THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF
NEWS
& JOURNALISM

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by S. Elizabeth Bird

Worldwide

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Introduction

The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Why Now?

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After decades of interdisciplinary scholarship on news and journalism, is there anything new that anthropology can bring to the table? My colleagues and I seek to answer that question in this book. My hope is that it will speak not only to fellow anthropologists but also to our colleagues in communication and journalism studies who share our belief that to grasp the complexities of meaning construction in today's world, we need to explore the many ways in which "truth" is negotiated through news. And I also hope the essays in this book will speak to journalists themselves and to those who teach not only the profession of journalism but also how to reflect upon it.

So what is an anthropological perspective on news and journalism? Briefly put, it is a way to explore the nature of news as a form of cultural meaning making — its creation, content, and dissemination. The preferred method is ethnography, which has long been the cornerstone of anthropology, although now taken up enthusiastically by social scientists across disciplines. Wolcott (1999: 76) argues that, although ethnography is not in itself a clearly defined "method," a "central and unifying" principle of all ethnographic work is "a commitment to cultural interpretation" through a close, personal engagement with the people and phenomena studied. This is the perspective from which the authors in this book explore news and journalism, although their work shows how complex ethnography has become in a world where the local can no longer be understood without reference to the global. A further strength of anthropology is its commitment to see cultural phenomena comparatively, never assuming that "my way" is intrinsically more definitive than "your way." This global, comparative perspective is one of the key dimensions that anthropology can offer to journalism scholarship, which has tended to assume that "news is news," wherever we might find it. By seeing how news operates in specific and variable circumstances, these ethnographers problematize easy assumptions about what news means and does across cultures.

Journalism and the Anthropology of Media

Anthropologists who explore news and journalism are among the many who agree that to understand the contemporary world, we must grasp the role of media in constructing and maintaining that world. Our discipline came late to the field of media studies, but today the anthropology of media has come of age, as more anthropologists move away from bounded notions of local culture, necessitating consideration of global processes, such as the dynamic "mediascapes" defined almost 20 years ago by Appadurai (1990). Spitulnik's comment that there "is as yet no 'anthropology of mass media'" (1993: 293) has fortunately become outdated, as a growing body of literature has appeared (e.g., Askew and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002; Coman and Rothenbuhler 2005). Mark Peterson, in his fine analysis of the relationship between anthropology and mass communication, outlines the rise of an anthropology of media that is "theoretically eclectic, freely borrowing concepts and theoretical language from communication studies, British cultural studies, and literary criticism, as well as from theoretically sympathetic strands of social theory and political science" (2003: 56).

The impulse to study media comes out of an increasingly urgent sense that anthropology today can no longer dismiss media as external forces acting upon distinct "cultures," but rather that they are inextricably embedded in culture, reflecting and reshaping it in an ongoing process. For instance, in her introduction to her co-edited collection on anthropology and the media, Kelly Askew writes that "it is CNN, Hollywood, MTV, and other global media that now present and represent cultures to the majority of the world" (Askew and Wilk 2002: 1). And because it purports to describe reality, news is clearly a crucial force in representing and shaping public culture. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the global reach of CNN, internet news, and other forces, until recently few anthropologists explored *news* as a cultural phenomenon, focusing instead on entertainment media — TV, film, music, and so on. None of the essays in Askew and Wilk's collection nor in another recent volume (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002) address news or journalism except peripherally.

We now have a fairly extensive and sophisticated body of literature, emanating from inside and outside anthropology, on the reception of television programming cross-culturally, both in terms of non-Western cultures' readings of Western media and in terms of the importance of specifically local TV, film, music, and so on. Yet there remains a significant gap in the anthropological understanding of media, because we have neglected the role of news in constructing reality and the constitution of public culture. Zelizer (2004) in an influential call for the academy to "take journalism seriously" argues that although

there is a significant body of scholarship that approaches journalism from a cultural perspective, the rise of cultural studies, with its overwhelming focus on entertainment media, has tended to marginalize the study of news as a cultural phenomenon. Anthropologists looking for theoretical guidance in media studies have tended to take their cue from cultural studies, rather than from the more quantitative approaches traditionally favored in journalism studies, and thus have focused primarily on entertainment media. To be sure, several anthropologists have produced important ethnographies of journalists, such as the groundbreaking studies of war and foreign correspondents by Pedelty (1995) and Hannerz (2004a), respectively, and of the press in Ghana by Hasty (2005). These ethnographies shed light on the daily routines of news making, broadening the field from such U.S.-based studies as those of Tuchman (1978), Gans (1979), Fishman (1980), and the UK-based studies of Schlesinger (1991) and Born (2005). They have explored the very notion of what "news" is in different cultural contexts, examining the strategies through which news is defined, created, and disseminated. As Zelizer (2004: 176) writes, "Cultural inquiry assumes that journalists employ collective, often tacit knowledge to become members of the group and maintain their membership over time . . . yet presumes that what is explicit and articulated as that knowledge may not reflect the whole picture of what journalism is and tries to be." She points to the need to expand the global scope of news ethnographies, as we are attempting in this volume.

Less common have been anthropological contributions to both the textual content of news and the reception and circulation of news in everyday life. Outside anthropology and cultural studies there is a significant literature that either employs quantitative content analysis to reveal patterns in journalistic texts or uses sociological and psychological methods to study audience response to news. However, in many respects, these are precisely the kinds of approaches that cultural studies vehemently rejected, because they were seen as inadequate to capture the complexity of the way media texts actually circulate in the real world. Cultural studies explicitly rejected the traditional linear model of communication, which suggested a flow of information from producer, through text, to audience. As Johnson (1986) explained in a definitional article on cultural studies, a goal of the movement was to define this flow as much more complex, more accurately seen as circular rather than linear. In practice, studies that encompassed the range of producer, text, and audience are quite rare (my own 1992 study of U.S. supermarket tabloids being one attempt), but a cultural approach to media at the very least attempts to acknowledge and capture the fluidity with which media act within culture. As anthropology became more engaged with media studies, the emphases that seemed most compatible were ethnographies of production or reception and only occasionally analyses

of content, although news and journalism received little attention at all. On the other hand, the academic study of news and journalism, as represented in such key journals as *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, focused heavily on quantitative content analyses and social scientific studies of audience response. Somehow the cultural turn in media studies did not connect well with the traditional field of journalism studies until quite recently (Zelizer 2004).

Anthropology and Journalism as Related Endeavors

Thus the neglect of journalism by ethnographers to some extent reflects these disciplinary methodological differences. However, I believe anthropologists have also shied away from the cultural study of journalism because in considering it, we necessarily find ourselves thinking about the sometimes uncomfortable parallels between ethnography and journalism as ways of describing and understanding reality. As Shankman (2001: 49) writes, journalism is often "suspect in academic circles"; peer reviewers are known to dismiss ethnographies they dislike as "journalistic," meaning they are superficial or glib. Journalists, meanwhile, take pride in their ability to tell the story accurately and engagingly in a very short time, observing that anthropologists may take months or years to do their "reporting," and then write their "stories" in dense and impenetrable style. Nevertheless, we all know that ethnographers and journalists are both in the business of gathering information about people and constructing narratives about what they learn for an audience. In cultural anthropology, descriptive and interpretive approaches have always been at the core, epitomized in the ethnographic method, through which a "thick description" of culture is attempted, with the goal to see "from the native's point of view." These days, anthropologists recognize that ethnographic methods, developed to achieve a complete picture of small, isolated societies, must be adapted to the realities of a globally interconnected world, with ethnographers developing many new techniques, often resembling journalistic methods, and applying them in familiar societies (see e.g., Abu-Lughod 2000; Marcus 1998). Meanwhile many forms of journalism, known variously as "cultural," "new," or "public" journalism, can look very much like ethnography. Today there are many books that began life as journalistic accounts. Is a book like Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (1996) a work of journalism or ethnography? The line is not clear; nevertheless, anthropologists tend to take a "holier-than-thou" stance toward journalists, as Jennifer Hasty discusses in this volume.

So it is perhaps risky for anthropologists to venture into the "field" of jour-

nalism and news making and claim to offer insights about what journalism is and does. As a profession, anthropologists have not taken well to being "studied" by journalists, as the uproar over Patrick Tierney's book *Darkness in El Dorado* suggests (2000). While many of Tierney's accusations about the conduct of anthropologists working with the Yanomami people in the Amazon proved unfounded, he also offered a serious critique of some ethnographic practices (Borofsky 2005). If we wish to create an "anthropology of journalism," we should be prepared to engage with a "journalism of anthropology" in return.

This is not to say that the two professions are the same (see Bird 2005a). They have different missions, and they work in different environments and under different constraints, as Awad (2006) suggests in her discussion of both the intersections and divergences of ethical expectations in both fields. Journalists traditionally do not owe their allegiances to their "sources," as anthropologists do; they have the added burden of the public's "right to know." For journalists, developing rapport with people they cover is generally to be avoided, as hindering their ideal of objectivity. Anthropologists never quite settle on whether to be a "stranger or friend," needing a little of both. Yet the goals of anthropology and journalism are enough alike that some mutual appreciation is surely desirable. I hope this collection is a step in bringing the fields together with mutual respect.

Production, Content, and Reception: Anthropological Contributions and Absences

The most established tradition in the nascent field we call "anthropology of news and journalism" involves the ethnography of journalists, partly driven by an awareness that ethnography and journalism are related enterprises. Although media reception is now quite frequently on anthropologists' agendas, very few have tackled the reception of *news*. The essays in part 2 of this volume begin to address that gap. Even fewer anthropologists have explored the *content* of news, and before introducing this volume's authors and their work, I would like briefly to explore why I believe it would be worthwhile for more ethnographers to do so. Although the relative neglect of media content by anthropologists is understandable, a cautious return to the textual study of news is potentially valuable. Today we live in a mediated world; much of what cultures "know" about each other is learned from media, with news being a key conduit. News is unique among media forms in that it purports to be (and is often received as) an accurate reflection of reality, even though we know that news is a cultural construction that draws on narrative conventions and routine practices.

As Peterson (2003) shows, there actually was a fledgling "anthropology of media" movement in the mid-twentieth century, and one of its elements was an interest in using media texts as a way to "decode" cultural values. His overview shows that anthropologists studied commercial movies, other media such as soap operas, and (occasionally) journalistic texts. Perhaps most famous was the mid-twentieth-century "culture at a distance" approach, used in an attempt to understand societies that could not easily be studied ethnographically, such as Benedict's famous study of Japan, in which she used Japanese films, books, and other texts as cultural indicators (Benedict 1946). Such approaches meshed well with an interest in the "texts" of oral cultures, such as myths and folktales, drawing particularly from the field of folklore studies, which has a heavy literary influence. Later, as Peterson points out, such textually based approaches fell out of favor in anthropology, with occasional exceptions, such as Drummond's 1996 analyses of blockbuster movies as cultural "dreams." One reason for this was a decline of interest in the nation as a useful cultural unit, as well as a growing awareness that texts of this kind are likely to represent the values of those in power rather than "ordinary" people. In addition, anthropologists in the second half of the century were eager to shed vestiges of the "armchair anthropology" of earlier times, in which often decontextualized texts could serve as surrogates for ethnographic observation and study. Firsthand engagement with everyday life, always a hallmark of anthropology, became of primary importance; as Gupta and Ferguson (1997a) suggest, being "in the field" was the gold standard for real anthropology. Then in media studies, the rise of qualitative analyses of media audiences in the 1980s, often drawing on ethnographic models, also downplayed the importance of the text, focusing increasingly on creative audience responses (see Alasuutari 1999 for overview of audience studies).

However, as Zelizer (2004) discusses, in the United States there did arise a significant movement within journalism studies, inspired largely by the work of James W. Carey, who had argued for the role of news as a symbolic system that helped make meaning in culture, drawing heavily on the symbolic anthropology of Geertz (1973, 1983). The work of Carey and his followers advocated a culturally contextualized approach to news, while focusing primarily on qualitative interpretation of text, rather than on traditional content analysis or ethnographic studies of reception. A key theme in such work has been a reconceptualizing of news as a form of cultural storytelling (Bird and Dardenne 1988, 2008). Zelizer (2004: 181) provides a comprehensive assessment of the body of scholarship in this area through the 1980s and 1990s; current representative work of this kind includes several studies by Kitch (2000, 2003), whose work focuses on the role of news in defining shared cultural narratives, such as na-

tional mourning. Much work in this tradition explicitly draws on the analysis of themes in the myths and legends of oral cultures, something once common in traditional anthropological work but less relevant today, for obvious reasons. Perhaps the most extended use of the myth analogy is Jack Lule's (2001) work on the mythical themes discernible in the *New York Times*. Lule shows how "objective" news stories are framed and constructed around themes like "the victim," the "hero," and so on. I argue elsewhere (Bird and Dardenne 2008) that the problem with such approaches (most apparent in the work of Lule, who relies very heavily on Jungian archetypal theory rather than the more ethnographically sound approaches of symbolic anthropology) is that they can easily fall into the trap of invoking supposed archetypal themes, while ignoring real cultural context — why these themes, these stories in this specific culture? This, I believe, is one of the areas in which anthropologists might make a contribution. One of our central goals has been to "translate" cultures, and the stories told in news can tell us a great deal about specific cultural circumstances.

So it is perhaps ironic that interpretive textual analysis, the area of journalism studies that most explicitly invokes anthropology, is the approach that anthropologists have largely eschewed. Most of the authors in this book do not use textual analysis as a significant tool in understanding news; rather, they focus on how texts come to be and how they circulate. My own work (Bird 2003) has also predominantly focused on the circulation of meaning among audiences, although I have ventured into textual interpretation. Nevertheless, I believe anthropologists might profitably address more attention to texts, in addition to production and reception.

Finnish media scholar Alasuutari (1995) discusses how during the 1994 elections in Finland, a TV station asked people in the street what they thought about the public images of the presidential candidates, focusing on the question "Have the media influenced your images of the candidates?" Most of us are familiar with that kind of question, and with the usual responses, as people assert that they make up their own minds about such things and are not influenced by media (although, of course, "other people" often are). As Alasuutari points out, "None of the interviewees nor the journalists pointed out how absurd the question actually was. Hardly any ordinary citizen would have any means to form an image of the candidates *outside* or irrespective of the media. Still the interviewees were able to regard it as a basically sensible question" (89). The larger point here transcends political campaigns. People typically deny media influence — and, of course, the media do not have a simple predictable "effect." But media, especially news media, do have enormous power to shape the reality experienced by readers and viewers. As Philo (2008) argues, audiences, however active, cannot make an infinite number of meanings from the texts they are given.

For anthropologists, this is clearly significant. More anthropologists than ever are working in communities in their own countries, often on pressing social issues such as poverty, health disparities, education, and disasters. All these issues are defined by media; news does not merely report "the facts," but actively shapes reality into acceptable stories. To fully understand such issues, surely any anthropologist (even those primarily conducting more traditional, local ethnographies) should have an idea of how these issues are framed by the news media? Yet while it is quite common for anthropologists to use newspaper archives to trace local events and histories, it is much less common for them to do systematic media content analysis to develop a picture of the dominant "stories" that shape everyday reality.

Similarly, anthropologists working abroad are finding it increasingly valuable to explore not only how local and national media in their study countries frame events, but also how those nations' affairs are represented in international media. The inclusion of media content analysis, while still relatively rare, has become increasingly visible in the context of the multisited ethnographies that are becoming the norm. Anthropologists like Abu-Lughod (2000) have written about the need to add media analysis to their methodological toolkit in order to understand national and international processes. Edwards (1994) writes that traditional ethnography did not seem adequate to grasp the situation of people he worked with in Afghanistan. To produce a more multifaceted picture, he combines traditional "field" accounts with discussion of news narratives both from and about the country, as well as virtual ethnography of the internet communication among displaced Afghanis, all in an attempt to put the actual experiences of his field participants into their global context.

So, in addition to asking how journalists make news, and how people use news, an important question is: What are the stories that people in any given society are being offered as tools to make meaning? Occasionally, anthropologists have touched on these questions. Kottak (1990), for example, contrasts national television news in Brazil with news in the United States. He shows how both focus on civics, the nation-state, and international affairs, but that the balance is different. Furthermore, he points to a particular theme in Brazilian news — stories about the United States that focus on some (often unwelcome) aspect of technology in U.S. society, such as reproductive technologies. He argues that this theme confirms for Brazilians "the stereotype of American society as developed but flawed. . . . American culture sometimes carries its . . . inventiveness to inhumane extremes. Such stories appeal to Brazilians because they suggest that power, influence, and technology are insufficient to warrant full international respect" (92).

Kottak's admittedly cursory look at Brazilian news thus identifies themes,

but he does not go on to ask why, for example, stories about U.S. technology are structured in this way and what that might tell us about Brazilian worldviews and senses of cultural identity. This area is ripe for deeper anthropological analysis — how are particular topics turned into stories, framed in culturally specific ways? Some very useful anthropological work has begun to appear in this area. For example, Peterson (2007), well known for his ethnographic work on both journalists and news reception, has also offered close readings of specific news texts, such as Danish news coverage of Islam in the wake of the 2005 publication of cartoons that depicted the prophet Muhammad and caused outrage in many Muslim countries. He concludes:

> The point here is that through these textual operations, a particular perspective is overcoded. Readers are invited to see the events following the publication of the cartoons as a single global event in which rational Western actors engaged in a democratic practice are met with a hostile global response by undifferentiated "Muslims" whose protests are not characterized as forms of democratic expression but as irrational actions. (2007: 254)

Peterson does not claim that all members of the Danish news audience necessarily see events exactly like this. This is not a return to the overly simplistic view that there is one unproblematic "national character." Rather, the particular framing "invites" audiences to take this view — a much more subtle position. Similarly, Briggs (2007) offers an analysis of Venezuelan press coverage of infanticide, practiced by desperate people in poverty. He explains that this analysis is part of a much larger ethnographic project, during which he realized that in order to understand public and official attitudes to the issue, it was essential that he learn how it was framed in the news media, which were the source of everyone's information. He concludes,

> As each infanticide story transformed a few broken bodies into national discourses on social bodies (especially of poor communities) and the body politic ... press coverage offered elites a chance to confirm their sense that the poor in general partook in the brutality, irrational, and subhuman qualities of monster mothers and fathers at the same time that working-class citizens could attempt to distance themselves from the images and accusations and enter the space of the good citizen — to which they enjoyed so little access — by creating (for reporters), revoicing, and identifying themselves with the vox populi. (2007: 337–38)

Too often, I think the discussion of news content gets bogged down in wondering what is the "real truth" about a particular event, a question that seems to suggest that journalists really could be completely objective recorders of mere

facts, if only, somehow, they could get it right. More interesting, I think, is the question of which story is being told about any event. Why one story over another, and how does the story then become part of the commonsense reality in specific cultural contexts? Most of us, for instance, are very aware that the story of the Iraq war is deeply contested. We can scour the internet and find accounts of events that differ radically. If we have time (a lot of it!) we might sit down, sift through it all, and reach some kind of conclusion about the "truth." Most people in most societies don't have the time or the resources to do that — they have little choice but to engage with the stories that predominate in their daily experiences. And, of course, it is not just the information but the language, the choice of words, the images — the entire frame of the news coverage. For instance, the U.S. press, in the early years of the Iraq war, presented a "sanitized" view, "free of bloodshed, dissent, and diplomacy, but full of exciting weaponry, splashy graphics, and heroic soldiers" (Aday, Livingston, and Hebert 2005: 18). In other countries, even in nations that ostensibly supported the war, "the story" was framed differently. Ravi (2005), for example, compared news coverage in the United States, United Kingdom, India, and Pakistan, concluding that "newspaper coverage seems to reflect notions, values, and ideas that resonate within particular societies" (2005: 59), a point echoed by Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005), comparing Sweden and the United States. While we cannot know for sure how real audiences were affected by the differences, any anthropologist studying on the ground would do well to know the dominant frames of reference for such events. The texts themselves hold important, symbolic meaning and constitute significant cultural narratives, as Postill (2006) suggests in his study of the media's role in framing Malaysia as a nation, allowing the Iban to "become" Malaysian.

Postill's work, like that of Peterson and Briggs, does not rely on textual analysis alone, but incorporates such analysis into larger ethnographic studies. This, I believe, is where anthropologists can make significant contributions. Linguistic anthropologists have already applied techniques of discourse analysis to media texts (e.g., Cotter 2001). And their unique perspective, in contrast to that of many literary-trained analysts, is their realization that texts must be interpreted in the context of their creation and reception. This point is made forcefully by Schroder (2007), who points out the decontextualized nature of much media discourse analysis, and argues the need for genuine ethnographic work to test and elaborate on the textual interpretations. Richardson, speaking specifically about journalism, makes a similar point, arguing that "journalistic discourses are always socially situated, therefore analyzing them requires more than a list of text-linguistic concepts" (2008: 153). He goes on to write that the complex context of journalistic texts remains the least developed aspect of the

growing study of language and journalism. And as Gürsel reminds us in this volume, the "story" is more than just words; perhaps now more than ever, reality is constructed through images. So far, visual anthropologists, many of whose interests include the analysis of ethnographic images, have paid little attention to news photographs; this is an area ripe for anthropological interpretation.

From this brief overview, it should be apparent that there is indeed value in analyzing the content of journalistic texts, and that anthropologists, with their sensitivity to context and larger connections, are poised to join media studies scholars and interdisciplinary discourse analysts in interpreting the power of news stories to shape reality.

Nevertheless, textual analysis alone cannot tell us everything we need to know, as several decades of qualitative audience research has clearly shown. We cannot study a text, read off its meaning, and conclude that audiences will react in predictable ways. Texts do carry dominant meanings — news sets the agenda. But in everyday life, readers and viewers interact with those texts in a multitude of ways. Yet when it comes to news, especially news in cultures other than the West, we know very little about how the narratives of journalism actually enter daily life and consciousness, and that's where I believe we need some detailed ethnographic work. Kottak confidently says that the stories of U.S. technology "appeal to Brazilians," but do we really know that? Do Brazilians talk about these issues, and if so, in what context? Similarly, I might argue that for British people, in contrast to Americans, the Iraq war was framed more in terms of civilian tragedies than military success, because that is how the media framed it. But is that really translated into everyday perceptions and action?

As I have discussed, most ethnographic audience analyses have focused on specific media genres, and in part that is because it is relatively easier to do it that way. Anthropologists can frame observation and interviews around TV shows, as Miller (1992) has done with the reception of U.S. soap operas in the West Indies, or Mankekar (1999) with Indian viewers of native programming, showing how audiences use these texts to interrogate everything from gender roles to ethnic identity. An early pioneer in this field was Eric Michaels, whose important work on responses of Australian aboriginal audiences is collected in Michaels, Langton, and Hebdige (1994). News is harder to handle: it is received sporadically and is not even defined precisely. In a small project I did on audience reception and understandings of news in the United States (reported in Bird 1998, 2003), I found there was not even agreement on what news is. For some people, news includes talk shows, late-night comedians, parody news shows, or reality TV, while for others it is confined to "straight news" and does not even encompass magazine shows like *60 Minutes*. As Pedelty and others argue in this volume, "news" may flow through channels far outside journalism