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CHAPTER 15

News and Nonevents

Making the Visible Invisible

Mark Fishman

Some happenings in the world become public events. Others are condemned to obscurity as the personal experience of a handful of people. The mass media, and in particular news organizations, make all the difference. This study examines a crucial part of the newsmaking process—the routine work of beat reporters—that determines what becomes a public event and what becomes a nonevent. I will show that reporters' "sense of events," their methods for seeing the newsworthiness of occurrences, are based on schemes of interpretation originating from and used by agency officials within the institutions beat reporters cover. Nonevents are specific happenings that are seen as "out of character" within the institutional settings in which they occur. They are treated as "illegitimate occurrences" because they violate or challenge the procedural basis on which all routine business is transacted in the setting. To seriously entertain these occurrences as potential news events would force journalists to question their own methods for detecting newsworthy events. In short, what routine newswork systematically excludes from public view are just those occurrences that might challenge the legitimacy of the institutions reporters depend on for news.

thereby making them "a resource for public discourse" (Molotch and Lester, 1975). The world outside an individual's firsthand experience is a "public reality" constructed by those who have the power to promote mere occurrences as public events. Occurrences not so promoted are lost to public consciousness: They remain either the "private troubles" of individuals powerless to make news or the little-known workings of the powerful who choose not to make certain things news.\(^3\)

To be sure, events are formulated and accounts are made for strategic purposes. But Molotch and Lester's analysis passes over a critical question for the practical accomplishment perspective: How are journalists first able to perceive something as an event? Newsworkers must have ways of seeing meaningful chunks of activity in the happenings going on around them. They must have ways of delimiting the boundaries of events. How journalists routinely do these things is the subject of this study.

To examine the issue of how journalists see events, we must first consider what an event is. Events are interpreted phenomena, things organized in thought, talk, and action. People employ schemes of interpretation to carve events out of a stream of experience. Any scheme of interpretation, if it is to be useful in newwork, must allow reporters to pick events out of some ongoing activity and allow them to see events in relation to one another. That is, any scheme of interpretation that will be useful to a professional storyteller must enable that person to structure his or her experience in terms of a beginning, a middle, and an end. It must enable him or her to see a "chain of events"; that is, to see the overall action in terms of its phases with one phase leading into the next. Schemes of interpretation that do this will be called "phase structures."\(^4\) Shortly, we will examine the specific phase structures that beat reporters use.

When we examine journalists' routine methods for perceiving news events, we also discover what they routinely do not or will not see as news events. In other words, nonevents are by-products of schemes of interpretation (or phase structures). By a nonevent, I do not simply mean any happening or "mere occurrence" that goes unpublicized. We can think of nonevents as a special class of mere occurrences, that is, those that are or could be conceived as events worthy of public attention.

Since events are interpreted phenomena, an event is always an event for somebody or some collectivity who has come to define a complex of activities as a meaningful entity. Because events are part of actors' definitions of the situation, and because these definitions are not always harmonious, all parties to some ongoing activity can differ considerably over "what's happening here"; that is, what are the "real events"? Nonevents are born in such a conflict.

Individuals or collectivities who do not share the same schemes of interpretation can see different events in the same displays of behavior. From one point of view, a behavioral display can be "obviously a significant event," while from another point of view it can either go unnoticed or be noticed but deemed "trivial" or "a fragment of something else." Moreover, one can notice that others who were present did not see an event; that is, for them it was a nonevent. The term nonevent, then, denotes that which cannot be seen under a certain scheme of interpretation, but can be seen under a different one. It is a relational concept referring to a discontinuity between perspectives.

The concept of nonevent should be distinguished from the notion of "news selectivity" that is frequently employed in the literature on news bias (Lang and Lang, 1953, 1958; White, 1964; Gieber, 1956, 1964; Oestgaard, 1965; Robinson, 1970) to explain why journalists do not report some events. While that too is my purpose, I part ways with the latter concept in its assumption that all events (both the reported and unreported) are objective, unformulated entities "out there" in the world and that they are given in perception and available to any competent, clear-headed observer. Consequently, most sociologists studying news bias have assumed that they (and perhaps a few other select social scientists) are objective enough to recognize all the "real" events, against which they can measure the extent and pattern of selective reporting.

I am arguing that nonevents are not the "pure" events screened out by journalists. It makes no sense to speak of a "pure," unformulated event. Molotch and Lester (1973: 1) term the assumption that news can (or ought to) reflect some "pure" reality "out there" the objectivity assumption. As a methodological strategy Molotch and Lester (1974: 111) advocate dropping this assumption in order to study news not as a distortion of a reality that could be reflected but as a document that reflects the work of news promoters and journalists, those who have the power to construct reality for a public (see also Tuchman, 1978a). Following that strategy, this study examines the practices of beat reporters and the practices of those they depend on for their "raw data" for news stories. These practices are viewed as methods for constructing public accounts. These methods ought to tell us why journalists and news sources formulate some mere occurrences as news events, while other occurrences, although formulated by somebody as an event, become a nonevent.

Method

The data for this study come from research conducted in a small California city in 1973-1974. Two kinds of participant observation were done. First, I worked for seven months on an alternative weekly newspaper reporting about the affairs of city hall and county government. This, my first experience as a journalist, allowed me to observe beat reporters working for other media in the community. More important, my experiences as an apprentice journalist provided data that no veteran newsworker could have told me and that is only clear to the novice: the invisible background knowledge one has to know in the first place to determine "what's going on" in a setting in order to "see" news in it. Thus, my fieldnotes from that period were, in part, a kind of diary reflecting not only what I saw of the work of
other beat reporters but also my observations of myself learning to report news.

The second phase of my research was conducted inside the city's major newspaper. Over a three-month period, I observed the daily work routines of three journalists who covered the city hall, county government, and police-court beats. I shadowed each of these reporters as they moved through their workdays, tape recording wherever possible their interactions with other reporters, editors, and news sources. Interviews were also conducted both before and after observations of their work.

**Exposure to Occurrences: The News Net**

To understand how nonevents arise in newwork, we must first examine just what part of the world journalists come in contact with, and then we must look at the schemes of interpretation newworkers employ to identify newsworthy events.

Occurrences that become news must first become objects of experience to newworkers. Newworkers do not look for news everywhere at all times, but they do look at what Tuchman (1976a, 1977, 1978b) terms a "news net." News organizations favor coverage of occurrences taking place during weekday business hours, since that is when the media allocate the vast majority of their newsgathering resources (Tuchman, 1977: 46; 1978b). Moreover, they favor coverage of prescheduled activities (news conferences, trials, legislative sessions) because these allow news personnel more control over their work (Tunstall, 1971: 24-30; Bagdikian, 1971: 97; Epstein, 1973: 103-105; Tuchman, 1973: 123-124).

New organizations also spatially allocate their newsgathering resources according to a system of beats and bureaus that locates reporters almost exclusively in institutionalized institutions of society (Sigal, 1973: 119-130; Rosheo, 1975: 62; Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978b). Elsewhere (Fishman, 1980: 27-53) I have shown that the beat system includes within it a routine round of coverage activities that routes reporters through a normal number of governmental agencies. Inside these agencies, reporters follow a path that takes them to a few "key" locations that are seen as focal points of information (such as masters files, press officers, and meetings). Thus, on the newspaper I studied, this meant that crime was covered through the police and court bureaucracies. Local politics were covered through the meetings of the city council, county board of supervisors, and a host of other commissions, committees, and departments. Even nature was covered through a formally constituted organization (the U.S. Forestry Service). Whatever the sphere of human activities or natural occurrences (as long as it was covered through a beat) the newworker knew it through officials and authorities, their files and their meetings. The round systematically exposed reporters to settings in which only formally organized transactions of official business appeared. Thus, the temporal and spatial organization of the news net is institutionalized in a beat round that steers reporters away from collectivities that are not formally constituted or bureaucratically organized (Fishman, 1980: 32-46).

Community organizations and other informal groups, with members who have other jobs during normal business hours, meet on evenings and weekends when most reporters are off work. Grassroots social movements who lack the resources of press agency, have few if any meetings, have no formal leadership structure, and have no "headquarters" are virtually impossible to cover according to standard news practices (Tuchman, 1977, 1978b; Gitlin, 1980).

Following the round ensures that reporters will be in a position of exposure to occurrences on a beat. But it is quite another matter for reporters to know what to make of the activities to which they are exposed. Things going on right under a reporter's nose may not be noticed and thus not become news because the reporter does not have the means to see them as "something," as an event.

**Seeing Events: Phase Structures**

What kinds of schemes of interpretation do reporters employ on beats to understand what is going on and to find events in complicated displays of activities available in talk, gestures, and documents? My ethnographic evidence indicates that journalists see events by using the same phase structures that beat agency officials use to formulate their own and others' activities as events.

Within organizational settings (whether or not there is a reporter covering them), complexes of activities are organized into events on the basis of a few specific phase structures. When stepping into a new beat, the novice reporter is confronted with an established domain of "typical events." For example, on the police beat, which included the city and county police and courts, typical events were such things as "arrest," "sentencing," "preliminary hearings," "plea bargains," and "arraignments." These typifications were not encountered as a loose collection of event categories. They were seen as interrelated in a highly structured scheme: Typical events were organized according to a timeline or career path. Thus, the police reporter saw crime news events as organized around "legal cases," each of which progressed through a fixed sequence of phases: "the arrest," "the preliminary hearing," "arraignments," "readiness and settlement hearing (plea bargaining)," "probationary review," and finally "the sentencing." The entire sequence of events is a phase structure, each phase defining a possible news event. A phase structure portrays streams of interwoven activities as an object moving through a series of stages, or as a case moving through a career.

This manner of picturing events and reporting on them is not restricted to formally organized collectivities. In everyday conversation, one can present a complex of events (e.g., "What I did on my summer vacation") in a similar mode ("First, I went to Boston and saw some close friends, then I flew to... "). The formulation of phase structures in everyday (nonbureaucratic)
settings tends to be open ended, something that can emerge in conversations. The names of each phase of action (the terminology of events) and the number of phases (how far back the chain of events begins, how recently it ends, and how much "detail" goes in between) can be formulated in a variety of ways, depending on the purposes of the speaker, what the speaker thinks the hearers already know, the dynamics of the conversation, and a number of other contextual matters.

However, phase structures that reporters encounter in the agencies that they cover on their beat are formally fixed and prespecified. In these bureaucratic phase structures, the sequential order of phases, the number of phases, their names, when they begin and end, the duration of time between each phase—all these are standardized because they are made to happen by bureaucrats following "proper" agency procedures. Bureaucratic phase structures are organizationally produced and organizationally enforced. For agency workers, a bureaucratic phase structure is not merely a scheme of interpretation; it is used to produce the case and to move it through a sequence of stages. It is a scheme for doing as well as a scheme for seeing. It continually informs workers what the case looks like when it is done right and what I have to do in order to make it look like I have done it right. A bureaucratic phase structure is employed like a road map to produce the proper career of a case, and it is used as a scheme of interpretation to see the results of that work as the proper career of the case it was supposed to have been all along.

Despite the power and authority of legitimated institutions to impose an official scheme of interpretation on the activities taking place within their jurisdiction, it is important to note that bureaucratic phase structures are but one perspective on the chain of events associated with any actual case. For example, an individual taken into the criminal justice system as a "suspect" would most certainly organize his or her own experiences differently than the way an agency official or a journalist would. Events for the "suspect" could include such matters as the betrayal to police by a friend-turned-informer, the total gamut of experience in jail, the formulation of a legal defense with an attorney, and so on. These kinds of "personal" or nonbureaucratic phase structure have received considerable attention in the sociological literature on "careers," both deviant and nondeviant. Most notably, Goffman's studies of "moral careers" (1961, 1963) and Roth's work on "tumblebales" (1965) show the way in which clients, patients, and prisoners organize a set of experiences under institutional and noninstitutional conditions.

Although alternative formulations of activities may abound in the places reporters cover, the journalist's sense of events comes not from clients' oral histories (as it did for Goffman and Roth), but from official case histories. Journalists simply do not regularly expose themselves to "unofficial" interpretive schemes. For example, the police reporter steered clear of suspects, victims, and their families on his round. The only routine occasion in which the reporter was exposed to the suspect's version of events was during formal court hearings. But these are settings in which the suspect's version necessarily has been reformulated through an attorney to fit the legal-bureaucratic

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**Definition of events.** In general, reporters in courtrooms will seek out lawyers, not their clients, as news sources. Why, then, do newsworkers so readily adopt a bureaucratic definition of events?

As already pointed out, beat reporters systematically and exclusively expose themselves through their routines to formally organized settings that present them with bureaucratically packaged activities. Officials produce these activities so that they are seen as events composing some larger bureaucratic phase structure. Without reference to this intended phase structure, no observer could understand what agency personnel were doing at any given moment of producing the case and its movement through a career. Thus, reporters must learn bureaucratic phase structures when they learn how to cover their beats. They employ these idealizations as schemes for interpreting bureaucratic activities, just as the officials they observe employ these idealizations to produce what the reporter sees. If the reporter does not have cognizance of the specific phase structures of the beat, the reporter cannot understand at the simplest level what is happening there, what officials mean by what they are doing. Lack of understanding this basic could be seen as serious journalistic incompetence. After a few stories betraying this "ignorance," the reporter would be transferred off the beat. For the journalist, bureaucratic phase structures are socially sanctioned schemes of interpretation.

**The Uses of Phase Structures**

Bureaucratic phase structures are of much wider use to journalists than the mere passive understanding of "what's going on" within the agencies covered on a beat. In particular, bureaucratic phase structures enable newsworkers routinely to solve two practical problems in their work: (a) How is the reporter to know when something "new" is happening? and (b) how is the reporter to distinguish "important" from "trivial" events? Let us consider each of these.

**Seeing "Newness"**

News is considered a highly perishable commodity (Park, 1940: 676; Tuchman, 1973: 118; Roscho, 1975: 10-11). One aspect of the newsworthiness of stories is their timeliness. News must be published recently with respect to the occurrence of an event. But what is meant by "the occurrence of an event"? After all, most objects of news coverage are "occurring" all the time. A defendant in the criminal justice system is an "active case" whether standing before a judge, sitting in jail, or conferring with a lawyer. Antitrust suits develop over a period of several years through a succession of investigations, private negotiations, and court hearings. Legislative issues can continue over months and years of public debate, backroom agreements, and official voting. Even so-called spot news events like floods, plane crashes, oil spills, and nerve gas leaks can take months before a "full" account of what
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took place surfaces. How does the journalist know at what points in time these continuing activities warrant a story?

Bureaucratic phase structures solve this problem because they provide the resource for reporters to sense when something “new” is happening. That is, an event “occurs” when a case crosses a boundary between phases, when it moves into a new phase of its bureaucratic career. This movement provides the occasion for writing a news story, although by no means does it guarantee that one will be written. When a case enters its next phase, a news story is warranted only in the sense that the case’s official change in status justifies for reporters their superior coverage of the story at that point in time. Consider this routine crime story which I saw formulated on the police beat:

**Woman Pleads in Shootout Case**

Martha Mungan pleaded guilty today to a charge stemming from a predawn shootout last December that left her wounded and her common-law husband dead from police bullets.

Mrs. Mungan pleaded guilty to one count of threatening and interfering with police officers, and a second count was dismissed. Her sentencing was set for March 22 in the court of Superior Judge Lloyd Bennett.

Police were called to Mrs. Mungan’s home at 410-B Oceano Ave. last December by Rodney Charles Harvey, her common-law husband, during a family fight. In the ensuing gunfire, Mrs. Mungan was wounded and Harvey was killed when he retrieved the pistols and shot at police.

The reporter who was to write this article had been sitting in a courtroom looking for news. He suddenly knew that the court proceedings he had been viewing constituted “an event” as soon as he recognized that the defendant was Martha Mungan, that a plea bargain was being discussed, and that “this must be the Martha Mungan case in its next official phase” (the readiness and settlement hearing). On returning to the newsroom, he told his city editor what happened and said he preferred to wait until the sentencing in four weeks to write about the case. The city editor, however, told him to write about it now, because by doing a piece on her guilty plea the future story on her sentencing would be a “follow-up story.”

The Martha Mungan case was only “an event” each time it resurfaced in the courts to enter a next phase in its judicial career. For all practical (journalistic) purposes, the case was invisible in between these resurfacings. Reporters will not write about a case at any point in time; they need a “news peg” or “news hook” to hang their story on (Crouse, 1974: 115, 240; but see Goldenberg, 1975). Bureaucratic phase structures provide these pegs and hooks. The agencies covered on a beat establish for journalists their very concept of timeliness.

Moreover, journalists can plan the reporting of future news stories around bureaucratically defined news pegs. With the publication of succes-

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give stories about a case, newswomen establish for themselves and for their audience a sense of continuing news and follow-up stories. Bureaucratic phase structures create the possibility of continuing news and, at the same time, enable preplanned coverage.

**Seeing “Importance”**

Over and above the use of phase structures to occasion news stories, reporters employ these interpretive schemes in another important way. Once journalists have adopted a bureaucratic frame of reference, they possess a convenient means for spotting the highlights of events. That is, bureaucratic phase structures contain implicit schemes of relevance. A “scheme of relevance” is a scheme of interpretation that is used for deciding the relative importance of various perceived and interpreted objects. Two such schemes of relevance emerged from my observations of beat reporting in local government: the police, the courts, city hall, and county government. One scheme focused journalists’ attention on the official dispositions of cases; the other focused their attention on policy (as opposed to administrative) deliberations among officials.

One of the striking features of bureaucratic phase structures is their consistent orientation toward “the disposition of the case.” Each official phase of a case is procedurally organized around some decision to be made or action to be taken that “settles” the case for the time being; that usually means sending it to its next phase, if there is one. This disposition of the case is seen as the “key” or “central” activity within each phase. The reason for this is not hard to understand. Insofar as journalists (or bureaucrats) see something as a case moving through a phase structure, then their interest is bound to focus on the official outcome of the case since bureaucratic cases only exist so that they can be properly settled.

The Martha Mungan case illustrates this. After encountering the case in court, the police reporter told me he was “very interested in what would happen to her.” His primary interest was couched in terms of her “ultimate” disposition in the court system, that is, the future sentencing. His immediate practical interest was defined by her most recent disposition in the plea-bargaining stage, that is, the results of the bargaining. In classic journalistic style, the lead sentence of the reporter’s article stated, along with some background information, the “most important” aspect of the event, namely, its disposition. It was only at the end of the story that something other than the disposition of the case was mentioned.

The phenomenon of focusing on the dispositions of cases was not restricted to the police beat. On the city hall and county government beats, the key activities reported were the formal legislative dispositions of issues, which usually meant the results of voting in meetings. Pleading guilty to interfering with a police officer, getting sentenced to two years in prison, voting down a raise in the property tax, and passing a new loitering ordinance are all bureaucratically appropriate dispositions and they are the stuff of which routine news stories are made.
All other features of these kinds of events are of secondary importance. They become the "details" that are defined by and revolve around the "central" fact of the case's actual disposition. The bargaining process that produced the guilty plea, the judge's lecture to the sentenced prisoner, the defendant's reason for "interfering" with the police, the arguments for and against the legislative issue, the behind-the-scenes lobbying that arranged the voting—these are all "details" that embellish the "basic event." By focusing on bureaucratically appropriate dispositions in their everyday reports, journalists' stories leave invisible the agency procedures and social conditions that give rise to these dispositions. In this sense, routine news stories implicitly support the status quo by taking for granted these "background" factors. The report of Martha Mungan's guilty plea renders the procedure of plea bargaining unproblematic by obscuring it. Even less visible are the social conditions of Martha Mungan's life (as a ghetto resident) that surrounded the incident that made her into a judicial case in the first place.

The point is not that such "background" factors are never reported but that they are rarely given attention. When they are highlighted, they are not published as routine news but "human interest stories," "news analysis," and "editorial opinion." In short, what is written outside a bureaucratic scheme of relevance is "soft news," not "hard news." 6

Besides the dispositional aspect of cases, there is another equally important bureaucratically defined scheme of relevance based on an orientation toward "policy versus "administrative" matters in bureaucratic work. The policy/administrative scheme of relevance derives from a fundamental "political division of labor" in governmental work: Legislative or executive bodies deal with ("ought to deal with") policy matters, while an administrative staff deals with ("ought to deal with") administrative matters. Policy matters are considered "political decisions" (matters of opinion) of widespread importance that provide guidelines for the conduct of bureaucrats in the form of work instructions and the conduct of citizens in the form of laws and taxes. Administrative matters are considered "technical decisions," matters of professional problem solving, which are made in the implementation of policy decisions.

Bureaucratic work is self-consciously organized in these terms. The policy-administrative distinction provides an orientation principle by which decision-making authority and bureaucratic work is distributed or delegated. As such, it provides participants in bureaucratic settings with procedures for organizing, displaying, and recognizing "proper" governmental work. These procedures include:

1. If the business before us is an administrative matter, and this is a policy-making setting, then "rubber-stamp" the matter.
2. If the business before us is a policy question, and this is an administrative setting, then refer the matter to a policy-making body.
3. Serious questions about administrative matters should be taken up outside policy-making settings.

The distinction between policy and administrative business is so well known around institutions of government that it is normally taken for granted. Both the individuals who produce formal governmental business, in files or in meetings, and the journalists who cover these files and meetings employ the distinction as a means for deciding what matters of business are "important" and what are "trivial." For example, on every formal agenda for city and county meetings there were items of business that reporters would know in advance to focus on as potential newsworthy policy matters, while other agenda items were known in advance to be "merely" administrative matters on the agenda for technical reasons. To distinguish the newsworthy from the trivial agenda matters, these reporters were relying on the bureaucratically defined policy-administrative distinction. The actual determination of whether any given agenda item was "policy" or "administrative" was an ad hoc decision for reporters, primarily depending on the way the item was presented in the agenda, any previous experience the reporter had with the matter, and the way local officials were talking about it prior to the formal meeting. Shortly, we shall see an example of how the policy versus administrative distinction can lead to nonevents.

Nonevents

Bureaucratic phase structures serve as schemes of interpretation and relevance that are definitive of news events. By implication, these schemes also define what activities within the reporter's beat territory are nonevents. To explicate the nature of journalistic nonevents, I will present two rather typical cases in which reporters "saw" no event, while others within the same setting were clearly trying to formulate such an event. Both cases reveal that nonevents are happenings that are seen as "out of character" in the social settings in which they occur. Reporters, and others familiar with the routine business transacted in a given setting, ignore a nonevent because if it were attended to as a reasonable occurrence, the nonevent would call into question the procedural basis on which all routine business is transacted and would make problematic reporters' routine methods for identifying "important" events. Because they disrupt the "normal" flow of business-as-usual, nonevents reveal the taken-for-granted background features of social settings that reporters depend on for their sense of events.

Illustration 1: The Invisible Crank

In the course of its annual budget hearings, the county board of supervisors was considering next year's budget for the Sheriff's Department. This agenda item followed a prescribed sequence of activities: First, the chief administrative officer and the auditor-controller read their recommendations, then the board questioned the two bureaucrats, then the floor was opened to opponents and proponents, and finally the supervisors debated and voted on the issue.
During the "public input" phase, the speeches focused on whether the administrator was justified in recommending fewer new deputy sheriff positions than the county sheriff had asked for. The Sheriff's Department argued for a larger force so as to keep up with population increases. A taxpayer's group argued that new positions were unnecessary if one correctly calculated a "service ratio," the number of officers per 1,000 inhabitants. Then a young woman took her turn at the public podium to say that she felt any consideration of firing the Sheriff's Department was "shameful." She recounted an incident in which she had been selling wares from a pushcart when a sheriff's car pulled up to her. Two deputies stepped out and asked what she was doing and if she had a license. She protested that she did not know she needed one.

At this point in the story, the chairman of the board of supervisors interrupted and told the woman to come to the point or give up the floor. She simply continued: The sheriff's deputies had ordered her into their patrol car, and when she refused she was handcuffed and pulled in. When she insisted on knowing why she was being accosted, she was subjected to verbal abuse. At the sheriff's station, she was bound hand and foot and left in a room for several hours. Once again, the chairman interrupted and asked the woman to please leave the podium. She ignored him and went on to say that the sheriffs finally released her with no explanation, but that they would not accept complaints she tried to lodge afterward. By this point in her presentation, the woman was upset and angry. Again, the chairman broke in, said that they had heard enough, and told her she would be removed from the room if she insisted on staying at the podium. The woman quietly left.

From the point of view of those present, the woman's talk was so out of character with the budget proceedings that her presentation could only be "bizarre." Throughout her speech, no one in the room maintained eye contact with her; some people demonstrably showed their uninvolve by doodling, reading, or conversing with others, and others clearly indicated their impatience by rolling their eyes, smiling, or making jokes. At the press table, all the reporters acted as if the woman's talk signaled a "time out." Reporters stopped taking notes, and one journalist left the room, while others started up conversations about unrelated matters. Attention to the meeting returned as soon as the woman left the podium.

The incident was not reported in any news medium. It was a non-event, not in the sense that it was never seen, but in the sense that journalists considered it "not worth seeing." It never occurred to reporters that it could be a newsworthy event. It could only be an uncomfortable time out, a "snag" in the flow of the meeting. Why?

After all, the speaker was not incoherent, nor was her argument, taken on its own terms, senseless or irrelevant. But instead of speaking to the issues of "service ratios" and "tax cuts," the woman spoke of a corrupt law enforcement agency unworthy of any public support. What she proposed was "unreasonable" because it was not among the set of alternatives procedurally prescribed for the board to entertain in budget hearings. Moreover, the woman was not, and made no pretense to be, speaking from a structural position of interest. She represented no formally constituted group that fit into the constellation of interests appropriate to the issue. To entertain her talk as appropriate to the occasion, those present would have had to break the procedural bounds of the budget session in order to take on a wider political perspective from which one could render as problematic the issue of any funding for the Sheriff's Department.

Illustration 2: The Invisible Controversy

At a city council meeting, a "routine" agenda item came up, titled “Recommendation for contract award: Bid No. 943—one three-wheeled street sweeper, diesel powered, to lowest bidder, Boulder Beach Machine Company, in total amount of $17,623.20.” The public works director had placed the item on the agenda. Matters of this sort, in which a department head requests approval to purchase equipment after competitive bidding, are normally rubber-stamped by the council. A council member began by pointedly asking the public works director why he was replacing the old gasoline street sweeper with a more expensive diesel one. The director responded that the more expensive vehicle would last longer and consume less fuel. Two other council members joined with the first to press the original question. In doing so, they also seemed to be implying that the director's motives were suspect. Soon a controversy had taken shape, with three council members defending the director, three questioning him, and one refraining from the debate.

It was apparent to the four reporters at the press table and to others present that this was not merely a dispute over a street sweeper. One side was implying incompetence or venality on the director's part; the other side was asserting that the whole matter was overblown and that it was not the council's business to embroil itself in the details of staff operations. The longer the controversy was kept alive, the more the issue became a question of confidence in a department head. After 20 minutes of increasingly bitter debate, the council voted four to three that the director should return next week with more information.

During the debate, the four members of the press showed increasing signs of impatience with the proceedings. At first the reporters stopped taking notes, then they began to show disapproval to each other, and finally they made derisive jokes about the controversy: This was considered a "stupid debate" over a "trivial matter" unworthy of everyone's time and energy.

Although the incident did not go entirely unreported, one city hall reporter gave it only a brief mention. It was placed toward the end of a long story that cited several "miscellaneous" items of council business: "In other matters . . . the City Council voted 4-3 to continue until next week the recommendations of Public Works Director R. D. Dolan to purchase a diesel-powered street sweeper." This one-sentence report, the only mention of the incident in any news medium, rendered the controversy invisible.
Even though at the time of the incident I was sitting at the press table as a reporter making derisive comments about the "foolishness" of the council along with the other journalists, later it occurred to me how this controversy could be seen as an "important event" in city hall. The controversy explicitly dealt with whether it was appropriate for the council to embroil itself in the "details" of its staff's "administrative decisions." That is, the controversy rendered problematic the policy-administrative scheme of relevance discussed earlier. This was a debate over whether the council was going to abide by that traditional distinction. Three council members were challenging the underlying political analysis of government embodied in the policy-administrative scheme: that power is held by elected policymakers who, in turn, delegate authority to a professional staff to implement their decisions. Such an analysis contrasts with alternative views that power is held by an economic elite that manipulates official decision making, or that power is held by bureaucrats and technicians who form a technocracy that runs government. By reference to these alternative schemes, I could see the debate as "significant," "relevant," and "newsworthy."

But the controversy was a nonevent for the newworkers at the press table. The incident was "a waste of time" because it was an "administrative matter" that "ought to have been rubber-stamped." It prevented other "more important policy matters" on the agenda from being considered. Thus, reporters could not see the controversy as a sign of the council's brewing dissatisfaction over who, in fact, was running city government (elected officials or technocrats). This was invisible because the means by which reporters oriented to the meeting in order to sort out the "important" from the "trivial" was also the very topic of the controversy. For the journalists to have taken that topic as a serious issue would have meant calling into question some of their basic procedures for interpreting routine governmental activities. Newworkers do not readily part with their familiar methods of event interpretation—methods that make coverage of the beat territory possible in the first place.

Discussion

There is a good deal of similarity between the two cases I have described. In both nonevents, the reporters noticed things going on, but ignored them by taking a time out and pointedly showing their disapproval. Even though they literally "saw" something, all they saw was a moral character: These were occurrences that "did not deserve reporting." They were unnewsworthy in the strongest sense. The reporters never considered them as candidates for news. It is not that the journalists weighed their relative newsworthiness against other events, and then rejected the nonevents as not newsworthy enough. Rather, the two incidents were events that never had a chance. As soon as they were encountered, the reporters knew to cease paying attention to them as serious candidates for news. They were unpublishable because they were "illegitimate events" that did not belong as topics in the territory (setting) in which they occurred. To publish an illegitimate event would be "unprofessional." If the city council becomes embroiled in a dispute over an administrative matter, it would be "misleading" to cover it "as if" it were another plausible argument in the debate. In short, to the reporter nonevents have the quality of being morally seen but professionally unnoticed.

In both of these nonevents, their morally seen and professionally unnoticed character derived from the fact that they were occurrences that stood outside the procedurally provided-for alternative courses of action possible in the bureaucratic setting. Bureaucratic procedures organize activities within formal settings. To follow these activities—to understand "what's happening" and "what's important"—reporters rely on these same procedures as schemes of interpretation and schemes of relevance. Incidents that defy, ignore, or question the procedural foundation of the setting, if taken seriously by journalists (i.e., entertained as potentially newsworthy events), would bring them to question the very methods they have come to rely on in doing their work. Nonevents are possible because, ironically, reporters are blinded by their own methods for seeing events.

Nonevents are violations of the bureaucratic procedures that organize beat settings. If, from a bureaucratic point of view, something is not a legitimate occurrence, then, from a journalistic point of view, it cannot be a genuine news event. News events and bureaucratic events are tightly bonded, and nonevents are the consequence of this union, the illegitimate offspring, as it were. Thus, nonevents are not primarily the result of journalists' personal biases, nor of their attempts to protect friendly bureaucratic sources, nor of their following orders from politically motivated editors. Rather, nonevents are a consequence of journalists' protecting their own methods of event detection—methods that are wedded to the bureaucrat's methods of formulating events.

Because this study has dealt with beat reporting on a single newspaper, the generality of the findings can be questioned. Moreover, it is not clear whether and to what extent this analysis of nonevents applies to news produced by reporters who do not cover a beat, such as general assignment reporters and most broadcast journalists. Further research on nonbeat reporting and on other news organizations is necessary.

Nevertheless, the available data dealing with whether American newspapers detect occurrences mainly through beats or through general assignment indicate that the beat system is the predominant mode of coverage. Sigal (1974: 119-150) found that on the New York Times and Washington Post reporters largely worked on beats, particularly in government institutions in Washington, and heavily relied on official channels for news. The news organization I studied, which was fairly typical of the smaller news organizations that make up the vast majority of American dailies, located most of its reporters on beats: 69 percent of the paper's reporting staff positions were devoted to full-time beats while 31 percent were full-time general assignment.

The situation is rather complex with regard to broadcast journalism. Few television reporters seem to cover beats in the same sense that their col-
Summary and Conclusions

A massive bureaucratic apparatus mediates between happenings in the world and reports of those happenings in the media, between mere occurrences and public events. Recent research on the news media shows that newsmakers detect occurrences primarily through legitimate institutions of the society, which is to say, through such bureaucratically organized agencies as police departments, mortuaries, welfare agencies, congressional committees, and the like. What is known and knowable by the media depends on the information-gathering and information-processing resources of these agencies. Moreover, since reporters mainly “see” events during city council meetings, at White House press conferences, in arrest reports, and through the announcements of public relations officers, news as a form of knowledge is shaped by the contexts in which agencies present and package occurrences for journalists.

Journalists do not simply detect happenings through bureaucracies. They also interpret what they are exposed to by means of schemes of interpretation and schemes of relevance. They employ, and need to employ, virtually the same schemes of interpretation and relevance used by agency officials. While this similarity of perspectives allows journalists to “see” some things as events, it also makes invisible a specific class of occurrences as newsworthy happenings. These become nonevents.

Nonevents are occurrences that cannot be seen as legitimate events under the interpretive schemes of agency officials. Nonevents are occurrences that pay no mind to the idealizations of “proper” bureaucratic procedure embodied in an agency’s interpretive schemes. Because reporters adopt the schemes of interpretation and relevance employed within the agencies of their beat, they cannot and will not see as news things that might seriously challenge an agency’s idealizations of “what’s going on” and “what should be happening.”

To a certain extent, newswork on a beat is “repair work.” In the case of the invisible “crank” who was seen as sidetracking the normal progression of the budget hearings, both the county officials and the reporters at the press table worked to repair the situation, to restore it to “a right state of affairs,” by getting rid of the crank. The same repair work was apparent in the case of the invisible controversy at city hall. Not reporting both matters was a way of discouraging these and other incidents like them. Beat reporters “clean up” and repair flawed bureaucratic proceedings. Making coherent news stories out of bureaucratic proceedings in this way renders matters that violate or challenge official idealizations invisible in newspapers. Anything outside the “proper” official treatment of the case tends to be ignored in bureaucratic settings and in routine news stories.

Repair work is designed to normalize activities in bureaucratic settings. Beat reporters do not show this repair work and the part they play in doing it because it is one of the methods by which they construct their accounts. Thus, the news story does not show the sense in which it is a repaired version of what happened. Routine news legitimizes the existing political order by disseminating bureaucratic idealizations of the world and by filtering out troublesome perceptions of events. It leads the public to assume that the world outside their everyday experience is a proper sphere of bureaucratic (official) control; that everything falls within some agency’s jurisdiction; that policymakers, indeed, make the important decisions while administrators merely implement those decisions; and that, with the exception of a few corrupt and incompetent officials, government institutions function smoothly according to rational-legal standards. What readers of routine news see is normalized bureaucratic work, nothing more or less than the orderly bureaucratic universe as it is meant to be and as it is continually trying to be.

Notes

1. The work of Garfinkel (1957), Goffman (1974), Smith (1974a, 1974b), and Zimmerman and Pollner (1979) have been major influences on the studies cited below.

2. For example, in the traditional literature, “newsworthiness,” “timeliness,” or “importance” are sometimes thought to be characteristics in events that enable journalists to decide whether and how to cover them. More often, the assumption is that “newsworthiness,” “timeliness,” or “importance” are criteria of news selection that journalists apply to particular events. In the latter case, events are assumed to have other intrinsic characteristics (e.g., a certain duration, the participation of important persons, drama) that journalists directly translate into their “criteria” of news selection.

3. In a sense, mere occurrences in the collective life of a society are analogous to dreams in the consious life of the individual: if we do not write, talk, or think about them on awakening, they are lost to us as meaningful experiences that can be reflected on and have some bearing on our wakeful existence.

4. The term “phase structure” is my own. However, the idea that schemes of interpretation allow people to see ongoing activities in terms of phases of action or chains of events is a theme that appears throughout the work of Alfred Schutz (1962, 1964, 1966). The concept of “phase structure” also has certain similarities to Tuchman’s (1976) and Goffin’s (1970) concept of news as “frames” (see also Goffman, 1974).

5. This and all other names of specific people, places, and organizations in the research setting are pseudonyms.

6. This distinction between hard and soft news differs from Tuchman’s (1973). She claims that the distinguishing characteristic for journalists has to do with the scheduling aspect of the event; that is, an event that demands speedy coverage on the newswriter’s part is hard news; an event that can be published at the newswriter’s leisure is soft news.
However, events themselves cannot demand anything. Rather, it is the way journalists treat events that produces the sense of timeliness. Thus, Tuchman’s distinction begs the question of how newsworkers know in the first place whether to treat something as demanding speed. Journalists distinguish hard news from soft news on the basis of whether it is to be written from the angle of its phase structure disposition or from some other nonbureaucratically defined angle. The hardiness and softness of news is not inherent in events themselves but in the decisions of newsworkers.

7. This illegitimate quality of nonevents is closely related to Goffman’s (1963) notion of “spoiled” social identity. Like the stigmatized person, the stigmatized event is shunted because it possesses attributes that are out of character with the setting in which it is found.

8. This terminology (“morally seen but professionally unnoticed”) is patterned after Garfinkel’s (1967) characterization of certain essential features in common discourse as “seen but unnoticed” in everyday social settings.

References


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