

Multiperspectival news revisited: Journalism and representative democracy¹

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Abstract

Thirty years ago, I published an ethnographic study of four mainstream national news organizations entitled *Deciding What's News* (Gans, 2004 [1979]). In a final chapter devoted to news policy, I urged that the news become more multiperspectival, that national news depend less on top down news from high level government and other official and authoritative sources. Instead, the news media should do more reporting from and about other levels and sectors of society and how these see and interpret the country and its problems.

The mainstream news media as well as the economy and polity in which the news media are embedded have changed over the past decades and the arrival of the internet offers a chance to add different kinds of news. These changes justify a revisit to multiperspectival news which focuses particularly on the journalists' role in representative democracy.

Keywords

journalism, multiperspectival news, news media, public sphere, representation, representative democracy

The notion of multiperspectival news is grounded on the concept of perspectives (Mannheim, 1936), which argues that people's positions and roles in society shape how they see that society. That, in turn, should affect what news they need and want about it.

Journalists and the news media also 'see' the country from their position in society, which they express in and with their standards of newsworthiness. They are also guided by a set of organizational preconditions which include, among others, working for profit-seeking firms and having to address a large, often minimally informed and not very interested audience with a limited amount of time or space to report the news.

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These preconditions require compressing and simplifying the news journalists gather, emphasizing the conflict and drama in specific events to attract that audience, and attempting to remain neutral about controversial topics, among others. Being well-educated upper-middle-class professionals employed by private enterprise also affects their perspective, incentivizing them to emphasize the doings and misdoings of government decision makers.

I concluded that if some of these preconditions were changed, journalists could and should look at society from other perspectives. However, I also pointed out that multiperspectivism was merely a label for a conception of alternative news and suggested increased attention to five types of news:

- 1 *National, less Washington centered news*: adding stories about economic and other institutions to the journalists' preoccupation with electoral politics.
- 2 *Bottom-up news*: more stories on how ordinary people are affected by the decisions and acts of high government officials and the rest of the political elite who are journalism's major sources. Bottom-up news would also report how such people viewed and interpreted these elite decisions and acts.
- 3 *Output news*: on how public and private policies and programs have worked out in practice for intended beneficiaries and others.
- 4 *Representative news*: reportage on the activities and opinions of ordinary Americans in all their diversity.
- 5 *Service news*: providing the news audience with personally relevant and helpful information about the doings of government agencies and other institutions.

Today's news media do a better job on all five of the kinds of news I discussed, in part because there are more news media, many competing with slightly different news fare. The training of journalists has improved and media critics have increased in number, as has the attention paid to their criticism. A more extensive and intensive national sensitivity to gender, racial, religious and class bias has rubbed off as well, though the national standards of unbiased news are rising concurrently. Now the mainstream news media are even becoming aware of the role that ideology plays in the political discourse of a highly polarized country.

Further improvement is still needed in all these areas, especially on the part of the news media that targets the general (once called mass) rather than the educated audience. Among other things, journalists need to move further away from being stenographers for public officials, pay less attention to atypical happenings and extreme behavior, and become more analytic and reflexive about topics other than electoral politics. Greater skepticism about conventional wisdoms, stereotypical generalizations and questionable statistics would be desirable as well. A revival of foreign news is more necessary than ever, but it must report on foreign affairs other than just those involving Americans.

However, this revisit will concentrate and expand on the fourth of my quintet: representative news. Indeed, the rest of the article suggests that journalists take on a representational function and that the facts and conclusions they report represent the people they are covering, if and when – and to the extent that – they and their stories allow them to do so as journalists. Journalistic representation does not mean acting as advocates or like

elected officials; it suggests more reporting about the voters, non-voters and other people they cover so that elected officials can learn their views, stands and needs. They should do so for two reasons.

First, representative democracy in America is performing more poorly than ever these days and seems unlikely to change soon. Both the House and Senate must represent too many and increasingly diverse constituents and both have become polarized politically in recent decades as the Republicans have turned into an ideologically driven party. The representatives in both houses are further polarized because they must be responsive not only to their constituents but also to their campaign funders, lobbyists and other economic and political power holders.

At times, the people who elect them have the lowest priority, and those who lack the income, education or interest group affiliation to make themselves heard are not represented at all. In fact, America is an upscale democracy, in which those citizens and organizations with the time, income, knowledge and power to make their voices heard are far more effectively represented than the rest of the population.

The Senate suffers additional shortcomings, particularly because senators from small states have as much and sometimes more power than their colleagues from large states (Levinson, 2006). In a polity in which one person is supposed to have one vote, voters in the larger states are represented particularly poorly. The 81 million Californians, New Yorkers and Texans elect the same number of senators as the fewer than two million people living in North Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming.

Second, journalists pride themselves on being a bulwark for democracy, but in fact can do very little for it (Gans, 2003, 2010). Most news media seek only to enable the audience to keep up with the latest events of national significance and those who select the news do not take the bulwark function into account. Consequently, the news media do not provide enough politically relevant information for citizens who want to participate in the political process. Most news stories do not even offer sufficient detail to enable citizens to inform themselves politically.

Moreover, while journalists also seek to speak truth to power, power does not often have to listen. Politics is about the distribution of power, resources and other benefits and costs and with notable exceptions the information supplied by the news plays a minor role in the distribution process. Many of the notable exceptions are the result of investigative reporting, but it is mostly intended to make politics cleaner, more honest and more efficient. There are, however, other political – and non-political – shortcomings not often addressed by investigative reporting, such as systemic injustice, lack of accountability, inequalities of power, and the several inadequacies of bureaucracies, public and commercial.

Both the shortcomings of the polity and the limits on journalists' ability to be bulwarks suggest a somewhat different approach to the role journalists should play in American democracy.

Journalists as representatives

I use the term representation metaphorically, for journalists are not elected to represent anyone, not even their audiences. As detached or neutral observers, they cannot take

on deliberate political roles and thus cannot normally write or talk on behalf of the people they cover or to whom they supply news. They can, however, represent the people in and beyond the news audience in their reporting and writing, and in two ways.

First, the news media can provide news and other information *about* the various different sectors of the country, especially those not sufficiently spoken for by their elected representatives so that their relevant perspectives, ideas and activities are included in the public discourse. This I describe as *general* representation. Second, the news media can supply news and other information *for* specific sectors of the population – again with emphasis on the now insufficiently spoken for – by supplying them news they need or should need. This I discuss as *targeted* representation.

General representation

As general representatives, the news media – and particularly those serving the non-elite audience – should make sure that over time all the major demographic, geographic and other sectors of the country appear in the news, especially those now not well represented. Such representation should give elected officials – and their fellow Americans – a better sense of the country's diverse populations.

For example, national news needs to reduce its emphasis on the country's Northeast and find more national news elsewhere than at present. The news media should also do more reporting on how the nation, and Washington, look to other parts of the country. This is especially necessary because many elected officials seeking re-election so often run against 'Washington'.

In addition, the news ought to pay more attention to the various sectors of the national economy, from top management of large firms to unskilled workers in small ones – and the effect of that economy on its politics. The underground economy on the other side of the tracks from 'Main Street' should be newsworthy as well. Indeed, the news media should be covering the political economy.

Furthermore, although daily journalism looks for, and has to look for, the atypical and the unusual events, it thereby fails to report the more typical events and people. The run-of-the-mill legislation passed by state and local politicians is usually more significant than the bizarre laws that tend to become newsworthy. If the abnormal is always more newsworthy than the normal, then the criteria of newsworthiness have to be changed.

The news media, especially the electronic ones, do debate the major issues before Congress, but they need to represent more than 'both sides'. Prominent other sides are also newsworthy and so are different points of view among even minor sectors of the population. Ordinary people outside the Beltway and academic experts beyond Ivy League campuses can sometimes offer useful ideas and innovative solutions, as well as perspectives other than those of the party hegemony and ideologues that dominate television and cable news panels. Even the issues that never reach Congress or the Supreme Court ought to be covered, especially when these concern people, organizations and institutions that elected officials overlook.

Targeted representation

Targeted representation ought to offer news designed to reach the now insufficiently reported and represented, the people with different needs and wishes than the general audience, and the invisible sectors of society.

Targeted representation would provide populations of different ages, incomes, occupations, religions, interests and other characteristics with news about the particular institutions and organizations which touch their lives. Government alone carries out an immense number of activities that are of little interest to the general audience but that are significant to many specific audiences. The news media serving such specific audiences would supply stories on generally newsworthy topics but adapted to the needs and perspectives of the targeted audience, as well as a great deal of distinctive news relevant primarily to each target audience.

Targeted news media have been available for a long time, from neighborhood and ethnic newspapers to the print and electronic media for the seekers of gossip, sports, lifestyle and gendered news. There are news media for an endless variety of hobbyists, and newsletters for people with highly specific occupational, political and other interests.

The internet has vastly expanded the amount as well as the diversity of targeted information; whether on the investment opportunities in and politics of countries ignored in mainstream news or the latest tips on planting fruit trees in America's tropical regions. Much of that information is supplied by commercial interests or ordinary people with limited knowledge, and, at times, professionally gathered news is required.

More important, there are also unserved populations, especially among the otherwise unrepresented, even on the web. For example, poor people should have access to news media that might make their survival a little easier. Although they need business news as much as anyone else, stories about the stock market, investment opportunities and changes in tax policy are irrelevant for them. They should have detailed information about national anti-poverty policy or its absence as well as local news about available jobs, helpful welfare agencies, food pantries, emergency clinics, legal service offices, safe neighborhoods and decent low cost housing.

The public sphere and the symbolic arena

One of the prime purposes of general representation is to make sure that as many voices as possible are heard in the public discourse, especially that which shapes the political climate. In addition, the widest range of people and interests ought to be heard or shown figuratively in the public sphere. That sphere needs to be broader than the one originally conceived by Habermas (1989).

As the concept became popular, the public sphere began to resemble a giant public conversation pit occupied mostly by well-informed and well-educated talkers engaged in discussions that are supposed to take place among all citizens of a democracy. Like others (e.g. Schudson, 1997), I am dubious about the amount of literal public conversation taking place, except perhaps on the part of the so-called chattering classes.

Actually the news media are one of the major if not the major content suppliers of the public sphere, and if journalists are to function as representatives, what they contribute to the public sphere should also be representative: a picture of the country that is empirically and otherwise as accurate as possible.

Politicians who must act pragmatically and realistically need such a picture, but so do voters who have to make political decisions and other people who have to make everyday decisions related to the state of the country.

The country's picture should reflect as many agreed on perspectives, and be as free of incorrect facts and generalizations, inaccurate stereotypes, rumor, nostalgia and the like as possible. In reality, this ideal is unachievable, in part because the journalistic input is distorted by the emphasis on authoritative sources and on dramatic stories that foreground atypical events and people.

Moreover, as long as beliefs, interests and stereotypes influence the perception even of largely agreed on facts, many people will refuse to believe or will reject some or all of an accurate and realistic picture. Still, it is worth trying for, if only to keep some avoidable mistakes out of the actions of politicians and other decision makers. If such a picture will also temper the beliefs and viewpoints of people driven by fear, anger or fantasy, so much the better.

Although the public sphere may fit the democracies of Western Europe, I find it more useful, in America, to think of that sphere as a symbolic arena, a stage or set of public stages open to anyone wanting to 'perform' news, opinion, or additions and corrections to the picture of the country in most people's heads. Like the circus arena, it is also constantly changing, with new ideas, facts, opinions and other symbolic material appearing all the time. As everything else in modern society, it is a contested site with people struggling not only to appear on the center stage, but also to shape that part of the overall picture of the country in which they are depicted.

Conversation takes place as well, but mostly in the seats, for the stages are, as already noted, saturated by the news media. The symbolic arena also accommodates the marketplace for ideas, but idea marketers vary in economic and cultural power, and arenas have center and secondary stages that place marketers on the basis of their power.

The main representational function of the symbolic arena is to assist people in making sense of their economy, polity – and society. Consequently, the news media should aim for, as Robert Hutchins' Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947: 26) already put it, 'the projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in society'.

Implementing representation with digital news

The arrival of the internet and its varieties of websites has already expanded all imaginable kinds of news fare, and presumably future technological and other innovations will add to that expansion. Equally important, the scarcity of space and time that has always restricted the print and electronic news media is likely to become a thing of the past.

Audience attention spans for the news will continue to be bounded; the audiences with greater interest in the news and longer attention spans will be able to turn to targeted news. The end of space-time scarcity enables journalists to rethink and expand the criteria for newsworthiness, especially for such audiences. Only funds will continue to be scarce.

However, if the web is to be an effective communication medium, it will somehow have to be reorganized as a mass medium, with the relatively small numbers of websites that attract significant proportions of the total audience standing out from the rest. The majority of television viewers look at no more than a dozen of the hundreds of available channels and the majority of website users will presumably act similarly.

Equally important, the web equivalents of newspapers, magazines and programs will have to be separated from the sites that are devoted mainly to individual blogging and commenting. If and when news websites start charging user fees, that separation will probably follow almost automatically. The bloggers and commenters will nurture multi-perspectivism beyond belief and the most widely attended mainstream news websites will have to make the newsworthy nuggets of news and opinions they add available to the general audience.

I assume that at some point all news will be delivered digitally to a machine that comes in various shapes and sizes but combines newspaper, radio, television set, computer, smartphone, e-reader – and who knows what else. If print news media survive, they will do so for a small population of news buffs willing and able to spend the high cost of printing and delivering a sheaf of paper at their front doors.

I also assume some current mainstream news formats will survive whatever the technology, including that of the television network evening news and *USA Today* among those produced for a general audience. Most likely, even in digital form, these and other mainstream news media will be owned and operated by large firms, not very different from the handful of newspaper chains and other large firms that have been supplying national news since early in the 20th century. Whatever the shortcomings of large firms, at least they have funds to pay for as labor intensive an activity as reporting the news.

Moreover, I assume that the basic news paradigm that has driven the national news delivered to the general audience for about a century will continue relatively unchanged. Its digital incarnation may contain more opinion, which is cheap to produce and can add to the news when time or space is no longer as limited as it is in the electronic and print news media.

However, as long as the largest proportion of the news audience consists of people who want to keep up with news mainly to monitor the social and other environments beyond those they can monitor personally, top-down event-disaster-and-conflict driven news fare will probably survive. It will also be the prime vehicle of general representation and will send its portrait of America to center stage in the symbolic arena.

Other targeted news

Targeted representation should flower on the internet, for what I described as a second tier of smaller, lower cost news media in my 1979 discussion will be much more easily and cheaply produced on websites. The success of the Huffington Post and similar websites suggest that others that target ‘news buffs’ may be established. Highly educated buffs who want detailed news about individual subjects are a logical possibility, at least if they need the kind of information collected by journalists rather than only the websites being established by individual experts.

Yet other targeted websites might be established for audiences with occupationally driven interests in the news, such as Politico, as well as the digital trade publications and

newsletters for business people and professionals already in existence. What about a website that constantly delivers national news relevant for immediate use in sociology, economics, communications and other courses?

Many other news websites could be imagined. Some members of the news audience might want to become periodic rather than daily monitors: to obtain the news on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Many people who left the daily news audience in recent decades might then rejoin it.

Another type of website should supply process-centered news to complement conventional event-centered news. Monitors may be best served by event-centered formats, but audiences who seek to understand the country require news not only about the processes driving it, but also the forces and agents that do the driving.

Process news is not daily news and may be cheaper to gather than event driven news, but it would require a more intensely analytic and explanatory journalism than is now practiced, except by some columnists, commentators and journalists writing *ex post facto* books on world-shaking events.

Two types of targeted news websites strike me as particularly necessary if the news media are to be representational. One would supply news to the unknown but probably sizeable number of people who because of age, lack of education and other reasons have trouble comprehending the general news prepared for the mass audience. Such people need news in everyday, almost conversational English, with technical terms fully explained and journalistic shorthand kept to a minimum.

The other type, perhaps the most urgently needed, is citizen news. Its main purpose would be to supply, and to steer citizens to, the information they need to participate politically, especially between elections.

Citizen news sites would additionally report when citizens participate actively and with what effects, including how often they are ignored. These sites can discover how elected representatives do their representative job, and for whom, and how they deal with the different members of their constituencies on a variety of issues. Journalists can also provide more detail than is now available about how lobbyists work and when lobbying is effective and ineffective. This kind of website should pay special attention to lobbies that seek to benefit ordinary citizens in various roles, reporting what citizen lobbies can and cannot do.

In addition, citizen news websites can supplement the data collected by pollsters. They can be multiperspectival by reporting in more detail how the demographic, geographic and other sectors of the population perceive the major issues about which governments have to make decisions. These websites should also try to report about and for the invisible citizenry, the unorganized, unrepresented and often unreachable, thereby at least representing them informationally.

Technology goes only so far, and targeted news websites can only come into being if a sufficiently large audience is available to enable news firms to attract funds from commercial, semi-public and public sources. The funds must be generous enough to hire professionally trained journalists, for whatever the contributions of so called 'citizen journalists', stringers and interns, they are unlikely to supply enough news or to hold an audience on a steady basis.

Needless to say, these kinds of websites are difficult to establish and maintain. For instance, whether targeted news sites would attract enough poor people – and obtain the

needed funds – can be questioned, although they are badly needed to reduce the amount of misinformation that poor people now obtain through mostly oral grapevines. Process-centered news might be too difficult to gather and analyze, at least not without recruiting a highly educated set of specialist journalists, and an audience dominated by academics, other researchers and policy elites.

Issues of implementation

The proposals in this article are currently as unrealistic as those I presented in my 1979 book. The supply of news has always been greater than the audience demand for it. Only the further evolution of the internet and its successors will tell how much of what kind of additional news programming will find an audience. Whether that addition will enable the news media to function as the representatives I have described is also in question.

Some of the proposals require differently trained journalists. They also imply different criteria of newsworthiness, although the large amount of time and space, the speed of dissemination on the web, the mix of news and opinion, among others is already bringing about changes in these criteria.

Other proposals make unreasonable demands on journalists, but they should not be expected to do it all themselves. For one thing, journalists ought not to be required to teach their audiences introductory economics and political science – or sociology. Those courses should long ago have been taught by the schools, beginning in the higher elementary grades and continuing through high school and beyond.

Furthermore, news organizations must be supported and complemented by other professions that gather and report data about society, ranging from the think tanks and other research organizations that Lippman called political observatories (1920), to social scientists and scholars from other disciplines (Schudson, 2010). These should work especially to provide data and other support to journalists responsible for analytic, process and other specialized news. They should also participate, together with pollsters and others, to develop the picture of society that appears in the symbolic arena. Actually, one could argue that researchers ought to have prime responsibility for making sense of society, leaving journalists the reporting tasks for which they have been trained.

Getting researchers and journalists to work together is a daunting task, especially given the many differences between the two professions. However, both would gain from a properly designed division of labor; journalists would enable empirically inclined academics to be more topical, and thus more relevant to the general public, and researchers could help to sharpen the journalists' analytic skills and repertoires.

And who would pay the bills? Today's news media are in economic trouble due to declines both in audiences and advertising. No one knows how many news media will return to economic health, or whether web advertising will ever produce enough income to pay for a labor-intensive enterprise like journalism.

If people really need to know more about their society, the news should be redefined as a public good (Bollinger, 2010; McChesney and Nichols, 2010). Although public goods are usually financed completely by the government, this is inappropriate for the news.

In 1979, I called for a federal Endowment for News, modeled on the Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, particularly to fund innovative journalistic ventures. I

think the Endowment still makes good sense, but a public good needs far more extensive support, from government, non-profit foundations and other sources. Calls for such support are beginning (e.g. Downie and Schudson, 2009; McChesney, 1999) but finding funders and persuading journalists to accept funds other than from advertisers will take time.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the internet has already become an indispensable medium, we are probably still in the early phases of the newest stage in the communication technology and organization, the final outcome of which cannot yet be predicted. The same observation applies to the economy of the news and the profession of journalism – and therefore also to the forms that multiperspectivism should take once the digital age moves towards maturity.

Note

- 1 The idea for this revisit followed my presentation in a Michael Schudson seminar in Columbia University's PhD program in Communication. I am also grateful to Schudson for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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Biographical note

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