



Neamp

Keeping history together: the role of social memory in the nature and functions of news

Carolyn Kitch*

Abstract

Over the past three decades, memory studies have drawn the interest of scholars across the globe and across disciplines, including my own field of journalism. This perspective has provided a seemingly new theoretical lens through which to view news production, content, and audiences. Yet memory always has been implicit in the nature and function of journalism. This essay discusses five ways of understanding present journalism in terms of its uses of the past.

Keywords:

Memory. Journalism. Narrative. Photography. Commemoration.

Resumo

Durante as últimas três décadas, estudos de memória tem atraído o interesse de estudiosos em todo o mundo e em todas as disciplinas, incluindo o campo do jornalismo. Essa perspectiva tem proporcionado uma lente de novos teóricos através da qual se pode ver a produção de notícias, conteúdo e público. No entanto, a memória sempre foi implícita na natureza e na função do jornalismo. Este ensaio discute cinco maneiras de compreender o jornalismo atual em termos de usos do passado.

1 News as narrative and lesson

Journalists and audiences alike are drawn to “a good story” because we recognize it. Whether it is a story about a corrupt politician or a triumphant athlete, a terrible accident or a courageous rescue, its basic plot and characters already are in our memory. “The facts, names, and details change almost daily, but the framework into which they fit—the symbolic system—is more enduring,” write S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne.¹ We understand our world through cultural narratives that are lasting because they are socially constructed and

* Carolyn Kitch, Ph.D., is a Professor of Journalism at Temple University and the author of three books; *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media*, *Pages from the Past: History and Memory in American Magazines* and *Journalism in a Culture of Grief* (co-authored with Janice Hume). She is a former magazine editor and writer.

¹ Bird, S. Elizabeth and Robert W. Dardenne. “Exploring the narrative qualities of news,” in *Social meanings of news* (pp. 333-350), ed. Dan Berkowitz. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997. p. 335. Also see: Lule, Jack. *Daily news, eternal stories: the mythological role of journalism*. New York: Guilford Press, 2001.



Neamp

socially circulated, not only through journalism, but also through literature, folklore, theater, art, entertainment media, and other forms of communication.

In order to be remembered, news events must be explained, or at least defined as one thing or another. As James Carey observed, explanation in news often is achieved through personalization, a reportorial choice of featuring newsmakers who appear to act for reasons that we can understand in retrospect.² Though their tale is nonfiction, these actors star in plotted dramas that end in familiar lessons of literature and folklore: crime doesn't pay, hard work is rewarded, heroes surface in times of crisis, hope emerges from tragedy.³ Within such frameworks, unexpected occurrences become accounts that make sense, tales that are resolved in terms of what "we" will remember to have learned from them.

In this sense, journalism can be understood as part of a broader narrative repertoire through which we routinely recollect in order to make sense of our present surroundings, a process of harnessing "memory in action," to use the words of Barbara DeConcini.⁴ Moreover, what is newsworthy is, by definition, potentially memorable, and what strikes us as memorable tends to make news. Andrew Hoskins notes that "one can see a strong correlation between that which drives news agendas ('news values') and the features that are claimed to shape enduring memories such as a surprising or shocking events; newsworthiness is translated into collective memory through striking images and accounts."⁵

2. News as snapshot and scrapbook

As Hoskins suggests, we *see* as well as read or hear news stories. Despite current claims that the most vivid visual news experiences lie in interactive digital media, the best-known examples of visual memory are in fact still images, whether they first appeared in print or video. What is preserved in our minds, and often is later revisited in anniversary or

² Carey, James. "Why and how? the dark continent of American journalism," in *Reading the news* (pp. 146-196), eds. Robert Manoff and Michael Schudson. New York: Pantheon, 1986.

³ The latter lesson is what religion scholar Edward Linenthal calls "the progressive narrative" that circulates after a major tragedy. See: Linenthal, Edward T. *The unfinished bombing: Oklahoma City in American memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁴ DeConcini, Barbara. *Narrative remembering*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990. p. 106.

⁵ Hoskins, Andrew. "News and memory: old and new media pasts," in *The Routledge companion to news and journalism* (pp. 460-470), ed. Stuart Allen. London: Routledge, 2010. pp. 463-464.



Neamp

summary journalism, is the moment of memory imprint, “a neat slice of time, not a flow,” wrote Susan Sontag.⁶ The aircraft exploding in the sky, the winning goal stretching the net, men landing on the moon—even though all of these events transpired through motion, they are frozen in our recollection in the form of what psychologists call “flashbulb memories.”

That metaphor suggests that, at the moment we first witness a major news event, we mentally take a picture of it to keep in our minds. Yet most of us “remember” a particular picture not necessarily because we ourselves saw the event unfold in real time (and if we did, we almost certainly did so through media), but because we have seen it over and over again in mediated reuses of it. The picture is “taken” repeatedly, it is framed and reframed, and it is displayed in photo albums whose contextual content changes over time. In his foundational theorizing of collective memory more than eighty years ago, Maurice Halbwachs used a similar metaphor, likening memory to a process of “retouching [a] portrait” so that “new images overlay the old.”⁷

It is often said of famous photographs that a certain picture acquired iconic status because it was instantly recognized to signify the ultimate meaning of event. Yet of course we do not instantly know the ultimate meaning of an event; only through photography’s circulation within journalistic narratives do we recognize—in other words, draw on our past cultural repertoire to realize—what story, what “truth,” it tells. Even most “flashbulb” memories make their first impressions in tandem with news stories, and their power grows with the collection, circulation, and reuse of images in journalism over time.

3. News as conscience and ceremony

Photographs are a form of witnessing, and when they are used within journalism, they can pinpoint and heighten the moral lesson of the news narrative. Writing about news audiences’ responses to photojournalism depicting atrocity, Barbie Zelizer notes that “bearing witness moves individuals from the personal act of ‘seeing’ to the adoption of a public stance

⁶ Sontag, Susan. *On photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973. p. 17. This point has been made by many scholars and photography critics; also see: Goldberg, Vicki. *The power of photography: how photographs changed our lives*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1993.

⁷ Halbwachs, Maurice. *The collective memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter. New York: Harper & Row, 1950. p. 72.



Neamp

by which they become part of a collective working through trauma together.”⁸ Sontag called such photography “an ethics of seeing.”⁹ In its initial recording and eventual recirculation of words and images that explain important events, news media make moral judgments about their society.

As many journalism critics have argued, news narrative (about ordinary as well as extraordinary news) tends to uphold the status quo and promote social order as it is defined by governments already in power. Yet memorable news events are made sense of in ways that sometimes shine light on social tensions not routinely apparent in news. Survivors of disasters, for instance, often contest or contradict declarations of political or economic “closure.” More generally, in its documentation of extreme social disorder—the image of police dogs lunging at a child, the testimony about ethnic genocide—journalism can make powerful political statements, and, as they reappear in subsequent retrospective journalism, these moral judgments remain in memory long after the initial report.

There is a moral dimension, too, to the ceremonial nature of news coverage of historically important events. Some such events are unexpected, including natural disasters, mass murders, and the spontaneous public rituals enacted after such tragedies. Other events are anticipated, including coronations and inaugurations, weddings and funerals of public figures, and globally significant events such as the Olympics and the dawn of the Millennium. Scholars are quick to place the latter kinds of occasions into the category of “media events,” news events that are orchestrated in anticipation of news coverage, and Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz’s well-known term is generally used pejoratively.¹⁰ Yet it is precisely because of their vast mediation that these are among the most compelling kinds of memory events, and that journalists actively shape their lasting cultural and political meaning. Because most people can “participate” in such events only through media, journalists are not merely witnesses but conductors of the broader cultural ceremony of celebration or mourning that takes place.¹¹

4. News as keepsake and historic record

⁸ Zelizer, Barbie. “Photography, journalism, and trauma,” in *Journalism after September 11* (pp. 48-68), ed. Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. p. 52.

⁹ Sontag, *On photography*. p. 3.

¹⁰ Dayan, Daniel and Elihu Katz. *Media events: the live broadcasting of history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

¹¹ Kitch, Carolyn and Janice Hume. *Journalism in a culture of grief*. New York: Routledge, 2008.



Neamp

Today, “media events” unfold in ways conducive not only to news *coverage* but also, and perhaps especially, to the creation of “special” or “collectible” media products. Those products are written and designed as material culture, as memory objects meant to be saved. The leading news organizations in such endeavors are those that have come to be called “legacy media”—prominent, corporate media invested primarily in print or traditional broadcast journalism. In recent years, such institutions repeatedly have marshaled their resources and reputations to create definitive records of major news events. In the United States, the three original broadcast television networks, the nation’s most influential newspapers, and its two surviving newsmagazines have dominated the market in the production of special editions, books, and DVDs explaining the historic meaning of events including the attacks of September 11 and the inauguration of the country’s first black president.

Though perhaps on not such a massively commercial scale, mainstream news institutions elsewhere in the world issue similar products. As in the United States, these special reports are not limited to tragic events. While scholars have shown more interest in memory of very serious subjects, keepsake journalism also routinely celebrates popular culture. The remarkable rise in this type of journalism over the past three decades suggests that the royal wedding of Prince William may result in even more media collectibles than the nuptials of his parents did.

Repackaging news as memory has become a survival strategy of the leading old-media brands as they compete in a new-media world. It has been embraced by smaller-scale media, as well, in their coverage of ordinary news. While online versions of (or alternatives to) newspapers may deliver daily news faster than their print counterparts, they are not as savable. Local journalism is in the memory business, too, in its documentation of club meetings, local award winners, community concerts, weddings, births, and deaths—events that are newsworthy only to those who will save their coverage in scrapbooks and attics. The appeal of such personalized memory content is one factor in the journalism profession’s recent interest in “hyperlocal” or “community” journalism. Increasingly, the personal is profitable.

5. News as conversation and community



Keepsake journalism lies at the intersection of history and memory, of the official and the personal. Reporters claim to author “the first draft of history,” yet in covering important events they also overtly speak on behalf of ordinary people. The reports they produce are simultaneously authoritative accounts of the event and conversational discussions of the meaning of the community drawn together by the event. This journalism is, at least ostensibly, a shared process of *commemoration*, and its voice often shifts into first-person plural, assessing what has happened *to us* and what will matter to us in the future.

When the memory event is local and relatively ordinary—a school sports championship or the anniversary of a town’s founding—news media will use their web sites to solicit individual audience members’ recollections, to be collected and then published in a special edition. Folk (especially children’s) art and folk ceremonies (such as parades, festivals, and fireworks) tend to feature prominently in news coverage of local memory events. When the memory event is understood as a matter of national (or other broadly cultural) memory, journalists consult experts and employ historic references—yet, interestingly, ordinary people become even *more* important in news narrative and imagery, which almost inevitably feature “typical” citizens who either have experienced or are reacting to the event.

The most common character in journalistic memory of war or disaster is an ordinary hero. This character — a person just like any of us who rose to greatness when called — is celebrated in news content by other ordinary people, quoted or pictured as individuals and in groups, paying tribute to the national (or generational or otherwise socially defined) “character” that is the lasting lesson of such sacrifice. In any country, this news story is something more than just an ideological display of patriotism (though it often is indeed that). It is also a moment in which the conventional hierarchies of journalistic sourcing and authorship are inverted, as the audience apparently decides who and what should be remembered.

6. Conclusion

When they construct social memory, journalists inclusively identify with audiences, reporting on behalf of all of us. They serve simultaneously as the conscience and the celebrants of the community united by the memorable event. They create historic documents,



Neamp

full of narrative lessons and iconic images, that we can keep so that in the future we may remember who we were and how we felt.

In all of these aspects, commemorative news reporting reminds us that journalism is not an exceptional profession, but rather one of several didactic institutions — others include museums, art, music, education, and even religion — whose relationships with their publics fluctuate when memory is at stake. As James Carey¹² famously contended, such journalism is not an account of culture; it *is* culture, a public expression blurring production and reception, reporting and ritual, and past and present.

7. References

Bird, S. Elizabeth and Robert W. Dardenne. “Exploring the narrative qualities of news.” In **Social meanings of news** (pp. 333-350), ed. Dan Berkowitz. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997.

Carey, James. **Communication as culture: essays on media and society**. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988.

Carey, James. “Why and how? the dark continent of American journalism.” In **Reading the news** (pp. 146-196), eds. Robert Manoff and Michael Schudson. New York: Pantheon, 1986.

Dayan, Daniel and Elihu Katz. **Media events: the live broadcasting of history**. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

DeConcini, Barbara. **Narrative remembering**. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990.

Goldberg, Vicki. **The power of photography: how photographs changed our lives**. New York: Abbeville Press, 1993.

¹² Carey, James. **Communication as culture: essays on media and society**. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988.



Neamp

Halbwachs, Maurice. **The collective memory**, trans. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter. New York: Harper & Row, 1950.

Hoskins, Andrew. "News and memory: old and new media pasts." In **The Routledge companion to news and journalism** (pp. 460-470), ed. Stuart Allen. London: Routledge, 2010.

Kitch, Carolyn and Janice Hume. **Journalism in a culture of grief**. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Linenthal, Edward T. **The unfinished bombing: Oklahoma City in American memory**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Lule, Jack. **Daily news, eternal stories: the mythological role of journalism**. New York: Guilford Press, 2001.

Sontag, Susan. **On photography**. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973.

Zelizer, Barbie. "Photography, journalism, and trauma." In **Journalism after September 11** (pp. 48-68), ed. Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.