



A Political History of Journalism

Géraldine Muhlmann

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Translated by Jean Birrell

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Introduction

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of technological advances in the Western democracies transformed journalism. The growth of railway transport facilitated the circulation of newspapers and assured them a far wider readership; the extension of the telegraphic communication network meant news could be gathered with greater frequency and from further afield. The newspaper ceased to be simply a forum for the expression of diverse opinions and became a source of news, ever more news, gathered by people who began to call themselves 'reporters'. The nascent press agencies increasingly established 'reporting' as the core of journalistic activity and, broadly speaking, journalism embarked on the path to its professionalization.

In the eloquent metaphor used by one media specialist to describe these changes, 'The press no longer gave voice, or less so. It relayed. The newspaper had been a voice. It became an echo.'¹ Unlike the 'voice', which comes from a particular place and is heard within a limited perimeter, the 'echo' comes from the immensity of the universe and reaches the most far-distant ears. In seeking to be an 'echo', therefore, the new journalism of the nineteenth century was setting out to interest a mass readership for the first time.

The mass circulation, cheap and popular press was effectively born in the decades before the mid-nineteenth century. The 'penny press' appeared in the United States in the 1830s. The *New York Sun*, founded in 1833, was a pioneer in the field, followed two years later by the *New York Herald*, which had a circulation of 40,000 at the end of fifteen months, and that rapidly reached 100,000. The 1830s saw a spectacular increase in the number of American newspapers and in the number of newspaper readers: in 1830 there were 650 weekly and 65 daily American papers, the latter with a circulation of around 1,200, that is, a global daily circulation of some 78,000; by 1840 there were 1,141

weeklies and 138 dailies, with an average circulation of 2,200 in the case of the latter, hence a global daily circulation of about 300,000.² Europe followed suit within a few decades: in France *Le Petit Journal*, which cost five centimes, was launched in 1863; *Le Petit Parisien* appeared in 1876, and *Le Matin* in 1883. In Great Britain, the 'halfpenny papers' were born in the 1880s, *The Evening News* in 1881, *The Star* in 1888.³

The experts see this popular press as having invented the modern concept of 'news'.⁴ It was only in the 1880s, however, they argue, that the 'reporter' truly became the new face of American journalism. Here, the two major events were the takeover of the *New York World* by Joseph Pulitzer, in 1883, and the purchase by William Randolph Hearst of the *New York Journal*, which became its most immediate rival. These two great papers are, for reporters, a sort of holy of holies.

Europe was not to be outdone: here, too, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the reporter was the emerging figure in the world of journalism.⁵ The cult of 'facts' was beginning to rule supreme, and the journalist-reporter set to work, that is, to observe and to write, on behalf of an ever larger public. In all the Western democracies, the 1880s marked a sort of beginning of modern journalism.

This is also the period when there emerged those concerns about journalism that have dogged it ever since. The criticisms have varied in content, but they all, then as now, start from the same sombre diagnosis: journalism is responsible for a powerful trend to homogenize the public sphere of opinions and gazes, which is prejudicial to democratic life, itself dependent on the exchange of a variety of points of view.

This diagnosis has been for some critics an opportunity to vent their hatred of democracy. This was the case with Gustave Le Bon, who, in 1895, published *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, in which he compared the new readers of newspapers to 'crowds'. For Le Bon, the 'crowd' was a gathering with essentially psychological characteristics; a readership could, therefore, though invisible, resemble a crowd, that is, be something he saw as hateful, incapable of subtlety, and paving the way for the degeneration of the French 'race'. For Le Bon, the press concentrated vices which were in practice inherent in democracy itself.

But there is also unease among thinkers who, in contrast, want a true democracy, plural and marked by multiple exchanges. Many of them point to the paradox of democracy, which, as it has developed, has led to the neutralization of conflicts, a 'reification' of discourses and gazes, and a 'closed society'. This is how the scholars of the Frankfurt School, for example, describe the new form of domination which characterizes contemporary society. In the 1940s Adorno and Horkheimer examined the new relationship to culture which had become dominant along with

industrial society;⁶ television, responsible for the destruction of critical thinking, was one of their chief targets.⁷ For Marcuse, the media played a major role in this 'trend to integrate, which, for the most part, proceeded without open terror: democracy consolidated domination more firmly than absolutism; administered liberty and instinctive repression became constantly renewed sources of productivity'.⁸ For Habermas, here heir to the first thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the advent of the mass circulation press marked the beginning of the corruption of Publicity, in the critical sense of the word (that is, of that virtuous exposition before the public to whom opinions are submitted so that they can be improved thanks to an exchange of opposing views) into a consummate 'Publicity', which dominates minds and standardizes judgements. The new media of the twentieth century, he believed, had only intensified this corruption, which dated back to the end of the nineteenth century.⁹

Current critics of television, though they sometimes proclaim the novelty of the problems posed by the omnipotence of television, offer analyses which are mostly little different in essentials from the concerns created by the press revolution at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Pierre Bourdieu, for example:

Television's power of diffusion means that it poses a terrible problem for the print media and for culture generally. Next to it, the mass circulation press that sent so many shudders up educated spines . . . doesn't seem like much at all. By virtue of its reach and exceptional power, television produces effects which, though not without precedent, are completely original.¹⁰

The last sentence of this passage suggests that it is, after all, a difference of degree rather than of kind that differentiates the current problems posed by the triumph of television from the effects of the press revolution of the late nineteenth century. Increasing 'uniformity' remains central to Bourdieu's analysis,¹¹ which he, too, sees as a pernicious form of domination over individuals and, in particular, as a neutralization of the conflicts which permeate the social sphere. Media 'events' are thus designed not to 'offend anyone'; they 'must never bring up problems' or, if they do, 'only problems that don't pose problems', as when, in daily life, we talk about the rain and the fine weather in order to avoid any subject that might cause annoyance or lead to conflict.¹²

No one who has observed the development of modern journalism closely can deny that there exists within it a desire to *integrate* the community of its readers (potentially the entire political community): reporters unify

their public behind them. This journalistic process of *unifying* can be traced in history, whether one studies how journalism speaks about, presents and understands itself, or only how it is practised, that is, its 'productions'. This *unifying* is probably the big idea of modern journalism.

Does this mean, however, that we have to keep automatically repeating what is said about it, that it kills democratic conflictuality and leads to a blandness of attitudes? Is it as simple as that? Should we not recognize that journalistic practices differ? Are there not many types of 'unifying' journalism, some of which, far from shunning whatever causes conflict, base their practice of the unifying process on a conflict they reveal and activate?

Also, if the conflicts that are revealed in the gaze of 'unifying' journalists are dismissed as too limited and too constrained, should we not ask whether the history of journalism contains other approaches? Should we not ask whether a journalism of 'resistance' has ever emerged in opposition to the dominant unifying journalism? Does there exist, and in what forms, a journalism that seeks to re-inject a more radical conflict into the democratic community, that seeks to make visible what we, united and clustered round our 'centre', do not see, or no longer see, that is, a journalism that *decentres*?

It is time to put platitudes aside and address these questions. This book, as will have become clear, has no interest in hasty judgements on the routine mediocrity of journalism. Since the criticism of journalism is generally directed at a certain journalistic 'modernity', let us dare to study this seriously: what can we learn from the history of journalism since the end of the nineteenth century? And since what lies at the heart of this criticism is a heavy sigh in the face of a hopelessly homogeneous gaze, one that smoothes over social reality and irons out its failings and its contradictions, let us examine the journalistic gaze seriously, beginning with the question of conflict: how can it present conflict, misunderstanding and confrontation? Is it really helpless to do this? Might it not be possible to distinguish journalisms that are primarily 'unifying', that reveal a conflict only as a test for the political community, enabling it ultimately to reconstitute itself and to reactivate within it the feeling of a 'we', and journalisms that are 'decentring', that seek to expose a conflict more serious, more threatening to the collective identity, and more disturbing for the 'we'? What are the advantages, the difficulties and the limitations of each of these approaches?

I have discussed elsewhere the philosophical foundations and issues of an approach to journalism on the basis of the problems posed by the presentation of conflict.¹³ Here, I propose to apply this approach concretely, by a journey through the history of journalism: who are the 'unifiers' and who are the 'decentrers'? What do they each reveal about these processes

they practise through their gaze? Current work on journalism too often lacks substance and historical depth. This book tries to lay down a few markers and to suggest 'figures' which I hope will help readers to think about journalism today. It is a sort of personal and political history of modern journalism – a portrait gallery, in order concretely to explore the political processes of *unifying* and *decentring*, which can operate in the journalist's gaze.

Unifying and Decentring in Modern Journalism

To appeal to the largest number: this has been, from the beginning, what modern journalism is all about. The desire to bring people together, to *unify*, is most visible in journalism's concern to give readers the 'truth' – that is, something that is acceptable to all, beyond differences of opinion. My study will show that the 'unifying' journalist often assumes the features of what I will call a *witness-ambassador*, key figure in the 'dominant' modern journalism. I will then ask what figures 'of resistance' can be opposed to the witness-ambassador, in fact, whether a journalism that *decentres* is possible.

1. Unifying journalisms: the triumph of the witness-ambassador

'Facts' acceptable to all

As many studies have shown,¹ it was the penny press and its modern conception of 'news' that gave rise to the journalistic concern for factual accuracy. The ideal of objectivity in modern journalism has its roots, therefore, in a press often despised by elites, who called it, to discredit it, the 'yellow press'. This requirement of the 'popular' press of the nineteenth century to provide true information, accurate and 'objective' facts, was closely linked to its concern to *unify*; it clung to the 'facts' so that it could bring together readers who might well have different opinions on a subject, and hence reach the common denominator of an increasingly large readership. The spectacular growth of this readership led, therefore, to 'the triumph of "news" over the editorial and of "facts" over opinion', and created 'the journalist's uneasy allegiance to objectivity'.²

Those involved in this 'revolution' often explicitly declared their desire to unite the public for whom they wrote. The *New York Sun* of Benjamin Day proclaimed in its heading: 'It Shines for All'. This 'shining' was

clearly intended to bring this 'all' together, as Day suggested in an article of 28 June 1838:

Since the *Sun* began to shine upon the citizens of New York, there has been a very great and decided change in the condition of the labouring classes and the mechanics. Now every individual, from the rich aristocrat who lolls in his carriage to the humble labourer who wields a broom in the streets, reads the *Sun*; nor can even a boy be found in New York City or the neighbouring country who will not know, in the course of the day, what is promulgated in the *Sun* in the morning. Already we perceive a change in the mass of the people. They think, talk, and act in concert. They understand their own interest, and feel that they have numbers and strength to pursue it with success.³

Similarly, James Gordon Bennett, founder of the *New York Herald*, emphasized that his paper was 'equally intended for the great masses of the community – the merchant, mechanic, working people – the private family as well as the public hotel – the journeyman and his employer – the clerk and his principal'.⁴

We see, furthermore, that the 'public' was often represented in this wide circulation press as an entity transcending partisan divisions, as a great *body*, united by this very demand for truth, and urging journalists to honour this demand. The metaphor of the body to evoke the public is clear in the writing of, for example, Bennett, who evokes 'the whole body of the people',⁵ who understand only the language of 'common sense', far removed from partisan political allegiances: 'Our only guide', wrote Bennett,

shall be good, sound, practical commonsense, applicable to the business and bosoms of men engaged in everyday life. We shall support no party, be the organ of no faction or coterie, and care nothing for any election, or any candidate from president down to a constable. We shall endeavor to record facts on every public and proper subject stripped of verbiage and coloring with comments when suitable, just, independent, fearless, and good-tempered. If the *Herald* wants the mere expansion which many journals possess, we shall try to make it up in industry, good taste, brevity, variety, point, piquancy and cheapness.⁶

Associated in this way with the natural requirement for 'common sense', the concern for factual truth was closely linked to the more general conviction of serving the public interest and what was right against partisan divides. Let us quote, in this connection, the words of Dan Schiller, a specialist in the field:

The impartiality and independence claimed by the penny press successfully ushered in its stewardship of the pursuit of enlightened reason in the

public sphere. Although different penny journals had distinct identities, which were subject to change in various contexts, they shared what Bennett termed 'the great focus of intelligence, news, wit, business, independence, and true knowledge' (*Herald*, 31 March 1836). The preemptive claim staked by the cheap journals to the defence of natural rights and public good was . . . the enduring foundation upon which the structure of news objectivity was built.⁷

The reporters of the 1880s were simply continuing in the same vein as the penny press a few decades earlier. By providing only the 'facts', and by suppressing their personal opinions, they were supposed to be appealing to 'common sense', which enabled them to reach the largest possible public. The ultimate aim remained to *unify*; this explains the slogan 'ACCURACY, ACCURACY, ACCURACY!' chosen by Joseph Pulitzer to decorate his office wall, and, more generally, it explains the draconian rules imposed on reporters by their editors. Thus, one of the clauses in the code of the *Chicago Daily News*, whose managing editor was then Charles Dennis, ran: 'Put no editorial comments or debatable statements into news matter. Keep your personal likes and dislikes out of your copy.'⁸ The frustrations provoked by these rules in many budding writers, required to efface their own unique voice in their writing, are well known. Lincoln Steffens, for example, said of his years on the *Evening Post*, 'Humor or any sign of personality in our reports was caught, rebuked, and, in time, suppressed. As a writer, I was permanently hurt by my years on the *Post*.'⁹

All this discipline was intended to enable the reporter to provide what American journalism still calls a 'story', that is, a narrative that could be received collectively, in fact 'de-singularized', and so of interest to the largest number. When the story turned out well, it could give the public, seen as a unified entity (a body), a true experience by proxy. In fact, it is in these very terms that the American sociologist Helen M. Hughes defines the function of the story: 'to make a word picture that will be a substitute to . . . readers for the experience of perceiving'.¹⁰

In the first half of the twentieth century, the sociologists of the Chicago School, to which Hughes belonged, and which produced pioneering studies of the historical development of the press in the United States, also developed a notion crucial to an understanding of this modern journalism: that of 'human interest'.¹¹ By this they meant that part of human curiosity that is common to the largest number, that is of *general* interest, and that is seen by the wide circulation press as its prime aim. To put the notion of human interest at the heart of the 'popular' journalism born at the end of the nineteenth century is simply to emphasize that its main concern, its founding act, was to *unify*.

This aim continues to show through whenever journalism insists, especially in discussions of an ethical nature, on its ideal of 'truth', whether the vocabulary is that of factual accuracy, objectivity, impartiality or fairness. In fact, beyond the apparent nuances, the aim seems to remain always the same: to emphasize that journalism addresses a public perceived as a unified entity, or at least as an entity that is capable of being unified, and that has a right to obtain what is its due, that is, a description which is not exclusively singular, but applies the criteria of common sense and so presents a *common* reality.

This aim is clear in the various professional codes which punctuate the history of American and European journalism. In, for example, the ethical code of the journalistic professional association Sigma Delta Chi of 1926, one of the first American codes to proclaim the duty of the journalist to 'serve the truth', and to use the words 'accuracy' and 'objectivity', it is clear that this imperative is part of the recognition of a 'public right'.¹² Professional and legal development in the twentieth century has been broadly in the direction of a conception of press freedom increasingly viewed from the standpoint of the 'consumer', that is, of a public represented as an entity with rights.¹³ The Declaration of Bordeaux, adopted by European journalists in 1954 and amended in June 1986, states that 'respect for the truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist'; the Munich Charter, adopted in 1971 by the Union of Journalists of the European Community, Switzerland and Austria, urged the profession 'to respect the truth whatever the consequences for itself [journalism], on the grounds of the public's right to know the truth'.¹⁴

The notion of objectivity – a notion more often formulated than explained – is part of the same logic. It was evoked, for example, in the encyclical of John XXIII of 1963, *Pacem et Terris*, where it is explicitly linked to the notion of the possibility of a common world view, shared by all; it is for the media, it follows, to provide this 'collective' view.¹⁵ The notion of 'objective reality' was also emphasized by the UNESCO Declaration of 1983: 'People and individuals have the right to acquire an objective picture of reality by means of accurate and comprehensive information . . .'.¹⁶

The notion of fairness, sometimes evoked as a way of distancing the speaker from the ideal of objectivity, belongs, nevertheless, to this same 'unifying' ambition. Hubert Beuve-Méry, founder and first editor of *Le Monde*, said he preferred fairness to an always inaccessible objectivity. While this notion is part of a very French tradition of circumspection,¹⁷ it is not without its advocates in the United States. In 1989, when he drew up a new code of ethics for the *Washington Post*, Benjamin C. Bradlee claimed to be breaking new ground when he emphasized, in

opposition to the notion of objectivity, which had led to interminable controversies, the more flexible and more concrete concept of fairness.¹⁸ Nevertheless, if we look closely at the paragraph in this charter devoted to fairness, we see that the issues remain the same. In the first place, the epistemological difficulty is far from resolved: journalists are called on to make 'fair' choices in the gaze they direct at the world, in particular to know how to distinguish between 'secondary news' and 'significant facts'. One can imagine the epistemological debate seizing on this 'fairness' and miring it in a confusion not unlike that in which it customarily sinks the notion of 'objectivity'. Secondly, the socio-political aim of *unifying* remains the same: it is still a matter of producing a collectively acceptable gaze that conforms to the general norms of the 'public'. More than ever, the reference to a 'common sense' guiding the journalist's gaze seems clear, if implicit. 'Fairness includes recognition of what is relevant,' states this charter; it seems clear that the criteria of relevance, and journalistic choices in general, are actually those of the 'community'. The charter also declares that 'the *Washington Post* is intensely concerned with the national interest and with that of the community'. In essence, therefore, there is little difference between this 'new' requirement for 'fairness' and the old injunctions of nineteenth-century editors to their reporters to silence any personal voice in favour of an approach concerned only with 'facts'. The aim was still appropriately to incorporate the criteria of the widest public – criteria which defined what was a 'fact' and its 'relevance' in relation to other facts; that is, to make this public have an experience by proxy.

The requirement for 'true', 'objective' and 'fair' journalistic descriptions should still be seen, therefore, whichever adjective is employed, from a *unifying* perspective. This may explain the great epistemological poverty of the concrete rules current in the journalistic profession and supposed to respect this requirement for objectivity, a poverty emphasized by most researchers. The aim is not epistemological rigour in itself, but to apply the rules which the public regards as acceptable, and as defining 'objectivity' *in its eyes*. It means honouring a pact with the public, which allows journalists to aspire to a collectively acceptable approach; but it is a pact that does not necessarily have great epistemological coherence.

This point was made by Gaye Tuchman, in 1978, in an article on what she called the 'rituals of objectivity' in the journalistic profession.¹⁹ These are 'rituals' in the sense that many practices are defined as marks of objectivity, but without clear epistemological coherence. The few epistemological principles which seem to emerge are hardly rigorously applied, and they are contradicted by other associated practices. Take the case of the much-quoted rule to the effect that every 'fact' must be