

Everyday News, Newsworkers, and Professional Journalism

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Journalists have no monopoly on gathering and reporting new information; we all do so every day as we report our latest news to family members, friends, coworkers, and others. Such everyday news probably constitutes an overwhelming majority of the news we receive from day to day, and the everyday newsworkers who supply it play vital roles in society. Comparing them with professional journalists suggests some similarities and even more differences, offers some lessons for professional journalism, and represents a fascinating research site for students of the news media.

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If journalism is defined as the gathering and reporting of new information to an audience, then we are all journalists, for we devote much of our everyday conversation to transmitting new information to family, friends, fellow workers, and other audiences. We tell our spouses/partners what we did at work today and what new chores our bosses have imposed on us. But we also ask our spouses about their work day, and we want our children to tell us what they learned at school today. Friends offer new ideas about a weekend get-together, neighbors pass along the latest block gossip, and the area's lawn care opinion leader reports on the newest lawn product she saw advertised on late-night television (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). These observations suggest a distinction between *everyday news* and *journalistic news*, and between everyday newsworkers (ENs hereafter)¹ and professional journalists.²

Newsworker is not an entirely accurate term, because everyday newswork is not considered work and ENs are not aware they are doing newswork. (That, incidentally, also goes for professional journalists when they go home and exchange the day's news with their families.) But then everyday newswork does not even feel like work because it is so well integrated into everyday conversation.

Everyday news serves many purposes, but two seem to be primary. One is to facilitate and enhance everyday life, thereby assuring the continuation of social life. Parents tell

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I am grateful for comments on an earlier version by William Gamson, Douglas Maynard, Emmanuel Schegloff, Michael Schudson, and Barbie Zelizer. This article was inspired by Lemann's critique of citizen journalists (Lemann, 2006), which reminded me of never undertaken research in Levittown, New Jersey, 50 years ago of how the Levittowners gathered and reported block, neighborhood, and community and other news to each other.

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each other new information about their children's behavior; friends offer analyses of shared events that enable people to meet their social obligations; coworkers pass on news about another colleague's illness. Listen sometime to loud cellphone conversations on campus, for examples for students exchange information or rumors about questions likely to be on the next test and the latest news about a member of the opposite sex with whom they are or would like to be involved.

A second type of everyday news is about nonconforming behavior; how bosses, fellow workers, friends, or neighbors have recently broken rules or violated moral norms.³ When the news is about rulebreakers or norm violators who are directly or indirectly connected to the news audience's networks, the news is likely to be important; when the newsmakers are strangers or celebrities whose behavior does not affect the audience directly, the news is interesting and possibly titillating. However, if Durkheim is right that all news about rule breaking and norm violation restates and relegitimizes rules and norms, then even titillating news may sometimes be important.

Until the invention of the mail, the telegram, and the telephone, most everyday news was delivered face to face. Today it is reported on much faster platforms, for example e-mail, cell phones, and IM. In fact, email and cell phones have become essential in everyday work and to the functioning of the economy and, sometimes, the community (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). These platforms have also increased the amount of everyday news; for example, cell phones make it possible for people to send regular news bulletins about when they will arrive for dinner.

Now, everyday news is appearing on the Internet. Blogs, listserves, streaming video sites, and others enable ENs to report to physically and socially distant audiences heretofore reached only by professional journalists. "Sponsored" Web sites are reserved for new information among buyers and sellers, but others allow ENs to offer news and commentary about every problem, dilemma, and topic ever reported over the picket fence, around the cracker barrel, by the water cooler, and at the Xerox machine. Although EN blogs vastly outnumber those of professionals, the latter's blogs are now and will probably always be the best known and most often "hit."

Similarities

Everyday and professional news are similar in a number of ways. Both exist to enable people to monitor their environments, in Schudson's apt terminology, looking for changes to which they have to adjust as well as threats and dangers.⁴ In addition, both supply raw material for the chit-chat that keeps social life lubricated.

Like professionals, ENs are supplying news to a regular audience; usually, stories about what happened at work on a given day are exchanged about the same time every day. Likewise, phone calls, e-mails, and other digital technologies allow ENs to resort to bulletins to report breaking news.

Consequently, everyday newswork is virtually as structured as the professional kind. Both operate with criteria of newsworthiness, distinguish between fresh and stale news, and whenever possible begin with a lead story expected to attract the audience's attention. Like professionals, ENs have to remain aware of how much everyday news to report before audiences' eyes glaze over.

Even story structure seems to be similar. ENs also frequently begin with hooks, although they can usually do without the strong ones needed by journalists who are reporting the news to an immense number of strangers. ENs may skip some of the five Ws, but their presentations follow the rest of the inverted pyramid.⁵ However, their audiences

throw out clues about when to stop that professionals must do without. ENs' audiences are also less tolerant of the truisms with which TV reporters often end their stand-uppers.

Both kinds of news are gendered and age graded.⁶ The news exchanged at coffee klatsches differs from that in men's clubs and wherever men and women socialize separately, including at parties. But then newspaper sections, magazines, and now even some cable channels and many Web sites are gendered.

Age grading is more complicated. Most professional journalism is not highly age graded, which is surprising in part because older people are journalism's most loyal customers. We know little about what kind of news is exchanged by children, but they often seem unable (as well as unwilling) to supply everyday news that adults want from them. That helps to explain why they often report to adults that nothing has happened today. However, facing different threats and dangers than adults may affect their monitoring behavior and thus the everyday news they consider relevant.

Adolescents and young adults apparently need more and more quickly delivered everyday news than adults. Their identities and status positions are still in flux, and their everyday news supplies part of the evidence and assurance they need. As a result, they cannot wait till the end of the day to find out about the activities of peers, friends, and enemies and to disseminate their own newsworthy activities to them.

However, young people do not seem to exhibit much interest in journalistic news, other than what is supplied in teen platforms. This should not be surprising; adult society has little use for them other than to do adult bidding, even after they are old enough to vote. Consequently, the adult news reported by professional journalists is rarely relevant to their own lives.

Differences

Nonetheless, the differences between everyday newswork and professional journalism far outnumber the similarities. To begin with, a reasonably strict division of labor exists between them. For the most part, ENs supply new information about people's immediate physical environments, while professionals report about more distant ones.

ENs and journalists also report about different social environments. ENs cover the informally organized parts of society, the "private" worlds of family, friends, compatible neighbors, work colleagues, and the like as well as the informal networks, cliques, and clubs in which they come together. Professional journalists mainly cover the formally organized or "public" world: the offices, factories, firms, public and private agencies, and other bureaucratically and politically structured organizations—local, state, national, and international. However, much professional news is actually about elite parts of society from which the news audience is excluded.⁷

Many people other than elites try to avoid the impersonal and the formal structures of the public world whenever possible. They work in it because that's where their jobs are, but they work there to pay for their lives in the private worlds in which they are socially and emotionally invested.

Consequently, people are more involved in the news they get from ENs than from journalists, unless they have a personal need for what they get from the news media. Partly as a result, journalists try to leaven "hard" news with service news, about health or homemaking for example, that is useful in everyday life and "human interest" stories, which are often more dramatic examples of those told by ENs. Even the most unneighborly neighbors pay attention to ENs when a local child is kidnapped, one reason why tabloids and cable television devote so much time to such stories.⁸

The ENs' audience differs from journalists' in other ways. For example, it is usually captive, and walking away from a neighbor eager to report gossip is harder than turning the newspaper page, switching channels, or clicking on a different Web site.

There are other differences between the two kinds of news. ENs report more autobiographical and biographical information than professional journalists, even though they update the biographies of the powerful on a daily, or now instantaneous, basis. Everyday news lacks fact checkers and operates with few standards and even fewer taboos. Thus, ENs can rely on anonymous sources and unsourced stories, report rumors, and pass on libelous and slanderous information. They can also mix facts and opinions without making the distinction, but ENs who offer only opinion are not very popular. If they turn into pundits, they risk being shunned as opinionated.

ENs operate without formal news organizations, except during disasters or family crises, when ad hoc news bureaus are created and support group members may turn into temporary ENs. Nevertheless, most communities, organizations, and networks have a grapevine along which everyday news travels when it is not delivered in person. When the grapevine connects with other grapevines it does not normally reach, the news it transmits becomes "word of mouth," which may be the largest and most influential news medium in every society.⁹

Lacking news organizations, ENs are not hierarchically organized and, as a result, benefit from more egalitarian working conditions than professional journalists. They also do without editors and producers, although sometimes spouses/partners, other relatives, and close friends edit each other or offer advice about the desirability of self-censorship. ENs can, however, be classified as general and beat reporters, the latter being the local experts on the various subjects that are important in everyday life.

Implications for Professional Journalism

That professional journalists do not have a monopoly on news should not be surprising, for probably every profession is accompanied by—and in competition with—its equivalent of everyday news and newswriters. Doctors and pharmacists must compete with home remedies; professional sociology exists alongside so-called "folk sociology" that supplies the ideas, generalizations, strategies, and tactics that enable people to navigate private and public worlds.¹⁰

Some professions may even benefit from the existence of folkish equivalents; doctors are often called in to undo the damage caused by home remedies, and professional plumbers and electricians are called in to repair the work of amateur plumbers and electricians. Professional journalists sometimes perform the same repair function; they can correct rumors and put an end to panics generated by fearful ENs and their audiences.

Still, folk equivalents can teach professionals some lessons, too. One is the realization that ENs provide most of the news that people obtain every day. Professional journalists supply only a small share; consequently, they must understand that their ability to reach and inform their audience, other than "news buffs," is more limited than they would like to believe.

However, when professionals report news that the audience deems essential to its everyday life, they can suddenly become very important. Thus, if journalists knew more about what their audiences consider essential about the public worlds they cover, they could probably get a better handle on what journalistic news these audiences want or are ready to accept. Otherwise, journalism will have to settle for the limited task that enables the news audience to "keep up" with what is happening in the country and the world.

Journalists may perhaps find other lessons in ENs' communicative success. Although the EN's task is far easier than that of the journalist, perhaps EN story-telling techniques can offer clues to professionals. The failure of TV "happy talk" suggests that journalists should not be conversationalists, but other features of everyday news reporting may be more relevant.

For example, journalists can be more sensitive to exactly how people use medical and other service news in everyday life and make these stories even more useful rather than depreciating them as "soft news." If such sensitivity could help journalists make political and related hard news more audience-friendly, they might be able to play a greater role in enhancing democracy.

Implications for Research

I need not spell out the research implications. This article reports the existence of a world-wide news medium that needs to be better understood and then compared with the professional news media to which mass communication researchers have so far limited themselves almost entirely.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Douglas Maynard (2003) for emphasizing their everydayness. They could also be called *amateur newswriters*, but they would need to be distinguished from *amateur journalists*, who seek to put the print, pictorial, and video news they gather on the Internet or, better still, sell it to the news media. These amateurs are currently labeled *citizen journalists*, a term I would reserve for people supplying news about the civic and political activities of citizens, if only to demarcate them from professional journalists who report on professional politicians but rarely pay attention to citizens between elections.

2. Remember that journalists are so called because they supply news to "journals," even if these are today electronic and digital as well as print.

3. People known as "gossips" occupy a significant even if often disparaged beat on the news staffs of everyday life.

4. We are still learning that all living beings, flora as well as fauna, monitor their environments and thus carry out everyday newswork as well.

5. Since ENs have existed since the start of human groups, they presumably originally invented the story structure that journalists use today. Empirical researchers will have to determine whether and how much today's ENs and journalists imitate each other. Although organized crime members are said to have modeled some of their behavior on the *Godfather* movies, I have never heard an EN imitate one of the well-known network TV anchorpersons.

6. Empirical research is needed to discover whether everyday newswork varies with class, but on first glance class-mass distinctions are not obvious. Perhaps the gossip of lower socioeconomic orders is closer to the tabloid style than that of the higher ones, and people pursuing professional careers may talk shop, or a different kind of shop, more often than those holding manual and non-manual jobs.

7. Nonetheless, journalists get a good deal of their information from the informal or private-world-like groups and networks that exist inside and alongside formal or public-world structures. These are created to make work more efficient and working conditions more pleasant, and to monitor the formal structure for dangers and threats. Investigative reporters look for such groups because they usually know when legal and moral corners have been cut, providing them with raw material for exposés.

8. The Pew Research Center's News Interest Index (<http://people-press.org/nii/>) reports the news stories that poll respondents indicate they have followed "very closely." The index shows that

the largest proportion report stories that affect them or people like them, either disasters or crisis-creating events in everyday life. For example, of the 43 stories that have been followed very closely by at least 60% of respondents since 1986 when the index began, 19 are about disasters such as terrorist attacks, earthquakes, hurricanes, and school shootings; another 12 are about crises, generally those involving high or rising gasoline and oil prices. The *Challenger* disaster has been No. 1 on the list since it took place in 1988. The 1987 story of a little Texas girl who fell into a well was formerly among the top 5, but in the years since 9/11 it has dropped to No. 14; 9/11 itself ranks sixth.

9. As digital platforms become more widely used, a new term will be needed for word of mouth.

10. Sociologists must also compete with popular sociology, a journalistic framing and mixing of folk and professional sociology.

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