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# The New Journalism and the Struggle for Interpretation

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# The New Journalism and the struggle for interpretation

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## Abstract

Scholarship in literary journalism often focuses on matters of technique and style, and on the ethical challenges of immersion reporting. In some contexts, however, literary journalism may also take on a sense of moral purpose, as when reporters assert the importance of their interpretations, or readers attribute special meaning to a particular style of writing. The New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s offers a revealing example of how magazine and book publishing markets and writer–editor relations inevitably shape journalists’ interpretations and lend them a sense of social significance. The New Journalism did not stand alone and apart from the larger profession, but took root within a network of writers, editors, and publishers, and grew out of a wider, ongoing debate over the nature of journalists’ interpretive responsibilities.

## Keywords

Interpretive reporting, journalism ethics, literary journalism, magazine publishing, narrative journalism, New Journalism, objectivity

Two years into his term as editor-in-chief of *Harper’s* magazine, Willie Morris would ponder the task he had set for himself. He had been chosen in 1967, at age 32, to make the nation’s oldest magazine more relevant and contemporary, and by all accounts had done just that. Morris had devoted an entire issue to Norman Mailer’s edgy account of the March on the Pentagon (and another to an excerpt from William Styron’s controversial novel *Confessions of Nat Turner*); created a home for talented reporters like David Halberstam, Larry L. King, Gay Talese, and Marshall Frady; and inspired occasional expressions of concern and outrage from long-time readers and some of the magazine’s sales people. Now, writing a progress report for his publisher, John Cowles Jr, from ‘somewhere in Minnesota’, Morris (1969) cited Mailer’s stories on the Pentagon march and the 1968 political conventions as exemplars of the new *Harper’s*. Mailer had done nothing less than ‘revolutionize magazine journalism by an inventive new form which probed the realities behind contemporary politics and protest’. He had ‘brought the journalistic and literary impulses together, making of reportorial approaches an abiding imaginative literature’. Looking to the future, Morris argued, *Harper’s* ‘must go deeper, to real human causes, to the core and substance of our malaise’, and ‘show its readers where the country is going and try to do something about it’.

Anyone who studies literary journalism will find such claims familiar. Our scholarship often speaks of the personal engagement that immersion reporting requires, and the deep truths about human behavior that it seeks. Literary journalists (and the scholars who love them) imagine themselves on an interpretive quest in which reporters deploy an ensemble of literary techniques to make sense of ‘true stories’ (Sims, 2007). That quest is at once epistemological, existential, and ethical. Literary journalists assert a knowledge claim when they reject the traditional news story’s contrived display of objectivity and routinized, formulaic structure. They seek to capture social complexity in all its richness and nuance, and to celebrate the integrity and cultural authority of the individual reporter. Sometimes, this quest carries existential overtones. ‘We tell ourselves stories in order to live’, was Joan Didion’s (1979) much-quoted formulation: ‘We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices’ (p. 11). As David Eason (1990) has perceptively argued, the unwillingness of writers such as Mailer and Didion to accept

easy closure in their reports signified the immensity of the interpretive task they faced and the frailty of the narratives we use to make sense of the world. Finally, literary journalism has often embodied a sense of moral purpose, as when Morris' report to his publisher defends his writers' effort to blend literature and reportage, write stylishly, and confront 'our malaise'.

If we remember that Morris is writing a report to his publisher, we may notice something else: a conviction that *Harper's* approach to literary journalism grows out of the specific social and political conditions of that era. Elsewhere in his report, Morris describes his magazine as confronting a moment when 'America is profoundly at war with itself'; as editor, he feels the need to 'act upon ... the doubt and turmoil and uneasiness of his generation'. I want to argue that we need a more institutionally situated history of literary journalism to place alongside our studies of writerly technique.<sup>1</sup> Long-form narrative reporting must find its niche within an existing system of media production and distribution. It addresses its claims for distinction to social peers (or would-be peers) who serve as gatekeepers of literary reputation. Market demand and reader demographics make some styles of work more commercially plausible than others. Organizational routines – how editors solicit, read, and critique submissions – shape a story's final form. And the relations connecting these participants – writers, editors, readers, publishers, critics – are mediated by the larger society's discourse, which assigns value and status to their activities. In a dozen different ways, literary journalism not only reports on society but enacts the social: in the imagined reader that it addresses, in the authorial voice the writer chooses, in the venue chosen to distribute the story, and in the meaning imputed to its reports.

The New Journalism of the 1960s illustrates the methods and value of an institutionally situated approach to the history of literary journalism.<sup>2</sup> This is because the New Journalism aroused extensive comment in its time; advocates and critics alike believed it was something worth arguing about. That era has also left a considerable archival record that documents the market strategies of magazines such as *Esquire*, *New York*, and *Harper's*, and the relations between its writers, editors, readers, and publishers, making it easier to learn about the organizational processes that ushered the stories into print. My argument seeks to sharpen and qualify the familiar claim that the New Journalism was an expression of its times. The work that commentators labeled New Journalism was more than a response to a moment of widespread discontent, more than the coming of age of a new generation of inventive writers, and more than the sign of a wider revolt into style. It was also a response to a broader interpretive crisis in the journalism profession that was decades in the making. The New Journalism was the product of many forces, including changes in the media marketplace, reporters' dissatisfaction with newspaper careers, collaborations between talented writers and visionary editors, and a sustained epoch of social dislocation that made understanding public life an urgent task for writers, readers, and publications.

Using the New Journalism as our example also allows us to reconsider how we approach the history of literary journalism more generally. Questions of continuity and discontinuity run through all forms of historical writing, of course, but have been particularly vexing in studies of literary journalism. John Hartsock's (2000) history of the field, for example, reminds us of the form's long traditions of 'heightened subjectivity' (p. 247). Much of the scholarship published in the journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies similarly stresses continuities in the genre across national boundaries and epochs. At other moments, our historiography emphasizes discontinuity, as scholars attempt to distinguish literary journalism from conventional news reporting, the essay, and the memoir. And so the debate rages. Should we portray literary journalism as a continuous tradition of literary

invention? Or as a stylized approach to journalism distinct from the more familiar and conventional work that surrounds it? The decision to stress continuity or discontinuity may depend less upon our judgment of the essential traits of an individual work than upon the sorts of evidence we choose to examine. If we focus on literary technique, we will more easily notice the use of similar narrative devices in different combinations across time and space (Bak and Reynolds, 2011). If we focus on the meanings attributed to certain styles of work, however, we will more easily notice discontinuity; the same style of work, resituated, might be taken to mean something different. The institutional history of literary journalism that I propose emphasizes questions of this second sort. It does not displace the study of technique, but it does seek to emphasize processes of production and the culturally specific ways in which groups attribute meaning to a particular writer, publication, or narrative style at a given moment.

The New Journalism aptly illustrates the value of this approach. The discussion of whether it was actually new is bootless, as is the conclusion that it must have been meaningless if its advocates cannot convince us that it was new, as claimed. Criticisms of the texts themselves cannot explain why advocates considered it something different, or why critics felt compelled to debunk its novelty. The meaning of the New Journalism emerges only out of the close study of the institutional relationships that gave it life.

My argument proceeds in two steps. First, I summarize a decades-long debate over journalists' powers of interpretation that would make discussion of the New Journalism meaningful (and contentious). Although the concept of objectivity figured importantly in that debate, it was not its singular focus. Journalists themselves were among the first to express reservations about the meaning of objectivity in news reporting. American reporters, editors, and publishers recognized the intellectual and ethical complexity of their work during a moment of profound social change and political conflict. Journalists deployed the term *interpretation* to figure out where they stood in relation to Communism, civil rights, feminism, Vietnam, rebellious youth, and the sexual revolution; to affirm the cultural authority of the narratives they were creating; and to justify the daily newspaper's continuing importance in a media marketplace being reconfigured by television, special interest magazines, and paperback books.

Second, I explore the ways in which the New Journalism came to shape this ongoing discussion of journalists' habits of interpretation. My approach focuses upon the organizational practices that connected writers, editors, and publications rather than on the free-floating zeitgeist of that tortured era. Eason has beautifully captured the angst one finds in the writings of Mailer, Didion, and Hunter Thompson, and described how their grasp of that age's anxiety encouraged ambiguity, uncertainty, and hesitance in their narratives. By contrast, he argues, writers such as Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese seemed more at ease with their judgments of reality, and believed that in-depth reporting could adequately capture Americans' experience. I want to argue that social and political unrest created a market opportunity for both writers and publications. The writers who came to be described as New Journalists styled themselves as interpreters of large social trends (and that was true across both groups of writers Eason analyzed), and magazines like *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and *New York* sought the work of those writers in order to create an identity that would appeal to educated, upscale readers. The ethical challenges of doing literary journalism thus emerge not only from the intrinsic difficulties of the work itself – writers negotiating the delicate relations between subjects, stories, and truth – but from the moral claims made on its behalf. How did writers, editors, and publications explain what they were up to, and why it mattered?

## The interpretive turn in American journalism

The journalism profession's discussion of interpretation often appears tucked between the lines of its discussion of objectivity. When journalists and scholars pair those terms, they more typically nod to the latter. Objectivity has been treated as the powerful, dominant norm that defines American journalists' professional identity, and interpretation as the day-to-day challenge that calls that deep philosophical commitment to objectivity into existence. For example, even though Michael Schudson (2001) acknowledges that in the 1930s, 'At the very moment that journalists claimed "objectivity" as their ideal, they also recognized its limits' (p. 164), he argues that objectivity has remained the 'the moral norm American journalists live by in their professional lives, use as a means of social control and social identity, and accept as the most legitimate grounds for attributing praise and blame' (p. 167). Other scholars have described a longer ongoing dialogue between the two concepts. In his survey of objectivity in journalism, Stephen Maras (2013) argues for a 'dynamic relationship between objectivity and interpretation' (p. 133). He describes the profession's early view of objectivity as passive and subtractive – the elimination of all values, judgments, emotions, and perspective from one's reporting – and argues for interpretive reporting as an active and additive approach to objectivity – an affirmation of the profession's commitment to critical perspective, fairness, and thoroughness. Stephen Ward (2004) similarly critiques the limits of 'traditional objectivity' – the effort to separate facts and values – although he recognizes that even such an overly simplified concept of objectivity often grew out of an ethical impulse: 'The objective journalist is a rule-bound Cartesian, searching for certainty and absolute facts in a confusing, deceitful world' (p. 256).<sup>3</sup> Ward proposes a 'pragmatic objectivity' that takes for granted interpretation as humans' mode of being in the world, and treats objectivity as a systematic, culturally nuanced method for evaluating journalism's forms of truth-seeking (p. 307).

Many accounts of US media history define objectivity deontologically, as a first principle that allows journalists to respond to the challenge of interpretation. But what if we were to reverse our perspective, calling interpretation to the front stage and nudging objectivity to the rear? Rather than treating objectivity as an end in itself, an axial principle that commands the devotion of any true professional, we could treat it as a rhetorical strategy that journalists use to explain their work to themselves and justify it to others (Tuchman, 1972; Ward, 2004: 3). The reasons for that choice given by American journalists have been as much historical as philosophical, as many commentators on objectivity have noted (Forde, 2007: 230–232; Maras, 2013: 22–57; Schudson, 2008: 33–34; Ward, 2004: 214–219). Objectivity helped journalists portray their work as professional, scientific, nonpartisan, and ethical. It also helped them manage an impossible task: turning the dislocations of politics, economics, and society into intelligible news. Americans' experience of being propagandized by their own government in World War I foreshadowed the difficulties that citizens and journalists alike would face in making sense of complex global events (Karp, 1979: 216–245; Lippmann, 1922; Sproule, 1997). The 1930s made that struggle for interpretation palpable. Anthony Smith (1980) argues that world events made American journalists skeptical of their own routines and the organizations that employed them. Objectivity arose out of uncertainty, he writes, 'out of a world where values had ceased to be widely agreed upon or universal but were merely relative'. It was a 'refuge' not a 'quest', and journalists' stories came to read like 'the remnant of reality left behind when the reader had been protected from the one-sided truths of the press agent and the double-edged truths of the politician' (p. 61). Herbert Brucker (1937), journalism educator and later editor-in-chief of the *Hartford Courant*, conceded that 'this idea of interpretation in

the news goes against the grain of the American newspaper man', but said that the complexity of the world had overtaken the profession's conception of itself:

Nowadays, what with the WPA, sit-down strikes, fascism, dust storms, wars that are not wars, the A plus B theorem, silver nationalization, the Comité des Forges, import quotas, Father Coughlin, cosmic rays, nonintervention agreements to screen intervention, and unemployment, news is different. There must be interpretation. (p. 11)

Evidence of an interpretive turn could be found everywhere in the United States in the 1930s. Scholars often mention the American Society of Newspaper Editors' (ASNE) 1933 resolution encouraging newspapers to devote 'attention and space to explanatory and interpretative news' (Forde, 2007: 230; Landers, 2005: 15, citing Schudson, 1978: 147–148). Throughout that decade news organizations developed narrative forms to add depth and perspective to their reporting (Landers, 2005: 14–15; Winfield, 1987: 698–699). They expanded their use of bylined syndicated columnists, creating a stage on which elite American journalists such as Walter Lippmann, Arthur Krock, and Raymond Clapper could perform their expertise for a national audience. Backgrounders, wrap-ups, sidebars, 'situationers', 'interpretives', and similar story forms became more common, as did the use of weekly news summaries. On Sunday, 27 January 1935, the *New York Times* introduced a section called 'The News of the Week in Review', which included editorials, letters to the editor, and brief, briskly opinionated analyses of current events. Newspapers embraced these storytelling forms partly in response to the increasing popularity of *Time* magazine. By 1938, James Baughman (2001)\_notes, *Time* had become 'a fixture in the middle-class home' (p. 37). Although less comprehensive than the *New York Times*, its scope of coverage compared favorably to that of respected dailies in other cities. *Time's* tone of omniscience, its 'willingness to "know"' distinguished it from newspapers: 'Week to week *Time* could synthesize many individual occurrences, tell one story and often derive conclusions from it' (p. 48). Looking back upon these evolving practices, journalism educator Curtis MacDougall decided to change the name of the new edition of his 1932 textbook, from *Reporting for Beginners* to *Interpretative Reporting*. MacDougall said that in the past 6 years newsgatherers and news agencies had significantly changed their methods: 'The trend is unmistakably in the direction of combining the functions of interpreter with that of report, after about a half-century during which journalistic ethics called for a strict differentiation between narrative and commentator' (quoted in MacDougall, 1982: vii–viii).

The journalism profession's discussion of interpretation continued through the 1950s in trade and professional journals. In the years following World War II, journalists confronted a new set of complex global issues and came to believe that their better educated readers needed more full, in-depth reporting. Reporters found themselves in conflict with federal agencies' policies for classifying and withholding information and with the federal government's habit of justifying such restrictions in the name of national security, as in the development and testing of atomic weapons (Davies, 2006: 33–39). They saw the ease with which Senator Joseph McCarthy promoted his anticommunist crusade by manipulating their habits of objectivity. McCarthy understood how his position as US senator made his words and activities newsworthy, and enabled him to barrage news organizations with charges and counter-charges that 'left reporters little time to confirm his allegations' (Davies, 2006: 42). David Davies (2006) argues that 'the McCarthy phenomenon accelerated the trend toward interpretation that was already underway' at major newspapers and the Associated Press (p. 43). McCarthy's behavior, and journalists' eventual resistance to it, soon became part of the profession's lore, a parable told to illustrate the shortcomings of traditional objectivity and the value of an aggressive, skeptical press.

Although less frequently noted in discussions of objectivity, the civil rights movement posed challenges of interpretation every bit as difficult. President Harry Truman's 1948 executive order desegregating the armed forces was soon followed by a series of vivid conflicts in the South that demanded news coverage. The aggressive harassment of Blacks by Citizens' Councils and other segregationist groups, the murder of Emmett Till, the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision on school desegregation, the Montgomery bus boycott, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus attempting to bar nine Black students from entering Little Rock Central High School, the spread of college sit-ins – each event created national news, and compelled the mainstream White press to reconsider its definition of balanced, objective, professional coverage. Roberts and Klibanoff (2006) observe that the Till case 'brought white reporters into the Deep South in unprecedented numbers', leaving their Northern readers 'shocked and shaken by what they read' (p. 87). The *Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors* made some effort to assess the press' performance ('Desegregation Coverage: A Further Look', 1956; 'The Integration Story: Four Southern Editors Appraise Newspaper Coverage', 1957; 'The Mob and the Newsmen', 1957), but participants in those forums often applied the most minimal standards of objectivity: Was the coverage thorough? Did it balance criticism of segregation with examples of where desegregation was working? Did it overemphasize episodes of violence? Did it show respect for Southern culture? The social ties that bound Northern and Southern editors limited the candor of this self-assessment. Southerners regularly filled leadership roles in the national professional organizations. Even respected liberal editors like Harry Ashmore, Ralph McGill, Hodding Carter, Jr, Mark Ethridge, and Jonathan Daniels hoped mostly to counterbalance the virulent segregationist voices in their communities and help the South find a more gradual and gentle path to integration (Roberts and Klibanoff, 2006: 24–42). The middle ground they imagined proved uninhabitable, however, given the violence regularly visited upon Blacks in the South. The call for voting and housing rights in the 1960s pushed the dialogue about race permanently onto the national stage, implicating Northern as well as Southern editors. ASNE responded with another series of self-assessments, inviting prominent civil rights activists to speak at its conventions ('Civil Rights and the Newspaper Editor', 1965; 'Civil Rights Combatants', 1964; 'Our Urban Dilemmas – Can We Lick Them?' 1967). Those conversations proved even more blunt and unsettling for editors.

Against this backdrop, editors – the people in a position to negotiate between the different parties and take the lead within editorial institutions – sought principles to guide their interpretations. Lester Markel (1953), Sunday editor of the *New York Times*, attempted to clarify the terms of the debate and make 'the case for interpretation' (p. 1). He argued against any concept of pure objectivity because all journalists exercised three forms of judgment: about which facts to include in a story, which facts to emphasize in the lead, and – especially if they were in an editing role, as Markel was – where to display the story in the newspaper. Journalists, in short, always chose, and their choices shaped readers' understanding of the news. Although he distinguished between opinion as 'subjective judgment' and interpretation as 'objective judgment' (p. 1), he insisted that 'the newspaper cannot succeed in informing unless it interprets' (p. 2). Interpretation created 'a deeper sense of the news' by capturing 'the color, the atmosphere, the human elements that give meaning to a fact' (p. 1).

Three years later, Lippmann would push the argument even further. Reflecting upon what editorial writing had become, Lippmann (1956) declared that



the old distinction between fact and opinion does not fit the reality of things, in part because the world had become more complicated and in part because we have all become more sophisticated about what are facts and about what are opinions. (p. 7)

The editorial writer was now expected to interpret and explain the news, not just express an opinion about it. As a result, 'no clear line can be drawn as to where the work of the reporter and the correspondent ends and where the work of the editorial writer begins'.

Markel returned to the topic in 1961, in response to an article by Walter Krebs, editor of the *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat* (Krebs, 1960). Krebs had dismissed interpretive writing as nothing more than a return to 'personal journalism'. He believed that a reporter 'cannot clarify a confused situation by interpreting it for the reader because the confusion is inherent in the news development itself' (p. 8). Krebs said the only way to maintain the confidence of the reader was to stick to factual reporting and provide background knowledge. Markel (1961) replied that he saw no way to report in depth without engaging in 'genuine interpretation' (p. 2). He believed that newspapers were up to the task, citing the *Times'* long success with its 'Review of the Week' section. If news reporters did not rise to that challenge, he said, they would be ceding the work of interpretation to television broadcasters, newsweeklies, 'Britannica', 'Winchell', or columnists (p. 2).

To be sure, other editors had argued versions of Krebs's position through the 1950s. Carl Lindstrom ('What Students Ask', 1953) of the *Hartford Times* wondered how any newsman could make sense of the complexity of Russian policy. Walter Jones (1954) of McClatchy Newspapers feared that it would prove easier for a journalist to offer an opinion or weave a stylish explanation than to do the tough legwork required by traditional reporting. Others said that if reporting were more 'penetrative' (Colburn, 1954) or complete (Hamilton, 1954), it would not require added interpretation. Similar arguments would be made in response to Markel's (1961) article (Pope, 1961; Thornton, 1961). Frank Ahlgren (1961) of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* identified the style conflict running quietly through the debate over interpretation: objectivity represented a commitment to old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting that uncovered facts and left interpretation to the reader and editorial writer; interpretation would make journalism an effete profession: 'Interpretive writing opens the door to the know-it-all and the superficial gentleman with the patronizing air' (p. 5).

Although the debate over the meaning and value of objectivity would continue, by the 1960s, most observers acknowledged that journalists needed to do a better job of interpreting the news (Ethridge, 1962). They tried harder to put the news into context, a trend that has continued to the present according to Fink and Schudson (2013). But terms like *contextual* or *explanatory reporting* do not fully capture the felt experience of that moment. Journalists painfully recognized that their traditional methods no longer captured the complexity of the world they were reporting. Their readers were better educated and more sophisticated, with a new range of media available to them. The 1950s had also brought journalists face to face with their own cultural prejudices. It was they, after all, who had denied Black editors membership to the ASNE and moved ever so slowly to hire Black reporters (Mellinger, 2012). And it was they who had consigned women reporters to the balcony of the congressional press gallery and to minor roles in their organizations (Robertson, 1992). Moderate Southern editors like Ethridge (1962) spoke of the difficulties of telling stories even about people such as themselves. The conflict over integration, he said, 'has driven the South ... back into introversion, into an isolationist mood, into an insularity so intense that it feels [like] embattled martyrdom' (p. 475).

The cultural authority of the daily newspaper as an institution was also in decline, and critics asked whether the news organizations themselves were to blame. Ben Bagdikian (1964) chided newspaper editors for being so thin-skinned. 'Of all the great institutions of our country', he said,

the press is the least subject to overall systematic study, it is the least cooperative with its critics and students, it runs less critical news of itself than of other segments of our social system and it is the most easily outraged at suggestions by other institutions that the press might have some serious failings. (p. 101)

Although the daily newspaper had become an educational institution, Bagdikian said, publishers and editors had not responded to the changing interests of their young, better educated audience: 'Public taste and awareness have risen very rapidly and this has left many operators of dailies and many editors bewildered at the loss of their old magic and, therefore, excitable in the fact of criticism' (p. 108).

## Institutional origins of the New Journalism

The New Journalism took root in that moment of change, in response to the larger profession's struggles over interpretation. Years before Tom Wolfe capitalized its name and declared it a movement, observers were talking about a 'new journalism' that covered society and politics differently. The pace of social change had accelerated, encouraging a wider interest in public affairs. College enrollments were booming, enlarging the audience of educated readers. Ambitious young reporters were forsaking the grind of daily deadlines, hoping to bear witness to the tumult. Leading editors and publishers began to wonder aloud whether the newspaper business was attracting the best available talent. The exploding market for paperback books (many of them used in college courses) created more opportunities for free-lance careers in long-form journalism, with writers building upon articles they had originally published in magazines (MacDougall, 1972: 79–86).

The literary style of Wolfe, Talese, Mailer, Thompson, Joan Didion, Joe McGinnis, Terry Southern, Garry Wills, and John Gregory Dunne may have resembled that of *New Yorker* writers, or of late-19th-century reporters like Stephen Crane or Hutchins Hapgood (Connery, 1990), but in the 1960s, it signified something different (Pauly, 1990). The instability and inadequacy of the larger profession's interpretive practices created an institutional space that made the New Journalism's experiments available for reflection and comment (and propelled the careers of a small but exceptional group of reporters). My discussion, therefore, draws mostly upon the experience of three magazines: *Esquire* under editor Harold Hayes, *Harper's* under Willie Morris, and *New York* under Clay Felker. Although versions of the New Journalism could be found in several publications in the 1960s and early 1970s, including the *National Observer*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone*, *Scanlan's*, *Atlantic*, and *Look*, stories published in *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and *New York* attracted the most comment and controversy. Each in its own way, these publications challenged three conventional beliefs: that newspapers offered the best venue for serious reporting, that objectivity was the surest means to guarantee the cultural authority of a report, and that readers highly valued a dispassionate style of interpretation.

The New Journalism made its home in commercial magazines rather than in the daily newspaper. By the 1960s, some commentators were arguing that the magazine article, rather than the news story or editorial column, offered the best venue for in-depth reporting. In a 1962 lecture at the University of Minnesota, John Fischer (1963), editor of *Harper's*, said the hectic pace of newspaper reporting had always left him feeling that he had not done his best work, or been able to explore complex issues as

fully as he wanted. Fischer said he found magazine reporting less formulaic. The narrow conventions of objectivity meant that 'I was constantly reporting what somebody said, even if I knew that it was untrue, misleading or self-serving' (p. 199). Magazine journalism involved him in 'recording and analyzing history as it is being made' (p. 200), not just reporting news.

Norman Podhoretz (1958), editor of *Commentary*, noted a parallel shift from fiction to nonfiction in American literature. It wasn't just that novelists and short story writers were trying their hand at a different genre, but that

the discursive writing of people who think of themselves primarily as novelists turns out to be more interesting, more lively, more penetrating, more intelligent, more forceful, more original – in short, better – than their fiction, which they and everyone else automatically treat with great respect. (p. 74)

Podhoretz did not know what to call these new forms of nonfiction, but he believed that magazine articles were combining artfulness and practicality in a way that readers found attractive. Writing years later, the magazine historian Theodore Peterson (1974) distinguished the New Journalism from the old magazine formula of 'an anecdotal lead, an informal summary paragraph that staked out the subject to be covered, a series of generalizations illustrated by anecdotes or examples, and an anecdote or generality to close' (p. 174).

Upheaval in the magazine business created a space for the New Journalism in general interest publications that were trying to reinvent themselves for a new market. The large magazines that David Abrahamson (1996) calls 'premier mass-market flagships' – *Life*, *Look*, *Saturday Evening Post* – emerged from World War II as embodiments of American consensus. By the early 1960s, each had begun to falter, the victim of competition with television for advertising dollars, inept management, flawed circulation strategies, and the changing interests of readers (Abrahamson, 1996: 19–24). A new class of special interest magazines came to the fore, catering to consumers' interests in leisure activities, including driving, music, sports and recreation, home and garden, and travel. These new specialized publications offered advertisers an integrated product in which both stories and ad copy spoke to the passions of a tightly defined target audience. General interest magazines, which had traditionally appealed to the broad center of American life, found themselves saddled with legacy facilities, enormous production costs, and no marketing strategy to sustain their traditional self-conception. By the early 1970s, the list of victims included *Collier's* (d. 1957), *Saturday Evening Post* (d. 1969), *Look* (d. 1971), *Coronet* (d. 1971) and *Life* (d. 1972).

The most notable exception to this trend was *Esquire*. In the mid-1950s, publisher Arnold Gingrich began remaking the magazine in order to capture what he called the 'new sophistication' of American life. In a 1960 talk to the sales staff, Hayes explained his editorial concept for the magazine. Hayes wanted *Esquire* to seek readers they believed to be 'knowledgeable, curious, influential, dynamic'. He imagined *Esquire* as 'a sort of supercharged FYI memorandum routed to the officers, dens and drawing rooms of the best informed and most curious people in America' (Hayes, 1960). At *Harper's*, Morris (1968) said he sought an 'intelligent and sophisticated reader' who was no longer satisfied with just being informed: '[The *Harper's* reader] is tired of myths and can sense falseness a mile away. He wants to be challenged, enraged, tested, and, most of all, emotionally involved'. Clay Felker's *New York*, read mostly by upscale Manhattanites, hoped to capture the city as a state of mind: 'We want to cover everything about New York', an early promotional piece would declare (Felker, n.d.). In each case,

interpretation offered a path to market distinction. Each magazine promised a style of cosmopolitanism – a hip, ironic, polished take on social trends; a passionate, literate engagement with current political and social problems; an inside-dopester’s account of life in the world’s most dynamic city. Achieving this style of knowingness required the management of what Garry Wills (1983) has called ‘lead time’. Monthlies like *Esquire* and *Harper’s* could not cover events quickly as daily newspapers or newsweeklies. They needed to assign writers to topics months ahead of deadline, to allow time for the in-depth research they were seeking. So the editors urged their staffs to watch for trends, and to cultivate writers who seemed *au courant* and could take an event that had already passed and make it interesting to a reader.

This commitment to interpretation as a form of market distinction led each magazine to search for (and, ideally, monopolize) culturally authoritative writers. Hayes’ decade-long love–hate relationship with Mailer was sustained by his recognition that Mailer was *Esquire’s* hottest writer, the one whose work most stimulated sales and response in the early 1960s. Hayes was constantly reevaluating the talent available to him, often rejecting story ideas from writers he personally admired but whose style did not fit the magazine persona he was creating. One of Morris’ first acts as editor was to secure King and Halberstam as contributing editors, and to reach out to others – Didion, Dunne, Mailer, Talese – to encourage them to write for *Harper’s*.<sup>4</sup> Felker originally pitched *New York* to his contributing editors as a writer’s magazine, a place that would regularly publish the work of established reporters like Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, and George Goodman (‘Adam Smith’) as well as that of newer contributors like Gloria Steinem. In such matters, the New Journalism responded to the familiar needs and routines of the magazine business. In each case, however, editors played a crucial role. Hayes coined the term *conceptual editing* to describe his efforts to work closely with writers in the initial stages, to sharpen their sense of the gist of a story. After the direction and tone of the story was set, he allowed the writer a wide berth and only lightly edited most copy. Felker told his staff that he wanted ‘sharply angled’ stories in which writers added special insight to their account of an event. In an article for *Antioch Review*, Felker (1969) argued that the individual magazine editor had more discretion than the newspaper editor to shape the character and tone of his or her publication. That discretion often involved making curious and improbable matches between writer and subject, as when Hayes invited Jean Genet and William Burroughs to help *Esquire* cover the 1968 Democratic National Convention (after Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter had turned him down).

*Esquire*, *Harper’s*, and *New York* each set high expectations for the stylishness of the writing and the comprehensiveness of the research they expected. Contributors whose work was solicited and accepted praised the freedom of voice they were allowed. Because each magazine, in its own way, proposed to put its arms around society, these editors insisted on research consistent with that ambition. Wills (1983: xv) said that writing for such magazines often required more research than could be justified by the fee paid. Writers nonetheless eagerly sought to publish in *Esquire*, *Harper’s*, and *New York* because they recognized that these magazines would showcase their work. The growth in book reading helped outstanding magazine writers leverage lucrative book contracts, and it was those contracts that permanently freed them from newspaper jobs and the indignities of free-lance magazine writing. The financial possibilities of this career path can be seen in the ever-larger advances being given Norman Mailer. *Harper’s* paid him US\$10,000 for his 1968 ‘Steps of the Pentagon’ article, and New American Library offered him a US\$17,500 advance on the book version. A year later World Publishing offered a US\$50,000 advance for the book that would become *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, based upon his

convention stories for *Harper's*. A year or so later, Little Brown would offer Mailer a US\$448,000 advance for his book, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, based upon a story about the Apollo 11 astronauts originally serialized in *Life*.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1960s the New Journalism produced a number of best-sellers. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* earned nearly US\$3 million from the sale of books and rights in its first year ('*In Cold Blood: An American tragedy*', 1966), winning the attention of many writers, and George Goodman's 1968 book *The Money Game* spent 67 weeks on the *Publisher's Weekly* nonfiction bestseller list, much of that time in first place.

## Interpretation and the quest for moral purpose

The New Journalism took shape within a social network of writers, editors, and publishers, in response to an ongoing debate within the professional journalism community over the nature of its interpretive responsibilities. In that sense, the origins of the New Journalism were ethical in a way that we have not fully recognized. That debate over ethics was always institutionally situated. It involved not only individual reporters pondering different ways to tell stories, but magazine editors talking to reporters about the social significance of their material and about their choices of story angle, tone, and point of view. All this is in itself unremarkable. One could easily argue that similar processes of collaboration occur in all forms of professional reporting, in newspapers and book publishing as well as in magazines.

The New Journalism was significant because it made the interpretive work of the profession visible, palpable, and available for comment. The history of the New Journalism thus tells us something important about the social construction of moral purpose. By that phrase, I mean to call attention to the public meanings we attribute to our private ethical choices. Journalists interpret – they choose what to report, and how, and why – and we publicly discuss those ethical choices in an effort to render them intelligible and plausible. By the nature of their profession, journalists inevitably find themselves at the very center of conflicts over the moral purposes of their work (Pauly, 2009). And while all reporters make a living interpreting the lives of others, literary journalists may experience the contradictions of such work with special poignance. They must ask themselves what it means to immerse oneself, to tag along in another's life, to write stories for anonymous readers about subjects that one has come to know personally, or to make the intimate details of another's life available for public scrutiny. Journalists, like sociologists and anthropologists, must always make sense of these social dynamics of fieldwork. And in the end, as David Craig (2006) reminds us, 'All of the storytelling devices writers employ and editors evaluate have ethical implications' (p. 1).

By the early 1960s American journalists realized that the struggle for interpretation could not be resolved by appeals to the objectivity of their accounts of reality. They began to recognize that they made interpretations, but not in conditions of their own making. A journalist starts with the assumption that the work of interpretation is a socially meaningful activity. When pitching a story to an editor, the journalist asserts the social value of his or her interpretation, or works with the editor to discover that value. The historical moment of an article may add force to its intellectual or moral claims, or help build the reputation of the publication in which it appears. As writers build their careers, they begin to imagine the sort of interpreter they would like to be, the forms of reality they would like to imagine, and the sorts of influence they would like to exert.

None of this happens in a vacuum. Institutional structures, processes, and relationships lend form and meaning to all these social imaginings. The enduring significance of the New Journalism is that it helps

us understand the journalism profession's struggle over interpretation as a permanent, institutional dilemma, not just a private quandary. Our studies of the ethical choices literary journalists make need to consider the social and material conditions under which they work, and the wider moral purposes they hope their stories will serve.

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## Notes

1. My approach draws upon Robert Darnton's scholarship on the history of books, particularly his concept of a 'circuit of communication'. One simple example, 'Authors are readers themselves. By reading and associating with other readers and writers, they form notions of genre and style and a general sense of the literary enterprise, which affects their texts' (Darnton, 1982: 67). In the hothouse atmosphere of New York City publishing, writers and editors were constantly reading and responding to one another's work and framing their own ambitions with reference to what others were publishing.
2. For a similar approach that applies Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *field* and *habitus* to the work of journalists, see Broersma (2010: 30–32).
3. See Glasser (1984) for an opposing view: that objectivity is a bias that precludes journalists from fulfilling their deepest ethical responsibilities.
4. One can find examples of these invitations in Morris' correspondence in the *Harper's Magazine Records*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. For an overview of Morris's efforts to combine in-depth analysis and fine writing, see Hudson and Townsend (2009).
5. Financial information about Mailer's book advances and magazine fees can be found in containers 601.8, 834.5, and 835.5, Norman Mailer Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

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