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Why Journalism Has Always Pushed Perception Alongside Reality

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Why Journalism Has Always Pushed Perception Alongside Reality

Disciplines

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ASSESSING EVIDENCE IN
A POSTMODERN WORLD

Edited by

Bonnie Brennen



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WHY JOURNALISM HAS ALWAYS PUSHED PERCEPTION ALONGSIDE REALITY

Barbie Zelizer

The title of this conference and book project – “Assessing evidence in a postmodern world” – rests on a number of suppositions that I want to call into question at the beginning of my chapter.

One is what we mean by assessing. Though one of the things we do to accrue cultural authority is assess the evidence we are faced with – and journalists, as spokespeople for the unfolding events of the real world, are no exception – I want to raise the oft-argued position that we have overstated a certain model of assessment and that we need to think more clearly about a different kind of relationship with the evidence we find. In fact, beyond the often-assumed idea that value can be assigned just by virtue of observing and evaluating presenting characteristics, a second valence surrounds the word “assessment.” Though the former has long been our default setting for thinking about how to relate to evidence, this second stance denotes activity of a more aggressive and strategic nature. It is what we attribute to home appraisers, tax consultants, insurance adjusters – where assessing means fixing a value to what surfaces based on imported categories of what matters, not just allowing value to emerge naturally from what presents. Assessing, in this second view, might be thought of as a more forceful and directed activity than we have tended to think until now.

Two is what we mean by evidence. While one of the earliest notions underlying the idea of “evidence” had to do with establishing grounds for belief, its surfacing in legal discourse from the sixteenth century onward cemented an association with proof, reason and rationality,

and it is in that regard that we tend to use it. But there exists a whole slew of material out there in the world that seems to have no evidentiary value because it does not fit that mindset, and so it gets largely discounted. Messiness, hesitation, emotions, imagination, contingency, contradiction, qualification all often go under the radar of the evidentiary envelope, even if they exist plentifully in the world. This means that the evidence we pay attention to does not always best reflect what is; nor does it signal how partial that evidence remains. In fact, in many cases, evidence reflects more about things as we want them to be than about how things are on their own terms.

Three is what we mean by postmodern. The assumption has been that its reigning traits – its liquidity (to quote Bauman), fluidity (to quote Giddens), relativity, instability and shifting positions – somehow are expected to change the fundamentals of our relation to the evidence that we find. But how new are these traits? The very lexical impossibility of naming a period “post” while going through it is problematic on its own, but its claim to distinctiveness further weakens when we focus not on what differs from early to later modernity, but on what stays the same. For though postmodernity is defined by its positioning of perception and perspective alongside reality and sometimes even in place of it, core aspects of our longstanding relationship to evidence have always pushed these bedfellows in equal doses, long before postmodernity made current such a turn.

So, with apologies to the conference and book organizer, I would like to think about the relevance of these terms by focusing on an area I know best – news images. As second-class citizens, these are important tools for thinking about how evidentiary values work, particularly because images are so important in times of crisis. What I hope to do is show how and why a close look at journalism's pictures forces a rethinking of what we expect when assessing evidence in a postmodern world. And in doing this, I am wavering between a discussion of evidence itself and a meta conversation about what we think we are saying when we focus on it. I am going to make an argument about the form and content of news, and how, in privileging the former – as Tuchman argued long ago and Glasser reminds us – we may be losing the latter, all of which connects to the available modes for assessing evidence in the news.

A few words about journalism to begin with. The assessment of evidence plays a central role for journalists attempting to differentiate

themselves from their surroundings. Journalists claim they do it better and more reliably, offer necessary context and explanation in a way few others can do, and know how to carefully select the evidence that most fully approximates the circumstances to which it points. And yet as important is what is not said – that journalists assess strategically all the time, that evidence often falls through the cracks of newsmaking routines, that what we think we know we may not be able to prove, that what we are told about the world reflects larger assumptions that are often as central as what is being covered. These are the material conditions to which Nerone refers to in his chapter.

Journalism is cluttered with the tensions that arise between the rhetoric of what journalists say they do and the reality of what unfolds on the ground. And nowhere does this become more the case than when thinking about the global flow of news, where the capacity to assess evidence is undermined, and sometimes even neutralized, by noise – spatial and temporal distance, cultural variation, inflexible ways of understanding difference, to name just a few. Noise sometimes becomes so great that it exceeds the capacity of any given news organization to cover the events and circumstances it is responsible for.

And yet we need coverage and demand that it take a certain form. Prominent here is a dispassionate approach to evidence, a privileging of the facts over the fantasy, a play to coherence and congruity even if the world has none. This quandary forces journalists to compensate for the limitations of the evidence they find but also forces them to be quiet about doing so. In other words, it is no surprise that journalists regularly rely on perspective, push perception over reality and import categories of what matters to assess the evidence they find. We just do not like it thrown in our faces.

I want to hone in on three sets of tensions that journalists regularly navigate in doing newswork: the connection between simplicity and complexity – how the complexity of real life needs to be compressed intelligibly into a news story or camera's frame; the global/local connection – by which the increasingly wide scope of global news necessitates a different, often tenuous relation with the local venues on which news unfolds; and the past/present connection – where the past looms increasingly relevant in a journalistic environment that has always prided itself on playing to the present but has insufficient tools for embracing its lack of certainty.

Longstanding attributes of visual news coverage – a play to the familiar, the memorable, the dramatic, the schematic – force a patterned resolution of these tensions. In each case, journalism primarily migrates to one side of the connection, banking evidence by privileging simple over complex, global over local, past over present. Because these impulses surface in tandem, when combined they offer a powerful compression of the evidence that journalists are charted with addressing.

We can see how all of this happens by looking at one individual photo. The photo I chose, shows a statue-dismantling in Baghdad's Firdus Square in April of 2003. I choose this photo to discuss here because it has been discussed so widely elsewhere. The central focus of three different academic studies, multiple public discussions, and a recent essay in the *New Yorker*, it has itself become an event, a critical incident by which all of journalism's observers and critics can debate an ongoing set of anxieties about evidence and journalism so relevant to the topic of this conference and book project.

Taken at the beginning of the latest Iraq war, the picture depicted what was then hoped to be a turn in the war's fortunes, a revolution against the regime of Saddam Hussein. But in fact, what its circulation, reception and discussion established was everything but. It offered instead a diminution of complexity, a cannibalization of local nuances within the news story and a minimization of the contemporary context against which to understand the photo and the event, which it depicted in lieu of a celebration of its historical parallels. The assessment of evidence, then, was performed but in ways markedly different from what journalists and other purveyors of evidence are expected to provide. The question, then, is whether the bigger problem is that the evidence or our expectations of it are at fault. I am going to argue the latter.

COMPLEX EVIDENCE, SIMPLE NEWS

The fact that journalists regularly and systematically simplify the complexities of the worlds on which they report is not new. This is the heart of journalistic storytelling, and we have long lamented journalism's predilection for the formulaic, dramatic, easily understood and accessible aspects of the news. As the exigencies surrounding journalism become more tenuous, we have become simultaneously more and less tolerant of journalism's need to figure out new presentational

routines to stay afloat – so too with pictures. The move to simplify almost always comes at the expense of the comprehensively told. Issues of cropping, framing, focus, light, context and positioning as well as background staging are all tools by which journalism engages its viewers, and as journalists have become responsible for more kinds of mediated stages than ever before – often producing the same product for print, electronic and digital platforms – the parameters of what counts as simple have narrowed. It should then be no surprise that journalists often orient all their tools toward shaping one particular meaning of what they show, using the lowest common denominator in which to show it. In that light, they have developed patterned modes of presentation that often short circuit what we hold dear about evidence and what we like to think goes on in its assessment. In other words, issues of form tend to determine issues of content because it is the most effective way for journalists to do their work.

This picture, for instance, came to signify far more than what might seem initially evident. Toppling this statue of Saddam Hussein was one of the most widely distributed and discussed pictures of the war. Taken on April 9, it extracted one frame from a series of visuals depicting a sequence of action that took place over two short hours, when a crowd of Iraqis in a central Baghdad square milled about the statue and then – with help – brought it to the ground. At the end of that sequence of action, the picture prematurely (and erroneously) was pronounced a signal image of the war's end. Today, nearly eight years later, the war continues and debates rage over what happened in between those two points in time – who initiated the action (Iraqis or the U.S. military), who watched the action (Iraqis, U.S. military, or foreign media), who pushed the action's interpretation (U.S. military or foreign media). Debates also rage over the status of the evidence itself – how representative was the square of the rest of Baghdad or to what degree was the event strategically chosen (and by whom). In photojournalist Peter Maas' view, the only thing the picture emblemized was "the fact that American troops had taken the center of Baghdad" – and not, as was claimed, "victory for America, the end of the war, joy throughout Iraq." In other words, as more and more people discussed the photo, the event it depicted became more and more complex, the evidence less and less reliable.

What did we learn? It was true that the U.S. military, in tanks, seized Firdus Square, that a group of Iraqis tried to dismantle the

statue with a sledgehammer and rope, that an American flag was briefly draped over the statue's head, then replaced with an Iraqi flag, and that the statue was eventually brought down – at the request of the Iraqis – by a Marine vehicle equipped with a crane. But it was also true that the square was never more than a quarter full (a fact hid by the photo's close cropping), that the crowd grew – whether naturally or by invitation – from start to finish, that most Iraqis did no more than throw dirt on the statue, that the American flag was only up for a minute and a half, and that the Iraqi flag it replaced belonged to an American soldier.

The evidentiary value of the photo was thus suspect – at least in terms of the expectation that it might reference some kind of naturally occurring value – and journalists' assessment of it was seen as problematic too. For it was also true that nearly the entire foreign news media were headquartered at the Palestine Hotel, adjacent to Firdus Square, and easily watched the tanks that cordoned off the square. The media hyped the event – a true photo-op – because they were there and able to run with the story. As Maas told it, journalists were primed for triumph. "They were ready to latch onto a symbol of what they believed would be a joyous finale to the war," and they had "an aesthetically perfect representation of that preconception" to push the vision forward. For that reason, reporters themselves later contended that their editors made them play up the joyousness of what unfolded, even when they had not seen it themselves. In other words, what was shown drew more from what the U.S. media wanted it to mean than what actually happened on the ground.

But is our disgruntlement with the picture of the statue-toppling driven only by a discomfort with what it showed or also by our limited notions of how evidence should be assessed? Journalists did what they always do: they turned to a proven visual formula – pictures of defaced representations of fallen leaders that date back to pre-media times – and they did so because that formula allowed instant and accessible meaning to be attached to the photo with little need for extensive verbal explanation. In other words, if seen as evidence that reflected the media's imported categories of what mattered – finding a simple, easily understood image that could accommodate the play to form while not undermining content – the photo did what it needed to do. And that remains the case even if the complex nature of the circumstances it depicted were not fully captured within it.

LOCAL EVIDENCE, GLOBAL NEWS

A similar quandary occurs in the tension between local and global. As journalists are held increasingly accountable for events beyond the immediate proximity of a given news organization (how local is local news anymore?), they need to make decisions about how much local information can reliably and effectively play to a distant (and generally unknowledgeable) public. Though there are always more aspects of the local than can be factored into any circulating news item, when one story or picture claims to stand in for the whole, the move to familiar forms becomes an even more useful way of accommodating the importation of already-formed categories of what matters. It is here that signal pictures come to stand in for potentially disparate events occurring elsewhere, as local nuances – the hesitations, contradictions, incongruities – that accompany almost any news story's unfolding are removed from coverage, displaced by a play instead to clear similarities with other events from other places, all of which perform more effectively on a global stage. Here too, we see a systematic privileging of form over content, as journalists look for photos that can easily play for varied audiences around the globe.

This means that the story took a similar form wherever it traveled, and many local aspects of the story were shunted from coverage. While an end to the war was heralded in Firdus Square, multiple battles raged elsewhere, what CBS called "total anarchy." Even the novelty of the statue dismantling was locally overturned, for British forces had earlier destroyed a similar statue in Basra, but because the event was not photographed or filmed, it drew little attention. Two days before the Firdus Square events, American forces toppled a statue of Hussein on horseback outside the Republican Palace in Baghdad. But there were no Iraqis present, few Americans, and an uninspiring surrounding landscape. Thus, the event remained thinly covered.

And yet despite the compression of local nuance, as this picture circulated globally, its form was celebrated. So powerful that it leaked into other events, imagined and real, it surfaced in parallel form within months in a variety of geographic locations – in discussions of a hoped-for regime change in a statue of Christopher Columbus going down in Venezuela, transforming what had been till then the Day of the Discovery of America into the Day of Indigenous Resistance. We also see it in the facsimiles of statues

of George W. Bush being toppled in Canada; or in statues of North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung in demonstrations in South Korea.

Significantly, in each case, the depiction proclaimed more about what was hoped than what transpired. For of course, a people's revolution did not occur – not in Iraq, nor in anyplace else. Rather, we saw the imagination of a more equitable, possibly democratic regime as a message that resonated globally. Again, evidence holding fast to imported categories about what matters, even if those categories, driven by a familiar form, do not fully reflect the messiness in content.

PRESENT EVIDENCE, PAST NEWS

We see similar impulses in the tension between present and past. While journalists are routinely charted with covering the present of news, where they offer that much-cited "first draft of history," they in fact regularly travel backward in time, using retrospectives, anniversary journalism, revisits to old events as a way of assessing contemporary news. So too do pictures bring back the past, though often in far more subtle ways. From the moment Hussein's statue was tackled, the historic parallels about statue toppling at other points in time shouted for attention – even before it was clear what kind of history was in the making. This is not incidental, for journalism often moves to the past, when information about the present is unclear, unavailable or incongruent.

Falling statues perform well in this regard, for evidence of statue toppling dates long before the media were ever around to show their pictures and images of felled statues have appeared in the news from the times of the U.S. Civil War onward. Coverage of the Cold War was filled with them, when events like the 1956 Hungarian Revolution cemented images of statues toppling into the visual memory of regime change. It was no surprise, then, that within minutes of the first TV visuals streaming globally from Firdus Square, the networks proclaimed the statue's demise-in-progress as "historic." CNN called it a "seminal moment in the nation's history," recalling the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and later juxtaposing images from 1989 with those of 2003. Fox News, ABC and CBS all heralded the historic nature of the event, while Katie Couric called the photo a "lasting symbol" of the war. As the shots were repeatedly displayed over the day – according to Sean Aday and others, on average once every four and a half minutes on Fox News, once every seven and a half minutes on CNN – they became

a branding device to promote upcoming coverage. It was not long before the parallels were adopted elsewhere, as when then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld proclaimed, "Watching (the Iraqis), one cannot help but think of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain."

The play to the past was thus instrumental in helping pictures of the present play as they did. Here too, the value of the evidence rested upon imported and proven categories of what mattered, even if they introduced unevenness in what was depicted. Form again took over content.

CONCLUSION

So what have we learned here about how journalists assess evidence in this postmodern moment? I have argued that journalists regularly migrate away from the noise, tentativeness and incongruity in the circumstances they cover. That is why they use pictures of the simple to cover the complex, pictures of the distant to cover the proximate and local, and pictures of the past to cover the present. These modes of assessing evidence all push perception alongside (and often at the expense of) reality, and, as has been argued, undermine a fuller understanding of the reality behind the evidence.

There is no question that this is a real problem. But to tackle it, we need to ask ourselves if we are effectively poised for its resolution. For I have not yet articulated what should by now be the most obvious point. Journalists play to the simple, the global and the past because that is where they can find the evidentiary qualities – of reason, rationality, certainty, clarity – that allow them to navigate the tensions between the kind of relationship with evidence that we expect them to have and the kind of relationship that circumstances on the ground make available. For as long as the complex, the local and the present continue to accommodate a lack of closure, hesitation, noise, heightened incongruity and contradiction (and given the texture of experience, why would that ever change?), journalists will continue to migrate elsewhere in culling the evidence of news. Their mode of engagement, driven by simplicity, global address, and the past, is thus their solution to the problems that assessing evidence in contemporary newsworld raises.

This obviously has its price. For as we have seen, journalism's push for form inevitably undermines content. And so we come back to the

question I raised earlier – is the bigger problem the evidence or our expectations of it? I still maintain the latter. We need to think more creatively about how the ground for assessing evidence affects the assessment we get. Either we have to develop a regard for a different kind of relationship with evidence or we have to be more tolerant about losing the news content that the old relationship requires. I do not think we can do both.