

Journalism's Memory Work

BARBIE ZELIZER

Of the numerous social and cultural settings involved in the establishment and maintenance of collective memory, the environment associated with journalism is perhaps among the least obvious vehicles of memory. And yet journalists play a systematic and ongoing role in shaping the ways in which we think about the past. This chapter considers the scholarship tracking the relationship between journalism and memory, and in doing so it addresses how that relationship both strengthens and weakens each of its constituent parts.

1. Why the Journalism-Memory Link is Problematic— and Inevitable

When seen from the perspective of what journalists themselves deem important about their work, journalism appears to be an ill-suited setting to offer an independent tracking of the past. For as long as journalism has been around, the popular assumption has been that it provides a first, rather than final, draft of history, leaving to the historians the final processing of journalism's raw events. Against such a division of labor, journalism has come to be seen as a setting driven more by its emphasis on the here-and-now than on the there-and-then, restricted by temporal limitations associated with rapidly overturning deadlines. Journalism distinguishes itself from history by aspiring to a sense of newsworthiness that is derived from proximity, topicality, and novelty, and it is motivated by an ongoing need to fill a depleting news-hole despite high stakes, a frantic pace, and uncertain resources. In this regard, the past seems somewhat beyond the boundaries of what journalists can and ought to do in accomplishing their work goals.

The degree to which the present drives journalism seems to position journalism's alignment with memory—and indeed, with all things associated with the past—at odds with its own sense of self. As Edy succinctly states:

[T]he fact that news media make use of historical events at all is somewhat counterintuitive. Journalists have traditionally placed a high value on being the first to publicize new information. Extra editions, news flashes, and program interruptions for important new information all testify to a desire to present the

latest information to audiences. Many stories go out of date and cannot be used if there is not space in the news product for them on the day that they occur. (74)

Not surprisingly, then, memory is seen as outside the parameters of journalists' attention.

But does journalism really leave the past to others? The burgeoning of the literature on collective memory during the mid-1980s helped promote a turn in scholarly recognition of journalism's involvement with the past, for as work by Maurice Halbwachs, Jacques le Goff, Pierre Nora and others was translated and widely disseminated, there grew a recognition that journalism's alignment with the past reflected a slightly more complicated relationship than that suggested by traditional notions of history. Scholars began to pay attention to the fact that collective recollections and reconstructions of the past were set in place by agents with their own agendas to promote and—particularly among sociologists like Schwartz, Schudson ("Dynamics of Distortion"), and Wagner-Pacifici—that memories existed on the level of groups. This made memory work a fruitful way to think about journalists' involvement in the past, and scholars began to address journalism's persistent, though unstated, predilection for times earlier than the unfolding of contemporary events. As Lang and Lang argued, memory work drew from "a stock of images of the past that, insofar as they continue to be mediated, [...] lose little of their importance with the passage of time" (138). They suggested that in journalism

even cursory perusal reveals many references to events no longer new and hence not news in the journalistic sense. This past and future together frame the reporting of current events. Just what part of the past and what kind of future are brought into play depends on what editors and journalists believe legitimately belongs within the public domain, on journalistic conventions, and of course on personal ideologies. (126)

Understanding journalism as one kind of memory work offered scholars broadened ways of explaining journalism. References to the past came to be seen as helping journalists regularly make sense of the present. In Lang and Lang's view, such references came to fill many functions for journalists trying to make sense of rapidly evolving events. They helped journalists build connections, suggest inferences, create story pegs, act as yardsticks for gauging an event's magnitude and impact, offer analogies, and provide short-hand explanations. The past came to be seen as so central to journalism that it emerged as an unspoken backdrop against which the contemporary record-keeping of the news could take place.

All of this is a roundabout way of stating that a close attendance to how journalism works reveals that journalists rarely concede the past to others. Although much has been made of journalists' so-called reliance on the commandment questions of news—the who, what, where, when, and

how of journalism, with not enough emphasis on the “why” (Carey)—a necessary attachment to the explanatory paradigms underlying current events is always there for the taking in journalism. The past remains one of the richest repositories available to journalists for explaining current events, and scholars have begun to track the variant ways in which the past helps journalists interpret the present.

A recognition of journalists' work as engaged with memory thereby proceeds by definition against journalists' own rhetoric of what they claim to do. And yet, journalists' role in making and keeping memory alive ranks uppermost in the list of those institutional actors and settings critical to its establishment (Zelizer, “News”; Zelizer, “Reading the Past”). Equally relevant, how the past sneaks into journalism plays to the recognition of collective memory more actively than an embrace of traditional notions of history. Journalists provide a particularly useful example of how memory work takes shape among those who produce recollections of the past, in that when journalists are involved in record-keeping about the past, they reflect larger impulses that complicate its ownership. Acting on what Warren Susman long ago observed—that “history [...] is not something to be left to historians” (5)—the ascendance of the past in journalism enhances the possibility for journalists to act as amateur historians and sleuths of the past—in events as wide-ranging as the Kennedy assassination (Zelizer, “*Covering the Body*”), Watergate (Schudson, *Watergate*), and recollections of Richard Nixon (Johnson)—in a way that accommodates the ever-changing nature of the past and its variations across the technologies of modern media. This means that collective memory, rather than history, is a useful frame through which to consider journalism.

2. Characteristics of the Journalism-Memory Link

The specific relationship that draws journalism and memory into close quarters has numerous characteristics that derive from the fundamental fact that much of journalism is crafted beyond the reach and scrutiny of others. This means that when journalists resist conceding their grip on public events, there is little to offset their efforts. Practices like rewrites, revisits to old events, commemorative or anniversary journalism, and even investigations of seemingly “historical” events and happenings are regular occurrences in the daily register of newsmaking (Zelizer, “News”; Edy).

One of the first scholarly endeavors to look at memory and the news was Lang and Lang's 1989 consideration of how the public opinion process is shaped by past events, and it was indicative of a key entry point for thinking about journalism and memory—through the audience and jour-

nalism's impact on the public's perception of the past (e.g., Volkmer). As memory continued to draw attention as a prism through which to consider journalism, however, more scholars began to approach journalistic work itself as a topic relevant to memory alongside its role in audience perception and response.

This has not always been a visible characteristic of work on journalism and memory. For instance, many scholars have tended to address the link between them by eclipsing the journalistic project within broader discussions of media, at times providing wide-ranging considerations of a past covered by journalism as one of numerous memory agents. Edgerton and Rollins discussed the various treatments of the past provided by television in general, while Doherty tracked the role of visuals in shaping the Army-McCarthy Hearings of the 1950s. While a substantial body of literature has emerged, then, not all of it has been identifiable for its consideration of the linkage between journalism and memory. This has in effect understated the particular role that journalism plays in helping us track the past.

What does journalism bring to an understanding of memory work that differs from that of other memory agents? Much existing literature has followed two intertwined strands—thinking about the form and content of memory—in conjunction with journalism.

3. Invoking Memory Through Form and Content

The particular rules and conventions of remembrance that characterize journalism make it well-suited to invoking memory in certain ways but limited in others. Many scholars have focused on journalistic work as a kind of recounting that strategically weaves past and present by upholding journalism's reverence for truth and reality (Schudson, *Watergate*; Zelizer, *Covering the Body*; Huxford), all the while drawing on the singular characteristics of memory work—its processual nature, unpredictability, partiality, usability, simultaneous particularity and universality, and materiality (Zelizer, "Reading the Past"). This twinning is seen as producing a tension in the kind of memory work journalism can produce, which has not always been the most effective tool for reconsidering the past. A gravitation toward simplistic narratives, recounting without context, and a minimization of nuance and the grey areas of a phenomenon all make journalistic accounting a somewhat restricted approach to the past. Against this tension, journalists' mnemonic work tends to be driven through variations on the relationship between journalism's content and its form, which forces different kinds of engagement with the past. As Wagner-Pacifici notes, "there is no natural dialogue between content and form. Everything waits

to be decided" (302). How decisions take shape depend on a wide array of factors that are central to newsmaking.

4. When Memory Draws From Content

In that journalism's charter is to explain events in the public sphere, drawing from memory and the past offers an obvious source through which to understand topical events. Meyers, for instance, showed how the news treatments of Israel's national celebrations were shaped by references to earlier celebrations. Kitch (*Pages from the Past*) tracked how U.S. magazines recycled celebrity stories and stories of a certain kind of nation-state as the predictable repository of content across time. Wardle considered stories of child murder against the historical contingencies that forced a similar story into differential shapes across time periods.

News topics often are given a look backward simply because attending to the topic forces an engagement with the past. Obituaries, for instance, are modes of engaging with the past as a way of coming to grips with its finality. Events involving death often themselves make good news stories, and journalists often look to memory when the public needs help in recovering from the trauma surrounding death. The U.S. response to September 11, for instance, was crafted in conjunction with the news media's capacity to move the story of grief toward one of recovery (Kitch, "Mourning in America").

Journalism's institutional memory is nurtured by the tensions surrounding the critical incidents of the public sphere, and so the presence of contestation and debate is often a reliable predictor that memory work will at some point begin. This suggests that when the event itself is contested, as is often the case with the news of war, crime, terror, and natural disaster, journalists look to the stories of memory as a way to guide its retelling.

5. When Memory Draws From Form

At times it is the available form of memory rather than the news story that makes engagement with the past attractive. Certain forms of journalism's look to the past suggest some attendance to memory though they do not insist on its presence. This includes forms that use the past as a way to understand journalism's topicality. Using history or events of the past as a way to understand the present is basic to the scholarly projects associated with collective memory, but it is built in pragmatic ways into journalism as

well. The past offers a point of comparison, an opportunity for analogy, an invitation to nostalgia, a redress to earlier events.

Most often, engagement with the past takes the shape of historical analogies, as in *Time's* labeling of its coverage of the Iraq War as "Gulf War II" (Zelizer, "When War") or in discussions of the Columbia Shuttle disaster as a repeat of the Challenger explosion (Edy and Daradanova). Predictably, the past is at times remembered erroneously. One discussion of the U.S. coverage of the Vietnam and first Gulf Wars showed how the news media labeled war protestors as "anti-troop" not during the Vietnam War but during the first Gulf War, as a way of strategically misremembering war dissidence so as to better fit journalistic discussions of the later conflict (Beamish, Molotch and Flacks).

Scholars have invested efforts in tracking the coverage of particular news events and the historical analogies from which they draw. Zelizer discussed how historical references were used by journalists to recount the present-past relationship in visual terms, showing how atrocities in Bosnia and Rwanda (1998) and the war in Iraq (2004) were illustrated through images of earlier events.

6. When Form Necessitates Memory

At times, journalism is driven by those journalistic forms which exist by virtue of the ease with which they can produce memories. Themselves dependent on periodic reinstatement (Schwartz), these include various kinds of commemorative discourse, retrospective issues, and other modes of anniversary journalism. Edy, for instance, suggested that journalists connect with the past in three main ways—commemoration, historical analogies, and historical contexts. In each case, the argument can be made that the journalistic project would not exist were it not for some kind of a priori engagement with the past.

Journalism tends to produce mnemonic work through those news organizations with the most extensive archives, and in this regard certain kinds of news institutions, organizations, and individuals are better attuned than others to be producing memory work. For instance, Kitch ("Useful Memory") showed how Time Inc. became a predictable repository for crafting memories of the past by virtue of its extensive and accessible data retrieval system. Even individual journalists who tend to address the past are those who were themselves involved in the past being addressed: Dan Rather has been at the helm of mnemonic addresses to the Kennedy assassination, which he covered as a cub reporter (Zelizer, "*Covering the Body*"); the story of Watergate has been recounted over the

years through the celebrated persona of Woodward and Bernstein (Schudson, *Watergate*).

This work can be grouped by two categories. On the one hand are the special projects produced by news organizations that strategically address the past and are produced for that aim. They include both the publication and broadcast of retrospective issues, programs, special broadcasts, books, and volumes that track a general past—as in the state of a particular news organization, particular news medium or journalism writ broadly over time—and those that follow a specific past, as in the coverage of a particular news event or social issue over time. On the other hand, journalists make extensive effort to track the past by explicitly and strategically following journalism's own earlier projects. Grainge offered a thoughtful analysis of *Time*'s various attempts to track the hundred most influential people of the twentieth century. He found, not surprisingly, that the 100 list read as a “particular kind of memory text, a figuration of collective cultural inheritance” which *Time* sought to promulgate as a “memory of democratic and capitalistic achievement” (204). Zelizer (“Journalists”) found that journalists do a kind of “double-time” on the events that they report, allowing them to correct in later coverage what they missed earlier: Thus, they adapted earlier reportage of both McCarthyism and Watergate into stories that better fit their evolving understandings of the events.

The scholarship that attends to these explicit forms of mnemonic engagement suggests that attending to the past is an integral part of journalism. In essence, it provides a “time-out” in the flow of news (Zelizer, “Collective Memory”), by which both journalists and the organizations that employ them are able to predict and control the erratic quality of news flow. In this regard, they echo the more general role of collective memory in lending coherence, however temporary, to ever-present contestations over the past.

7. On Journalism and Memory

By drawing from content, drawing from form, and accommodating forms that necessitate an address to the past, journalism's memory work is both widespread and multi-faceted. Recounting the present is laced with an intricate repertoire of practices that involve an often obscured engagement with the past. This renders journalism a key agent of memory work, even if journalists themselves are adverse to admitting it as part of what they do.

What all of this suggests is that we are far from knowing what journalism can tell us more broadly about how memory takes shape. As jour-

nalism continues to function as one of contemporary society's main institutions of recording and remembering, we need to invest more efforts in understanding how it remembers and why it remembers in the ways that it does.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Dan Berger for assistance with this manuscript. An earlier version of this manuscript appeared in Vita Fortunati and Elena Agazzi, eds., *Ricordare: Percorsi transdisciplinari attraverso la memoria*. Rome: Meltemi, 2006.

References

- Beamish, Thomas D., Harvey Molotch, and Richard Flacks. "Who Supports the Troops? Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the Making of Collective Memory." *Social Problems* 42.3 (1995): 344-60.
- Carey, James. "The Dark Continent of American Journalism." *Reading the News*. Eds. Robert Manoff and Michael Schudson. New York: Pantheon, 1986. 146-96.
- Doherty, Thomas. *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism and American Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.
- Edgerton, Gary R., and Peter C. Rollins. *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2001.
- Edy, Jill A. "Journalistic Uses of Collective Memory." *Journal of Communication* 49.2 (1999): 71-85.
- Edy, Jill A., and Miglena Daradanova. "Reporting the Present Through the Lens of the Past: From Challenger to Columbia." *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 7.2 (2006): 131-51.
- Grainge, Paul. "Remembering the 'American Century': Media Memory and the Time 100 List." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 5.2 (2002): 201-19.
- Huxford, John. "Beyond the Referential: Uses of Visual Symbolism in the Press." *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 2.1 (2001): 45-72.
- Johnson, Thomas J. *The Rehabilitation of Richard Nixon: The Media's Effect on Collective Memory*. New York: Garland, 1995.
- Kitch, Carolyn. "Mourning in America: Ritual, Redemption, and Recovery in News Narrative after September 11." *Journalism Studies* 4.2 (2003): 213-24.
- . *Pages From the Past: History and Memory in American Magazines*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005.

- . "'Useful Memory' in 'Time Inc Magazines.'" *Journalism Studies* 7.1 (2006): 94-110.
- Lang, Kurt, and Gladys Engel Lang. "Collective Memory and the News." *Communication* 11 (1989): 123-39.
- Meyers, Oren. "Still Photographs, Dynamic Memories: An Analysis of the Visual Presentation of Israel's History in Commemorative Newspaper Supplements." *Communication Review* 5.3 (2002): 179-205.
- Schudson, Michael. "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory." *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past*. Ed. Daniel Schacter. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995. 346-64.
- . *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget and Reconstruct the Past*. New York: Basic, 1992.
- Schwartz, Barry. "The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory." *Social Forces* 61.2 (1982): 374-402.
- Susman, Warren. *Culture as History*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- Volkmer, Ingrid, ed. *News in Public Memory*. New York: Lang, 2006.
- Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. "Memories in the Making: The Shape of Things That Went." *Qualitative Sociology* 19.3 (1996): 301-20.
- Wardle, Claire. "Monsters and Angels: Visual Press Coverage of Child Murders in the US and UK, 1930-1990." *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 8.3 (2007): 263-84.
- Zelizer, Barbie. "Collective Memory as 'Time-Out': Repairing the Time-Community Link." *Communication and Community*. Eds. Gregory J. Shepherd and Eric W. Rothenbuhler. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001. 181-89.
- . *"Covering the Body": The Kennedy Assassination, the Media and the Shaping of Collective Memory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- . "Journalists as Interpretive Communities." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 (1993): 219-37.
- . "News: First or Final Draft of History?" *Mosaic* 2 (1993): 2-3.
- . "Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12.2 (1995): 215-39.
- . *Remembering To Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.
- . "When War is Reduced to a Photograph." *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*. Eds. Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer. London: Routledge, 2004. 115-35.

