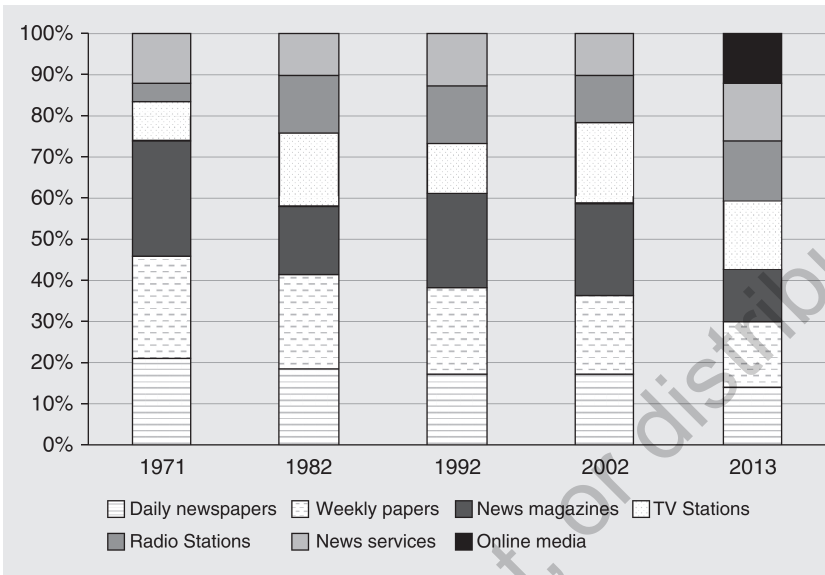
Figure 2.2 Percentage of Women Journalists in News Organizations, 1971–2013



Source: David H. Weaver, Lars Wilnat, G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "The American Journalist in the Digital Age: Another Look at U.S. News People," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 96*(1): 101–130.

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was president. Just over 2 percent of all US news media professionals were working in online media.

Figure 2.2 highlights changes in the representation of women journalists in American media. Notably, the percentages of women working in radio, television, daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, and news magazines in 2013 are higher than they were in 1971. However, 1992 was the best year for women in weeklies and news magazines. The largest sustained gains have been made in radio (but recall from Figure 2.1 that radio journalists are only about 5 percent of all journalists). Women are closest to achieving parity in television and weekly newspapers (both about 42 percent women in 2013). Weaver and colleagues reported that the pay gap between men and women in journalism continues to plague the industry. The gap was about $7,000 in 2012, a $2,000 (and three percentage point) improvement from 2001. The average man in journalism made $53,600 in 2012 while the average woman made $44,342.

Table 2.1 reveals changes in the percentage of self-identified racial and ethnic minorities in journalism. While there are gains across the board, they are extraordinarily modest, especially when compared to the demographic

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Table 2.1 Representation in News Organizations by Racial and Ethnic Groups, 1971–2013

	1971	1982	1992	2002	2013
African American	3.9	2.9	3.7	3.7	4.1
Hispanic	1.1	0.6	2.2	3.3	3.3
Asian American	NA	0.4	1	1	1.8
Native American	NA	NA	0.6	0.4	0.5
Jewish	6.4	5.8	5.4	6.2	7.6
White and other	88.6	90.3	87.1	85.4	82.8

Source: David H. Weaver, Lars Wilnat, G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "The American Journalist in the Digital Age: Another Look at U.S. News People," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 96*(1): 101–130.

NA = Not Applicable due to too small of a number of respondents.

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totals of groups such as African Americans and Hispanic/Latinx Americans represented in the population as a whole.

Of course, the individual identity that media critics point to the most when seeking to criticize the news media for being biased is party identification. Figure 2.3 shows that the majority of journalists identified themselves as independents in 2013. However, for most of the years that similar surveys were conducted, Democrats were the largest group. Just over 28 percent were Democrats in 2013 while only 7 percent identified as Republicans—an 11-point drop from 2002. This was the lowest percentage of journalists identifying as Democrats in the forty-two years of surveys conducted by those studying American journalists. The same was true for the percentage of reporters who were Republicans. In terms of their political ideology, almost 39 percent said they leaned to the left, about 44 percent described themselves as *middle of the road*, while only 12.9 percent said they leaned to the right. In terms of their partisanship and their ideology, American journalists do not look like the rest of the country—especially with respect to the number of conservatives and Republicans in their ranks.

Some worry that this is a problem, believing that a reporter's individual political views will affect the fairness with which that reporters does their job. After all, the argument goes, people's core political values affect what they think is important, reasonable, and right—it would be difficult to imagine how journalists could divorce their own views from their reporting. On the other hand, others counter this argument by noting

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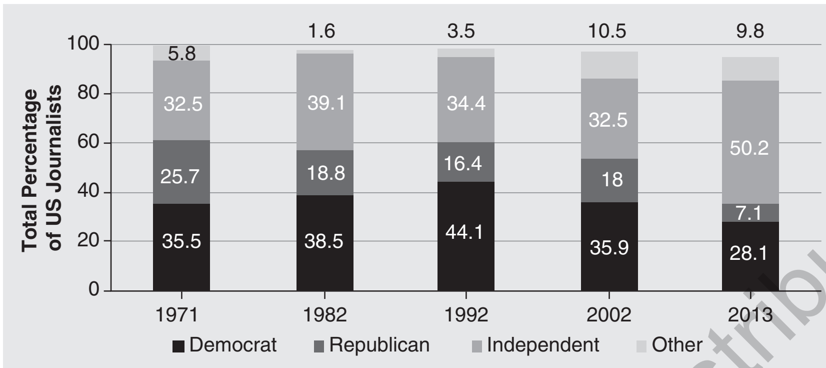
Figure 2.3 Political Party Identification of US Journalists, 1971–2013



Source: David H. Weaver, Lars Wilnat, G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "The American Journalist in the Digital Age: Another Look at U.S. News People," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 96*(1): 101–130.

that there are liberals, moderates, and conservatives in every profession. People tend not to ask their airline pilot if they are going to fly the plane in a conservative or liberal way or their surgeon if they should be worried about their doctor's views on the capital gains tax before an emergency appendix surgery.

Why is it that there are fewer conservatives in journalism? It might have to do with their general orientation toward authority. Weaver, Wilnat, and Wilhoit report that 78 percent of reporters said investigating government claims is "extremely important." Questioning authority is something that liberals tend to prefer as compared to conservatives. Psychologists Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian Nosek found that conservatives tend to endorse five *moral foundations*: authority/respect, purity/sanctity, harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, and ingroup/loyalty. Liberals tend to only endorse two (harm/care and fairness/reciprocity).[22] Since journalists have to question authority and strive to the verifiable truth as compared to an ingroup they favor, liberals may be more likely to self-select into the profession as compared to conservatives. Others have suggested that since a high percentage of media jobs in the United States are on the coasts where liberals are a larger share of the population, that part of the explanation is geographic; another explanation is that journalism professors like us, who are more likely to be liberal than conservative, train reporters to adopt a liberal orientation to their work.[23] There is less support for the latter two explanations in the research literature,

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but it is also the case that there has not been much work done to debunk these possibilities.

Besides questioning those in power, what else do journalists say is an extremely important part of the gig? Sixty-nine percent say the same about providing analysis of complex problems. Just under half believe it is extremely important to get information out quickly to the public. Journalists, as a whole, do not see being an adversary to government (22 percent) or business (19 percent) as very important parts of the job, nor do they think they should be setting the political agenda (2 percent) or be entertaining (9 percent).

Despite heavy workloads and the general precariousness regarding the health of their profession, over three-quarters of journalists in the United States say they are satisfied with their jobs. One area in which journalists perceive less than exciting changes in their jobs is the autonomy they have. Over the past forty years, fewer journalists report that they can choose what to work on or how they want to frame their stories.

In terms of journalists' views about ethical behavior in their reporting, few say it may be justified to use personal documents without permission (25 percent), pay people for confidential information (5 percent), agree to protect confidentiality but then not do it (2 percent), or claim to be someone else (7 percent). More than half of reporters believe it may be justified to use confidential public documents without permission.

Journalists are also adapting to the digital environment. An online survey experiment of working US journalists conducted by Shannon McGregor and Logan Molyneux found that journalists who use Twitter less in their jobs tend to dismiss information their colleagues who are Twitterfiles find to be newsworthy. They also find reporters who use Twitter as a regular part of their reporting routine believe that tweets are as newsworthy as headlines from the Associated Press wire. On the one hand, Twitter can push back against indexing and include more voices into the news agenda. On the other hand, heavy-Twitter-using journalists may be more likely to behave as a pack, quickly coming to conclusions about topics based on their use of Twitter as compared to other tools in the reporter's toolkit.[24]

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Journalists' Perceptions of Their Audience

In the digital era, we assume that journalists can know their audiences better than ever, given all of the tools at their disposal to measure clicks, time spent reading a story, the number of times a story was shared on social media, analyzing the comments on the story, and so forth. Notably, a Tow

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Center report for the *Columbia Journalism Review* concludes that little has changed since the print era, though journalists appear more open to learning about their audiences than reporters were in the 1970s.[25]

Previous work from the print era concluded that journalists' perceptions of their audience were grounded in ideas about the institutional audience of the publication they worked for, their professional peers, their sources, and people who were important in their own lives (family, friends). In 2019, the report found that "while journalists are open to engaging with readers, the ways in which they form audience perceptions remain largely unchanged despite the rise of audience metrics and analytics."[26] This, of course, is partly because journalists are more interested in the news than they are interested in their audience.[27] This is not to say that journalists do not value their audience—after all, providing news to the audience is a foundational principle of news reporting. Journalists often fear that being too open to audience feedback could harm their news judgment.

Today, journalists can learn from their audience directly via social media conversations, for example. They can also learn about their audience by using data: the metrics and analytics that are used to infer what it is the audience likes, knows, and wants. Of course, social media platforms like Twitter can be echo chambers for journalists as well.[28] Other times, audience response on social media can be downright frightening. Journalists have been harshly and vulgarly criticized and even threatened on social media. The murder of a Roanoke, Virginia,[29] television reporter and cameraman on-air in 2015 and the mass shooting that killed five in the Capital Gazette newsroom in Maryland[30] contribute to the sense of unease that can accompany getting closer to the audience.

The Tow Center report concludes,

> Perhaps one of the ironies of the digital era may be that the most persistent and vivid reader perceptions are still based on actual personal contact, a fundamental human connection that virtual communication—be it through numbers, graphs or even email—struggles to replicate.[31]

How might journalists go about improving their understanding of the audience in order to shift the audience they imagine into the audience that actually exists? It is difficult to say. The Tow Center report suggests that asking reporters what audiences they want to impact is not enough. News organizations will need to figure out who they want to target with particular stories and use contemporary analytics and metrics to investigate whether they actually reach them. Choosing to empower the audience a bit is another suggestion, but how this would work in concert with journalistic norms and routines discussed earlier in the chapter is unclear. Finally, since so much of how journalists perceive audiences comes from their peers and

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their friends, newsrooms need to seriously focus on diversifying. Recall Table 2.1. Newsrooms are not diverse places. Studies show that people of different backgrounds and experiences can fundamentally alter what kinds of stories get covered and how they are reported. Of course, diversity is not enough—changing routines, habits, and poorly-rooted preconceptions about the news is required as well.

Market Forces and the News

Another major set of factors affecting the content of the news is the market itself. Johanna Dunaway's research reveals that there are important differences in agenda, tone, and slant when comparing corporately owned media to privately owned firms and by contrasting the news coverage of small media companies to enormous media conglomerates. For example, both large newspaper chains and public companies print more negative campaign coverage than privately owned news outlets. Moreover, corporately owned news organizations are less likely to cover political issues than news outlets owned by smaller companies.[32] Chain-owned papers also print more letters to the editor and editorials that are critical of major institutions.[33] Robert McChesney's research provides numerous examples of how corporately owned news organizations limit the issues, voices, and perspectives presented in their pages.[34]

Indeed, there is evidence that journalists' behavior is responsive to economic concerns favoring corporate and commercial interests. Journalists cover elections as a horse race and policy battles as a game, in part, because it sells.[35] Regina Lawrence's research into how news organizations cover stories shows that game framing is more likely as a debate approaches a decision on an issue carrying electoral consequences.[36] James Hamilton's book *All the News That's Fit to Sell* shows that there is more local news coverage of politics in media markets that have higher subscription rates to *Time* magazine. When markets have higher subscription rates to *People* magazine, local news organizations provide less hard news to their audiences.

The limitations regarding the small range of perspectives the market often encourages can even be applied to the editorial voice of the news organizations themselves. Newspapers typically have an editorial section of the paper that is produced by different people than the various news sections of the paper. The editorial section is designed to provide a range of views, through regular opinion columns, syndicated columnists, invited or submitted op-eds, and the paper's own editorials, which are typically unsigned. In the past, mainstream national and local television outlets also provided regular commentary. Today, a handful of stations have local editorials while the stations owned by media giant Sinclair Broadcast Group carry commentaries they require their stations to air.

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Sometimes, the market can push papers to keep their editorial perspective quiet. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* decided to endorse a presidential candidate in 2004, and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, bruised after making an endorsement in the contentious recall election of Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, declined to make an endorsement in the 2012 presidential race. Kimberly Meltzer argued that this decision to "toe the owner's political line" was one reason, along with pleasing readers, that editorial endorsements might be predicted by knowing who the publisher prefers, something that is more likely for private companies than publicly traded ones.[37]

Beyond the quality and content of coverage itself, market forces simply and directly affect whether news organizations can exist. Between 1970 and 2016, around five hundred daily newspapers went out of business. Several others reduced their publication schedule, shrank their news hole, or moved to an online-only production plan.[38] Newsrooms that have survived often are living with smaller statehouse, Washington, and foreign bureaus.

Media critics worry that our ability to govern ourselves is severely diminished, or even destroyed, if we do not have easy access to independently produced information that informs us about the issues of the day and the behavior of those in power. Social media makes it easier than ever for public officials to jump over the scrutiny of reporters and communicate directly with their constituents, react to news stories (even if they were not willing to comment in the stories in the first place), and shape public debate. What scholars have called the contemporary *hybrid media* system allows for people like President Trump to not only tweet to his followers but also have his tweets breathlessly covered by the news media. A team of scholars, led by Chris Wells, found that a strong predictor of news coverage of Donald Trump, when he was seeking the Republican Party nomination for president in 2016, was his behavior—and the behavior of his followers—on Twitter. When Trump's media attention was lagging, he was more likely to go on a *tweetstorm*. When his followers retweeted his missives in higher numbers, news organizations were more likely to write stories about him.[39]

Tweeting for news coverage is not something that restricts itself to presidents. When the Republican Party surprisingly lost a state legislative seat in a special election that took place several months before the governor's election, then Wisconsin governor Scott Walker sent a series of tweets (Photo 2.1) aiming to energize his supporters and generate news coverage. Several state news organizations covered the tweetstorm, amplifying the governor's message to his supporters.[40]

What can be done to stop the decline of newspapers and usher in a new era of robust news coverage that holds public officials to account while informing the public? Former *Washington Post* editor Leonard Downie, Jr.,

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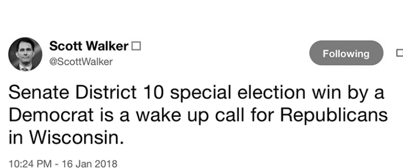

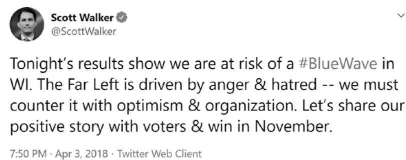

Scott Walker/Twitter

Photo 2.1 Tweets From Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker After Republicans Lost a Special Election Eleven Months Before Walker's Reelection Bid

and media scholar Michael Schudson proposed forcing broadcast companies, internet service providers, and those of us who use their services to pay into a fund that would be used to pay for local journalism across the United States. Many other nations already do this. Canada has provided more than $600 million for local journalism. Great Britain has taken $10 million from the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) budget to give to local journalism outlets. In New Jersey, a state fund set up to pay for quality journalism and media start-ups was set to kick off in 2019.[41]

State support might be necessary, even in the digital age. Matthew Hindman's book *The Myth of Digital Democracy* shows that, far from being a power-flattening equalizer of information provision, internet clicks tend to go to sites operated by traditional media and aggregation sites that link to content provided by old media.[42] Moreover, the digital-only organizations that dominate web traffic are a relatively small number—just as there are a small number of companies that dominate mainstream media.

Opponents of state-funded news organizations generally pursue two lines of argument—the first is that the news should be a self-sustaining business. If news organizations cannot earn enough to stay afloat, it must mean that they are not doing a good job meeting the needs of their audience. A second line of argument is fueled by worries that news organizations would become beholden to their funders, in this case the government. If corporately owned newspapers, for example, produce less issue coverage than other newspapers, perhaps government-funded papers would be less willing to hold government officials and institutions to account.

Research suggests that in advanced industrial democracies, these concerns are misplaced. Audiences continue to trust public news outlets in the United States and abroad. The Democracy Index, produced by the magazine *The Economist*, rates democracies based upon how their government functions and protects civil liberties, and how citizens participate, among other factors. The top six countries have some of the most robust public funding of journalism in the world.[43] The United States, which funds public media to a much smaller degree than the top six nations ranked in the Democracy Index, ranks eighteenth.

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Audience Demands and Behavior

Since news organizations have more measures of the behavior of audiences at their fingertips than ever before, it stands to reason that some of these measures would be used to affect the kinds of stories that get covered and how they are framed.

Building upon Boydstun's alarm/patrol hybrid model of journalism, researchers have studied how what we search the internet for on Google can affect what news organizations put on the agenda. The theory of *agenda-uptake* provides explanations for when we should expect: 1) the mainstream media's agenda to influence niche media's agenda or the public's agenda; 2) niche media's agenda to influence the mainstream media's agenda or the public's agenda; and 3) the public's agenda to influence the mainstream media's or niche media's agenda.

For issues receiving patrol coverage, like the abortion issue, public attention to the issue tends not to shift based on mainstream media coverage, nor is it affected by niche (i.e., partisan cable news or narrowly focused digital outlets). People who are interested in abortion politics are already interested and seek to follow news about the issue regularly. The mainstream news media, however, is reactive to what more narrowly targeted news outlets are doing. That is, they are more likely to cover abortion politics when niche organizations are paying more attention and when the public does show an interest, based upon their Google searches about the topic. Niche organizations also are more likely to cover abortion when the mainstream news media cover it and when people are searching for information about the topic.

Issues that received patrol coverage and regularized alarm attention as well affect the public and news agendas a bit differently. Issues like the state of a nation's economy get regular attention from news organizations but also earn routinized punctuations in coverage around releases of monthly reports, major changes in the stock market, and election seasons. The public's agenda regularly takes up mainstream and niche coverage of the economy. Niche organizations do not affect the mainstream media's coverage of economic news but traditional news organizations are influenced by public searches about economic issues. Niche organizations are not affected by mainstream coverage, but they follow public interest as well.

One example of alarm issues that tend not to become patrols are scandals, which tend to generate a great deal of attention for a short amount of time. Sometimes, as with the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, coverage builds slowly over time, causing the scope of the scandal to grow as investigative journalists learn more. But, most scandals are relatively short-lived in the media ecology. Typically, mainstream coverage is driven more by the availability of new information to reporters and niche media's attention

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to the scandal. Since a scandal usually focuses on one side of the political spectrum (e.g., Democrat Bill Clinton's inappropriate sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky or Republican Donald Trump's attempts to thwart a government investigation into his presidential campaign's dealings with Russia), niche news is more responsible to public attention as they are in the position to provide the "red meat" of scandal coverage to their audience when it is the other side that is in trouble.

Beyond Google searches as a measure of the public agenda, scholars have shown that social media behavior also can influence what news organizations choose to cover. For ten of the twenty-nine issues studied, traditional news coverage led to social media conversation about political issues. For seventeen of the issues studied, social media activity led to mainstream news attention to political issues. The largest effects were for gun control.

One example of how the fact that social media conversation can affect news coverage matters can be found by looking at social media conversations about gun policy in the wake of mass shootings. An ambitious study of Twitter discourse about fifty-nine mass shootings from 2012 to 2014, led by Yini Zhang, highlighted the importance of social discussions about major issues. Zhang and her colleagues found that tweets about *thoughts and prayers* immediately follow mass shootings. There is typically conversation about gun control that persists for a few days as well. Importantly, tweets about increased gun rights dominate social media coverage for *forty* days after each shooting.[44] Future research is seeking to understand whether the frames used in social media conversation have any relationship with the frames used in news coverage of the same issue.

The Future of News

Legacy News Adapting

The increasingly fragmented media environment, albeit with traditional powerhouses still demanding a great deal of attention, is the major story of the past two decades of mass communication research. While widely mocked when awarding the "Person of the Year" to You in 2006, the focus on individual content creators did not go far enough in announcing the changes coming to global communication. Personalized mass media is here.

Traditional media are modernizing. Their power has been meaningfully reduced, but they still control a nontrivial portion of the most popular news production and distribution outlets. Technology has made it far easier to do much more traditional reporting. Enormous, searchable databases now hold exabytes of data, making computer-assisted reporting easier and more immediate. The distribution of news has flattened as well.

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Local newspaper websites can stream live video of something happening halfway across the world. Broadband technology has reduced delays in when news is shared with the audience. As technological changes help reporters do their jobs, they also can cost some reporters their jobs. Newsrooms are shrinking and reporters who hold onto their jobs are being asked to write more stories across more platforms while also maintaining an active social media presence.

Meanwhile, traditional media also remain under attack. Newspapers, local broadcast stations, and cable television are all competing with what the web can provide. In addition to competing with a new slate of hungry and nimble content providers, traditional sources are also competing with the explosion of streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, and Roku—all of whom provide scores of binge-worthy entertainment options with a few simple clicks. While traditional media have maintained much of their power, local news has been suffering. The growth of *news deserts*—communities without dedicated local media coverage, usually due to newspaper closures—are associated with increased polarization, lower political knowledge about one's own representatives, and the further nationalization of political news.[45]

Technology and the Truth

A major element of news' future is likely to be wrapped up in deciding what is true. Over the past decade and a half, fact-checking journalism has exploded. Digital-only sites like Politifact and FactCheck.org hold equal or greater prominence to *The Washington Post*'s fact-checker in the United States. The International Fact-Checking Network now certifies fact-checking organizations across the globe based upon the frequency of fact-checks organizations produce, how transparent they are about their funding, reporters, fact-checking process, political activism, and corrections policies. Rather than reporting claims from competing political perspectives and *leaving it there* before the commercial break, fact-checking organizations directly tell their audience whether claims newsworthy people make are true.

Technological advances are making it easier for people to engage in *deep fakes*, which use artificial intelligence to combine images and video from one or more sources to make it look like evidence of another source engaging in that rhetoric (imagine one of the authors of this text recording themself saying that the Minnesota Vikings are the greatest franchise in NFL history, but using deep fake technology to make it look like Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers was saying it . . .). As deep fake technology improves, it is likely that it will be used to try and embarrass political enemies in campaigns and other contexts. News organizations will

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be on the front lines of helping citizens determine what is real and what is not. It is not hard to imagine fake video potentially derailing a major political campaign, nor is it hard to imagine real video of nefarious activities passed off as a deep fake (e.g. Anthony Weiner initially claimed the lewd photos he shared were pictures that were stolen and altered).

More Interactivity

It is no secret that information flow is no longer one-directional. Digital media is interactive and is likely to remain so. Even traditional outlets are now encouraging feedback from their audience. Beyond how interactivity affects the news, the internet has been used as an effective tool to drive support and fundraising for a variety of causes. Political candidates raise $25 to $50 at a time from hundreds of thousands of web donors.

Interactivity also affects how people experience the news and newsworthy events. Second screening political news coverage has been shown to influence political participation. In particular, during the 2016 presidential campaign, those who second screened newscasts and had positive attitudes about Donald Trump were more likely to report engaging in political participation than second screeners who did not like Trump.[46] In a study examining second screening and the American and French presidential debates in 2012, political party–associated Twitter accounts helped shape discussion of the debates in real time, moving the spin room from backstage onto social media. In France and the United States, political and media elite accounts were heavily retweeted. In the United States, humorous tweets—such as those seeking to produce memes—also received a boatload of attention on Twitter.[47]

From Research to Real Life

How is an understanding of news models, journalistic norms, journalists' backgrounds and beliefs, and market forces and the news relevant to your life? First, understanding journalistic routines and models of newsmaking can help you understand why stories you encounter in the news media look the way that they do. More importantly, it can help you think about how you might want to pitch stories to reporters to get them interested in a topic that is personally important to you. Understanding elements of newsworthiness and how the beat system works can make you a more effective communicator with reporters that you are trying to get to cover a story.

Second, understanding who journalists are and how they approach their job can help you prepare for interviews you or the people you work

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with, represent, or are promoting will have. What kinds of things journalists are likely to ask about can be more accurately predicted by understanding the content of this chapter.

Third, for those of you looking to disrupt the system—it is crucial to understand what you are seeking to upend. What routines and norms would you want journalists to keep in the media company you might wish to start? Which ones would you jettison? What would you want to replace them with so that your own vision for a modern journalism might be reached?

In other words, understanding how the news is made will make you a more skillful user of the news and a more effective advocate during the times that you want to shape how a particular event is understood by reporters and their audience.

Conclusion

Despite a rapidly changing information ecology, a great deal of what becomes the news continues to be shaped by long-standing journalistic norms and organizational routines. Who reports the news that is seen by the most people, who gets covered, and what range of views are given the most attention have not changed at the rate many early adopters of the web predicted. Of course, there are now myriad alternatives to legacy media available for people. These sources serve a variety of needs from demographic representation to deep concerns with particular social problems. On the one hand, the media ecology is fragmenting. On the other hand, media power continues to be concentrated in a relatively small set of conglomerates.

News is shaped by all of these factors and more—including the demographic make-up of those reporting the news, audience demands and interactivity, and market forces. There is no singular reason for why the news is the way it is. That fact is one reason it is so difficult to change.

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DIY Research

Kathleen Searles, Louisiana State University

Searles, K., & Banda, K. (forthcoming). But her emails! How journalistic preferences shaped election coverage in 2016. *Journalism*. Online First.

Kathleen Searles is a political communication professor in the Department of Political Science and the Manship School of Mass Communication at

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Louisiana State University. Searles has published more than thirty academic journal articles, many of which are cited in this book, examining issues ranging from how journalists cover politics to how various communication devices affect how we pay attention to the news to how campaigns use emotional appeals in advertising. She is an editorial board member of the terrific site #WomenAlsoKnowStuff, which makes it easier for journalists and scholars to locate women experts in political science to cite in research and quote in news stories. Her article, written with Kevin Banda—a political science professor at Texas Tech University who studies how candidates interact, campaign advertising, and the influence of partisan polarization on public opinion—examines coverage of the 2016 presidential election to understand how journalists prioritize newsworthy information. The article is new, innovative, and sure to be influential for political communication scholars, and, hopefully, journalists, in the years to come. Our Q&A with Searles, conducted over email, is below:

Wagner and Perryman: In an election season where the stories that focused on qualifications, experience, and ideas all favored Hillary Clinton, what does your research show were the reasons why coverage, in your words, ended up with a "balance of news stories that favored Trump"?

Searles: In this article we wanted to better understand the *preferences* of journalists, in other words, beyond picking and choosing stories, how do journalists rank-order the stories they cover? To that end, we compared the relative volume of three types of news stories for each of the two major party candidates during the 2016 US presidential election—horse race, issue, and scandal. Unsurprisingly, we found that media outlets were more likely to cover the horse race for both Trump and Clinton, suggesting an overall journalistic preference for such stories. However, we also found that media outlets were disproportionately more likely to cover Clinton's scandals relative to Trump's scandals. We conclude that, inasmuch as scandal coverage is not positive for candidates, an overall balance of stories that emphasized Clinton scandals may have inadvertently favored Trump.

Wagner and Perryman: What are some of the major questions you were left with about how journalists prioritize their work after wrapping up this research article?

Searles: The model we pose of *rational journalistic preferences* proved explanatory in an American presidential election context. However, in ideal circumstances we could test this same model for other election years, for other election types (e.g., gubernatorial, state), and in other countries. Our results

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(Continued)

also bring up more normative questions regarding how news outlets invest in scandal coverage. While we theorize (and the data support) that media outlets assign resources to frontrunners because such an investment allows them to economize with limited budgets, in 2016, this means that two major party candidates—both plagued by scandal—received different coverage. How news organizations can avoid such issues in the future remains an open question.

Wagner and Perryman: What kinds of things could students interested in your work do on their own to try and advance knowledge in this area in a small-scale way?

Searles: Sponsored by the Shorenstein Center, Dr. Thomas Patterson has produced wonderful reports on media coverage of the 2016 presidential election that are publicly available and written for a lay audience (authors' note: we rely on this data for much of our discussion of the 2016 election in Chapter 9). Students can also use the model we pose as a jumping-off point for thinking about other subject areas they find of interest that also may be shaped by journalistic preference, for example, science coverage or crime coverage. A cautionary note: This model does not dictate that journalists always behave rationally (none of us do!) but gives us a framework for generating predictions given complex circumstances. Once you think of it that way, the possibilities are seemingly endless.

Wagner and Perryman: What is your advice for students assigned to group projects who are coauthoring research papers for their class?

Searles: First, find a subject matter that interests you and second, think through the *how* you would test a possible research question. There are many projects we would like to do (this is true for all of us!), but there isn't available data, or we don't have the right skill sets to test that question. In other words, balance the needs of your intellectual curiosity against the constraints of the task!

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How Can I Help?

Rosario Dominguez, Univision Chicago

A child of immigrants to the United States, Rosario Dominguez is a reporter for Univision Chicago. Earlier in her career, she served as the David Maraniss

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Fellow at the *Capital Times* newspaper in Madison, WI, an intern at CNN En Español, and a television reporter at CBS 31 (WMBD-TV) in Peoria, IL. A bilingual journalist with print and online experience, Dominguez now tells stories in English and Spanish for television news audiences. We interviewed Dominguez over email.

Wagner and Perryman: What drew you to broadcast journalism as a career?

Dominguez: Watching Spanish news was a daily routine for my family and I while I was growing up in Chicago. I always enjoyed being informed and staying up to date with current events. While I was pursuing my undergraduate degree (Dominguez later earned a MA degree in Journalism), I learned about storytelling through video and found myself producing short videos about my Mexican community, to a predominantly white classroom. My passion for video and storytelling seemed to draw me to broadcast journalism.

Wagner and Perryman: How did you get your internship at CNN En Español? What should students expect to do on internships?

Dominguez: I applied to multiple internship positions at CNN without really believing I would get it. I had met a CNN recruiter at a conference. I followed up with her to let her know I had applied. It is still unclear to me if she had an influence, but I believe networking is very important for landing an internship like this one. Students should expect to have to push to do more than shadow or sit on a desk and do minimal work. Use this time to meet as many people as you can and work hard to do more than what they ask you for.

Wagner and Perryman: What are your favorite stories to tell?

Dominguez: My favorite stories to tell are of those who are in the margins, whose story is not often told. I love stories that focus on humans and the impact they are making. I also enjoy telling stories that help break stereotypes and barriers. Most importantly, I like to inform my audience of people or events going on, that they otherwise wouldn't hear from because they are not part of their world.

Wagner and Perryman: What are the similarities and differences involved in reporting a TV story in Spanish as compared to one in English?

Dominguez: The news-gathering phase of reporting in Spanish and English is basically the same. A main difference is that a story has to be modified depending on the audience. Some sound bites can be more relevant for a Spanish-speaking audience than for an English-speaking audience.

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Challenges come when you have written the script in one language and have to translate it. It is a process that can take time to produce accurately. Often times, news managers don't understand how time consuming it can be. They are treated as one single story when in reality, it's two separate stories.

Wagner and Perryman: What advice do you have for students looking to have a career in TV news?

Dominguez: Set foot in a newsroom as soon as you can whether it's an internship or part-time job. This will help you see what it entails, and you will know if this is really something you want to pursue. Work on a video reel showcasing your on-air presence and reporting skills because it's what will help you land a job. Most importantly, build a strong support network with mentors and family members and always take care of yourself no matter what!

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