Journalists as Interpretive Communities

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☐—*This article suggests that the notion of "profession" may not offer the most fruitful way of examining community among American journalists. It proposes viewing journalists as members of an interpretive community instead, one united by its shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events. The article applies the frame of the interpretive community to journalistic discourse about two events central for American journalists—Watergate and McCarthyism. Journalists have generated collective interpretations of both events by capitalizing on the double temporal position they occupy in regard to them. This situation of "doing double time" allows journalists to interpret an event at the time of its unfolding as well as at the time of its retelling. This suggests that journalists routinely generate shared meaning about journalism by capitalizing on practices overlooked by the frame of the profession, and underscores the need for alternative frames through which to conceptualize journalism in all its complexities.*

WHAT does it take to make a community? Since American journalists were first identified as an upwardly-mobile group, the academy has looked upon reporters as members of a profession or professional collective. Seeing journalism as a profession, however, may have restricted our understanding of journalistic practice, causing us to examine only those dimensions of journalism emphasized by the frame through which we have chosen to view them.

This article suggests an additional way to conceptualize community other than through "the profession." The relevance of journalistic discourse in determining what reporters do, informal contacts among

them, and the centrality of narrative and storytelling, are all dimensions of journalistic practice that are not addressed in general discussions of professions yet help unite reporters. This article thereby suggests an additional frame through which to examine journalism, one that accounts for alternative dimensions of journalists' practice. It suggests that we consider journalism not only as a profession but as an interpretive community, united through its shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events.

This view calls for examining the proliferation of journalistic discourse around key events in the history of news gathering, as a means of understanding the shared past through which journalists make their professional lives meaningful and unite themselves. The article applies the frame of the interpretive community

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to our understanding of two events central to American journalists—Watergate and McCarthyism. In considering how reporters have collectively made sense of both events, it suggests that they not only use discourse to generate meaning about journalism, but they do so to address elements of practice overlooked by the formalized cues of the profession.

THE DOMINANT FRAME: JOURNALISTS AS PROFESSIONALS

Seeing journalism as a profession has long helped us understand how it works. Sociologists view an occupational group as "professional" when it shows certain combinations of skill, autonomy, training and education, testing of competence, organization, codes of conduct, licensing and service orientation (for example, Moore, 1970). "The profession" also provides a body of knowledge that instructs individuals what to do and avoid in any given circumstance (Larson, 1977; Friedson, 1986; Gouldner, 1979). Journalists thereby gain status through their work by acting "professionally" and exhibiting certain predefined traits of a "professional" community. This generates an ideological orientation toward the production of journalistic work that is necessary for journalism to maintain its communal boundaries (Friedson, 1986; Larson, 1977; Johnson, 1977; Janowitz, 1975). As such, the commonality of journalists is determined by a shared frame of reference for doing work.

How does journalism benefit from being called a profession? Since the early 1900s, when ·a scattered and disorganized group of writers was able to consolidate via agreed-upon standards of action (Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978), the profession has given reporters a sense of control over work conditions, wages, and tasks. Journalists' ability to decide what is news has constituted the expertise that distinguishes them from non-reporters. Already by the 1920s, "media professionals had themselves adopted the notion that professionals are more qualified than their audience to determine the audience's own interests and needs" (Tuchman, 1978b, p. 108).

While this idea has been used within media organizations to safeguard against change, loss of control, and possible rebellion (Soloski, 1989), the ideological orientation behind determining such expertise has nonetheless remained the foundation for recognizing journalism as a profession. Being professional has not only generated an aura of authoritativeness based on a specific attitude toward accomplishing work, but has suggested that reporters ought to approach reporting in certain ways —as objective, neutral, balanced chroniclers (Schiller, 1979, 1981). Adopting such an attitude has helped offset the dangers inherent in the subjectivity of reporting at the same time as it has allowed journalists to call themselves professionals (Schudson, 1978).

Although contemporary academics tend to evaluate journalism through the frame of the profession, it is in fact unevenly realized in practice. Various dimensions of journalistic practice, for example, are not addressed in most formal discussions of journalism as a profession. For in-

stance, practicing reporters rarely admit their *usage of constructions of reality,* seen among critical observers as a common way of presenting the news (Goldstein, 1985; Tuchman, 1978a; Schiller, 1979). They instead stress their adherence to notions of objectivity and balance, both of which are suggested by professional codes (Gans, 1979). This raises questions about how and why journalists use professionalism as a way to conceal the constructed nature of their activities. How does "being professional" become a codeword for hiding the elaborate mechanisms by which reality is constructed? The failure to address this common part of newswork has allowed it to flourish uncritically, creating a need for an alternative explanatory frame.

The *informal networking* among reporters has been similarly overlooked in formal discussions of journalism as a profession. Sociologists have found that journalists work via a distinct sense of their own collectivity (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978b; Fishman, 1980; Roshco, 1975; Tunstall, 1971; Roeh, et al., 1980), favoring horizontal over vertical management, and collegial over hierarchical authority (Blau and Meyer, 1956; Tuchman, 1978a; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979). Such informal networking may be as responsible for consolidating journalists into communities as the highly standardized cues of association and interaction that tend to be emphasized in formal analyses. Yet acting in ways that build upon such informal collectivity does not figure in discussions of journalism as a profession. An alternative frame is needed to address the relevance and function of so-called "pack journalism," media pools, briefings, membership in social clubs, and other ways that reporters absorb rules, boundaries, and a sense of appropriateness about their actions without ever actually being informed of them by superiors. How, for instance, does journalistic community emerge through cultural discussion? How do journalists accomplish work by negotiating, discussing, and challenging other journalists? What role does checking regularly with one's colleagues about story ideas or modes of presentation play? How do journalists benefit by recycling stories across media? An alternative frame might address this shared collectivity, by which reporters engage in cultural discussion and argumentation across news organizations.

Practices of *narrative and storytelling* among reporters have been similarly overlooked. While journalists have long discussed among themselves issues connected with narrative and storytelling—questions about "how to tell a news story," distinctions between fact and fiction, stylistic and generic determinants and specific conventions of news presentation (Evans, 1991; "Be It Resolved," 1989/1990; Berryhill, 1983)[1]—admitting to non-reporters a dependence on narrative practice seems to imply a lack of professionalism. Ignoring narrative in discussions of journalism as a profession has generated an ambivalence over narrative practice that has in turn produced scandals around the fact-fiction distinction, such as the Janet Cooke scandal in the early 1980s.[2] Journalists' awkwardness in dealing with discussions of fakery suggests that existing frames for understanding journalism have

not accounted for storytelling practices. An alternative approach might address questions relevant to the centrality of narrative—how journalists have ascribed to themselves the power of interpretation, how certain favored narratives of events are adopted across news organizations, and how narrative has helped reporters neutralize less powerful or cohesive narratives of the same event. A narrative's repetition in the news may have as much to do with connecting journalists with each other as it does with audience comprehension or message relay.

And, finally, journalism simply does not require all the *trappings of professionalism*. Unlike classically-defined professions like medicine or law, where professionals legitimate their actions via socially-recognized paths of training, education, and licensing, these trappings have had only limited relevance for practitioners. Journalists tend to avoid journalism textbooks (Becker, et al., 1987), journalism schools and training programs (Johnstone, et al., 1976; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986), and codes of journalistic behavior. Training is considered instead a "combination of osmosis and fiat," with largely irrelevant codes of ethics and a routine rejection of licensing procedures (Goldstein, 1985, p. 165). Reporters prefer instead the limited credentials issued by the police department, which, in Halberstam's view, function like a "social credit card" (quoted in Rubin, 1978, p. 16). Journalists also are unattracted to professional associations, with the largest—the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi—claiming only 17 percent membership of American journalists (Weaver and

Wilhoit, 1986). This suggests that the trappings of professionalism have not generated a coherent picture of journalism as a profession. Yet we know that journalists function as a community, even if they do not organize solely along lines of the profession.

When viewed through the frame of the profession, the journalistic community does not appear professional. In some cases, in tending to ignore, downplay, or at best remain ambivalent about its trappings, reporters run the risk of being labelled "unsuccessful professionals" and are faulted for promoting "trained incapacity" (Tuchman, 1978b, p. 111). As one research team suggested, "the modern journalist is *of* a profession but not *in* one. . . . [T]he institutional forms of professionalism likely will always elude the journalist" (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986, p. 145). Existing discussions of journalism as a profession thereby offer a restrictive way of explaining journalistic practice and community, with the organization of journalists into professional collectives providing an incomplete picture of how and why journalism works.

This does not mean that the collectivity represented by the profession does not exist among journalists. We can easily recall phrases like "the boys in the bus," "pack journalism," or in the recent view of one woman journalist, "the eyes in the gallery"—all of which signal some shared frame of reference. It does suggest, however, that we need another approach to account for practices other than those offered by formalized views of journalism as a profession. We need a frame that might explain journalism by focusing on how journalists shape meaning about themselves.

THE ALTERNATIVE FRAME: JOURNALISTS AS AN INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

An alternative way of conceptualizing journalistic community can be found by looking beyond journalism and media studies to anthropology, folklore, and literary studies, to the idea of the "interpretive community." Hymes (1980, p. 2) defines the interpretive community as a group united by its shared interpretations of reality. For Fish (1980, p. 171) in literary studies, interpretive communities produce texts and "determine the shape of what is read." Interpretive communities display certain patterns of authority, communication and memory in their dealings with each other (Degh, 1972). They establish conventions that are largely tacit and negotiable as to how community members can "recognize, create, experience, and talk about texts" (Coyle and Lindlof, 1988, p. 2). In some cases, they act as "communities of memory," groups that use shared interpretations over time (Bellah, et al., 1985). These views suggest that communities arise less through rigid indicators of training or education—as indicated by the frame of the profession—and more through the informal associations that build up around shared interpretations.

While the idea of the interpretive community has been most avidly invoked in audience studies, where local understandings of a given text are arrived at differently by different communities (Lindlof, 1987; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984), communicators themselves can be examined as an interpretive community (Zelizer, 1992b). Such a dependence by jour-

nalists on their collective character has its own place in scholarship on journalism. Park's (1940) view of news as a form of knowledge, Carey's (1975) definition of communication as ritual and a shared frame for understanding, O'Brien's (1983) ideas about news as a psuedo-environment, and Schudson's (1988, 1992) studies of how journalists construct knowledge about themselves all suggest the importance of generating meaning through discourse. Journalists as an interpretive community are united through their collective interpretations of key public events. The shared discourse that they produce is thus a marker of how they see themselves as journalists.

Examining journalists as an interpretive community addresses their legitimation through channels other than the cues provided by "the profession." Journalists, in this view, come together by creating stories about their past that they routinely and informally circulate to each other—stories that contain certain constructions of reality, certain kinds of narratives, and certain definitions of appropriate practice. Through channels like informal talks, professional and trade reviews, professional meetings, autobiographies and memoirs, interviews on talk shows and media retrospectives, they create a community through discourse. Viewing journalism as an interpretive community differs substantially from the professional framework and addresses elements of journalistic practice that are central to journalists themselves.

The shared past through which journalists discursively set up and negotiate preferred standards of action hinges on the recycling of stories about certain key events. Journalists

become involved in an ongoing process by which they create a repertoire of past events that is used as a standard for judging contemporary action. By relying on shared interpretations, they build authority for practices not emphasized by traditional views of journalism.

While journalists consolidate themselves as an interpretive community when discussing everyday work—such as covering politics, the police, or stories of conflict of interest—the value of the interpretive community as an analytical frame can best be seen by examining journalistic discourse about key incidents in the annals of journalism. Such targets of interpretation, through which journalists have marked their ascent as professionals, are "hot moments" (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 259), phenomena or events through which a society or culture assesses its own significance. These incidents do not necessarily exist "objectively," but, following de Certeau (1978), are projections of the individuals and groups who give them meaning in discourse. When employed discursively, critical incidents are chosen by people to air, challenge, and negotiate their own boundaries of practice. For instance, contemporary wartime reportage, as seen with the Gulf War, is judged against the experiences of reporting World War II and Vietnam "Reporting a New Kind of War," 1991; Valeriani, 1991; Williams, 1991; Zelizer, 1992a). Discourse about critical incidents offers a way of attending to concerns at issue for the journalistic community, and professional consciousness emerges at least in part around ruptures where the borders of appropriate practice need renegotiation. For contemporary reporters,

such discourse creates standards of professional behavior against which to evaluate daily newswork.

Discourse tends to proliferate when addressing unresolved dimensions of everyday newswork. One such set of practices surrounds the journalist's relation to time. Journalists are constituted (or need to be) in what might be called "double-time" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 297). Journalists constitute themselves not only as the objects of the accounts they give but as the subjects of other accounts that elaborate on their earlier reportage. Thus, while traditional scholarship has examined journalists largely on the basis of their original reportage and not its recollection years later, viewing journalism as an interpretive community accommodates double-time positioning as a necessary given. It offers a way to analyze journalists' authority for events through simultaneous accommodation of two temporal positions, thereby enlarging the boundaries of their collective authority and the community this engenders. These narrativized interpretations of double-time have primarily a local and a durational mode.

Local Mode of Interpretation

Reporters establish themselves as qualified to discuss a certain critical incident through what I call the local mode of interpretation. Here reporters discuss the importance of one target of interpretation from a localized, particularistic viewpoint. This mode is critical for providing reporters with discursive markers that uphold their own professional ideology. Journalists' authority is assumed to derive from their presence at events, from the ideology of eyewitness authenticity. In producing met-

aphors like "eyewitnessing," "watch-dogs," "being there," practices of discovery, or "being on the spot," reporters establish markers that not only set up their presence but also uphold its ideological importance. To borrow from Bhabha (1990, p. 297), reporters assume the role of "peda-gogical objects"—"giving the dis-course an authority that is based on the pre-given historical event."

The local mode of discourse can be either positive or negative. Although journalists might and do discuss ini-tially the pros and cons of any given change in their standards of prac-tice, they quickly reach consensus about the meaning of such change. Already at the time of occurrence, then, the event is filtered for its value in setting up and maintaining stan-dards of action. Discourse is highly emulatory in cases of professional ac-complishment. In a sense, reporters acquiesce to the critical incident mak-ing headlines. They discuss the inci-dent in a variety of news formats, claim to copy the practice it embod-ies, and emulate the reporters re-sponsible for publicizing the prac-tice. Awards and prizes abound. References to the critical incident ap-pear in trade magazines and become the topic of professional meetings. Journalists become highly strategic about setting themselves up in con-junction with the event and in consol-idating their own association. In cases of professional failure, the local mode of discourse displays less of these im-itative practices and there are no prizes or awards. But this does not mean the incident is ignored. Rather, reporters set themselves up in a miti-gated association with the event— sometimes emphasizing how they ob-served what was going on but did not

participate, or referencing other journalists who were involved, or sim-ply marking out their own member-ship in the community. The incident is discussed at professional meetings and trade reviews, but not as a marker of positive accomplishment.

Regardless of how positively the event is initially encoded, the local mode of discourse displays an initial tightness of the interpretive commu-nity. Because it is predictable and in keeping with journalists' explicit claims about practice, the local mode of discourse helps consolidate the boundaries of journalists as an inter-pretive community. Association, pres-ence, and "being there" are instru-mental in making larger authoritative claims that stretch across time. For this reason, change—as embodied by the event—is either embraced and accepted, or denied and rejected, but it is treated discursively in a unitary fashion. As events happen, journal-ists tend to interpret them unidimen-sionally because they see them collec-tively moving the community in one way or another. This underscores the instrumentality of discourse in maintaining collective boundaries.

Durational Mode of Interpretation

What is not yet explicit is how re-porters use the authority of local dis-course to transport themselves to a second interpretive mode—the dura-tional. Reporters establish a second kind of cultural authority that allows them to compensate for not being there. In assessing events that oc-curred many years preceding their incorporation into discourse, journal-ists position the critical incident within a larger temporal continuum. Here we see reporters as recollec-

tors, as historians. Often reporters use the authority culled from their local placement within the event to expound on its more general significance. Reporters create their own history of journalism by making each critical incident representative of some greater journalistic dilemma or practice.

In this view, the reporting of Vietnam becomes part of a larger discourse about war reportage. Covering the Kennedy assassination becomes representative of problems associated with live televised journalism. Reporters use durational discourse to generate a continuum of contemporary reportorial work against which they can situate themselves. They discuss a given incident as a marker in this continuum by connecting it to other incidents that both preceded and followed it. The reporter becomes, to use Bhabha's (1990) terminology, a performative subject engaging in a process of signification that uses the past as data to generate more contemporary accounts. *Washington Post* reporter David Broder (1987, p. 15), for instance, defined his journalistic career as stretching from "the Watergate case, which banished the President from government, to the Janet Cooke case, which tarnished the reputation of journalism's highest prize." James Reston (1991, p. ix) talked about a stretch of time— "from Pearl Harbor in 1941 to the Gulf war in 1991"—as years that for him "didn't always make sense but always made news."

Because reporters are involved in making their own history and construct such a continuum in books, films, or talk shows, the incident marks the discussion about journal-

ism. Reporter Sam Donaldson (1987, p. 68) framed his book on TV news around the Vietnam War and Watergate, because "these two events . . . convinced many of us that we should adopt a new way of looking at our responsibilities." At issue here is the larger durational continuum into which reporters place these incidents and against which the whole of journalism is appraised. Starting one's overview of reporting with the Teapot Dome scandal or with Vietnam suggests highly different views of what is relevant to the journalistic community in determining contemporary standards of action.

Reporters in durational discourse tend to differentially associate themselves with the event, facilitating a loosening of the tight interpretations initially accorded it. If journalists initially praised the event, some continue to do so but through different technological lenses. Television reporters might interpret either Vietnam or the Kennedy assassination differently than do radio reporters. Some journalists begin to dissociate from the practices being emulated. At this point the "healthy" critique begins, as the critical incident makes its way into a more durational mode of appraisal. In cases of professional failure, reporters begin to show differential association by appreciating their pedagogical value even if at the time they occurred reporters found them problematic. These broad subcultures of interpretation within the larger community—subcultures that allow for the systematic tailoring of a key event over time—suggest that it may not be right to speak of a unitary interpretive community after a period of time. Rather, interpretation as it unfolds becomes an index of a

wider networking of forces, interests, and capabilities. Yet it is only by examining discourse that its complexity presents itself for analysis. The traditional view of journalism has highlighted the local mode of discourse at the expense of the durational. The uncritical way in which the latter has flourished raises important questions about its role in maintaining community for journalists.

Watergate and McCarthyism

The interplay between these two modes of interpretation plays itself out systematically in events that are negative and positive markers of journalistic accomplishment. Watergate and McCarthyism offer two examples whose interpretations have collectively changed over time, and in both cases such change has enabled journalists to shape their recollections of these events for addressing larger discourses about the state of American journalism.

We can consider Watergate first. From a local perspective, Watergate appeared to be a glaring success, one that reporter Peter Arnett called "a glorious chapter in American journalism," alongside one of the "darkest in American history" ("Newsmen," 1973, p. 28). It was a "Watergate honeymoon" (Adamo, 1973, p. 152). Professional forums, like the Associated Press' Freedom of Information Committee, vigorously debated the issue made most relevant for journalists by Watergate's coverage, that is, how to protect sources (Ayres, 1972, p. 42). Guidelines appeared on how best to use the unidentified source (Pincus, 1973), and journalists hailed what appeared to be a marked rise in the use of anonymous sources ("News-

men," 1973). Various news organizations started programs that sprang from extensive sourcing techniques. ABC News' *Closeup*, for instance, began in September of 1973, and major news organizations permanently expanded their investigative staffs that same year (Sesser, 1973). It was, in reporter Mary McGrory's (1973, p. 437) view, a "time not to be away."

Reporters motivated the enthusiasm for Watergate that characterized this local discourse. As numerous prizes and other awards marked what seemed to be a turning point in American journalism—earning the *Washington Post* a Pulitzer Prize and Daniel Schorr three Emmy awards— reporters attempted to address Watergate in professional meetings, press columns, and other routes of association. Yet, it was the *Washington Post*'s Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward whose names won the spotlight. As Dan Rather commented, no one "in journalism can applaud themselves [for their coverage] but Woodward and Bernstein" (cited in Sesser, 1973, p. 15).

In 1973 Woodward and Bernstein earned nearly every award available to journalists, including the Sigma Delta Chi Award, the Worth Bingham Prize, the Newspaper Guild's Heyman Broun Award, the Drew Pearson Prize, and the George Polk Memorial Award ("Other," 1973). Already that year Bernstein earned his own listing in the periodical guides under the entry "journalists," and one trade story on Walter Cronkite introduced the piece by apologizing "with all due respect to the *Washington Post*'s Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein" (Powers, 1973, p. 1). CBS executive William Small predicted that the story as Woodward and

Bernstein had reported it would turn out to be "the story of the decade," and he applauded the rare circumstances that had propelled the two reporters "so clearly ahead of the rest of us in covering that story" (cited in Bernstein, 1973, p. 45).

Yet Woodward and Bernstein's names persisted beyond the local interpretive mode; by the late 1970s they had written two best-selling books on Watergate (Woodward and Bernstein, 1974, 1976) and had appeared as the focus of a popular movie, "All the President's Men." Collective persistence in remembering Woodward and Bernstein thus became linked with the emergence of a durational mode of interpretation surrounding Watergate that often bore little resemblance to the event as it had unfolded.

Of all the reporters available for the durational discourse around this event, Woodward and Bernstein fit best. They offered distinct markers that moved the story of Watergate from a particularistic discussion of sourcing techniques to discourse about a broader continuum of journalistic practice that pivoted on investigative reporting. By the mid 1970s, in some accounts the story of the journalistic coup began to displace the story of the nation's electoral and judicial processes, as in one commemoration titled "All the President's Men—and Two of Journalism's Finest" (1976). Investigative journalism became defined as a craft with "Watergate popularity" (Behrens, 1977, p. xix), and articles on investigative journalism began with anecdotes about Deep Throat and *All the President's Men* a full decade later (Mauro, 1987; Leslie, 1986). Even in cases where Watergate's effect on

practice was questionable, editors and reporters altered the narrative to fit the recollection. Schudson (1992, p. 110) relayed how the *Atlantic Monthly* framed an article about journalism education as upholding the Watergate myth, even though the article's author had not intended the connection. By 1977, many of the articles concerning Watergate focused on the reporters who covered it.[3] Stories about reporting Watergate became a regular part of stories about Watergate itself. One recent retrospective of Watergate, the political scandal, was accompanied by a smaller piece about Watergate, the journalistic story. Significantly, the latter piece detailed how journalists had learned the wrong lessons in covering the event (Martz, 1992).

From a durational perspective, then, the event was reframed so as to acknowledge a broader perspective on journalism. Reporters saw Watergate not only as suggesting new practices of sourcing or news-gathering but as instrumental in a larger way—in setting up standards of investigative reporting (Armstrong, 1990; Banker, 1991; Langley & Levine, 1988; Rather with Herskowitz, 1977, pp. 238–296). Within that view, it was called "the most crucial event in the rise of investigative reporting" (Broder, 1987, p. 141); the "most intense story I've ever covered" (Donaldson, 1987, p. 61); and a marker of a "new degree of respectability" for the anonymous source (Schorr, 1977, p. 179). Dan Rather (1977, p. 340) said that the "the heroics of Woodward and Bernstein" turned journalism into a "glamour profession." All of this has made it easy to claim that Watergate remained a "proud moment in the

history of American journalism" (Broder, 1987, p. 365), even though evidence now suggests it was Vietnam, not Watergate, that pushed reporters to be more aggressive in their reporting (Schudson, 1992).

In their more critical discourse about this event, journalists wondered whether Watergate actually changed journalism or just highlighted the atypicality of Woodward and Bernstein (Schudson, 1992). While early warnings to that effect had been relegated to side-bars—as in one reader's letter that called the *Quill*'s adulation of Watergate "excessive" ("Watergate," 1973, p. 6)—reporters began increasingly to question the immobilization of the general press by the Watergate scandal (Sesser, 1973). As time passed, journalists were criticized for uncovering very little without the aid of non-reporters (Epstein, 1974). Articles appeared that questioned the value of Watergate's input on journalism, exemplified by an *Esquire* article entitled "Gagging on Deep Throat" (Branch, 1976). Dan Rather (1977, p. 296), who devoted some 50 pages of his autobiography to the topic, argued that Watergate was in effect a story of the televised hearings—hearings that "said volumes about the Congress. And about television. Both systems worked." By the late 1980s, even Bernstein admitted that Watergate did not have the hoped-for effect on journalism (cited in Schudson, 1992, p. 121).

Implicit here were concerns as to whether the incident possessed effective standards of action for generally acting as reporters. One ASNE *Bulletin* ("The Press," 1974, p. 9) in late 1974 predicted that Watergate would demonstrate that "the American press oversold itself on its adversary role." That same year the *Columbia Journalism Review* warned that the press would overreach

in the pride, or even arrogance, that may come with power. In the self-congratulation about Watergate, there has been perhaps too much assertion that only journalists know what is best for journalists ("Press and Watergate," 1974, p. 1).

David Broder (1987) complained that reporters at Washington briefings adopted an overly prosecutorial style to their questions. The inability to meet the so-called Watergate standards involved renegotiating the boundaries of investigative journalism within the more general parameters of "good" reporting. Journalists failed to meet these standards in covering "Billygate," the name affixed to the ties between then-Presidential sibling Billy Carter and Libya (Broder, 1987, pp. 112–113), "Irangate," referring to the Iran-Contra affair, or "Iraqgate" (Baker, 1993). As one trade headline proclaimed in 1990, "Iran-Contra: Was the Press Any Match For All the President's Men?" (Armstrong, 1990, p. 27). Regardless of how positively they appraised it, reporters were able to evaluate the broader impact of Watergate on practice. These kinds of evaluation considerably expanded the unidimensional surge of interest in Watergate at the time it was taking place.

These patterns of recollection suggest that years after the event reporters were better able to appraise Watergate in a critical fashion, both positively and negatively. In doing so, they could position Watergate within a continuum of journalistic practice that made it, regardless of its accountability to real-life events, a

representative incident of the quandaries surrounding investigative reporting. This was not accomplished through a local mode of interpretation, but required a more durational mode to set the shape of Watergate reportage in place.

Do similar distinctions between local and durational discourse exist surrounding a negative critical event, that is, McCarthyism? In 1986, the *Columbia Journalism Review* defined coverage of McCarthy as a "journalistic failure" because journalists had remained more "accomplice than adversary" (Boylan, 1986, p. 31). It was, recalled David Broder (1987, p. 137), a time when reporters felt "personally and professionally debauched by the experience."

How did local discourse about this event look? At first, reporters almost seemed to humor McCarthy and his cronies. Headlines like "Busy man" (1951, p. 26) or "Dipsy-doodle ball" (1951, p. 21) suggested that they did not take him as seriously as they could have. But once the event became more than just a humorous sidebar, reporters generally wanted no part of it and agreed it was a non-story. From the first days, it was framed as a "battle of the files" rather than a battle with the press, with the only exception a near fist fight between McCarthy and Drew Pearson that won coverage in 1950 ("Battle," 1950, p. 16). There were no prizes, no awards, no excess of the practices used to cover the Wisconsin senator. Rather, the event served to mark the vulnerability of objective reporting. As Ronald May of the *New Republic* wrote in 1953, "For decades the American press has worshipped the god of objectivity. This seemed to keep voters informed until the inven-

tion . . . of the big lie [which by current reportorial standards] . . . will be reported straight" (May, 1953, pp. 10–12). Almost no mention was made of McCarthy in the professional and trade literature, and one of the first indications that he had become a force in journalism came at the end of 1951, when the ASNE *Bulletin* ("Should Tass," 1951) debated whether Tass reporters in the U.S. should be curbed. Even more telling, in 1955 the ASNE voted McCarthy the second most overplayed story of 1954 ("Second guessing," 1955, p. 1). All of this suggests that journalists were slow to recognize the impact this story would have on American journalism.

This is curious given the debates about interpretive reporting that proliferated at the time. In numerous trade columns and professional meetings, reporters fell on both sides of the fence, preaching "objectivity" or "interpretation" to each other (Christopherson, 1953; Hamilton, 1954; Lindstrom, 1953). Oddly enough, McCarthy was not initially mentioned in this discourse; only one article obliquely referenced him as "Senator McThing" (Markel, 1953, p. 1). Instead, much of the value of interpretive reporting was linked to reporting the Korean War. And while journalists did address the event—as in Edward R. Murrow's exposes in 1954, Drew Pearson's increasingly biting columns, or Herblock's cartoons—their voices joined the fray too infrequently and too late to have a lasting influence. As James Reston (1991, p. 227) recalled, "it wasn't until 1954 . . . that I was able, along with many other colleagues in the press, to take a stiffer line." Few jour-

nalists made the event a story about journalism, at least not at the time.

This changed, however, in durational discourse, where journalism became a fundamental part of the McCarthy story. There, reporters embedded tales of McCarthyism within a larger discourse about interpretive reporting. Within that discourse, reporters underscored the value of having experienced the event, even if they had not personally done so. Their comments often came in the form of apologetic statements, as in: "No journalistic memoir would be complete without an attempt to explain, however painful, the role of the press during McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade" (Reston, 1991, p. 222). Reston said that the McCarthy era gave him his "first test as an editor," a test that he "didn't handle well." Choosing the "best congressional reporter we had" to keep a careful record on McCarthy, Reston had been stunned when McCarthy attacked the *Times* for its coverage, screaming in the Senate that the *Times* had chosen as its reporter a former member of the Young Communist League. Reston repaired the damage by suggesting that the reporter be moved from Washington to New York. In his words, "the reporter [was ordered] back to New York, where he did excellent work until he retired" (Reston, 1991, pp. 225–226). It was no accident that Reston turned his narrative recounting of that incident into an event with a moral lesson for the larger community, for the damage inflicted by McCarthy in this case was mitigated by the larger threat to the continuity of journalism.

In durational discourse, journalists did not view the reporting of McCarthy positively. The journalistic community needed to frame the event in a way that would allow for a change demanded not by journalistic triumph but by journalistic failure. So in marking their link years later, reporters often chose to mitigate their association with the event, quoting other reporters rather than referencing their own presence in the event, positioning themselves as representative of whole cadres of reporters, emphasizing the event's instructional value regardless of its negative impact at the time. David Broder (1987, p. 138) quoted UPI correspondent John Steele as saying "there was very little opportunity in those days to break out of the role of being a recording device for Joe." Broder (1987, p. 138) also quoted Charles Seib of the *Washington Star* as saying "he felt trapped by our techniques. If [McCarthy] said it, we wrote it." Reston (1991, p. 228) admitted the press corps felt "intimidated much of the time." He said "with the exception of Ed Murrow everybody came out of the McCarthy period feeling vaguely guilty" (p. 227). Richard Rovere (1984, p. 100) was one of the few reporters who admitted he was "one of the first writers in Washington to discover what in time became known as McCarthyism." Durational discourse, then, was differentiated by the type and degree of mitigated associations it displayed. The associations central here were propelled not only by connecting oneself with the event as a reporter, but by connecting as a more distanced and less-knowing observer, as a colleague to the entrapped, as simply a journalist born from the experience but not of it. This occurred because it was interpretive reporting that rose

following the McCarthy era, not the kind of objective recounting that got reporters into trouble in covering McCarthy (Bayley, 1981, p. 219). McCarthyism provided an example of what NOT to do as a reporter. Its value, then, by definition needed to emerge in discourse—not at the time of the event's unfolding but at the time of its retelling.

Journalists reframed the event within a continuum of journalistic practice that stressed the value of interpretive reporting. Broder (1987, pp. 137–9) held McCarthy responsible for setting up the limits of so-called "objective" reporting and starting an era of interpretive reporting. Another former journalist claimed that "covering McCarthy [had] produced lasting changes in journalism," in that it took "a performance [that] spectacular . . . to move the guardians of objectivity to admit that the meaning of an event is as important as the facts" (Bayley, 1981, p. 85). Others saw the event through other technological lenses: Daniel Schorr (1977, p. 2) claimed the event taught him about television's impact; Eric Sevareid complained that covering McCarthy's "exposes" of American Communists revealed the insufficiency of "our flat, one dimensional handling of news" (quoted in Broder, 1987, p. 138). McCarthy, in a word, forced the "leading journalists of the time . . . and their colleagues to reexamine how they were operating, the codes that guided their work" (Broder, 1987, p. 139). Here again, journalists utilized the event as a marker in durational discourse that often had little to do with the initial discussion of what happened. Moreover, it often obscured journalists' own susceptibility to McCarthy, exacerbated by

considerable participation in the anti-Communist Cold War consensus (Bayley, 1981). In a sense, then, the value of the event increased over time, fulfilling a pedagogic function for journalists who invoked it in their discourse years later. It was transformed from an uncomfortable experience into a lesson well-learned, again regardless of its accountability to real-life events.

What does this suggest? Thanks to the two modes of interpretation, journalists are able to consolidate authoritative evaluations of events that valorize them regardless of how problematic they might have been initially. As Schudson (1992) has demonstrated in his study of Watergate, the event's impact has more to do with the carrying power of the recollection than with the definitive changes it brings about in practice. In the best of cases, reporters can celebrate events because they uphold their own professional ideology of eyewitnessing. But when events do not meet expectations at the local mode of interpretation, journalists have a second chance at making things meaningful. They are able to employ a historical perspective in evaluating events differently from how they first transpired. This second chance at interpretation suggests a function for journalistic discourse that extends the authority of the journalistic community beyond that suggested by the frame of the profession. Through durational discourse, reporters are able to compensate for their own dual temporal positioning, despite the fact that their professional ideology accounts for their presence only at the time of the event. In establishing authoritative views of an event long after it took

place, they generate contemporary standards of action for other members of the interpretive community.

The forcefulness of these two interpretive modes surrounding journalists' relation to time raises disturbing questions about the far-reaching ability of reporters to establish themselves as interpretive authorities for events, both past and present. It points to the possibility that journalists exercise similar licence in building authority for other practices not accounted for by traditional views of journalism. Equally bothersome, it underscores our own bias in understanding journalism only in certain, preconstructed ways. For without a frame that validates the examination of discourse unfolding over time—in memoirs, news-clippings, social clubs, and the proceedings of professional forums—we have no reason to examine it. In limiting our evaluations of journalism to the time of an event's initial reportage, we have little understanding of the ways in which journalists create community. Yet these pages suggest that they do so through a discourse that structures recollection of events according to evolving agendas and sets up everchanging standards of action by which reporters conduct themselves in the present era.

DISCOURSE AND THE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

The proliferation of discourse about each of these incidents suggests that reporters regularly use their own conversations to generate meaning about journalistic work. Through discourse, they set standards of evaluation to appraise more general journalistic coverage. Thus,

during the first years following each incident, reporters displayed an excess of the practices that each incident represented. Yet as the employment of different practices levelled out over time, discourse about the incidents behind them came to be used as an effective standard for evaluating daily coverage.

It is a well-known truism among reporters that "journalism is but a first rough draft of history." That assumption, largely supported by existing understandings of journalism, suggests that journalism ends where history begins, and that as time passes reporters yield to historians in taking over authority for the message. But this examination of journalists' discourse suggests that in fact reporters do not necessarily yield their interpretive authority to historians, and that journalists use both kinds of discourse to maintain themselves in double-time. Double-time, in turn, allows them to claim historical authority on the basis of the recognized parameters of their so-called "journalistic authority." If they miss the first time around, then, reporters can always cash in on the rebound.

What does this suggest about journalistic community? The swells of journalistic discourse around each target of interpretation underscore the centrality of discourse for journalists. Reporters use discourse to discuss, consider, and at times challenge the reigning consensus surrounding journalistic practice, facilitating their adaptation to changing technologies, changing circumstances, and the changing stature of newswork. While these are not the only critical incidents relevant to American reporters—and reporters

from other eras would certainly cite events like the Teapot Dome scandal, the Civil War, and the Spanish American War—their usage of discourse points to the consolidation of journalists not only into a profession but also into an interpretive community. They come together not only through training sessions, university curricula, or formal meetings, but through stories that are informally repeated and altered as circumstances facing the community change. The collective discourse on which such a community emerges may thus be as important in understanding journalism as the formalized cues through which journalists have traditionally been appraised. This does not mean that other professional communities, such as doctors or lawyers, do not do the same. Nor does it mean that the journalistic community is not concerned with professional codes, only that it activates much of its concern through its collective discourse.

Reporter Daniel Schorr (1977, p. vii) once offered the view that reporting is "not only a livelihood, but a frame of mind." This discussion has addressed how that frame of mind is set and kept in place. Recognizing journalists as an interpretive community depends on the proliferation of discourse about events that are instrumental in helping reporters determine appropriate practice. This view suggests that journalism does not need to be coded as overly "folkish" or unprofessional. Rather, it is "the profession" as a dominating frame that makes it appear so. By viewing journalists also as an interpretive community, such "folkishness" might be coded as much as a tool of empowerment as an indicator of untrained incapacity. And understanding that empowerment may help us better understand how and why journalists create their own history of journalism, and how and why they use that history in the relay of news.

NOTES

[1] Some academics have begun to examine these issues. See Darnton, 1975; Carey, 1986; Schudson, 1982; Campbell, 1987; Manoff and Schudson, 1986.

[2] Janet Cooke was a *Washington Post* reporter who received a Pulitzer Prize for her fictionalized account of an eight-year-old drug abuser (Eason, 1986).

[3] Of the 21 listings on the Watergate case in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* for the period from March 1976 to February 1977, half concerned Woodward & Bernstein.

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