

Journalistic Uses of Collective Memory

By Jill A. Edy

It has become clichéd to assert that journalists write the first draft of history. Far less attention has been paid to who does the rewrites. Frequently, second drafts of history are also written by journalists. The typology developed here describes the ways journalists use our public past and offers some insights about the process of collective memory development in the news media. Commemorative journalism seems to offer the best chance to reexamine our past, but may offer little incentive to do so. Historical analogies may not encourage us to contest the meaning of the past due to the simple, dramatic narratives of news reporting. Historical contexts may not encourage us to look closely at the meanings we ascribe to the past either, because they are presented as facts rather than interpretations.

It has become a cliché to assert that journalists write the first draft of history. Far less attention has been paid to who does the rewrites. Yet this “memory work” is extremely important. As our society continues to dissect itself into small, competing groups, our possession of a past in common may be one of the few ties that bind us as a whole. Collective memory, the meaning that a community makes of its past, is home to critical aspects of political culture, community tradition, and social identity. It informs our understanding of past events and present relationships, and it contributes to our expectations about the future.

Frequently, for the narratives of the past that have important impacts on our collective memory, later drafts of history are also written by journalists. The media are unique in their ability to reach huge communities simultaneously. However, like all other narrators of the past, journalists work within the constraints of their profession. If we are to understand how our past is made meaningful for us in the media, and how our political traditions, culture, and identity are handed down to us, we must explore the ways in which journalists use and reconstitute the past. In this essay I develop a typology of the ways in which journalists use history, and explore the implications of these uses for our understanding of our past and future.

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Collective Memory

Barry Schwartz (1991) offered the most concise definition of collective memory: "Collective memory' is a metaphor that formulates society's retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting" (p. 302). Halbwachs (1950/1980) explained that memory is the product of a social group. It is a past that is shaped by and meaningful for a community. Communication is a critical element of collective memory. It is what transcends the psychological aspects of memory and makes the concept sociological. Communication makes possible the unique capacity of collective memory to preserve pasts older than the oldest living individual.

The media are extremely important to the construction and maintenance of a national collective memory in the 20th century U.S. The stories of the past presented in media, especially on television, are far more visceral than those presented in the classroom. Further, whereas the classroom teaches history with careful attention to objectively presented facts, the media may encourage the personal and emotional connections with the past that are associated with collective memory. As Bennett (1988) implied in his discussion of the dramatic storytelling of the news media, this emotional emphasis is likely to be present in both media fiction and news.

As history "speeds up" in the late 20th century, the media become evermore responsible for our memory of events, including those that occurred in the years since we left school and those hurried history instructors could not cover. Media reminders are important in themselves and because, unlike the reminders provided by museums, statues, and other commemorative objects, media remind all of us more or less at once. Further, their reminders are relatively difficult to avoid. Commemorative objects and museums have been fruitfully studied by many scholars (e.g., Katriel, 1997; Schwartz, 1991; Wagner-Pacifiçi & Schwartz, 1991), but studies of the media's role in public memory are unusual.

Most explorations of the media's depiction of historical events have focused on fictional media (e.g., Cohen, 1976; Nimmo & Combs, 1983; Parenti, 1992). Scholars have found that fictional presentations of the past focus on the elite elements of the society (i.e., the rich and powerful). History is depicted as the responsibility of individuals, rather than social forces. These fictions have supported conservative interpretations of pasts, even downplaying revolutionary aspects of the American Revolution (see Kammen, 1978).

The news media's presentation of collective memory has been explored less. Lang and Lang (1989) argued that journalists invoke the past for four basic reasons: "to delimit an era, as a yardstick, for analogies, and for the shorthand explanations or lessons it can provide" (p. 127). Zelizer (1992) demonstrated that journalists construct collective memory in ways that retain their roles as authoritative storytellers about public events. Schudson (1992) argued that Watergate stories are preserved in the media as a means of legitimating journalists as storytellers, but that the stories also perform other functions such as providing analytical tools for describing later government scandals. Both Zelizer and Schudson described some of the impacts of these uses of the past on the development of public memories.

Journalists' depictions of the past have repercussions for the ways in which a community relates to its past. It may be that journalists' work impacts whether we remember our past at all. The stories told by reporters may affect whether we see ourselves as one community or many groups, whether we think critically about our past or just accept it as "the way it was," and whether and how we see the past as relevant to the present and the future.

The power of these stories is derived, in part, from claim that they are factual accounts of what "really" happened. This sets them apart from fictional media works that use historical events as a backdrop (e.g., the film *Gone with the Wind*), and those that dramatize historical events (e.g., *Glory*). The documentary style of journalists' work gives them a unique authority in telling the story of the past. That authority may make for more powerful emotional connections on the part of the audience. The viewer who sits through action and horror films without difficulty may find the image of Robert Kennedy as he lay dying on the floor of a hotel kitchen far more troubling because it is "real." Thus, news images and stories of the past must be considered in addition to the media products classed as historical fictions. A closer examination of the conditions under which the news media recall our past to us and the implications of mediated remembering is warranted. This study takes a first step. Using an exploratory, inductive approach, I identify the kinds of stories journalists tell about the past and speculate about how narratives of each type construct our relationship to and understanding of the past.

Mediated collective memory of the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles serves as a vehicle for exploring these issues. It is not possible to describe any collective memory as "typical," but collective memories of the Watts riots have some distinctive characteristics that set them apart from many other social memories that have been explored in previous research. The Watts riots were controversial, and they were understood differently by diverse contemporaneous groups. The process of remembering such an event can be somewhat more complicated than it would be with noncontroversial events. However, such complexity adds a richness to the typology that undisputed pasts do not offer. Memory of the Watts riots also remains contained. It contributes to the urban history of Los Angeles, but it rarely is tied to national concerns. This narrow scope makes the universe of mediated memories of the Watts riots relatively easy to identify and examine. Memories that form a more central aspect of the national psyche, such as the "myth of the West," Watergate, or the Vietnam War, can be much more difficult to trace because they are so embedded in the broader culture. Thus, this case study sacrifices some aspects of richness for thoroughness. The results, however, offer concepts that should prove useful for scholars who seek to examine foundational memories. A more informal discussion of other recent instances of collective remembering in media is included to demonstrate the wider applicability of the typology developed.

Journalists' references to the Watts riots were identified with *Lexis/Nexis* searches of the *Los Angeles Times* from 1985 through 1992, and the *New York Times* from 1980 through 1992. Each of these searches begins with the year the full text of the relevant newspaper first became available on *Lexis/Nexis* and ends with the 1992 Los Angeles uprising. The keyword used was "Watts" within 50 words of "1965."

This search missed indirect references to the riots, references that did not include the date, and references where the date was mentioned at great distance from the riots. However, 444 stories mentioning the Watts riots appeared in the home edition of the *Los Angeles Times* in 8 years, and 108 appeared in the *New York Times* in 13 years. About half the references in both papers appeared in connection with the upheaval in Los Angeles in 1992. This systematic search was supplemented with the obituaries of former Los Angeles Mayors Sam Yorty and Tom Bradley, both of whom died in 1998.

When Journalists Remember

The fact that news media make use of historical events at all is somewhat counterintuitive. Journalists have traditionally placed a high value on being the first to publicize new information. Extra editions, news flashes, and program interruptions for important new information all testify to a desire to present the latest intelligence to audiences. Many stories go out of date and cannot be used if there is not space in the news product for them on the day that they occur. However, stories about the past appear regularly in the news in three basic forms: commemorations, historical analogies, and historical contexts.¹ Each of these journalistic allusions to the past has different implications for the ways in which we collectively remember.

Commemorations

Commemorative stories are sometimes referred to as “anniversary journalism.” The process by which the events to be commemorated are chosen is unclear. In many cases, it appears that a kind of social inertia is built up behind the event, bringing a variety of social events (e.g., wreath layings, reenactments, speeches at a memorial or the site of the event itself) that provide news pegs for journalists. Because these events are usually sanctioned by some social authority, the commemorated person or event is often noncontroversial. Alternatively, the commemorated may be something or someone about whom authorities would like to create social consensus (see, e.g., Bodnar, 1992). Finally, it may occasionally happen that a difficult aspect of the past is commemorated because social authorities cannot deny its importance (see, e.g., Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991).

There are several distinctive kinds of commemorations. An example of event-oriented commemoration is the mention of the riots that appears every year in connection with the *Los Angeles Times*'s coverage of what are now called the L.A. Games. This high school sporting competition, which includes a variety of events, was founded in 1966. The *Times* mentions every year that the games were meant to bring the young people of Los Angeles together after the riots (e.g., Ripton, 1991). A similar mention of togetherness appears in stories about the Watts Sum-

¹ Although it may appear that story types are concentrated in one newspaper or the other, this is not the case. My purpose in this study was to explicate the typology using the best examples of each type of story. Commemorations, historical analogies, and historical contexts appear in both newspapers.

mer Festival, an arts festival founded after the riots to memorialize those who died, but a dying institution itself by the middle 1980s.

When covering such an authorized commemoration of the past, journalists often tell the story of the commemorative event and the story of the event that is commemorated. Good examples of such storytelling patterns appeared during the first anniversary commemorations of the Oklahoma City bombing, in which network news covered the events staged in Oklahoma City, and also took the opportunity to renarrate the bombing itself. However, it is perhaps a testament to the lingering controversy of the Watts riots that a one-line mention of the reason for the games and the festival is usually the only mention of the riots in stories of this type. Although this event-oriented commemoration is similar in some ways to a historical context (described below), it is distinct because the event is constructed as an act of remembrance rather than as an outgrowth of previous social events.

A second type of commemoration is anniversary stories about the riots. Unlike event-oriented commemorations (which typically focus on the present), anniversary stories make the past their main subject. Although it may be factually informative, the story that is told about the past may also make that past live again for the audience. The story creates an emotional connection between the past and the present, making us recall the scary, exhilarating, furious days of violence in the streets. In 1990, the *Los Angeles Times* printed a series of stories to mark the 25th anniversary of the Watts riots. A story that profiled the dispatcher who took the first call from the scene of the riots began this way: “‘Officer needs help! Officer needs help!’ The message was an urgent whisper over the two-way radio. It was a hot Wednesday evening around 7:20. The date: Aug. 11, 1965, the night the Watts riots began” (Jones, 1990, p. E1).

This is how the dramatized news that Bennett (1988) identified affects media presentations of the collective past. It does not really matter if, for some of the audience, the story provokes memories of a past they lived through, whereas for others, the story creates a world they never experienced. In both cases, it is appropriate to say that collective memory is invoked because one unique aspect of collective memory is that it outlasts individual life spans. However, the media’s emotional and factual reconstruction of the past may be more influential for members of the audience who did not live through the event (see Lang & Lang, 1989).

A final type of commemoration of the Watts riots is a kind of chance commemoration. In one case, it takes the form of an obituary. On Christmas Day, 1986, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Marquette Frye, the man whose arrest for drunken driving sparked the Watts riots, had died of pneumonia at the age of 42. His death provided an unexpected opportunity for the journalist to reflect on the Watts riots. Like an anniversary story, this commemoration retold of the man and the riots and is ambiguous. The writer even stated the “facts” of the arrest in a contingent fashion because there was still some disagreement about what happened at the scene of the arrest: “What followed is still subject to debate, but most accounts reflect that Rena Frye hollered at her son for being drunk, that Frye began to resist arrest and that someone shoved his mother” (Folkart, 1986, p. 1). The story of Frye’s life and of the Watts riots was narrated as a tragedy. The lead reports:

Marquette Frye, whose arrest as a 21-year-old suspected drunk driver set off the Watts riots on Aug. 11, 1965, and whose later life was to become as tragic as the riots themselves, is dead of pneumonia, the coroner's office reported Wednesday. (Folkart, 1986, p. 1)

This narrative style allows for ambiguity (Osiel, 1997) and is also apparent in the other anniversary articles that retell the story of the riots, although it is especially obvious in this case. Like other commemorative stories about the Watts riots, this one located the violence safely in the past, making the struggle to make sense of them seem less urgent than it might: "Then, as the races moved closer together in recent years, Frye's popularity waned. . . . He had also grown to fervently wish that it had been someone else behind the wheel of the car on that long ago August day" (Folkart, 1986, p. 1).

Commemorative journalism typically does not attempt to connect the past to the present in meaningful ways. Although the stories may contain some references to the present, most notably what has changed since the commemorated event occurred, the connection to present issues and concerns is generally weak. For example, 1992 television retrospectives on the Cuban missile crisis commented on the fact that such a nuclear showdown was unlikely today because of changes in the international situation and changes in diplomatic practice (some of which were engendered by the crisis). However, they did not discuss the relevance of the Cuban missile crisis to current international or nuclear concerns, such as the continuing U.S. embargo. Commemorations of World War II, a popular topic in 1995, commented on the ultimate fate of the stories' protagonists and villains (both at a national and an individual level), but did not discuss the relevance of the war to late 20th-century world politics. One 20th-anniversary story about the Watts riots, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, traced the etymology of the catch phrase "Burn, baby, burn!" and the career of the disc jockey who coined it. The other major story on the riots that appeared that year described the experiences and ultimate fates of some of those who lived in the neighborhood and the government programs that had attempted to revive the community, but (the article implies) failed to do so. The story described the Watts riots as a closed chapter of history.

Commemorative journalism, then, fails to provide the sort of historical context that many media critics argue is needed in news stories. Nevertheless, the conventions of journalism suggest that this is one of the few times the media encourage us to look critically at our past. News tells narratively simple stories (Bennett, 1988). However, when the past is the subject of the narrative, even simple stories can offer a forum for debate about the meaning of the past. Conflict may take the form of demonstrations by groups that reject the official retelling of the past, or of some controversy surrounding the commemoration ritual itself, which implies a disagreement about what the past means. These contests, however lopsided, represent a negotiation about the meaning of the past and how we will remember it as a community. In the case of anniversary stories of the Watts riots, the value of the riots for the community and their meaning are contested by several academic sociologists, civil rights leaders, riot participants, and current residents of the neigh-

borhood, though not by city officials. Still, this critical reexamination is undercut by the general failure of commemorations to connect the past to the present. The meaning of the past may be reconstructed to some degree, but the impact of that reconstruction is unlikely to be felt unless this part of the past is remembered under other circumstances.

Although the news media, in general, have not been studied sufficiently in the exploration of collective memory, commemoration has been examined in some projects. There is a practical, empirical reason for this. Commemorative stories are easy to locate in indexes of news content and in listings of documentary programming. Historical analogies and historical contexts are not as easy to find. Keyword searches of full-text databases, such as the one used in this study, may be the only means of exploring all the ways collective memory is used in journalism. References to the Watts riots are scattered through every part of the paper—front page, metro section, real estate section, business section, lifestyle pages, television reviews, and more. References to the past can be incidental rather than central, and, as Zelizer (1995) noted, uses of the past are quite unpredictable.

Historical Analogies

Historical analogies, in contrast to commemorations, explicitly attempt to make the past relevant to the present by using a past event as a tool to analyze and predict the outcome of a current situation. A present dilemma is constructed as being similar to a past crisis (and vice versa, for it is often the case that the present informs our understanding of the past), and the past is referred to as a kind of “lesson of history.” This use of the past does not always rob it of its emotional load. For example, comparing a contemplated military undertaking to Vietnam can be a purposefully incendiary tactic.

Historical analogies can come from many sources. The analogy may be introduced by a traditional media source, such as a government official. However, journalists sometimes introduce the analogies themselves (see, e.g., Bennett & Lawrence, 1995; Edy, 1995). This is interesting. Journalists are notoriously cautious about introducing nonobjective material into their news stories. Opinions and analyses are almost always introduced into news by sources other than the journalists, frequently by elites. In fact, some scholars have documented journalists’ search for outside sources to say what the journalists themselves actually think (e.g., Tuchman, 1972). Where journalists engage in analysis themselves, their work is labeled “editorial” or “news analysis.” However, historical analogies are not handled in the same way other forms of interpretation would be handled. Reporters select the analogous past (and they often have several to choose from) and construct the analogy without defining their work as news analysis. One possible reason is that the factual nature of the past makes it objective information for journalists. The past event really happened, the current event is really happening, and observing similarities or differences between the two does not seem like interpretive work that must be labeled or sourced.

Although its factual base may make it appear neutral, a historical analogy can in fact form a powerful frame in all the senses explicated by Entman (1993). The comparison to the past may define the nature of the problem, define the agent

responsible for the problem, define a solution to the problem, and set standards by which a solution may be normatively judged. The Watts riots functioned in this fashion for both journalists and elites who used it as a tool for analyzing the violence in Los Angeles following the verdict in the trial of police officers accused of beating Rodney King. Analogies to the 1965 riots suggested that the problem was urban poverty and hopelessness, that the source of the problem was a lack of funding for inner cities, and that the appropriate solution was an activist government program to provide jobs, encourage commerce, and support education in inner-city neighborhoods. An October 4, 1992, *New York Times* story reported the results of the Assembly Special Committee on the Los Angeles Crisis:

“The Kerner and McCone commissions identified poverty, segregation, lack of education and employment opportunities, widespread perceptions of police abuse and unequal consumer services as the principal grievances which led to civil disturbances of the 1960’s,” the report said of two panels picked to study the Watts riots. “Little has changed in 1992 Los Angeles.” (“New Riots,” 1992, p. 36)

Thus, using the riots in Watts as a historical analogy for the urban violence in 1992 Los Angeles had important political implications. Although officials and community activists built on the Watts analogy, the first mention of Watts in *New York Times* coverage of the 1992 violence was not attributed to a source. It was introduced by a journalist (Edy, 1995).

Historical analogies have much in common with condensation symbols (Edelman, 1964) and news icons (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995). They are powerful symbolic resources that are pressed into service by various political actors. They may be applied to events very distant in space, time, and circumstance. However, historical analogies have an additional feature that makes them unique. Other condensation symbols and news icons crystallize an issue or problem. Historical analogies can be constructed so that the outcome of certain courses of action in response to the current problem appear predictable. That is, they can be used to suggest that the course of the future will resemble the course of the past. Introducing the Watts riots as an analogy to the upheaval in Los Angeles in 1992 seemed to suggest that the federal and local governments would step in with a massive aid package to provide economic opportunity and basic services to inner-city residents.

However, like other symbols, historical analogies are open to alternative interpretations. Although the analogy was widely accepted as a model for potential action, conservatives and liberals struggled over the nature of the lessons of Watts. Did the Watts riots demonstrate that government aid is necessary or that government assistance does more harm than good? The following passage, which appeared in the *New York Times* on May 17, 1992, captures this ambivalence:

A number of things may change the way these riots are viewed, as compared with those in Watts. Watts blew up toward the end of three decades of almost unbroken Democratic control of the White House, marked by intense social activism. The disturbances that began in South-Central Los Angeles came after two decades of largely Republican control, with much less Federal attention in social issues. (Apple, 1992, p. 20)

The fact that historical analogies resemble casting auguries more than scientific or logical exercises does not seem to reduce their attractiveness as predictors of the future. Smith (1985) argued that this is because all political action is uncertain, and therefore, unsettling to people. Even if the prediction of what is to come is wrong, the act of prediction makes people more comfortable with taking action. Smith offered an intriguing comparison between the invocation of memory and the taking of auspices by ancient Romans before they undertook important political tasks.

There seem to be two reasons the past is perceived as having predictive power. First, the fact that the past event really happened (regardless of its subsequent interpretation and reconstruction, and the plausibility of its comparison to the present) makes it appear to be a better predictor than the guesswork of officials or experts. The past is perceived as neutral, unlike educated guesses that may have an agenda behind them. Of course, this discounts the fact that the past, too, may be reconstructed to support an agenda. Second, the idea of the past as predictor draws on the notion that history repeats itself. This is one of the most basic narratives about the past. The idea is a very powerful one and constantly reinforced by the regular repetitions of natural cycles (e.g., seasons of the year, cycles of life), which include some variations but are essentially alike.

As Neustadt and May (1986) pointed out, historical analogies are filled with pitfalls for understanding the present. The greatest danger appears to be overestimating the similarities between the present and the past that is constructed as analogous. Neustadt and May offered several examples of political elites who misused history with disastrous results for present policy decisions. Schudson (1992) added to their list with a persuasive argument that analogies to Watergate were a serious impediment to the successful investigation of the Iran-Contra affair. Watergate analogies led both reporters and investigators to ask the wrong questions of the elites involved in Iran-Contra. However, Neustadt and May believed that historical analogies can be used successfully as analytical tools for current dilemmas, provided past outcomes are viewed as possibilities rather than certainties, and that differences between the past and the present are recognized along with similarities.

Unlike commemorative journalism, historical analogies reported in the media are strongly connected to our perceptions of the present and our expectations for the future. However, historical analogies used by the press do not provide us with much opportunity to reexamine our past. When historical analogies are constructed in the media, the focus remains on the present because of the journalistic demands for simple, straightforward, dramatic storytelling. Media discourses are generally too simple to accommodate simultaneous discussions of the meaning of the present, the meaning of the past, and the connection between them. The past is used as an illustrator, a model, and debate about the past may be restricted to the usefulness of a particular past as an analogy. Consider the special case of the analogies that are constructed between the Vietnam War and more recent proposals to deploy U.S. military forces. Although we still struggle over the meaning of our national experience in Vietnam, when this past is connected to proposed

military action, debate usually focuses on whether the proposed action is “like Vietnam,” rather than over what “Vietnam” was like.

Historical Contexts

Historical contexts differ from historical analogies in that they trace the portions of the past that appear relevant in leading up to present circumstances. Instead of constructing some aspect of the past as similar to some aspect of the present, a historical context explains “how we got here.” Bennett’s (1988) analysis of the nature of news seems to suggest that such contextual uses of the past are rare. He described news as “fragmented” and argued that this fragmentation offers Americans a poor sense of their own history. However, Bennett’s discussion of how this contributes to a diminished sense of national identity suggests that his analysis applies to collective memory as well:

When it comes to articulating a sense of national history—who we are as a people, what we have done, and where we are going—most people are stopped short. It is dangerous for any nation, much less a major empire to have such a diminished sense of its world role and therefore such a dim grasp of the historic choices before it. Historic events . . . just seem to “happen.” . . . History marches on, while the American people follow behind in confusion, bearing the responsibility for making the best of it. (p. 50)

Current events, he suggested, are rarely contextualized with an explanation of how we got “here.” Instead, events occur without rhyme or reason.

If reporters were reluctant to contextualize the present, it might be a function of the objectivity norm. Journalists might hesitate to construct linkages between disparate events because such work seems like “interpretation,” which is inconsistent with the objectivity ideal. When historical contexts are constructed, the implication is that one understands the causes of the present dilemma. This is not (or at least is much less clearly) the case with historical analogies remarking that the past is like the present. Claiming to understand the cause is a much riskier assertion for a journalist to make than claiming to recognize a similarity. Such high-risk claims may be left to highly legitimated sources.

Nevertheless, references to the Watts riots in the *Los Angeles Times* offer many examples of the riots’ use to contextualize other aspects of contemporary Los Angeles. These uses appear to be highly legitimated, because they are introduced by journalists themselves, but they are not terribly varied or deep. In addition to the burned-out buildings, the Watts riots appear to have left three key marks on contemporary Los Angeles, according to journalists.

First, the Martin Luther King/Charles Drew Medical Center’s roots in the Watts riots have been mentioned (e.g., Spiegel, 1989). The hospital underwent several financial shocks in the 1980s, but its importance to the community was constructed in terms of the riots in Watts. A major grievance of neighborhood residents before the riots was the lack of local medical care. In 1965, the nearest medical facility was 14 miles from Watts. The hospital is often viewed as one of the few tangible, positive outcomes of the riots.

Second, the riots have been described as the spark for a major migration in the city. Some stories' only reference to the Watts riots is that the violence marked the start of "White flight," a migration pattern in which White, middle-class families leave the inner city. There are several variations on this. Some describe the Watts riots and subsequent migration as precipitating the downfall of a once-solid, middle-class neighborhood that is filled with crime, drugs, and gangs today:

"The Jungle" didn't always have negative connotations. Also known as the lower Baldwin Hills area, it was nicknamed "The Jungle" because of its tropical foliage. That was before the so-called "white flight," or exodus of whites after the Watts riots in 1965. . . . The departure of tenants left many vacancies, some still unfilled. With the vacancy problem, landlords became less particular about qualifying tenants and maintaining properties. (Ryon, 1985, p. 1)

Another variation describes the flight of retail businesses from the inner city after the riot (often noting that there were few retailers in poor areas before the riots) and the subsequent lack of services. The relocation of the main campus of Pepperdine University to Malibu from central Los Angeles is also linked to the Watts riots.

Finally, the Watts riots have sometimes been described as a political watershed that led to the current power structure in city government. The election of Tom Bradley, the first African American mayor of Los Angeles, by a liberal coalition that included African Americans and Jews is seen as a major moment of healing after the riots. This is probably due, in part, to the fact that some of the rioters had targeted Jewish-owned businesses. By the late 1980s, journalists began to speculate about whether this post-Watts coalition would hold in light of the changing ethnic makeup of Los Angeles.

Schudson (1992) noted that historical events also give context to the lives of prominent people. Besides being described as a watershed event in the political and social life of Los Angeles, the riots have been mentioned in the resumes of people, such as high-powered attorneys Warren Christopher (who served on the McCone Commission that investigated the riots) and Johnnie Cochran (who defended some of those accused of looting and other crimes during the riots). In former Mayor Tom Bradley's obituaries, the 1965 riots and the 1992 unrest provided bookends for his political career, and his image as a healer in the wake of the Watts riots was underscored. Former Mayor Sam Yorty's obituaries noted his strong support for law enforcement and his insensitivity to ethnic minorities, both qualities that were expressed in his handling of the Watts riots.

This study also builds upon Schudson's (1992) findings, for it is apparent that profiles and obituaries of public men are substantively different from those of essentially private men, such as Marquette Frye, who experience a moment of public renown. In Frye's obituary, the story of the Watts riots was as salient as the story of the man's life. The 1965 riots were only briefly mentioned in the profiles and obituaries of the prominent. Thus, the death of a private person involved in a historic event may offer a better opportunity to reconsider the past than the death of a public person.

Explicit contextual uses of the past are uncommon in spot news stories. However, as Schudson (1986) pointed out, spot news may implicitly make use of the

past and the future to provide context for present news, as in the case of election campaigns. Direct references to the past are found more often in features and other stories reporters have had more time to work on, and they are typically introduced by the journalists themselves. When the Watts riots are used as a historical context, they are typically used as background detail to explain the reasons for some current state of affairs, offering the reader a richer understanding of contemporary circumstances. Consistent with this function, and the inverted-pyramid writing style, the reference to the riots usually appears toward the middle or end of the story.

However, reporters covering the 1992 violence in Los Angeles gave the Watts riots prominent positions in their stories, and references to the 1965 riots appeared on the day the violence broke out. The earlier riots were widely adopted by both reporters and sources as a means of understanding the nature of the more recent urban unrest. Besides serving as a historical analogy for the 1992 violence, the Watts riots served as a historical context in cases where reporters and sources considered the causes of the two disturbances to be not only similar, but the same:

“This is the alarm bell that if we did not respond in 1965, we certainly would be blind if we do not respond now,” said Warren Christopher, the lawyer who headed the independent inquiry into the police beating. “With all our wealth and success we’d better take this second chance.” (Reinhold, 1992, p. 1)

Even where events are contextualized, the potential for dangerous misunderstandings of the past exists. One source of error is the punctuation of events (Abu-Lughod, 1989). The point at which one begins the story of how we got *here* is largely arbitrary, but it can be critical to our understanding of a particular dilemma. This is the case with the discussion of White flight after the riots. Occasionally, even the *Los Angeles Times* has acknowledged that the migration patterns of Whites leaving the inner city may not be linked to the riots. However, in the everyday currency of reporting, the connection is made almost automatically.

Nevertheless, historical contexts do not have the failings of historical analogies. They retrace the trail of how we got here, even when they miss important landmarks we passed along the way.

Finally, these contextual uses of the past are actually far more commonplace than one might expect. However, whereas Bennett’s (1988) suggestion that contextual uses of the past are rare in journalism is not supported by this data, his overall critique that news fails to give Americans a sense of their own history is supported by this evidence.

Conclusion

Journalists use the past in many ways. Their work can help to make the past meaningful and enhance our understanding of the present. The typology developed here not only describes the ways in which journalists use memories of our public past, but offers some suggestions about the process of collective memory

development in the news media. Each use of the past has important implications for the collective memory. Commemorative journalism seems to offer us the best chance to reexamine our past. However, the exercise may appear unproductive because the past in these stories typically seems to be irrelevant to the present. Due to the simple, dramatic narrative typical of news reporting, historical analogies, which appear very germane to the present, may not encourage us to contest the meaning of the past. Historical contexts do not encourage us to look closely at the meanings we ascribe to the past either because they are presented as facts in evidence rather than as interpretations. The findings of this study suggest that journalists use our collective memory as a tool to analyze and dramatize without much concern for its construction and maintenance.

This typology of journalists' uses of the past raises important questions about collective memory. First, many scholars recognize that collective memory can be reconstructed. What motivates such reconstructions and how they are disseminated to the public are less clear. Some of the best work on this was done by Zelizer (1992) in her study of journalists' retelling of the Kennedy assassination, which constructs their authority as tellers of the tale. However, other important pasts, in which journalists have far less stake, are reconstructed as well. This study suggests that where and when such reconstructions take place can be critical factors in the development of the public past. Are reconstructions the result of the relatively careful consideration of commemoration, or are they sold as a bill of goods when a historical analogy is introduced that contains a different reading of the past than is usually ascribed to it?

A second question pertains to where the work of constructing a consensual collective memory is accomplished. Many memorable events are memorable precisely because they aroused controversy at the time they occurred. They were controversial because different social groups created different meanings about them. Where does the work of negotiating between these varying understandings occur? Katriel (1997) suggested that museums can become a focus for negotiation, as hegemonic perspectives on the past decay and that museum guides often tailor their storytelling to match the expectations of disparate audiences. This study suggests that journalism may provide a critical forum for the negotiation of shared meanings when a hegemonic understanding of the past has yet to emerge. The mass media are far more intrusive in the lives of individuals than museums, and journalists cannot tailor their stories to match subsets of the total audience as can museum guides. Journalists must attempt to tell stories that embrace the perspectives of everyone at once. However, this study also suggests that only commemorations provide discursive space for direct negotiations between varying meanings of the past. Thus, in some cases, as Dayan and Katz (1992) suggested, commemorative rituals and stories may serve as a means of developing unity in the wake of social discord rather than a means of celebrating unity.

Because our collective memory binds us together, because our past is an important ingredient in our future, and because our social remembrance is a critical element in our social identity, these questions should be explored further. This typology represents an important first step, a tool that should prove descriptively and analytically useful as researchers examine mediated collective memories.

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