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Harvey Molotch; Marilyn Lester

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NEWS AS PURPOSIVE BEHAVIOR: ON THE STRATEGIC USE OF ROUTINE EVENTS, ACCIDENTS, AND SCANDALS*

Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester

University of California, Santa Barbara

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By suspending belief that an objective world exists to be reported, we develop a conception of news as a constructed reality. Public events are held to exist because of the practical purposes they serve, rather than because of their inherent objective importance. The news content of mass media is seen as the result of practical, purposive, and creative activities on the part of news promoters, news assemblers and news consumers. At each stage in the process of generating an event, a given happening is attended to and its features assembled in the context of what has gone before and anticipated in the future. The result is a process of news creation, a kind of accounting procedure, accomplished according to the occasioned event needs of those with access to media.

The manner in which access is accomplished can vary and these variations lead to a typology of event types: routines, accidents, scandals and serendipitous events. Each type of event tends to reveal different kinds of information about the ways society is organized, and each type holds different challenges to those who have or lack power. The general implications of this schema for the study of media and power are discussed.

Everyone needs news. In everyday life, news tells us what we do not experience directly and thus renders otherwise remote happenings observable and meaningful. Conversely, we fill each other in with news. Although those who make their living at newswork (reporters, copy editors, publishers, typesetters, etc.) have additional needs for news, all individuals, by virtue of the ways they attend to and give accounts of what they believe to be a pre-given world, are daily newsmakers.

News is thus the result of this invariant need for accounts of the unobserved, this capacity for filling-in others, and the production work of those in the media. This paper seeks to understand the relationships between different kinds of news needs and how it is that news needs of people differently situated vis á vis the organization of news work

produce the social and political "knowledge" of publics.¹

THEORETICAL FOUNDINGS

Humans schedule and plan (Miller, *et al.*, 1960). We learn from the experience of a sociologist-patient in a tuberculosis sanatorium (Roth, 1963) that whether, from the standpoint of the outside observer, anything is "really happening" and whether there is any "real reason" to create calendars, reckon time, or scheme a future, people nonetheless provide accounts of activities which make those activities observable as real and patterned happenings. In a manner analogous to the creation of a meaningful spatial world, those happenings are used as temporal points of reference for ordering a past and future.

Pasts and futures are constructed and reconstructed, as a continuous process of

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¹The term "public" throughout this essay is used in the sense John Dewey used it: a political grouping of individuals brought into being as a social unit through mutual recognition of common problems for which common solutions should be sought. Information thus does not merely go to publics, it creates them. See Dewey (1927).

daily routines. In such constructions an infinite number of available activities are not attended to, and a certain few become created observables. These few become resources—available as practically needed—to break up, demarcate, and fashion lifetime, history, and a future.

Our conception is not of a finite set of things that “really happened out there” from which selection is made; our idea is not analogous to selective perception of the physical world. We propose (following Garfinkel, 1967, and others) that what is “really happening” is identical with what people attend to. Our conception thus follows Zimmerman and Pollner’s description of the work of “assembling the occasioned corpus”:

By the use of the term occasioned corpus, we wish to emphasize that the features of socially organized activities are particular, contingent accomplishments of the production and recognition work of parties to the activity. . . . The occasioned corpus is a corpus with no regular elements, that is, it does not consist of a stable collection of elements. The work of assembling an occasioned corpus consists in the ongoing “corpusing and decorpusing” of elements rather than the situated retrieval or removal of a subset of elements from a larger set transcending any particular setting in which that work is done. (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970:94-7)

Thus pasts and futures are not accomplished once and for all, with new “additions” embellishing an established “whole.” A new happening reinforms what every previous happening was; in turn each happening gets its sense from the context in which it is placed.

An *occurrence* is any cognized happening; it can be infinitely divided and elaborated into additional happenings and occurrences. “Important” occurrences are those which are especially useful in demarcating time. In their individual lives, Americans conspicuously use such rites of passage as birthdays, anniversaries, employments, promotions, geographical moves, and deaths for this end. Depending upon the context, other occurrences may serve the same function (e.g. the date the house was painted, the time one’s son was arrested, the year the crop failed). We will use the term “events” to refer to occurrences

which are creatively used for such purposes. Once such use occurs, an occurrence becomes, to a degree, reified as an object in the social world (cf. Appelbaum, 1973) and thus available as a resource for constructing events in the future.

DOING EVENTS

The everyday activities of constituting events are guided by one’s purposes-at-hand. A much oversimplified analogy to fact-making about the physical world may be helpful here. Individuals “see” chairs when they enter a room because of the recurrent need to sit. Sociologists sometimes “see” religion as an explanatory variable in their data because it sometimes “works.” The analogous process in creating temporal points of reference means that occurrences *become events* according to their usefulness to an individual who is attempting on a particular occasion to order her or his experience.² But the creation of temporal points of reference varies over time. Each time there is a need to carve up reality temporally, the reason for doing so constrains what kind of carving will be done. Events may thus, to a degree, persist, but they are not intrinsically durable. Any occurrence is a potential resource for constructing an event, and the event so constructed is continuously dependent on purposes-at-hand for its durability.

Collectivities of people—communities, clans, societies, civilizations—similarly appear to create (or have created for them) temporal demarcations which are assumed to be shared in common among those who are deemed and deem themselves to be competent individuals in the collectivity.³ *Public Time* is the term which we will take to stand for that dimension of collective life through which human communities come to have what is assumed to be a patterned and perceptually shared past, present and future. Just as the rudiments of an individual lifetime consist of private events, so public time is analogously constituted through public events. Thus the content of an

² Schutz draws a similar parallel between the world of space and the world of time constituting the natural attitude of everyday life (cf. Schutz, 1971; Vol. I, Part III).

³ As we imply above, while members assume that meanings are shared, we view that sharedness as yet another accomplished feature of the process of creating events.

individual's conceptions of the history and the future of his or her collectivity comes to depend on the processes by which public events get constructed as resources for discourse in public matters. The work of historians, journalists, sociologists and political scientists helps to accomplish this task for various publics by making available to citizens a range of occurrences from which to construct a sense of public time.

To the degree to which individuals or collectivities have differing purposes, rooted in diverse biographies, statuses, cultures, class origins, and specific situations, they will have differing and sometimes competing uses for occurrences. An *issue* arises when there are at least two such competing uses, involving at least two parties having access to event-creating mechanisms. For public issues, these mechanisms are the mass media.

Conflicting purposes-at-hand lead to competing accounts of what happened or, what is a variant of the same question, to dispute over whether anything significant happened at all. Under these circumstances an *issue* takes form. The thirtieth birthday, or the thirteenth birthday, or menopause, or the signing of a lease, will become an issue if there are competing interpretations of what really happened. That is, a struggle takes place over the nature of the occurrence, and embedded in that struggle are differing interests in an outcome. It is currently being disputed, for example, whether menopause is a "real" event. Women's liberationists assert that although it is in fact an occurrence, that is, it "simply" happens, it is not an event. It should not serve as a time-marking feature of the environment *through which certain consequences* (e.g. no woman should hold important responsibility) *should follow*. Others (usually men) assert the contrary; and in these differing accounts of the meaning of the occurrence (i.e. whether it is or is not an event) an issue resides.

In all public issues, analogous processes are at work. We debate, for example, whether the "My Lai massacre" "really" happened or whether it was "only" a routine search and destroy mission. That choice between accounts determines the nature of the occurrence, and at the same time, the degree to which it was special enough to be used to reorder past occurrences and events, change priorities, and make decisions. Any public

issue involves a similar struggle over an occurrence and similar interests in the outcome: Did the ITT lobbyist send that memo as specified? Is the crime rate so high that now "you-can't-walk-the-streets"? The existence of an issue demonstrates that competing *event needs* exist with respect to a given occurrence. Sometimes, in fact, the issue itself can become an issue. For example, a politician might charge that his opponents have deliberately "cooked up" a "phony issue" to deflect voter attention from the "real issue." In such instances, the issue of the issue becomes an event.

The work of promoting occurrences to the status of public event springs from the event needs of those doing the promoting. Unlike the case of private events, it involves making experience for great numbers of people. This potential public impact means that the social multiplier effect of the work of those who do news for publics is much greater than the effect of people who do news for themselves and their face-to-face associates. Although analogous processes and distinctions exist for private and public events, this greater impact of the latter leads us to focus our discussion on public events.

CAREER LINES OF PUBLIC EVENTS

In the career pattern of a public event, an occurrence passes through a set of agencies (individuals or groups), each of which helps construct, through a distinctive set of organizational routines, what the event *will have turned out to be* using as resources the work of agencies who came before and anticipating what successive agencies "might make out of it."⁴

⁴ Cicourel (1968) makes an analogous argument with respect to the creation of a juvenile delinquent. A delinquent is constituted by a set of accounts produced by a series of law enforcement agencies motivated by the need to appear rational to others in the processing system. Any youth's activities will be made (through a course of accounting work) to tally with or violate some law. Thus a delinquent is an accomplishment of a chain of processing agencies who need to do a competent-job-for-all-practical-purposes. That is, what the act, the person, (or event) "really is"—is as it is attended to through members' practical work. This view departs fundamentally from the gate keeping theory of newswork which sees the self-same happening as acted upon by a series of newsworkers (cf. Shibutani, 1966). For a discussion of gate keeping, see White (1965), Gieber (1964).

For simplicity, we view events as being constituted by three major agencies.⁵ First, there are the *news promoters*—those individuals and their associates (e.g. Nixon, Nixon's secretary; Kuntzler, Kuntzler's spokesman; a man-who-saw-a-flying-saucer) who identify (and thus render observable) an occurrence as special, on some ground, for some reason, for others. Secondly, there are the *news assemblers* (newsmen, editors, and rewriters) who, working from the materials provided by the promoters, transform a perceived finite set of promoted occurrences into public events through publication or broadcast. Finally, there are the *news consumers* (e.g., readers) who analogously attend to certain occurrences made available as resources by the media and thereby create in their own minds a sense of public time. Each successive agency engages in essentially the same kind of constructing work, based on purposes-at-hand which determine given event needs. But the work accomplished at each point closes off or inhibits a great number of event-creating possibilities. In this closing off of possibilities lies the power of newswork and of all accounting activity. We now turn to a detailed examination of the newswork done by each agency in the newsmaking process and the power implications of that work.

1. Promoting

There are interests in promoting certain occurrences for public use, as well as interests in preventing certain occurrences from becoming public events. By "promoting" we merely mean that an actor, in attending to an occurrence, helps to make that occurrence available to still others. In some instances, the promoting may be direct, crass, and obvious—as in public relations work (cf. Boorstin, 1961) or transparently political activity (e.g., a candidate's press conference). In others, promotion work is less crassly self-serving as when a citizen tries to publicize a health danger. Commonly, promotion work revolves around one's own activity which like all social activity is accomplished with its prospective and retrospective potential uses in mind. Thus, the press conference is held for the

benefits which its public impact are assumed to provide; a protest demonstration is, in the same way, geared for its selection as an event (cf. Myerhoff, 1972). Similarly, a decision to bomb North Vietnam is conducted with what-will-be-made-of-it and what-it-really-was-all-along (e.g. its deniability) as two of its constituent features. In our language, then, doing and promoting are part of the same process; indeed, the career of the occurrence will, in the end, constitute what was "done." That is, if the bombing is not widely reported or is reported as "bombing selected military targets," the nature of the act itself, from the perspective of the agent (Nixon), will radically differ from the result of prominent and widespread coverage which stipulates "indiscriminate massive bombing." Thinking through these possible coverages is part of the work of a newsmaker and is essential to competent event creation.⁶

Although promoters often promote occurrences for which they themselves are responsible, they also have access (within limits) to promote the activities of others—including individuals whose purposes are opposed to their own. Thus, a political candidate can "expose" the corrupt occurrence work of a

⁶Our mention of policy statements of public figures raised the question of *lies* for readers of earlier drafts of this paper. Based on the principle that event creation universally stems from contextually constrained purposes, our schema does not make an objective distinction between telling a truth and telling a falsehood. For us, a lie is a meaning accomplished for purposes at hand, including those involved in having to deal with others. A lie to us is distinguishable by the fact that another party (observer) sees it as a deliberate move to effect a purpose done without respect for the conditions of an assumed, objective reality. This assumed lack of correspondence to reality is typically invoked when the second party has purposes contrary to the liar's. Lies, like any meanings, are thus created because they are "looked for" by the second party. When a liar is "caught," that is, when he cannot persuade others that his promoted account corresponds to an objective reality, he attempts to handle the situation by: a) demonstrating that the second party was, in fact, looking for the lie, being picky, or making a mountain-out-of-a-molehill, or b) minimizing the effect of the objectivity assumption by selectively claiming inherent ambiguity in the present case as expressed in the claims, "it all depends on how you look at it" or "if you knew what I knew at the time, you would see it as indeed corresponding to what is, for all intents and purposes, the truly relevant reality." A selective assertion of a subjective world thus becomes a resource like any other.

⁵These agencies, as here presented, are generally consistent with Holsti's six "basic elements": source, encoding process, message, channel of transmission, recipient, decoding process (see Holsti, 1969, p. 24).

political rival or take credit for its beneficent consequences. Similarly, Richard Nixon could promote letters from P.O.W. mothers which were written as private communications and perhaps not envisioned by their authors as public events. The richness and irony of political life is made up of a free-wheeling, skilled competition among people having access to the media, trying to mobilize occurrences as resources for their experience-building work.

2. *Assembling*

Media personnel form a second agency in the generation of public events. From their perspective, a finite number of things "really happen," of which the most special, interesting, or important are to be selected. Their task involves "checking a story out" for worthiness, a job which may involve months of research or a fleeting introspection or consultation with a colleague. The typical conception of the media's role, then, at least in western, formally uncensored societies, is that the media stand as reporter-reflector-indicators of an objective reality "out there," consisting of knowably "important" events of the world. Armed with time and money, an expert with a "nose for news" will be led to occurrences which do, indeed, index that reality. Any departure from this ideal tends to be treated as "bias" or some other pathological circumstance.

To suggest the view that assemblers' own event needs help to constitute public events, is also to imply the importance of the organizational activities through which news is generated. The nature of the media as formal organization, as routines for getting work done in newsrooms, as career mobility patterns for a group of professionals, as profit-making institutions, all become inextricably and reflexively tied to the content of published news.⁷ The extent to which news organizations generate event needs among news assemblers that vary from those of occurrence promoters is the extent to which the media have an institutionally patterned independent role in newsmaking. How then does the construction work of the media coincide or conflict with the construction

work of promoters? Assemblers' purposes-at-hand, as they contrast or coincide with the purposes-at-hand of different types of promoters, will determine the answers to such a question.

Powerful promoters may attempt to increase the correspondence between their event needs and those of assemblers by pressuring media into altering their work routines. The sanctions which the powerful exercise to control media routines may be direct and crude (e.g. threatening speeches, advertising boycotts, anti-trust suits against broadcasters) or subtle (e.g. journalism awards, and the encouragement, through regularized interviews, leaks and press conferences of newsroom patterns which inhibit follow-up, experimentation and deviation). Thus, for example, all television networks have abandoned their habit of "instant analysis" of presidential speeches, as a response, we assume, to White House pressure. What may eventually evolve as a journalistic "professional canon" will have been historically grounded in an attempt by the institutionally powerful to sustain ideological hegemony. In this instance, the event needs of assemblers come to closely resemble those of promoters who affect journalistic work routines.

In societies having a formally-controlled press, the substantive relationship between news promoters and assemblers is less obscured. In such societies, media are organized to serve a larger purpose (e.g. creating socialist man or maintaining a given regime). Validity thus tends to be equated with utility. Presumably, career advancement and survival depend on one's ability to mesh her or his "nose for news" with the bosses' conceptions of the general social purpose and thus of the utility of a given occurrence.

Because Western conceptions of news rely on the assumption that there is a reality out-there-to-be-described, the product of any system which denies this premise is termed "propaganda." Thus, in the Western mind, the distinction between news and propaganda lies in the premise seen to be embedded in the assemblers' work: those with purposes produce propaganda; those whose only purpose is to reflect reality, produce news.

As Tuchman (1972) has argued, the assumption of an objective reality allows Western newsmakers at all levels to have an ever available account of their activities—i.e. they

⁷ Breed (1955), Gieber (1964; 1956) and Tuchman (1972a; 1972b; 1973) have provided important insights into the assembling process.

report (or at least try their best to report) what is there. But this kind of self-definition by practitioners should not be allowed to obscure the purposiveness of media work. In fact, that self-definition as an account is itself part of the very organizational activities through which newswork gets done. By choosing to suspend belief in an ability to index "what really happened" (cf. Wilson, 1970), we make manifest the basic similarities between newsmaking in any social or political context.

In the West as in the East, parallels exist between the event needs of assemblers and promoters. These parallels do not necessarily result from plots, conspiracies, "selling out" or even ideological communalities.⁸ While not ignoring these, we are intrigued by the possibility of news generated through the parallel needs of promoters and assemblers which arise for different reasons. Though perhaps unaware of the implications of one another's work, they somehow manage to produce a product which favors the event needs of certain social groups and disfavors those of others.

3. *Consuming*

Members of publics, glutted with the published and broadcasted work of the media, engage in the same sort of constituting activity as news assemblers. A residue of biography, previous materials made available by media, and present context, all shape the consumer's work of constructing events. Their newswork is procedurally identical with that of promoters and assemblers, but with two important differences: the stock of occurrences available as resources has been radically truncated through the newswork of other agencies; and, unlike assemblers, they ordinarily have no institutional base from which to broadcast their newswork.

A TYPOLOGY OF PUBLIC EVENTS

Despite the overarching similarity of individuals' and organizations' methods of newsmaking, we find it useful to describe certain substantive differences in the ways in which

⁸ A. J. Liebling (1947) provides anecdotal illustrations of the occurrence of such plots and related chicanery. See also almost any issue of *Chicago Journalism Review* or (*More:*) *A Journalism Review* or Cirino (1970).

occurrences are promoted to the status of public event.⁹

In using this typology, we are imposing ideal types on data. Consistent with that fact, any event which we may pull from a newspaper's front page for illustrative purposes may be seen to contain some features of each event type. Similarly, the category which any kind of event "fits" may similarly shift with changing features or schemes of interpretation, which may lead to a revision of what "really happened."

We distinguish between events by the circumstances of the promotion work which makes them available to publics. The answers to two questions which can be asked of any event provide the basis for our typology. First: Did the underlying happening come into being through intentional or unintentional human activity? And second: Does the party promoting the occurrence into an event appear to be the same as the party who initially accomplished the happening upon which the event is based? The relevance of these questions will become clearer as each event type is described.

Routine Events

Routine events are distinguishable by the fact that the underlying happenings on which they are presumably based are purposive accomplishments and by the fact that the people who undertake the happening (whom we call "effectors") are identical with those who promote them into events. The prototypical routine event is the press conference statement, but the great majority of stories appearing in the daily press fall in this category; hence, on grounds of frequency, we term them "routine."¹⁰

Whether or not a given promoter is the "same" as the effector can be difficult to determine in some instances. It is clear, for example, that if Richard Nixon's Press Secre-

⁹ That is, following the ethnomethodological instruction, we have heretofore attempted to suspend our belief in a normative order. However, to extend our analysis to a common-sensically useful approach to news and to provide tools of concise description for mundane, practical work, we enter the "attitude of everyday life" in this section of the essay.

¹⁰ Manela (1971), in an analogous typology of events, treats events as objective phenomena which are categorized in terms of how well they fit ongoing formal organization rules and routines.

tary promotes the President's trip to China or Russia, the effector (Nixon) and the promoter (Press Secretary) can be taken as identical for all intents and purposes. If, however, Nixon reads a letter on TV written to him by a P.O.W.'s wife, the degree of identity between Nixon, the promoter, and P.O.W. wife, as effector, is less clear. To the extent to which it can be assumed that both party's purposes are identical—e.g. to bring public attention to P.O.W.'s and/or to mobilize support for the war—the promoter and agent can be deemed identical and the written letter as a public event can be classified as routine. Of course, it may be that Nixon wants to bring attention to the P.O.W.s for other long-range (“ulterior”) purposes not shared by the P.O.W. wife. In such a case, Nixon is not merely using his position to advance the effector's public event needs, but is fostering a new occurrence of his own and promoting it as a public event. After noting that kind of constructing work, the “new” occurrence is analytically the same as any other.

While all routine events share certain features, elucidating those features does not tell us what makes for a successful routine event. Each day a multitude of activities is done with a view to creating routine events. But those intentions must complement the work done by news assemblers if a public event is to result. The success of a potential routine event is thus contingent on the assembler's definition of an occurrence as a “story.” Put another way, those who seek to create public events by promoting their activities (occurrences) must have access to that second stage of event-creation. With respect to this accessibility, various subtypes of routine events can be discussed;

- (a) those where the event promoters have *habitual access* to news assemblers;
- (b) those where the event-promoters are seeking to *disrupt* the routine access of others to assemblers in order to make events of their own; and
- (c) those where the access is afforded by the fact that the promoters and news assemblers are *identical*.

(a) *Habitual Access*. As the term implies, habitual access exists when an individual or group is so situated that their own event needs routinely coincide with the newsmaking activ-

ities of media personnel. Thus, for example, the President of the United States is always assumed to say “important” things. This “importance” is taken-for-granted, and a Washington reporter who acts on the opposite assumption will probably lose his job. Habitual access is likely limited in this country to high government officials, major corporate figures, and, to a lesser extent, certain glamour personalities (cf. Tuchman, 1972b). Such people, especially those in political life, must be concerned with keeping their podia alive and organizing the news so that their goals do not suffer in the continuing competition to create publics. That competition may involve occasional struggles with other powerful figures, or, on the other hand, with insurgent groups seeking to provide a different set of public experiences. Intra- or inter-group competitions notwithstanding, habitual access is generally found among those with extreme wealth or other institutionally-based sources of power. Indeed, this power is both a result of the habitual access and a continuing cause of such access. Routine access is one of the important sources and sustainers of existing power relationships.

The function of habitual access is illustrated by a routine event such as Richard Nixon's “inspection” of a Santa Barbara beach after the calamitous 1969 oil spill (cf. Molotch, 1970). Nixon was depicted leaving his helicopter on a section of the sand, “inspecting” the beach beneath his feet. Needless to say, Nixon's talented assistants could have done the inspection for him; furthermore, Nixon is scientifically incompetent to “inspect” beaches. The activity was an attempt to generate an event so as to inform the American public that Richard Nixon was personally concerned about oil on beaches. His efforts and inspection were meant to instruct the public that the beaches were in fact clean. When Fidel Castro visits a hospital or Mao checks up on a generator, a similar dynamic is at work. When this type of occurrence becomes a successful public event, the results are seen as close to those first envisioned by the effector/promoter.

Although news assemblers commonly act upon the assumption that those with official authority are the most newsworthy (Tuchman, 1972b), other individuals and groups are occasionally in the position to generate events. Yet, whereas the U.S. President's

access to the media continues across time and issue, the access of other groups—e.g. spokespeople for women's rights, civil rights, and youth will ebb and flow over time and place (cf. Molotch and Lester, 1973). For this reason, the ideal-typical routine event is taken to be the generating of a public experience by those in positions to have continual access to asserting the importance and factual status of "their" occurrences.

(b) *Disruptive Access.* Those lacking habitual access to event-making who wish to contribute to the public experience, often come to rely on disruption (cf. Myerhoff, 1972). They must "make news" by somehow crashing through the ongoing arrangements of newsmaking, generating surprise, shock, or some more violent form of "trouble." Thus, the relatively powerless disrupt the social world to disrupt the habitual forms of event-making. In extreme cases, multitudes are assembled in an inappropriate place to intervene in the daily schedule of occurrence and events. Such activities constitute, in a sense, "anti-routine" events. This "obvious" disruption of normal functioning and its challenge to the received social world prompts the coverage of the mass media.

The disruptive occurrence becomes an event because it is a problem for the relatively powerful. We would argue that a protest event—e.g. a student sit-in or a Jerry Rubin remark—receives media play precisely because it is thought to be an occurrence which "serious people" need to understand. What does a sit-in mean? Have students gone berserk? Will secretaries be raped? Is order in jeopardy? People interested in maintaining the ongoing process need to answer these questions before developing strategy and plans for restoration of order. The coverage which results typically speaks to these implications—not to the issues which raised the protest in the first place. Thus, to the extent that student protest activity continues as an issue, it does so because important parties disagree about what the protest means and how it should best be handled. Important liberals think it means that certain institutions need to be reformed (e.g. a particular war ended, stepped-up counseling in the Dean's office, improved student-faculty ratios); important conservatives think it means that students are bums and should be coddled less.

Issues exist through this disagreement on meaning-methods among parties with access. The focus is typically on how to handle dissidents, and not on the points raised by the dissidents. That is why the leaders of campus revolts almost never find themselves quoted *substantively* in the press (cf. Sale, 1973).¹¹

We would argue that coverage of student protest fades as the event needs of one or the other important party declines. The mystery of the student protest declines as the scenario becomes increasingly typified through repetition: buildings are taken—speeches made—administrations respond—cops are called—heads are cracked—ringleaders arrested—trials proceed. No rapes, little destruction, token reform (maybe). People can go back to their everyday activities; the strategic need to know is satisfied.

There is a second reason this type of routine event declines in usefulness to important people. The very reporting on the occurrence may come to be seen as precipitating the creation of more such occurrences. Thus, an interest develops in eliminating such events from the news—either by taking actions to prevent them (e.g. softening resistance to student demands) or by agreeing not to report them. Police, for example, may bar reporters from the sites of ghetto riots, and be supported in doing so by politicians, civic leaders, and publishers as well. Certain canons of the "responsibility of the press" are readily available to editors who choose to bypass anti-routine events. The purposiveness underlying all routine events can be selectively perceived at appropriate moments to justify cancelling a story because it is viewed as promoted precisely for its media effects.¹² When important

¹¹ This situation eventually changed in reference to anti-war activity, because the position and event needs of the American press and a substantial portion of the elite became sympathetic with the movement. Thus, the event needs of a segment of the elite came to correspond to those of the protesters; accordingly the war became the issue, not the protest itself.

¹² In response to a complaint that his newspaper was holding back an important story, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times wrote Molotch the following defense: "We have not run an extensive story on _____ because of the judgment of my editors that because the _____ case has not become an issue of major proportions enveloping the campus community, we might be accused of creating an issue if we give it full-blown treatment at this point in time. It is not a case of holding back information, but the

people see a potential event as too costly, given their purposes-at-hand, there are various resources for eliminating it.

(c) *Direct Access*. Some news stories are generated by assemblers who go out and "dig up" the news. Feature stories are often of this sort but many "straight news" articles can be of the same type. For example, assemblers in scrutinizing the police blotter may detect that "crime is rising" or may interview or poll a population for attitude shifts. This newswork is routine in that creating the occurrence (e.g. record checking, attitude polling) is a purposive activity promoted as a public event by the effector. It is distinctive, however, in that the promoter and the assembler are identical. When this identity is sufficiently transparent, the media involved may be castigated for lacking "objectivity" or for engaging in "muckraking" or "yellow journalism." A tenet of the "new journalism" is that such newsmaking is indeed appropriate. This controversy is, in our terms, a conflict over whether or not media personnel can legitimately engage in transparent news promotion, or whether they must continue to appear to be passively reporting that which objectively happens.¹³

Accidents

An accident differs from a routine event in two respects: (1) the underlying happening is not intentional, and (2) those who promote it as a public event are different from those whose activity brought the happening about. In the case of accidents people engage in purposive activity which leads to unenvisioned happenings which are promoted by others into events. Accidents thus rest upon miscalculations which lead to a breakdown in the customary order.

Events such as the Santa Barbara oil spill, the Watergate arrests, the release of nerve gas

concern that my editors have for trying to avoid the situation where something becomes a major issue *because* a large daily newspaper has written about it at length." Personal communication to the author, January 8, 1971.

¹³What is or is not a transparently nonobjective technique changes historically. Fishman (forthcoming) details how the use of interview in straight news came as a radical departure from objective news coverage. The technique was introduced as part of the yellow journalism movement and was denounced by the more traditional papers.

at Dugway Proving Ground, and the inadvertent U.S. loss of hydrogen bombs over Spain all involve "foul ups" in which the strategic purpose of a given activity (e.g. oil production, political espionage, gas research, national defense) becomes unhinged from its consequences.

The accident tends to have results which are the opposite of routine events. Instead of being a deliberately planned contribution to a purposely developed social structure (or in the language of the literature, "decisional outcome"), it fosters revelations which are otherwise deliberately obfuscated by those with the resources to create routine events.

For people in everyday life, the accident is an important resource for learning about the routines of those who ordinarily possess the psychic and physical resources to shield their private lives from public view. The Ted Kennedy car accident gave the public access to that individual's private activities and dispositions. As argued elsewhere (Molotch, 1970), an accident like the Santa Barbara oil spill provided the local public analogous insights into the everyday functioning of American political and economic institutions.

When accidents surface as public events, they do so in "error"; we can expect that, unless the needs of powerful people differ, routine event-making procedures subsequently and increasingly come into play to define the accident out of public politics. But the suddenness of the accident and its unanticipated nature means that event makers are initially not ready and thus the powerful could give uncoordinated, mutually contradictory accounts. This process of accidental disruption, followed by attempts to restore traditional meanings can, we have found, be observed empirically; and thus, *we take accidents to constitute a crucial resource for the empirical study of event-structuring processes*.¹⁴

In their realization as events, accidents are far less contingent than are routine events on

¹⁴ It is precisely these forms of events which tend to be excluded in community power research using the decisional technique (cf. Banfield, 1962). By uncritically accepting those stories which appear in newspapers over an extensive time period as corresponding to the basic local political conflicts, use of the decisional technique guarantees that only those matters on which the elites do internally disagree will emerge as study topics. Thus, pluralistic findings are guaranteed through the mode of case selection.

the event needs of the powerful. Given the inherent drama, sensation, and atypicality of accidents, it is difficult to deny their existence; and typically nonimportant groups can more easily hold sway in the temporal demarcation process. Thus, the outflow of a small sea of oil on the beaches of California is for "anybody" a remarkable occurrence; and a reporter or newspaper which ignored it would, owing to the physical evidence widely available to direct experience, be obviously "managing the news." That is, if newsmaking results in published accounts considered by a multitude to differ from "what happened" as determined by their own event needs, the legitimacy of newsmaking as an objective enterprise is undermined. Of course, not all accidents become public events. Oil spills off the Gulf of Mexico, almost as large as the Santa Barbara spill, received far less coverage; similarly, the massive escape of nerve gas at Dugway Proving Ground (cf. Hirsch, 1969) could easily be conceived as far more disastrous to the natural environment and to human life than any oil spill; yet again, relatively little coverage occurred (cf. Lester, 1971). All this attests to the fact that all events are socially constructed and their "newsworthiness" is not contained in their objective features.

Scandals

Scandals share features of both accidents and routine events but differ from both as well. A scandal involves an occurrence which becomes an event through the intentional activity of individuals (we call them "informers") who for one reason or another do not share the event-making strategies of the occurrence effectors. Like a routine event, the precipitating happening is intended and the event is promoted; but unlike a routine event, the promoting is not done by those who originally brought about the happening. In fact, the event's realization typically comes as a surprise to the original actors. Thus, Ronald Reagan deliberately paid no state income tax 1970-71, but did not expect, in so doing, to read about it in newspapers. Dita Beard did, we assume, write the notorious "ITT Memo," but again, did not envision it as a public event. (The ITT *issue* derives from an attempt by ITT to destroy the scandal by denying the precipitating occurrence.) A scandal requires the willing cooperation of at least one party

having power and legitimacy which derive either from first-hand experience (the eye-witness) or position in the social structure (e.g. a "leaker" of memos or Pentagon papers). The more both circumstances are fulfilled, the greater the capacity to generate a scandal. Again, this capacity is disproportionately in the hands of elites, but their trusted hirelings are also strategically well situated. Like the accident, the scandal reveals normally hidden features of individual lives or institutional processes.

The My Lai massacre is one of the more dramatic examples of scandal. It is not a routine event in that those originally involved in making it happen—whether defined as the troops in the field or the President and Generals—did not intend that the mass murder become a recorded phenomenon. The tortuous route the occurrence followed (it was twenty months becoming a public event) has been elucidated in some detail.¹⁵ My Lai was originally reported as a successful, routine offensive against Viet Cong soldiers; only later was it transformed into a "massacre." In other scandals, high status people "fink" on each other—as, for example, when political reformers expose "the machine," or when political leaders wage internecine war to eliminate opponents (e.g. the Fortas, Dodd, Goldfine scandals). Of course, scandals can also occur when statuses are more asymmetrical; it may have been a clerk who exposed Reagan; it was an Army corporal who exposed My Lai. Also, when the informer is of relatively low status and unsupported by a group with power, the scandal-making business can be quite arduous (e.g. My Lai) and often a complete failure. Frequently, an accident can stimulate a series of scandals, as in the instance of the Santa Barbara oil spill, and in the McCord and Dean testimony in the aftermath of the Watergate arrests.

Serendipity

A fourth type of event, the serendipity event, shares features of both the accident and the routine. The serendipity event has an underlying happening which is unplanned (as with accidents) but is promoted by the effector himself (as with routine events). Examples of the serendipitous event are hard

¹⁵ See *New York Times*, November 20, 1969; *The Times* (London), November 20, 1969.

to come by precisely because one of its features is that the effector/promoter disguises it to make it appear routine. Self-proclaimed heroes are perhaps a variant of those who effect serendipitous events: one inadvertently performs a given act which results in the accomplishment of some courageous and socially-desired task. Thus, through self-promotion (or at least tacit approval), one converts an accident into a deliberate act.

Unlike the accident, the underlying happening in the serendipity event remains unobserved and perhaps unobservable for members of publics. Because the agent can transform the unintended happening into a routine event through his promotion activities, people are not given the kinds of information which accidents and scandals afford. Because serendipity events are difficult to differentiate from routine events, they are as unretrievable for sociological investigation as accidents are retrievable. They are the least sociologically useful of any event type.

By way of summary, Table 1 displays the four event types, distinguished by the degree to which their underlying happening is accomplished intentionally and by whether the occurrence effector or an informer does the promotion work.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION

Consistent with Gans' (1972) urgings, we attempt a new departure for the study of news. We see media as reflecting not a world out there, but the practices of those having the power to determine the experience of others. Harold Garfinkel made a similar point about clinical records he investigated; rather than viewing an institution's records as standing ideally for something which happened, one can instead see in those records the organizational practices of people who make

records routinely. Garfinkel concludes that there are "good organizational reasons for bad clinical records." And those "good reasons" are the topic of research because they spell out the clinic's social organization.

We think that mass media should similarly be viewed as bad clinical records. Following Garfinkel, our interest in its "badness" does not rest in an opportunity for criticism and depiction of irony, but rather in the possibility of understanding how the product comes to look like it does, i.e., what the "good reasons" are. We advocate examining media for the event needs and the methods through which those with access come to determine the experience of publics. We can look for the methods through which ideological hegemony is accomplished by examining the records which are produced.

Seen in this way, one approach to mass media is to look not for reality, but for purposes which underlie the strategies of creating one reality instead of another. For the citizen to read the newspaper as a catalogue of the important happenings of the day, or for the social scientist to use the newspaper for uncritically selecting topics of study, is to accept as reality the political work by which events are constituted by those who happen to currently hold power. Only in the accident, and, secondarily, in the scandal, is that routine political work transcended to some significant degree, thereby allowing access to information which is directly hostile to those groups who typically manage public event making. Future research on media and on the dynamics of power would be strengthened by taking this "second face of power" (cf. Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Edelman, 1964) into consideration. More profoundly, sociologists who habitually take their research topics and conceptual constructs as they are made available through mass media and simi-

Table 1. Event Classificatory Scheme

	Happening Accomplished Intentionally	Happening Accomplished Not Intentionally
Promoted by Effector	Routine	Serendipity
Promoted by Informer	Scandal	Accident

lar sources may wish to extricate their consciousnesses from the purposive activities of parties whose interests and event needs may differ from their own.

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