

TRUE STORIES: LITERARY JOURNALISM AND THE MAKING OF SOCIAL
KNOWLEDGE

by

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ABSTRACT

One way of thinking about culture is as a means through which structured relationships between people, objects, or meanings are reproduced over time. Using the case of literary journalism, I examine this process by investigating how members of the social world involved in producing literary magazine features collaborate to anticipate the responses and criticisms of an as-yet-unknown public audience by theorizing about the principles and methods particular readers will likely use to make sense of the article once it's published. This project is based on forty-three primary and over a hundred and seventy-four secondary interviews, in addition to a variety of lectures, articles, panel discussions, and archival materials, selected instrumentally for their capacity to illuminate typical cases, and analyzed using an abductive logic. It traces the production of a typical magazine feature from conception to publication, through the activities of reporting, writing, editing, and fact-checking. I highlight that although reporters and editors develop an embodied capacity for doing their work in roughly the correct way through experience as contributory members of the social world, each member's idiosyncratic background leads to divergent conceptions of right and wrong in any given interaction; solutions to these disparities have to be negotiated by reference to social objects that are understood to be commonplace among members (including "rules" of genre, structure, fairness, identity, and facticity). As members work toward a consensus, the text-in-progress is revised to account for the members' divergent ways of seeing, and it develops a capacity to withstand an increasingly diverse range of potential readings; at the same time, any individual's conception of the rules is clarified. By the time the text is published, and the response of a public readership can be observed, the piece can be read in conjunction with the public response as evidence of the existence and nature of cultural schemas that were purported to have governed its development,

thus providing a resource for applying the rules correctly to future projects. This approach highlights how the form and content of even a true account of reality is structured by the obdurate character of social accountability.

LAY SUMMARY

This project examines the production of literary journalism, using a magazine feature as a typical case. It involves a detailed investigation of the day-to-day work involved in reporting, writing, editing, and fact-checking such an article, with particular attention paid to the way the people involved in the process do their work with the expectations of their peers in mind. Considering magazine features as literary works whose production emphasizes their fidelity to the empirical world, a closer look at how these articles are made can illuminate links between the production of knowledge and the production of culture. Understanding the practical details of collaborative work like this provides a way of thinking about the relationship between specialized research methods and their consumption by a public audience, where the researchers serve as a focus group of sorts whose job it is to anticipate a wide range of public interpretations.

PREFACE

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Will Keats-Osborn. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 4 through 7 was covered by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board certificate H14-02769.

Ira Glass's show notes in Chapter 5, under the heading "Structuring in Practice," are courtesy of Andy Orin at the blog Lifehacker. The photograph of Robert Caro's office in the same section is courtesy of Martine Fougerson / Getty.

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GLOSSARY

Case - The specific, idiosyncratic person, place, event, series of events, and so on, that a feature story portrays.

Character - A subject as they're depicted in a story.

Copy editor - The editor responsible for stylistic issues in a draft, including adherence to a house style guide, grammaticality, and internal consistency.

Editor or editor-peer - One of the many people involved in a professional capacity in suggesting revisions to a writer's draft, including a story editor, a fact checker, a copy editor, a top editor, and an editor-in-chief.

Editor-in-chief - The editor responsible for the overall artistic or editorial vision of a magazine, as the formal leader of the editorial side of the organization. The EIC typically has the last say on what will be published in a magazine.

Fact checker - The editor responsible for evaluating a story's sourcing and determining what factual claims are warrantable based on the sourcing.

Journalist - A catch-all term referring to a reporter, writer, editor, or fact checker. Note that this is a nonstandard use of the term—opinions vary regarding who counts as a journalist.

Magazine - A catch-all term for the editorial staff plus the reporter or writer, as a collective.

Material - The potential building blocks out of which a story is structured, usually consisting of material traces of empirical objects or events (e.g., notes, recordings, clippings, computer files, etc.) before they're mobilized into a structure.

Reporter - Someone doing research for a magazine feature, who intends to later write the story.

Source - A person or other resource (e.g., a book, document, lecture, photograph, etc.) that provides material for the story but does not necessarily appear as a character in the story.

Story - A combination of a case and a topic, usually structured as a narrative, where the story illustrates a topic using an empirical case.

Story editor - The editor who serves as a point person for managing the production of a story in collaboration with a reporter or writer. A story editor will often (but not always) present a story idea or pitch to their peers prior to an assignment, provide support to the reporter while they're in the field, provide feedback on the first few drafts, enforce deadlines, and decide when a draft is good enough to share with their superior editors.

Story elements - The scenes, dialogues, quotes, passages of exposition, facts, descriptions, and other components that constitute the building blocks of a written story.

Structure - The sequential arrangement of elements in a story.

Subject - A person a reporter uses as a source, and who figures into the story as a character.

Top editor - An editor above the story editor but below the EIC in the institutional hierarchy; may include associate editors, senior editors, or deputy editors, depending on the organization.

Topic - The broader conceptual point, idea, or theme that a case illustrates.

Writer - Someone responsible for structuring and rendering in prose the material they gathered earlier while reporting.

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Special thanks of course to all my participants, many of whom remain unnamed, but all of whom contributed something indispensable to my understanding of their world. Many were especially generous in opening up their Rolodexes to make that understanding even deeper.

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DEDICATION

To Sinclair, of course.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 1964, the writer James Lord sat down in Alberto Giacometti's Paris studio to have his portrait painted. Lord had been a friend and admirer of Giacometti's for over a decade; at the time, he had written a few articles about the artist and he was corresponding with a friend in New York about their time together as part of what would turn out, twenty years later, to be preparation for Lord's authoritative Giacometti biography. What was supposed to be a quick sketch, expected to take an hour or two one afternoon, quickly telescoped into an eighteen-day effort as Giacometti struggled to achieve on canvas what he was seeing with his eyes. Because of the way they were positioned, Lord couldn't see what Giacometti was doing on the canvas during the sitting. Often, at the end of each session, upon seeing the day's progress for the first time, Lord would remark how certain he was that only an hour or two of additional detail work would be needed to complete the painting—only to be dismayed the next day when he saw the painter erasing the last day's work with a series of broad strokes over the middle of the canvas. In the hours they spent together, Giacometti's struggle to reproduce what he was seeing was a recurring theme of their conversation:

“It seems simple [Giacometti said]. What I'm trying to do is just to reproduce on canvas or in clay what I see.”

“Sure. But the point is that you see things in a different way from others, because you see them exactly as they appear to you and not at all as others have already seen them.”

“It's true that people see things very much in terms of what others have seen,” he said. “It's simply a question of the originality of a person's vision, which is to see, for example, and *really* to see, a landscape instead of seeing a Pissarro. That's not as easy as it sounds, either.” (1980, 89)

The notes Lord made during the creation of the painting became *A Giacometti Portrait*, published the following year by the Museum of Modern Art, and billed on the cover as a look inside the mysterious process of creating a work of art.

Quite some time later, waiting in the hallway of a New York publishing house while the editor I was interviewing took a private call, I came across *A Giacometti Portrait* while browsing through the bookshelves there. I had been talking to the editor about the work of editing nonfiction, in pursuit of my own inside look at the mysterious process of producing a work of literary journalism, and it struck me that Lord's curiosity about Giacometti was similar to my curiosity about the work that editor and I had been discussing. Many of the same problems seemed to be at issue: How does anyone render their subjective experience into a material form that's faithful to what they saw?¹ And how does anyone take stock of how *other* people see so the object they're producing is both original and intelligible? In both cases, the link between the experience and its reproduction is fairly arbitrary. In both cases, the experience is arduous and uncertain. In both cases, the bulk of the work is of trial and error, largely a matter of stumbling half-blind through an unfamiliar world trying to make sense of something that might have seemed, at first, to be exceedingly simple. Both cases highlight that the work of making sense of one's world is not just a domain of science, but that it's part of the daily life of any curious person, both the Giacomettis and the Lords alike—even if the Giacomettis and the Lords go about that work in a very different way.

The sociologist Howard Becker made this point deftly in his 2007 book *Telling About Society*, pointing out that all kinds of people use all manner of representations of reality to

¹ *They* is used here and on occasion throughout this thesis in the singular. Widely proscribed by style manuals on logical grounds, singular *they* has been ubiquitous in spoken and written English for several hundred years, since well before sociocultural factors entered the debate on the propriety of its usage. See, for example, Balhorn 2004; University of Chicago 1993.

communicate to others what they know about society—maps, novels, plays, photographs, poems, songs. None of these representations take everything into account, but they’re all “nevertheless adequate for some purpose” (2007, 3). A representation’s adequacy for the purpose at hand depends on what the producer and consumer wish to accomplish with it. A person who wants to communicate what they know to a specific audience, for instance, has to think about who that audience consists of, and what they’re like, and how the work can take into account what they’re like, so they can produce an object that has the desired impact. In his 1982 book *Art Worlds*, in fact, Becker carefully explored the ways that this type of interaction extends far beyond just the artist and their audience; the production of any artwork, he argued, was an accomplishment of a multitude of people all coordinating their day-to-day work to produce an object they all could agree was an artwork. In Giacometti’s case, his models—most often his brother Diego and his wife Annette—provided the physical forms (usually their heads) that he tried to reproduce; his dealers sold enough paintings to enough galleries and art collectors for him to rent a studio from a Parisian landlord; his audience, including a cohort of critics and curators, were enthusiastic enough about his work to render it valuable; his sources of canvas, paint, brushes, plaster, and other media supplied the raw materials he used for his representations; Diego also set up armatures and casts for Giacometti’s sculptures, which various foundry workers took charge of casting. No matter how original Giacometti’s vision may have been, he never worked within a vacuum; he was a component part of an *art world*, and his paintings and sculptures were ultimately traces of the collective work of its members.

As Becker took pains to point out, the cooperative nature of the work in an art world puts an onus on individuals to anticipate the expectations of their peers, to pay close attention to how their peers do what they do, so that they can do their own work the *right* way for their peers to

make use of it. Literary journalists do this every day, whether it's a reporter thinking about what their editor wants in a pitch, or thinking about how a reader might react to a dramatic turn of events, or an editor thinking about how a reader might distinguish the voice of their magazine from those of other publications, or a fact checker thinking about how an expert might try to dispute their claims. Predicting how your peers will consume your work, based on what you know about them and what you know about the social world you're both a part of, is a necessary part of collaborating to produce an artwork that's recognizable as "the kind of art works that art world is noted for," as Becker describes it (1982, x). In this situation, seeing things in a particular way might provide the basis for an original work—a "real" landscape instead of a Pissarro—but it also provides the basis for a series of difficult problems, when people come together with divergent understandings of what's going on.

The aim of the following account is to explore the way that people within the world of literary journalism work out these differences by trying to figure out as they go along the commonplaces that appear to define and govern their shared endeavour—to create something original that they and their ultimate audience can recognize as both an artistic and journalistic achievement. Although Becker explained how knowledge of one's social world is key for anyone's ability to coordinate their work with their peers, it's sometimes easy to forget in a discussion about *art* that knowledge is something that's produced and possessed by everyone, albeit in vastly different forms from one person to the next.² For this reason, literary journalism is an auspicious case: it's an aesthetic achievement as much as it's an empirical one. Making literary journalism is a matter of making knowledge as much as it's a matter of making art. In

² Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann made this argument in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, in which they took the unusual step of considering the knowledge of the everyday "man in the street" (1966, 13), rather than just those cohorts of society, like scientists and philosophers, whose job is to produce formal knowledge.

science as in any of the art forms described by Becker in *Telling About Society*, knowledge is not just a *product* of people's investigations; it's also a component part of the *process* that people use to ensure that the product is a true representation of the reality it's intended to reflect. Working out the differences between different people's ways of seeing takes what might have been an artifact of an individual's perspective, and adjusts it sufficiently so that multiple members can agree that it represents *their* ways of seeing as well. In this process, ways of seeing—understandings of what's real—influence how the organization of the social world evolves, as alliances are formed or broken, disputes are raised or resolved, reputations are built up or eroded. The configurations that shake out from the production of a given artwork provide the starting point, the present state of affairs, from which collaborations on the next artwork begin. Ultimately, it's a process of a world of people deciding what they can agree, collectively, is true about the world, and what's not, by considering both the reality within their social world and the reality outside it.

Literary Journalism?

For the purpose of this thesis, *literary journalism* is a style of writing that combines the empirical commitments of journalism with the aesthetic ambitions of literature. As the communication scholar John Hartsock puts it, literary journalism is writing that “reads like a novel or short story except that it is true or makes a truth claim to phenomenal experience” (2001, 1). This definition is close to being sufficient for the purposes at hand, and I will explain in more detail in the next chapter why a more exacting definition produces as many problems as it solves when the implications of a commitment to “truth” and “empiricism” are unpacked. For the moment, it will be worth expounding, in particular, on the role of literary journalism's aesthetic component in

distinguishing literary journalism from *news* journalism, keeping in mind that such a distinction is not something that even members of the literary and news journalism worlds necessarily agree on.

If all canonical examples of literary journalism really did read through like novels or short stories, Hartsock's definition would be more straightforward to use. In fact, the narrative and other aesthetic devices a reader would expect in a novel or short story often play only a circumscribed role in a feature article or nonfiction book. The journalism historian Kathy Roberts Forde puts it this way:

I am not comfortable with a definition of literary journalism that does not acknowledge the newsgathering that supports all journalism and insists that all literary journalism must read throughout like a novel or short story. Narrative is a key element in such works, but it need not be the only representational or discursive strategy employed. (2008, 7)

On the contrary, literary journalists tend to pick and choose literary and rhetorical devices depending on what they aim to achieve with any given piece, and often the segments that read like a novel or short story might make up only a small percentage of the total word count. Considering that the distinction between literary and daily news journalism typically hinges on the former's use of literary devices such as narrative, Hartsock's definition might seem too vague to be useful if Forde's caveat is taken to heart, especially when daily news journalists increasingly turn to narrative devices in their own writing, and not only for features in Sunday supplements and other traditional bastions of feature writing within the news world. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that, regardless of the exceptions that may exist, the world of literary journalism can be usefully distinguished from the world of daily news

journalism by keeping in mind not just the works that they respectively produce, but also the people who produce those works, and the way their beliefs and their work habits influence the form that their completed products take.

In general terms, the distinction between news and literary journalism is often grounded in the way that literary journalism is purported to achieve journalism's stated role in democracy by imparting beliefs about reality among public readers. Granting that journalists aim to distribute information about reality to a public for the purposes of democratic decision-making, literary journalists and news journalists tend to pursue this goal differently by packaging the information they've gathered into different forms. News journalists tend to provide what they consider the most important information in the lead; the who, what, where, when, and why all come in the first few lines of a news story, which means that reading through the rest of the article is optional depending on the reader's interest in the topic. This format purports to present just information—it *informs* the reader, in other words, rather than enlightening them. Literary journalists generally argue, in contrast, that by putting the information into a more or less narrative form, readers can be compelled to read about something they might otherwise find uninteresting. Forde links this commitment directly to John Dewey's suggestion in *The Public and Its Problems* that journalists presenting their work in a form that has "direct popular appeal" would facilitate public conversation:

Presentation is fundamentally important, and presentation is a question of art. . . . The freeing of the artist in literary presentation is as much a precondition of the desirable creation of adequate opinion on public matters as is the freeing of social enquiry. (1927, 183)

In this view, literary journalism is entertaining and engrossing and emotionally evocative in its own right, like literature, but with the added benefit that the reader comes away having learned something about the real world. Literary journalists, in other words, are a cohort of journalists who consider literary devices as resources that can permit them to achieve a particular purpose through their work that would not be achievable using the resources of daily news.

Whether or not it's true that literary journalism actually permits more effective democratic decision-making by virtue of this form is beyond the scope of this dissertation; it's not my intent to treat literary journalism as an independent variable whose impact on the functioning of democracy can be measured. But the use of aesthetic forms as a way of engaging a reader is arguably a defining commitment that can distinguish literary journalists at least in a heuristic way. The point of keeping this distinction in mind is to avoid the risk of assuming that the way literary journalists do their work is transferable to the way daily news journalists do theirs, in the same way it would be a mistake to assume that the way Giacometti's social world works to produce a Giacometti painting is the same as the work involved in a mason's laying a brick wall that's both level and true, despite the dependence of both activities on materials and craftsmanship. There are many similarities, of course, between literary journalism and daily news, both in terms of practice and outcome, but the differences are close to the heart of the following account.

As Forde's caveat suggests, the exact criteria that can be used to identify the form and the label used to denote it is a matter of considerable contention. Works I would associate with literary journalism have variously been called, for example, literary reportage, narrative journalism, narrative nonfiction, longform journalism, nonfiction novels, New Journalism, creative nonfiction, and even "faction." Writers and scholars concerned with these definitional

debates worry that different labels have objectionable implications: *longform* is too inclusive and says nothing more substantial about the genre than that its works are long; *creative nonfiction* suggests that authors have too much of a role in “creating” what are supposed to be rigorously factual accounts; *narrative journalism* suggests that the pieces are necessarily narrative, whereas many works tend to emphasize discursive, expository, descriptive, or argumentative elements over narrative ones; *nonfiction* defines the form only in terms of what it’s not, rather than what it is. Often, the debate is an existential one, most immediately because many journalists perceive an obligation to present to the public true accounts of reality, and the label communicates the substance of this contract to readers.

It’s not my intention to weigh in on this debate, as attempts to advocate for one term or another are examples of the *boundary work* (Gieryn 1983; 1999) that members do to make sense of their social world and their position in it. The important point is that a belief about the role of journalism in society, and the way members of this world attempt to realize this role by doing their work in a particular way, is a useful way of distinguishing literary journalism—and the people who make it—from other forms of journalism and other forms of social research. It’s not an essential quality, nor is it universal among members; rather, it’s a heuristic resource for thinking about the collaborative work that goes into creating *this kind* of account of reality, as opposed to any other.

A Brief History

One way of thinking about literary journalism as a cohort of practitioners who share a set of beliefs, rather than simply as a genre with particular textual features, is to consider today’s literary journalism genealogically, as a descendant of particular literary forms from the past.

John C. Hartsock (2001) traces the history of the American tradition of literary nonfiction as far back as the period following the Civil War, to writers like Mark Twain and David Thoreau, both of whom narrated their personal experiences in essays that were purported to be nonfictional. It wasn't until the end of the 19th century that feature-style magazine writing as we know it, based specifically on journalistic reporting rather than personal narrative, was inaugurated by magazines like *McClure's* and *Collier's*. At those magazines, early muckrakers like Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens pioneered the techniques we now associate with investigative journalism, taking the results of in-depth documentary and interview research and presenting it in long, narrative feature stories that were often serialized over subsequent issues of the magazines.

Steffens, for his part, had an abiding interest in municipal corruption, and a series of *McClure's* stories he wrote about corruption in St. Louis, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia were published in 1904 as *The Shame of the Cities*. These essays used many of the literary features now associated with literary journalism, including scene-setting, dialogue, and plot, but with a concern for facticity that was unusual for the time. In the introduction, Steffens makes a case for the literary presentation of these facts:

This is all very unscientific, but then, I am not a scientist. I am a journalist. I did not gather with indifference all the facts and arrange them patiently for permanent preservation and laboratory analysis. I did not want to preserve, I wanted to destroy the facts. My purpose was no more scientific than the spirit of my investigation and reports; it was . . . to see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame, would not burn through our civic shamelessness and set fire to American pride. That was the journalism of it. I wanted to move and convince. (1904, 17)

The form has evolved considerably since then. (“A lot of it was kind of boring,” one journalist told me; “a lot of it doesn’t hold up especially well over time, because it’s not very well structured—they didn’t really know what they were doing at that point.”) But the same impetus—to pique a reader’s interest and evoke an emotional response through the selection and arrangement of factual material—is familiar among today’s literary journalists. Take Pam Colloff, describing the motivation behind her *Texas Monthly* story “The Innocent Man” (December 2012), about a man wrongfully convicted of murdering his wife:

My interest in taking it on was to try to do what I think only long-form journalism can do: that is, to both delve into the rich, intricate details of a case and to overlay those details with the sort of storytelling that evokes a visceral response. I wanted this piece to really hit readers in the gut. (Williams 2013d)

In spite of the merits professed by Steffens at the turn of the century, mainstream journalism tended to move in the opposite direction over the first half of the 1900s, toward a more “scientific” model ostensibly driven by the norm of objectivity, as Michael Schudson describes in his book *Discovering the News* (1978). Leaving the Deweyan concern for the artistic presentation of knowledge to niche literary publications, mainstream journalism tended more toward a model espoused by Walter Lippmann, who questioned the ability of the fried-peas-and-nuts public to take account of the vast breadth of human knowledge in a way that would permit the kinds of informed decisions that effective governance requires. In his ideal, governance would be left to a class of technocrats with the expertise to make informed decisions, and the role of journalism would be to convey only the facts that the masses would need to vote the technocrats into or out of office.

Whether or not Lippmann was a progenitor or merely an amplifier of the values of objectivity and professionalization in journalism, he was certainly an outspoken advocate of them, and by the 1930s, according to Schudson, objectivity was “an articulate value of journalism” (1978, 157). (The journalism scholar Ben Yagoda quotes H. L. Mencken, who “wrote that when he was on the staff of the *Baltimore Sun* in the early years of this century, he and his fellow reporters felt ‘hobbled by the paper’s craze for mathematical accuracy,’ which resulted in reporters ‘who tended to write like bookkeepers’” (2000, 202).) Although Schudson questions the degree to which working journalists came to accept objectivity as an *attainable* goal, it had certainly become a dominant talking point in the middle of the 20th century, particularly as a resource for members of the journalism world wishing to establish their legitimacy or cachet (as it remains today). In Forde’s view, “Lippmann’s vision of professional journalism came to dominate daily newspaper and public culture while Dewey’s vision of journalism as art lived on in niche publications, muted and chastened” (2008, 15).

The muted and chastened publications who published works like George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* (1946), or Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* (1955) carried the mantle of *Collier’s* and *McClure’s* through World War II, but in the middle part of the century the pendulum was far enough on the side of objective and scientific journalism in the mainstream that certain writers who began in the 1960s to experiment, or re-experiment, with literary forms of journalism perceived a sort of radicalism in their approach. The novelty perceived in the work of writers like Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Gay Talese was pronounced enough that Capote’s 1966 book *In Cold Blood* was billed both by its author and its publisher as the inauguration of “a serious new literary form: the Non-fiction Novel” (Kauffmann 1966); Tom

The experimental approach to reported literature associated with Wolfe and his contemporaries in the 1960s and 70s effectively propelled magazines like *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and *New York* into mainstream American culture (or, at least, counterculture), and editors like Clay Felker, Graydon Carter, and Jann Wenner achieved the magazine industry's closest analogue to stardom. One effect of this ascendance was to provide another generation, referred to by Robert Boynton as the "new new journalists" (2007), with a fertile set of influences and mentors upon whose foundation they could hone the reporting and storytelling techniques that now form the basis of the journalism published in today's magazines.

Of course, the new new journalists and their peers had the dubious distinction of being one of the last generations of literary journalists to come of age in an industry exclusively concerned with print. There's no doubt that in the years since the turn of the millennium, the internet and associated forms of digital publishing and distribution have had a colossal impact on the publishing industry. Magazines that distribute paper copies through the mail are now spoken of, with a hint of pejoration, as "legacy" media, and almost every magazine has been forced to figure out how to develop a presence online in order to maintain a remunerative audience.

One effect of this development is that feature stories now commonly travel across the internet independently of the rest of the magazine's text. Traditionally, print magazines have placed their stories in a *feature well* bookended by front- and back-of-book elements like letters to the editor, listings, reviews, columns, and other short pieces. Now, stories that would show up in the well of a print issue, once posted online, might get shared on Twitter or Facebook, bookmarked by a service like Pocket or Instapaper, curated by a service like Longform, or shared digitally with one's friends and family members, all independently of whatever else might have appeared alongside it in the print issue. Aside from divorcing features from the *mix* that a print

editor typically envisions as a thread that ties together the pieces in a given issue, digital distribution has also upset the association between those pieces and the advertising infrastructure intended to fund them. As a response, some organizations have tried to develop publications based solely on the distribution of single features; Byliner, for instance, published an “e-single” in 2011 by Jon Krakauer, the bestselling author of *Into Thin Air* and *Into the Wild*, that quickly rocketed to the top of Amazon’s bestseller list, briefly igniting hope in a new model of magazine publishing—hopes that were dashed when Byliner folded in 2014 (Owen 2014). Organizations that continue to publish features independently of a print magazine tend now to do so as only part of an integrated media organization, like *BuzzFeed* subsidizing their journalistic work with custom native advertising campaigns, or *The Atavist Magazine* subsidizing their journalistic work with sales of a digital publishing platform, or Deca making feature stories in the context of a journalistic cooperative modelled after photographic organizations like Magnum.

A second, related effect is that revenue sources that have traditionally funded longform reporting and writing are undergoing a major shift. Print advertising in general has plummeted catastrophically, and much of the concern over the future of journalism is often linked to the precipitous decline in print advertising revenue for newspapers in particular. The 2015 report of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (Kilman 2015), for instance, indicated that print advertising revenue at North American newspapers decreased by 28 percent in just the previous five years. Similarly, the American Society of News Editors, in the decade before 2015, reported a total loss from American newsrooms of over 20,000 jobs—a contraction of nearly 40 percent (American Society of News Editors 2017). Not surprisingly, trends in the magazine industry have largely followed suit: according to Pew, overall ad pages among American news magazines dropped by 36 percent between 2003 and 2012 (Matsa 2013).

Virtually all legacy magazines have developed digital platforms of one kind or another for their editorial content, in order to raise revenue through things like digital advertising and paywalls, but rapid changes in technology and industry have made it difficult for digital publications to secure the kind of reliable revenue that print advertising provided over the latter half of the 20th century³. Ad blockers and the tiny screens on mobile devices continuously challenge the efficacy of display advertising, while at the same time, distributing articles as “singles” makes it difficult for publications to rely on the distribution power of Google and Facebook without ceding ad revenue to those platforms. Subscription sales have remained relatively stable, but readers do not appear willing to pay for subscriptions what it costs to produce the material those subscriptions entitle them to read, nor have they been since the invention of the penny press in the 1830s. As digital revenue becomes a larger and larger cross-section of any magazine’s income, figuring out how to keep abreast of broader changes in the advertising industry, in order to hold on to that subsidy, becomes a continuous challenge.

It’s an open question whether the apparent decline of print presents an existential threat to the genre of literary journalism, however. Many writers and editors acknowledge that producing literary journalism has almost always been a money-losing proposition—the audiences are simply too niche for either subscriptions or ad sales to provide much of a viable business model. “It’s a crap shoot,” says the journalist William Langewiesche. “We know it. But we are the people who decided we weren’t going to become doctors and lawyers. So it’s a very difficult road to walk. Always has been. Always will be” (Boyd 2007). It’s practically a tradition for publications with a particularly artistic bent to barely scrape by. *Harper’s*, perhaps the best example of this phenomenon, was purchased by the newly formed Harper’s Magazine

³ Marc Weingarten (2005) suggests that access to copious advertising income was partly, if not largely, responsible for the bold and risky editorial decisions made by Felker, Carter, and Wenner that made it possible for Tom Wolfe-era New Journalists to gain widespread popularity.

Foundation in 1980, when it was losing \$2 million per year (Manning 2000), and it has continued to lose money since then. But it lives on largely through the dedication of its patron, John R. “Rick” MacArthur and his family’s charitable foundation (Clifford 2010). Besides, one of the cornerstones of journalism, as I’ll explain in a moment, has been to try as much as possible to ignore what goes on on the business side of any publication, which means that a lack of job security has rarely stopped young writers who feel dedicated to the form from accepting very low pay for whatever amount of time it takes to develop the skills and connections needed to earn a living wage. As one editor told me, “It’s such an amazing moment, because print is dying . . . and nobody can figure out how to make money on the internet, but there is more good stuff right now than at any point in my career. There are so many good young writers out there, making nothing.”

Although fears about how the internet is changing the world of literary journalism certainly abound—people I spoke to regularly complained that standards of editing are eroding, that the training infrastructure of the print industry has evaporated, that digital publication is too ephemeral, that writing is becoming formulaic, that pieces are getting shorter and the pace is increasing—it’s not clear that these types of complaints wouldn’t have been aired at any other time in the history of literary journalism, especially with the introduction of any new technology⁴. There have always been bad editors and good editors, there have always been long pieces and short pieces, and there have always been reputable publications and dubious ones.

⁴ “Has ever a literary movement’s demise been more frequently hailed than New Journalism’s?” asks Robert Boynton (2005):

‘Whatever happened to the New Journalism?’ wondered Thomas Powers in a 1975 issue of *Commonweal*. In 1981, Joe Nocera published a postmortem in the *Washington Monthly* blaming its demise on the journalistic liberties taken by Hunter S. Thompson. Regardless of the culprit, less than a decade after Tom Wolfe’s 1973 *New Journalism* anthology, the consensus was that New Journalism was dead.

Profitable magazines, with the possible exception of *The New Yorker*, have rarely been the ones with the most cultural cachet. Complaints like these do not necessarily indicate that the social world of literary journalism is coming to an end, only that its members are taking account of changes within the world in much the same way they always have.

The “World” of Literary Journalism

Becker’s idea of an art world highlights that generic distinctions cannot easily be separated from the social organization of the people responsible for producing generic work. A central theme of the following account will be an exploration of how the social world of literary journalists is shot through with ideas about genre—how beliefs about what makes for good literary journalism influence how a journalist approaches the work they do with their peers, and in turn, how the outcome of that work influences beliefs about the “rules” of good literary journalism. The abridged history of literary journalism I just recounted shows, on one hand, how writers can identify themselves as a certain kind of writer by referring to genetic precedents for the work they’re doing—Tom Wolfe, for instance, clearly identified with the artistic freedom of the novelists he was reading rather than the buttoned-down news analysis of Lippmannian snore-mongers. It also shows, on the other hand, that organizational conditions—notably, the access to a magazine infrastructure with reliable advertising income—can accommodate certain kinds of writing better than others. These examples suggest that an account of the world of literary journalism such as this one has to go beyond textual attributes of the genre in defining its scope, to consider how the social organization of the world *produces* attributes that members of the social world can agree, more or less, are the attributes that mark works of literary journalism as members of a discrete genre.

Of course, the utility of a clear generic definition is that it provides a rationale for excluding peripheral cases; Becker's conception of an art world provides no such rationale. For Becker, an art world is never clearly demarcated in practice, and only achieves analytical utility by virtue of a judgment about how closely members are involved in cooperating to produce the kind of work the art world is known for. It's a collective attention to the "conventional ways of doing things," Becker says (1982, 57), that permit members of a social world to cooperate, so the scope of an art world can only be discerned by examining the work that members do together—how they themselves make sense of the work of their collaborators, and vice versa:

Art worlds do not have boundaries around them, so that we can say that these people belong to a particular art world while those people do not. . . . Instead, we look for groups of people who cooperate to produce things that they, at least, call art; having found them, we look for other people who are also necessary to that production, gradually building up as complete a picture as we can of the entire cooperating network that radiates out from the work in question. The world exists in the cooperative activity of those people, not as a structure or organization. (1982, 35)

Identifying people involved in the production of a literary journalistic magazine feature in this way is not particularly difficult; the difficulty is in deciding whom to exclude. One way to make this decision, as Becker suggests, is to refer to the distinctions that members of the social world make for the purposes of their own work.

A crucial distinction that emerges from even a cursory look at the literary journalism world is the distinction that its members make between the editorial and business sides of a magazine (and of the industry as a whole). A magazine's masthead provides a useful schematic for the social organization of a given publication, and the division of labour involved in

producing it, and magazine mastheads often make this distinction fairly conspicuous. It's a conceptual distinction—often denoted in a printed masthead by a line separating the respective staffs—but it is also in many ways a physical and practical distinction as well. The editorial staff will usually occupy a distinct office space and carry out face-to-face work to the exclusion of the business staff, and vice versa. At many magazines (as I'll discuss in Chapter 6), the division of labour might be fairly absolute, and the staff will work to keep it that way in defense of the magazine's reputation for editorial independence.

On the editorial side of this division, there will usually be a hierarchy of editors—the editor-in-chief at the top, followed by a deputy editor or two, maybe an executive editor, a few senior editors, a few associate editors, and a managing editor responsible for the day-to-day management of the editorial staff. Fact checkers or researchers, as well as copy editors and proofreaders, will usually be responsible for honing drafts as they approach publication. Editorial interns will often work with the staff editors in a mentorship capacity. Typically, an art director will direct a staff of editors in charge of the visual aspects of the magazine—illustrations, photographs, design and layout—in consultation with the text-based editors. Frequently, one group of staff members will be assigned to print production, while another will be assigned to digital, although the arrangement and permeability of this distinction varies widely; similarly, some editors may focus on the feature well, while others may be concerned more with the front or back of the book. Of course, a group of staff writers or contributing editors will report and write many of the pieces that the editorial staff will be responsible for selecting, editing, and arranging, while freelancers will be responsible for most of the rest.

On the publishing or business side of the organization are the people responsible for executing the publication of the editorial materials produced by the other side of the office. A

president and one or more vice presidents may oversee the process, developing business strategies, identifying sources and methods of financing, managing costs, keeping abreast of and adapting to changes in the industry as a whole, and representing the magazine to the industry and to potential customers. A sales staff will be tasked with selling print and digital advertising space, as well as subscriptions. Circulation staff will keep track of and communicate with subscribers. Some staffers will be responsible for communications, some for accounting, some for keeping the office running and managing clerical tasks.

Speaking in terms of Becker's art worlds, there are many people outside of the magazine office who play an imperative role in the functioning of the literary journalism world as well, if not directly in the production of magazine features. Advertisers, in many cases, provide much of a magazine's revenue, while subscribers provide a good part of the rest. Printers and distributors are needed to realize the magazine's physical form and to distribute it to retailers and readers. Literary agents may in some cases involve themselves in the management of payment and rights; lawyers may be consulted with respect to questions of libel. Critics may play a role, however circumscribed, in the ebb and flow of certain careers, and so may audiences, with whom reporters and editors ostensibly communicate through their work, and whose interest may serve to attract or dissuade an advertiser's or other revenue source's involvement with the publication.

In spite of the wide range of people involved in the literary journalism world, it is hard to overstate the importance of editorial independence in the minds of the people on the editorial side of this equation. Perhaps as a legacy of the move toward scientific accuracy described by Schudson (1978; 2001), or perhaps as a matter of artistic freedom, writers and editors who identify strongly with the democratic value of journalism or the aesthetic value of literature tend to perceive any impingement of commercial influence on their work as a grave moral

transgression, as it threatens the putative purity of literary journalism with respect to the faithfulness of its representation either of empirical reality (i.e., facticity) or timeless, transcendental reality (i.e., the kind of truth associated with literature). For this reason, it's extremely common for people on the editorial side of the masthead to ignore the existence of the more distal portions of the literary journalism world as much as possible, regardless of the frequency or intensity of the social ties that connect them. This phenomenon may become even more pronounced the more feature articles become separable from the magazine as a physical object thanks to digital modes of publishing. Consider the perspective of one participant I spoke to who had worked quite extensively both as reporter and editor, and now works exclusively for a digital publication:

What do you really need to do a story? You don't need a whole magazine infrastructure. You just need a great writer who can also report, you need a fact checker, you need a copy editor, you need an editor, and maybe a top editor to second guess the editor. That's literally all you need, all it takes to assemble that.

Literally, of course, it takes many more people than that, but to the extent that editorial independence of literary journalists is to be a real phenomenon, these are the people whose work *must* be carved out from the world as a whole, both conceptually and practically. Thinking of this work as distinct, and acting on that belief, is one of the "conventional ways of doing things" that permit people in those five roles to cooperate in producing articles that are recognizable as instances of the genre.

This is the reason I've chosen to focus on these particular roles in the following account, rather than treating literary journalism as a product of a broader and more diffuse world that

Becker might have been tempted to investigate. This account is based on a narrow reading of Becker's search for "groups of people who cooperate to produce things that they, at least, call art"; if a person on the business side thinks of a feature article as "content" to be "optimized" for delivery to an "end-user," rather than strictly as literature or journalism, that's a discrepancy that's relevant for the distinction I'm making in delimiting the scope of this project. While the editorial roles I examine certainly comprise a sub-world within a much larger world of cooperative activity, close examination of these roles allows for a more granular look at how the collective work of a social world is tied to the conceptual resources that allow the existence of the world to be discerned. The examination of these kinds of conventions—both in the way they govern world members' day-to-day practice, and in the reification of the conventions through that day-to-day practice—is *permitted* by viewing literary journalism as a world rather than as something else, like a field, structure, or institution. As Becker argued in a dialogue with Alain Pessin (2006), the use of the *world* concept aims to do away with the idea that people act on the basis of invisible, abstract forces that operate on them from above, and rather treats people as agents proceeding through their lives step by step, speculating about what to do, guessing at what people expect of them, and adjusting their lines of action according to how their peers respond. Even if a focus on a sub-world such as this one fails to provide a complete picture of cooperative action writ large, it nevertheless holds some promise for understanding cooperative work in concrete terms, rather than primarily through the use of abstractions.

Puzzling Out the Rules

So what does it mean for the members of a social world to use conventions of practice to govern their work, while at the same time discovering those conventions through their work? Members

of a magazine's editorial staff, at the beginning of any project or assignment, face a complicated task: they have to produce an accurate account of reality that "hits readers in the gut," and they have to do it by coordinating with a variety of people whose ideas of what's accurate and what's evocative might vary widely. Members of the editorial team have to decide as a group how readers will likely make sense of the finished text, in other words, so their work will have the desired impact. In general terms, this is the *simple* problem of literary journalism, and it's a problem that sociologists of various stripes have attempted to grapple with in various domains of social life for many years. As Jack Katz puts it, the problem is a matter of "taking into account, at Time 1, how others will respond at Time 2":

When composing music, working on an assembly line, or preparing food, people may be alone in the sense of executing sequences of behavior independent of others' interventions or monitoring, but they are shaping their behavior in anticipation of how others will pick it up: writing music for instruments that musicians know how to play; restricting output so that managers do not adjust the piece-work rate down; preparing food in such ways that the children will relish eating it. (2016, 697)

The simple problem of literary journalism is complicated by the collective nature of the work: rather than one person merely anticipating another's responses, as in the case of a parent cooking a meal for their child, the collective problem requires that a *multitude* of people anticipate an *array* of potential responses, and that they reconcile any discrepancies between their individual predictions, so that the product of the collective work appears credible to a wide range of consumers. In the *complex* problem of literary journalism, actions taken at Time 1 have to account not just for the reactions of the immediate consumer at Time 2 (as in, say, a reporter producing a draft for their story editor), but they also have to take into account the more distant

consumer at Time 3 or 4 or 5 (as in a reporter producing a draft that *also* satisfies a fact checker, copy editor, and lawyer). Any of the actions a member of the editorial staff takes in the course of their work, in other words, has to produce something that effectively anticipates a range of possible responses *among their immediate peers*; only if those interactions go well will the piece achieve publishability and find its way to a public audience. The solution to the complex problem permits the members of the team to produce a piece that hits readers in the gut, thus realizing the promise of the genre—but how exactly is the solution found *prior* to publication? How does a group of peers effectively predict the impact of the finished product on a range of public readers just by working things out among themselves?

By looking at literary journalism as an accomplishment of a social world, my intent is to inspect the work that's hidden by the commonsense picture of literary journalism as merely a matter of reporters at an upstream location uncovering facts that they proceed to communicate to a downstream audience—the public—in an entertaining or engaging way. This picture, while not inaccurate from afar, has little to offer any endeavour to understand either literature or journalism as a social process, because it removes from the picture the multitude of interactions that fall outside of the linear relationship between reporter and reader, which only occurs as a *result* of those interactions being navigated successfully.

There are two particular ways I intend to interrupt this linearity. The first is by recognizing that members of an editorial team have to expend a great deal of effort on looking inward, at their own social world, to figure out the “rules” or “conventions” by which their peers are ostensibly operating, the better to coordinate their work. Rules and conventions of practice are rarely explicit (see, for example, Polanyi 1958; H. M. Collins 1985), and even when they are, as in the case of ethics rules or style guidelines, it's often unclear how an explicit rule is to be

applied to a concrete situation. In the case of literary journalism, part of the criteria used to recognize a good article is its originality, both in terms of its literary value and the information it contains, and this means that even explicit rules have to be adapted to the new situations that each article involves. Figuring out how to manage novel situations requires that members of the team develop the competence—frequently through trial and error—to make decisions their peers will understand as the correct ones even for situations that have never before been encountered. A sense for the correct application of even implicit rules provides much of the basis for literary journalism’s credibility as a public good, especially when many of a piece’s empirical claims are delivered to the reader in a black box. The journalist Gideon Lewis-Kraus puts it this way:

Given our anxieties about what we can ever really know about another person, how can we ever have any confidence that the journalist’s account deserves to become official? The best we can do is make sure the journalist is playing by the rules. It’s a sociological solution, not an epistemological one, but it works fine for our purposes. (2013)

Publishing pieces that are discernable as having been made in accordance with the rules helps a publication develop the reputation it needs to afford the costs of future projects. Breaking the rules, on the other hand, even inadvertently, can erode a great deal of a magazine’s reputation, along with the reputation of the journalists and editors who work there, at one fell swoop.

The second, related way I intend to interrupt the linear picture of literary journalism is by suggesting that a large part of working out the correct applications of rules is speculating about how certain kinds of readers will evaluate a finished piece in terms of *certain types* of rules. This means recognizing that a magazine’s audience does not just consist of *the public*, as an undifferentiated Platonic ideal, but that it includes people both central and peripheral to the

literary journalism world itself—people to whom any given member of the world might be directly accountable in the present or in the future, if not as employer or employee, then as friend, idol, critic, mentor, source, or plaintiff. As participating members of the social world, this portion of the public audience is uniquely possessed of the competence to evaluate published work in terms of the conventions that all members of the social world are purported to share. Not every reader of a feature article will necessarily care about the use of a serial comma or the omission of digressions from a quote, for example, but certain readers almost certainly will if those kinds of concerns make up the nuts and bolts of their daily travails. A feature article in a magazine is what Clayton Childress might call a “thing that is many things” (2017, 4): it may be a compelling bit of entertainment to one reader, a shocking source of insight to another reader, and a grave insult to still another. Members of the team have to consider this range of possible responses by speculating about the rules that govern a range of social worlds. This means that anticipating the responses of readers with particular kinds of competence might play an outsize role in the decisions that members of the editorial team make at Time 1 with respect to post-publication outcomes, because the responses of those readers will be indicative of the team’s success in applying the rules of literary journalism correctly. Often, ideas about the Platonic public—the “typical” reader—serve as valuable conceptual resources for navigating the work of making these collective decisions face to face.

The important point is this: the correct outcome, and the correct series of actions or decisions needed to achieve it, is never clear at the outset, and puzzling out the rules of the social world—rules of structure, voice, style, evidence, ethics, accuracy, objectivity, and so on—must necessarily be done in parallel with puzzling out the empirical nature of the story under investigation, if as broad as possible a swath of the audience is to understand the story as a

legitimate instance of the genre—meaning, of course, that it recognizably meets the criteria of journalism, rises to the level of art, or, ideally, both. In spite of Becker’s exhortation of “shared conventions” as being the basis of collective action, I would argue that conventions of practice, regardless of how explicitly they’re stated, rarely provide any member of an editorial team with a clear roadmap for what to do prospectively over the course of the project, especially at time scales approaching weeks or months. The correct application of any rule is always clearer in retrospect. But one benefit of doing this work collectively is that applications of the rules can be tested, at least provisionally, with respect to certain portions of the projected audience, by using members of the editorial team as a sort of focus group that’s available to brainstorm theories of how certain stakeholders might respond to particular aspects of the piece. The outcomes of those tests can be used to inform revisions to the developing text. Each member of the team brings a set of theories about the social worlds they’re a part of, both professionally and personally, and differences in the scope of one person’s social world and another’s is a benefit when the sum of their experiences is taken. By coming to any given problem from a range of life experiences and perspectives, members of an editorial team can discover discrepancies between their respective understanding of the rules—points where conventions aren’t as commonplace as they ought to be for work to be easily coordinated—and by working out those discrepancies through revisions to the provisional text, the text gradually acquires the capability of evading critiques from a wider range of readers at the same time that rules of practice become clearer for the people involved.

Only after a piece is published does the accuracy of the team members’ collective, consensual predictions finally become visible. Whether the piece draws major criticism or is widely lauded as a paragon of the genre, the published piece can be used by the social world at large to discern what other members have agreed are the rules of literary journalism. Any piece

that isn't subsumed in scandal is a reasonable indication that things were done correctly, and can be used as an indication of how things ought to be done in the future. When a magazine publishes a feature article that withstands the scrutiny of a public audience, any member of the social world can read it "methodologically" for evidence of how other reporters typically go about gathering material or how other editors typically go about structuring stories, safe in the assumption that those ways of doing things are sanctioned by the world as a whole. And when members of the social world use the solutions to these problems as evidence for managing the needs of future interactions, the abstract rules effectively attain the status of things—not just incidentally, but because members of the social world actively work to reify them. So the cultural modes of practice are perpetuated and so they evolve. Members of a social world need to understand that there are conventional ways of doing things if they wish to coordinate their work, but the conventions need not be explicit, shared, or even static. Part of making literary journalism is discovering and reproducing the attitudes and idioms that make it possible. The more concrete the shared conceptual resources appear, the easier it will be to work collectively on the "simple" problem of bringing true stories to a public audience.

Literary Journalism and the Public Record

Such a focus on "rules" does not mean that I intend to explain what the rules are, especially not in such a way that true accounts can be distinguished from false ones. In the same way that science studies scholars since the "strong programme" in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (e.g., Barnes, Bloor, and Henry 1996) have tried as much as possible to explore how scientists themselves distinguish between true and false beliefs, rather than proclaiming on the truth or

falsity of those beliefs, my intent is to explore how literary journalists work out these kinds of distinctions in practice by trying to understand the rules that govern their own work.

One of Becker's contributions with *Art Worlds* was to demonstrate that art is rarely, if ever, a matter of creative individuals indulging their free-wheeling whims about what's possible with material and labour. With the exception, perhaps, of yet-to-be-discovered folk art, for an object to attain the status of art requires that it be recognized as art by contributing members of a social world who have competence with the endemic criteria that distinguish art objects from non-art objects. However implicit they may be, these criteria limit the ease with which an original or unusual object can be widely recognized as art. A creative individual can always create whatever they wish to create if they detach themselves from the assent of the art world, but the need for widespread recognition becomes an important constraint if a creative individual wishes to achieve such accomplishments as earning an income or interacting with a public audience.

Journalists who think of their work as playing a role in democratic governance inevitably have to work within such a constraint. As journalistic works, feature articles and nonfiction books contribute to what is commonly thought of as the *public record*—a record of the way things really are that's available to members of the public for the purpose of grounding debates about normative proposals for action. Journalists who wish to “hit readers in the gut” with factual accounts of the way things really are need to be able to afford the raw materials of a compelling account and they need an infrastructure that's capable of delivering their account to a broad range of public readers. The cost of this access is operating within the rules of the worlds that can provide it. People striving to produce credible accounts of reality have to do things in many respects by the book—they have to follow the rules of method, and do so correctly—and they

have to be seen doing things by the book by other people competent to pass judgment on how well their methods hewed to the rules. The rules are what distinguish literary journalism as a formal endeavour to develop knowledge about reality. This is an account of a literary form, but it's also an account of a form of empirical research that purports to provide the public with reliable knowledge about the way things are. In literary journalism, these two aspects of the work may often be in tension, but they're never separable.

One thing that might make literary journalism valuable for the sake of the public is exactly this tension in the criteria that distinguish the genre. In the absence of conventions of practice that are so commonplace and so internalized that they're invisible, the kinds of diversity that characterize members of this social world force them to speculate over and over about how other members of their social world understand the rules they're supposed to abide by. Concepts like "truth" and "facticity" are among the resources that members bring to bear on their day-to-day discussions about what's publishable. For a member to express a sense that a narrative structure "feels" natural or that a depiction of a character "feels" true is ultimately to express a theory for how other members of the social world might see the same structure or character, and how they might raise an objection based on their particular way of seeing—not just the story or the character, but the way that structure or character relates to the way things are "normally" done within the world of literary journalism. When people on the team see things differently, the best they can do is to continue to articulate their viewpoints in light of more and more evidence until they can reach an intersubjective consensus about what's probably true, considering what might happen if a powerful or expert reader happens to disagree. How much uncertainty will be tolerable, considering the risk that uncertainty might pose to the reporter, the editors, and the

magazine if a reader launches a convincing challenge? This is why it's important for the team to work toward a state of seeing things the same way. Achieving that state takes work.

When sociologists like me start digging into the work of fact-building, arguing that the objective facts that form the foundation of our democratic society are based “merely” on intersubjective agreement, it sometimes feels counterproductive or even harmful. When sociologists of scientific knowledge began poking around in scientist's laboratories in the 1960s and 70s, it wasn't long before scientists were blaming the crisis of public confidence in scientific knowledge on their meddling (Shapin 1995, 293). On the contrary, my aim in looking inside this black box is not to expose journalistic claims as groundless, only to get a better handle on what their grounding actually involves—the process by which members come to agree that a purported representation of reality really is well-grounded rather than spurious. A metaphysics of reality is not part of this account. Indeed, in canonical studies of scientific practice, the discovery has not necessarily been that those claims asserted as facts are or are not secured to the bedrock if you remove enough layers of topsoil. Instead, the discovery has been that a scientist's social reality contributes as much to what Herbert Blumer called the “obdurate character of the empirical world” (1969, 22) as their material reality. Saying that claims are not rooted in the way nature “really is” is not to say that facts can be willed into existence by anyone with an idea of the way they'd like things to be; it's simply to point out that the concrete details of social interaction are as much a part of the picture as the objective reality those interactions are attempting to describe, albeit a part of the picture that's often ignored when the resources of knowledge building—like concepts of truth, objectivity, and ethics of fairness—are ignored as topics for sociological investigation.

Even if this project looks under the hood of journalism more closely than some magazine journalists would be comfortable with, I would argue that a more detailed understanding of the process of knowledge building that literary journalism involves might provide some diagnostic utility in cases when journalism is expected to make an impact as a purposive social action. If a limited cohort of journalists have the resources to immerse themselves in unfamiliar worlds—like those of prison guards (Ted Conover’s *Newjack*), or Mormon fundamentalists (Jon Krakauer’s *Under the Banner of Heaven*) or slum dwellers in Mumbai (Katherine Boo’s *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*)—and to create compelling accounts of them, while other journalists don’t, we ought to be able to distinguish between how the different groups operate if we want to decide whose claims are empirically warrantable for whatever purposes their accounts might be useful.

Harry Collins and Robert Evans make a simple argument in their book *Rethinking Expertise*: “Other things being equal, we ought to prefer the judgments of people who ‘know what they are talking about,’” because “in spite of the fallibility of those who know that they are talking about, their advice is likely to be no worse, and may be better, than those who do not know what they are talking about” (2007, 2). Literary journalists certainly appear to know what they’re talking about, especially those who have spent months or years immersed in the worlds they write about. How do they come to know what they know? Members of this world do their work differently from other kinds of researchers, and indeed, in many cases, from each other. The approach they use enables them to develop warrants for their claims to reality that are different from those of others, and may well be better for some purposes, if not worse for others. In discovering the potential uses of their representations, and figuring out how that potential

might be realized more effectively, knowing what we're talking about when we talk about literary journalism is crucial first step.

The Structure of this Dissertation

The following account is structured loosely according to the order in which a magazine feature is produced—reporting, writing, editing, and fact checking. In most cases, reporting comes before writing, editing follows writing, and fact checking is one of the latter stages of editing. As useful as this might be for structuring a dissertation, it's not always an accurate description of the order of events in the production of an actual article. After all, an editor is usually involved in working out the details of a story idea even before it's assigned; writing is commonly done alongside the reporting; editing often uncovers issues that require additional reporting; and fact checking is a shared responsibility that a reporter starts and a fact checker mostly finishes, with input from various others along the way. And of course, a great deal of writing is done at every stage, regardless of whether it ever finds its way into a draft. Although this account is structured according to these four stages, it nonetheless requires a great deal of moving back and forth between different points in the process, as well as zooming in on concrete practices and back out to broad conceptual commonplaces, in order to account for the connections between different tasks and the variety of different approaches. The aim, in the end, is to provide a general overview of the process in much of its diversity and complexity.

Before I begin describing the work of reporting in Chapter 4, I provide an overview of the literature on literary journalism in Chapter 2 and a description of my methods in Chapter 3. I first explain how literary journalism fills a particular gap in the literature which emerges from a tendency in the sociology of journalism to take daily news journalism as the prototypical form of

journalism, as well as a tendency in studies of literary journalism to focus primarily on the text rather than the social interaction that goes into producing it. My approach, by contrast, sees literary journalism at the intersection of the sociology of knowledge, on one hand, and the sociology of culture, on the other—which is, in effect, to consider knowledge as a cultural object rather than an ontologically distinct category of human production, and to see culture as a process rather than merely a product or an object. Examining how a view of culture as a means for reproducing structured relationships over time opens up potential ways of seeing how cultural consumption is a prerequisite for cultural production. Then I explain how I went about producing this account—how I selected which cases to examine, how I identified and recruited participants, how I conducted interviews, which other sources of information I used, and the approach I took to managing human ethics issues.

In Chapter 4 I begin examining the practice of literary journalism by looking closely at the work of reporting. At this point, the scope of my account is limited mainly to reporters and their subjects. After explaining how dramatic structure serves as a major orienting principle for many reporters, I examine how reporters identify the empirical cases that will provide the narrative basis for their stories, and how they attempt to recruit subjects and sources. An extensive portion of this account concerns the ways that reporters interact with their “host” worlds—the things they encounter “in the field”—specifically with an eye toward rendering the material records they need to produce a substantial piece for their editors and ultimately their public readers, by doing things like managing the settings they find themselves in with their subjects, and presenting themselves in particular ways to close the social distance between themselves and their subjects. Finally, I explain how reporters convert those experiences into

material records as a way of buttressing the empirical nature of their claims, and I examine briefly how they decide when they have enough material to begin writing.

Chapter 5 concerns the act of writing—the conversion of memories and material records into text. Here I delve back into the idea of structure to explain how writers try to use conceptual clues in the text to control the way a reader will make sense of it, and how preparation for that control influences how they realize a dramatic structure out of the material they gathered. Anticipating readers means a writer must also take into account their obligations to their subjects, by carefully considering how to steward the information they receive in a way that preserves their and their magazine’s reputation for fairness. I then examine how writers go about actually producing words and phrases by alternating between creative and critical orientations to their work—first- and third-person perspectives, in other words—and I suggest ways that they consume previously published work as exemplars for informing their approach to whatever storytelling problems they’re struggling with. In its focus on early revisions to the text and how they relate to a writer’s control over the way a reader makes sense of it, this chapter highlights some of the ways a writer can “test” a reader’s potential response well before publication.

The main character in Chapter 4, the reporter, becomes the main character of Chapter 5, the writer. In Chapter 6, I finally zoom out somewhat to place the work of that character in the context of the magazine as a whole, particularly considering the magazine’s identity and the way the identity expresses a purported relationship between a magazine and the expectations of its readers; identity commonly serves as a conceptual resource that helps writers and editors work toward a common goal. Knowing that the identity of the magazine is at stake in any particular project, I then explain how editors manage the work of reproducing it—and the risk of eroding it—by developing relationships with their writers, by sifting through story ideas in light of how

they might fit with the magazine, by trying to match ideas with writers who will be capable of realizing them, and by working closely with writers through the reporting and writing stages of a project. Finally, I zoom back in and examine the work of story editing, with particular attention to the way an editor stands in for a general reader by articulating their reactions as they read along, and to how they negotiate with writers for the changes they think are necessary.

In Chapter 7 I investigate how fact checkers attempt to ensure that the claims in a piece can be warranted—which is to say, linked to the real world by chains of reference. When it’s successful, as I argue, checking realizes the journalistic goal of literary journalism, which is to provide true and accurate information to the public, while it also achieves an organizational goal of maintaining the magazine’s reputation by avoiding public disputes with powerful readers. I then move to the work of fact checking, explaining how methods of checking are inexorably linked to the checker’s understanding of readers’ expectations, and I explain how checkers attempt to discover and account for any potential weaknesses, or points of potential contention, to forestall the possibility that a reasonable or typical reader will be able to bring an effective dispute. I explain how a desire to avoid such disputes is weighed against the practical limits to anticipating all possible objections. Finally, I examine how checkers use diplomacy with a story’s subjects to maximize opportunities for the editorial team to collectively evaluate a source’s credibility.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I summarize the main themes of this account, briefly outline some potential blind spots, and suggest avenues for further research.

CHAPTER 2: THEORIES AND LITERATURE

Literary journalism is a social world that appears to occupy a liminal position between a variety of other social worlds, and it serves well, as a result, as a case example for examining liminal positions between a variety of scholarly fields as well. From an outside perspective on literary journalism, it's difficult to avoid taking something of a third-person perspective on the work of qualitative sociology as well, considering that members of both the literary journalism and qualitative sociology worlds work to develop coherent accounts of how specific portions of the world operate, mainly by talking to native informants, reading widely, theorizing about causes and processes, and writing up results of this work to the specifications of a genre. Being concerned with credibility and accuracy in their accounts of the real world, both literary journalists and qualitative sociologists are careful to reflect regularly about what they're doing in terms of the rules of method, to ensure that their accounts will be seen as warranted by the evidence, and yet both are rewarded for the originality of their findings. On the surface, members of both worlds are concerned with many of the same conceptual resources—facticity, truth, objectivity, consent, meaning—and both rely on a social and material infrastructure—publishers, financiers—to legitimize, fund, publicize, and critique their work. Taking such an analytical perspective on literary journalism, it's possible to highlight for a sociological audience certain ways that sociology and journalism share certain practices and resources, which can help bring to light certain general principles that might be shared by a range of people involved in the work of producing formal knowledge—the commonplace work, in other words, of observing, reading, arranging information, and writing.

At the same time, the differences between literary journalism and qualitative sociology can also help to illuminate certain general principles, when the analytical perspective tries to

account for the differences in terms of a general theory that explains differences between different social worlds. To clarify what I mean, consider a recent example of a boundary case, Alice Goffman's book *On the Run* (2014), which was ostensibly a sociological monograph, based on several years of ethnographic research, but written in a literary style, with scenes, characters, plot, and other narrative devices. Using the conventions of sociology, Goffman worked hard to maintain the anonymity of her characters, changing their names and changing details of the narrative to render them unrecognizable. When the book was read by readers in the literary journalism world, where the conventions suggest, on the contrary, that identifying sources helps readers to evaluate their credibility and that changing details is anathema, her book was subjected to criticism when journalistic attempts at verification were complicated by her use of sociological conventions (e.g., Lubet 2015; Singal 2015). Being at the boundary of the two genres and two worlds, her book was judged by readers from one world using their native criteria, generating criticism that might have been moot for readers from the other social world.

When an event like this is seen from a distance—from a perspective that views both sociology and journalism as different social worlds concerned with the production of knowledge—it's clear that the relative incommensurability of the two worlds' conventions was exposed when a cultural object traversed the boundary from one world to the other. From within the world of sociology, *On the Run*'s factual claims might have been warrantable based on the rules of sociology, while the same account, from within the world of journalism, might have made factual claims that were spurious, unsupported by the evidence. By relinquishing one's stake in the outcomes of particular research practices, in other words, it's possible to discern that what different worlds of research have in common—which is to say, their status as social worlds

with particular local conventions—produces what appears from *within* the worlds as a set of important, if not existential, differences.

What I want to do in this chapter is attempt to explain how “general” ideas about the production of culture can be used to explain differences between “local” approaches to producing knowledge. This move has important roots, which I’ll explain in more detail, in the work of sociologists concerned with scientific knowledge, who moved to relinquish their stake in the truth or falsity of scientists’ claims about reality to try to explain the work of producing those claims using more general ideas about how people try to distinguish between true and false beliefs in the course of their everyday lives, through mundane activities like reading, observing, and talking with their peers. Key to this approach, as Michael Lynch argues (1993), is to see accounts produced by scientists in roughly the same way as accounts produced by other types of people, as being oriented toward the achievement of ordered action in some specific social setting. In a given social world, the work people do to reconcile their beliefs with the social and material situations they encounter, especially when that reconciliation is mutual, helps to establish belief systems that have some widespread utility for situations people in that world commonly encounter.

In general terms, the study of culture is concerned with how people make sense of things, how they perceive meaning, and how perceptions of meaning relate to action through alternation between subjective and objective perspectives on social life. Looking at a society from the outside, rules and structures become discernible. But to participate in a society is to work out those rules and structures in the moment, situation by situation, so that the world continues to make enough sense that the demands of one’s day to day life can be met. In this tension between perspectives, the distinction between objective knowledge of the empirical world, and mundane

knowledge of the social world, blurs. An important part of this argument is that many academic approaches to science studies, which treat scientific knowledge as an ontological category separate from the rest of human culture, fail to see processes of scientific knowledge as specific applications of general practices of observation, description, and explanation. To be sure, scientists may have different ways of going about observing, describing, and explaining from other types of people, ordinary or otherwise, but I suggest that it might be more analytically fruitful to level the playing field with respect to different sites of knowledge production and use in order to see more clearly the role knowledge plays in general cultural processes.

Journalism as a Sociological Problem

Journalism has been of interest to sociologists for almost as long as it's been an institution of liberal democracy. In the study of journalism, like the sociological interest in the power of scientists to produce sanctified knowledge about reality, questions of knowledge intersect with questions of social organization. How does a local discovery or belief become general, and how does that transition affect the course of societies writ large? At issue is the "distinctly modernist preoccupation with, and a deep anxiety about, the role of truth in human affairs," according to Kathy Roberts Forde, the author of *Literary Journalism on Trial* (2008, 15). And just as debates about science and truth have raged for hundreds of years, going back to Hobbes and Boyle (Shapin and Schaffer 1985), debates about journalism and truth, at least in the twentieth century, have often run alongside them.

Sociological interest in journalistic institutions has not been purely academic of course, especially in cases when sociologists have perceived that their work might be of value or of interest to a public beyond the small cohort of specialists tuned in to the academic literature. The

founders of sociology often turned to journalistic publications—newspapers and magazines—to express their perspectives on contemporaneous events. Marx, for instance, began writing for the German press as a student and later became a prolific contributor of news analysis to the *New York Daily Tribune* (2007). Weber turned to the audience of the newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung* to share his perspectives on the German political structure during World War I (e.g., Giddens 2013). Robert Park, in particular, developed an interest in race while working as a newspaper reporter in the decade before he attended graduate school, and his journalistic experience, filtered through his work on the Congo Reform Association and with Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute, deeply influenced his ethnographic approach to urban sociology—particularly the importance of being there and seeing for yourself as a prerequisite to deciding what’s what. “Write down only what you see, hear, and know, like a newspaper reporter,” he apparently told his student Nels Anderson (Kirk and Miller 1986, 40). Since the term “public sociology” was coined in 1988 by Herbert Gans (1989)—who has devoted much of his career to the study of journalism—sociologists have been encouraged to share their findings with the kind of broad public usually associated with journalism, in the form of op-eds, essays, and monographs written for a general audience.

As an object of analysis, journalism¹ has generally been approached from either of what Brian McNair (1998) has called “downstream” or “upstream” directions. The former examines the effects of journalism by considering the various ways that the institution of journalism has produced particular outcomes on the course of society, treating journalism as something like an independent variable with a discernible effect on a dependant variable, society. The latter

¹ The chapter “Sociology and Journalism” in Barbie Zelizer’s book *Taking Journalism Seriously* (2004) provides a comprehensive overview of sociology’s history of treating journalism as a research subject.

approach examines the social determinants of journalistic production, particularly those features of social life that shape and constrain the form and content of journalistic publications.

Early approaches to journalism as a sociological problem tended to take the former perspective, and might best be exemplified by the work of Paul Lazarsfeld, who examined the magnitude of the news media's impact on public opinion (e.g., Lazarsfeld and Katz 1955; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1968). The debate between Dewey and Lippmann that I introduced in the last chapter was concerned, as well, with the ways that a public might take up different forms of mass communication, the better to govern themselves, and central to the debate was a normative concern with the reliability of a form of mass communication that's accessible enough to be of interest to the kinds of masses needed to make general, democratic decisions rather than specialized, technical ones. While it was Dewey's contention that "the function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" (Dewey 1927, 141), the mainstream of journalism tended in the Lippmannian direction toward the middle of the twentieth century, and publications committed to the Deweyan approach remained on the margins. This normative concern became a preoccupation of sociologists studying journalism as well, who tried to take account of how and under what conditions journalism might approach or fall short of objective knowledge.

This was the concern that animated early "upstream" approaches to the sociology of journalism beginning in the 1950s, when White (1950) and Breed (1955) began highlighting the possibility of examining the spectrum of influences that determine what makes the news. In this tradition, sociologists like Tuchman (1978), Gans (1979), Fishman (1980), and Gitlin (1980) later produced a series of landmark ethnographic studies of newsroom practices that shed light

on—among other things—the editorial “gatekeeping” processes used to determine what counts as newsworthy and what doesn’t.

One merit of these “upstream” studies is that they opened the door to considering journalism not just as a variable, but as a culture, consisting of journalists—people—with beliefs, values, opinions, habits, and relationships. Frith and Meech (2007), for example, have examined the professionalization of journalism by observing how a cultural “myth” of journalism as a craft, which idealizes on-the-job training, has tended to turn journalists against the possibility of journalism as an academic discipline, despite its apparent benefits to the field (see also de Burgh 2003). Ettema and Glasser (1998) have suggested that the culture of news journalism, which includes a fervent belief in journalists’ own moral disinterest, has led to the development of specifiable practices whereby journalists express moral outrage only implicitly through the ironic juxtaposition of commonplace public values with evidence of acts that are purported to have transgressed them. The myth of disinterestedness—a property of the culture of journalistic production—thus prevents journalists from openly acknowledging their role as moral mediators. Studies like these illustrate how considering journalism as culture, both in the sense that it produces cultural objects and in the sense that a “culture of journalism” is implicated in the objects it produces, can be very useful for a nuanced inquiry into how journalism works.

In their introduction to a special issue of *Ethnography* dedicated to ethnographic studies of journalism, Dominic Boyer and Ulf Hannerz (2006) observe that social scientific study of journalism can help to address a number of social science problems. For one, these types of studies help illuminate the role of media professions in producing symbolic representations that mediate people’s experiences of the social world, and the ways that various social conditions set the stage for this form of production. Secondly, considering certain similarities between

journalism and other qualitative forms of social research, journalism studies can also supply reflexive insight into the production of social knowledge in general, in accordance with what Laura Nader (1972) would call “studying sideways.” Thirdly, journalism studies can also provide reflexive insight into the operation of contemporary “knowledge societies” in general, which use social knowledge in self-monitoring for the purpose of making deliberate changes to the way their institutions are organized and operated.

The particular benefit of the approach I intend to take with this project derives from taking a broad view of a narrow case. I tried to emphasize in the preceding chapter the importance of differentiating between news journalism and literary journalism to avoid the risk of painting journalism as a whole with too broad a brush. If traditional sociological approaches to journalism have tended to take news journalism as an archetype of journalism as a whole, while carving off journalism from science and other institutions of formal knowledge as a separate domain of cultural production, this project intends to do the inverse: to consider a narrow sub-world of journalism as a way of generalizing about cultural production across domains, and not just across sub-worlds of journalism, but across the range of social worlds involved in cultural production, running the gamut from producers of science to producers of art. Looking at literary journalism very specifically as a sub-world, from a distance close enough for details of process and interaction to come into focus, it’s possible to see how a combination of upstream and downstream approaches are necessary to understand the production of any particular work—how the downstream use of a published work by interested members of the social world that was involved in producing it serves as an upstream input into the production of future works within the same genre. As I’ll explain in a moment, this approach illustrates the utility of recent

advances in the sociology of culture for considering the intersection of knowledge and social organization in all kinds of human affairs.

Genre as a Social World

Before I explain what I mean by thinking of culture as a process that plays out in local worlds of practical interaction, I want to return to the idea I introduced in the last chapter about the importance of thinking about genre in terms of social worlds rather than texts. I've mentioned already that the concern with genre boundaries is especially fraught in literary journalism, and the nascent field of humanistic research into literary journalism has taken the problem of boundaries as one of its central concerns. The genre's claim to credibility—its purported portrayal of real people and real events—is often the sticking point that scholars have to grapple with in any attempt to account for the genre as discrete from other forms of literature.

Josh Roiland (2015), for example, in a paper arguing for the merits of the term *literary journalism* as opposed to *longform*, notes that “nearly every book-length work of scholarship on the subject has waded into this definitional morass. . . . To appropriate a phrase from Tom Wolfe, characterizing literary journalism has proven to be a real ‘witchy thicket’” (61). As interest in literary journalism has ballooned since the 1960s and 70s, nonfiction genres have proliferated in different fields of art, and today podcasts like *This American Life* and graphic journalism like that of Joe Sacco (e.g., 2009) make the same claims to credibility, despite the diversity of their media, and it's fair to wonder how such diverse genres can claim the legitimacy of journalism. At issue is the ability for literary journalists to claim facticity or truth by differentiating their genre from fiction, essays, memoirs, and other works that don't claim to represent reality directly, and to communicate the legitimacy of that claim to readers through the label.

“Journalism is the only profession in the United States to enjoy constitutional protection,” Roiland notes. “Consequently, what counts as journalism has material, legal significance” (2015, 74). Arguing on behalf of the genre’s essential characteristics allows him, and other scholars, to push back against the lack of “delimiting elements” inherent in inclusive terms like *longform*, to defend the perceived social contract between a reader and a reporter that everything reported in a given story really is true. But his proposed scheme of demarcation leans heavily on textual rather than social features: scenic structures, voice, character development, and so on, which are shared with fictional literature by design.

Literary journalism has been a subject of fairly extensive study in humanistic disciplines, as well as journalism departments themselves. Roiland’s textual emphasis is common among much of this scholarship. In some cases, particularly within journalism and communications departments, upstream social processes have been treated as “problems” impeding journalism’s efficacy as a fourth estate, rather than as “phenomena.” Since 2006, much of the humanistic scholarship on literary journalism has coalesced under the aegis of the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies, which now holds an annual conference and publishes a peer-reviewed journal called *Literary Journalism Studies*. Canonical works in this field have included Edwin Ford’s *A Bibliography of Literary Journalism in America* (1937), Tom Wolfe’s *The New Journalism* (1973), Ronald Weber’s *The Literature of Fact: Literary Nonfiction in American Writing* (1980), Norm Sims’s *The Literary Journalists* (1984) and *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* (2008), *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism* by Thomas B. Connery (1992), Edd Applegate’s *Literary Journalism: A Biographical Dictionary of Writers and Editors* (1996), Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda’s *The Art of Fact* (1997), and *A History of American Literary Journalism* by John C. Hartsock (2001). While it’s hard to generalize about

the theoretical orientation of the field as a whole, the IALJS's organizing principle of studying "journalism as literature" highlights the link between their approach and the tradition of literary and critical theory. A bibliography of the field produced by Sims, for example, does not include any sources from the social sciences, and a selected bibliography produced by the IALJS in 2012, despite exhibiting an impressive range of humanistic scholarship on the form, is similarly bereft of representation from the social sciences.

Seeing literary journalism first and foremost as a set of textual features leads a lot of studies into a conceptual corner where philosophical problems regarding truth, representation, and relativism become persistent bugbears. Leonora Flis's book *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary Novel* (2010) serves as a useful illustration of many of these problems. Flis's main concern is with the way literary journalism has upset what she perceives were clear genre distinctions in the "pre-postmodern" period. In a postmodern context, where nonfiction can no longer be considered a "true" representation of reality, how can it be distinguished from fiction?

My study shows how the traditional viewing of the fictional and the factual as two antithetical narrative poles must be reconsidered and reevaluated in order to properly elucidate the documentary novel, a genre which indeed denotes an innovative break with the conventional boundaries of the established literary genres. . . . The concepts of fragmentation and decentering, criticism of the idea of logocentrism as well as of any other notion that implies a stable, anchored meaning (essence, consciousness, conscience) necessitate the creation of hybrid genres which, is precisely what the documentary novel is at the core, in my opinion. (3)

On this basis she devotes much of the book to establishing essential characteristics of the genre, which in her view is essentially a genre of fluidity and hybridity:

I show that there are distinguishable traits that connect documentary narratives with the ideas inherent in the notion of the literary postmodern. Some of the features that can serve as evidence of connectivity or overlapping are intertextuality, plurality of truths, self-reflexiveness of the narrative, the use of parody and irony, reliance on the prototext, deliberate anachronisms, and the tendency towards reevaluation of past events. Finally, there is the notion of the typically postmodern anti-totalizing ideology, namely, the realization that there is no ultimate closure, and no absolute truth. (43)

The selection of an “anti-totalizing ideology” as a description of literary journalism’s “inherent” qualities—what the documentary novel is, “at the core”—is a paradox that a lot of similar scholars seem to come up against as a result of their reluctance to look beyond the text for ways to ground the apparent facticity of literary journalism.

Many of these types of arguments take as axiomatic that journalism presents the truth to its readers while other forms don’t. Even Flis concedes that “Nevertheless, in principle, the nonfiction writer presents real people in real places to the reader” (2010, 26). But starting from this axiom leaves them with nowhere to go when confronted with the apparent influence of social, cultural, economic, or political influences on representations of the truth. In seeing literary journalism as a genre of hybridity, for example, Flis is never able to reconcile the appearance of relativism with the unproblematic use of realist categories not just by literary journalists and scholars, but by her own self, as when she states, “Thus far, it has been established that, *in reality*, there is no universal empirical standard, or no objective place from which we can agree on facts” (84, emphasis added). This paradox closely mirrors the struggle

scholars of science have encountered trying to describe the constructedness of scientific concepts while relying on a realist mode of speech as a way of establishing their own credibility, as Steve Shapin observes:

However much practitioners in this area may mean to show that such items as "neutrinos," "neurofibrillary tangles," or "social class" are theorized and socially constructed, the realist mode of speech is ineliminable in practice, and the "phenomenological bracketing" that allows analysts to be curious about how such items are constructed is dependent upon a robust realist idiom in speaking about other items. (1995, 298)

The way out of this paradox that I'm proposing is familiar from the sociology of science: by suspending judgment about the truth of any particular account, it becomes possible to examine the use of realist categories like "true" or "factual" *in practice*, which is to say, in the production of agreement about the truth of a particular account. How do people come to believe that some piece of text is factual while another isn't? In spite of Flis's lament that there is "no objective place from which we can agree on facts," scientists, sociologists, journalists, and all kinds of other people have no trouble agreeing on all kinds of facts over and over again in the course of every day, and like Flis, they regularly use classifications like "true" or "factual" unproblematically as *resources* in the act of working toward such agreement. This perspective looks at how facts appear at the end of a chain of social and material interactions, suggesting that claims to facticity might be more fruitfully examined by attending to how words like "truth" and "nonfiction," and objects like facts and articles, are *used*, rather than by considering just the products of those practices as though they are collections of inherent properties.

Sociology of Knowledge

How facts and ideas emerge from chains of social interaction is rightly the domain of the sociology of knowledge, and it will be useful to take a short foray into this field to understand the move I'm making with this project to considering literary journalism as an auspicious case for clarifying the process of cultural production in general. The idea to think of knowledge as an object of sociological inquiry is often attributed to Karl Mannheim, who devoted much of his scholarly work to the claim that social knowledge could be apprehended scientifically by examining the usefulness of particular assertions for realizing interests within particular social locations. With the exception of mathematics and certain natural sciences, he held that the remaining domains of knowledge tend to be bound to local social conditions, in much the same way that Marx's idea of *false consciousness* pointed to a system of beliefs that was particular to a social class and oriented to the achievement of particular ends owing to its origin in a particular social location. Mannheim's view went further, suggesting that the social genesis of all thought produced an ideologizing effect that was particular to the salient social locations. Mannheim was evidently uncomfortable with the relativistic corner this view appeared to back him into, and he suggested that the role of the sociology of knowledge would be to transcend the "partial" knowledges of any particular social setting by synthesizing a meta-perspective incorporating the kernels of truth contained in these local knowledges (2013). This "scientific" approach effectively imbued the sociology of knowledge with the same kind of transcendent, universality of truth criteria shared by natural sciences and mathematics, whose claims were capable of rising above the ideologizing influence of social life.

Mannheim's question of whether and how social processes can affect the content of knowledge claims underpinned a great deal of early work in the sociology of knowledge: "Are

social processes of innovation to be regarded as conditioning the origin or factual development of ideas (i.e., are they merely of genetic relevance), or do they penetrate into the perspective of concrete particular assertions?” (2013, 271). The spectre of relativism prompted many sociologists who conceded the possibility of a social genesis for a variety of beliefs to carve out exceptions for certain formal knowledges, such as most natural sciences and certain social sciences, and to look for social influences on the course of knowledge development without conceding the penetration of those influences to the knowledge claims themselves. This distinction persisted, notably, through the work of Robert Merton, a major progenitor of the sociology of science, who took it as unproblematic that the interests of scientists powerfully influenced the emphasis and pace of scientific research; these interests, in other words, affected the problems that scientists were likely to deal with at any given time, and the rate at which scientific knowledge advanced. He saw social processes, following Weber, as “switchmen” that could direct scientists’ attention to certain problems, or accelerate or inhibit the pace of scientific progress, while the nature of reality would ultimately determine the content of the knowledge itself (e.g., 1973). Merton certainly refused to go so far as to claim that social factors could penetrate into the content of particular assertions. He developed a theory based on a set of core norms—universalism, communalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism—that he took to govern scientists’ actions and decisions, suggesting that they function in conjunction with a reward system (a differential allocation of resources based on priority of discovery) that motivates scientists to hew to the normative requirements of the field.

Other sociologists were less eager to hew to this kind of exceptionalism. Thomas Berger and Peter Luckmann (1966), for example, argued against the notion that the sociology of knowledge ought to treat knowledge from different domains of social life with different

sociological resources—the notion, in other words, that scientists could resist the ideologizing influence of their social location while “regular” people in possession of folk beliefs could not. Their sociology of knowledge was based soundly on the knowledge of everyday people. They described knowledge as “the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics” and they hinged much of their approach on the simple assertion that “The man in the street inhabits a world that is ‘real’ to him, albeit in different degrees, and he ‘knows,’ with different degrees of confidence, that this world possesses such and such characteristics” (1966, 1). This perspective effectively uncoupled beliefs from interests, by insisting that knowledge is not chosen or developed based on what people wish to accomplish, but rather that people encounter particular realities based on the social situations—the institutionalized forms of particular beliefs—they encounter in the course of their socialization. Technical, theoretical, or formal assertions produced by people like scientists, they argued, form only a narrow portion of most people’s total stocks of knowledge, and a sociological approach to knowledge ought to be correspondingly general. Sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann argue, has to grapple with “the processes by which *any* body of ‘knowledge’ comes to be socially established as ‘reality.’ . . . [It] must concern itself for whatever passes for ‘knowledge’ in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such ‘knowledge’” (1966, 3).

Sociologists of science embraced the possibilities that were presented by the idea of bracketing judgment about the criteria of validity for particular knowledge claims, and looking for evidence of that judgment in the day-to-day work of scientists themselves. This tendency has been an impetus for a great deal of fruitful work, now often subsumed under the label Science and Technology Studies, including now-classic studies on tacit knowledge (H. M. Collins 1985), scientists’ rhetorical strategies (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984), the engineering of social “forms of

life” (Shapin and Schaffer 1985), social “boundary work” (Gieryn 1999; Gieryn 1983), and actor networks (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Latour 1987). These kinds of studies have laid the groundwork for the field’s almost-paradigmatic principles, including general skepticism about the correspondence between theory and reality; the influence of both material and social factors (in unknown proportions) on the development of beliefs; the theory-ladenness of observation, which is to say, the influence of internalized concepts, exemplars, or skills on how data are experienced; the dialectical links between knowledge-making practices or meanings and specific communities or forms of life; the importance of networks of actants or concepts; the provisionality of terms and categories; the inseparability of political and scientific activities; the rhetorical effect of scientists’ accounts; and the role of day-to-day social activities in the achievement of scientific findings.

Sociologists of culture, however, have been reluctant to seriously consider this inclusive view of knowledge as part of an everyday social process, albeit one that plays out differently for different groups, worlds, fields, or societies. The tendency is to maintain the partition between formal knowledge and the knowledge of everyday people. For example, Ann Swidler and Jorge Ardití, in describing a “new” sociology of knowledge in 1994, referred to “informal knowledge” as “the knowledge ordinary people develop to deal with their everyday lives” (1994, 321). Why scientists or other actors dealing with formal knowledge ought to be considered extraordinary people is not exactly clear, particularly in light of studies that have demonstrated how scientific knowledge is used by scientists to deal with their everyday lives (Lynch 1985; H. M. Collins 1985; Knorr Cetina 1999), just as other people—architects, engineers, artists, craftsmen, managers, salespeople, parents, teachers, and so on—use their stocks of knowledge to deal with their everyday lives. But still, Swidler and Ardití go on, “Whether such literature is properly

sociology of knowledge, or whether it belongs within a broadened sociology of culture or a sociology of consciousness remains to be seen” (321).

Hopefully it is clear by now where I stand on this question—a sociology of culture ought to be inseparable from a sociology of knowledge and consciousness, and vice versa. Recently, certain scholars have acknowledged the utility of using the conceptual tools of science studies to examine the production and use of *social* knowledge; Camic, Gross, and Lamont (2011) have pointed out that until recently, the tendency within social scientific inquiries into social knowledge has been characterized by what they call “traditional approaches to social knowledge” (TASK) that typically look for explanatory factors for the ideas of social thinkers in macroscopic variables like economic or political conditions, ideological orientations, or other social forces, and that a world of inquiry into the practices that intervene between the social structural “inputs” and the intellectual or conceptual “outputs” of social knowledge production remains relatively unexplored. But their approach, like mine, suggests that opening the black box of practices offers a way to examine the intersection between culture, knowledge, and consciousness.

As I’ll explain in a moment, a broad conception of the sociology of knowledge like that of Berger and Luckmann is indispensable to understanding the social processes described by sociologists of culture, and the same social processes are imperative for understanding the genesis of knowledge, both in terms of explicit beliefs and implicit practical know-how. People’s knowledge of how to live within their local social worlds provides the basis for the kinds of actions that Berger and Luckmann would see as instrumental for generating the institutionalized forms of knowledge that people encounter as their objective realities—the reproduction through people’s day-to-day actions of particular social structures or schemata. Drawing on Alfred

Schutz, they suggest that the focus of their sociology of knowledge is the question, “How is it possible that subjective meanings become objective facticities? . . . How is it possible that human activity . . . should produce a world of things”? (1966, 18).

Culture as a Local, Everyday Process

A central concern of the sociology of culture is, of course, the production and reproduction of things, both material and conceptual, but scholars have disagreed on how these social objects ought to be investigated and understood. For many years, a “top-down” understanding of Durkheim’s conception of *social facts*—“ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him” (2014, 21)—has informed the commonplace tendency among sociologists to consider culture as a system of norms, values, or meanings that provide the force behind human actions, compelling them to occur in certain ways rather than others. Thinking of social facts as forces often seems useful for understanding how structured relationships between people—institutions, classes, or social forms, for instance—persist through time. It’s a concern with these kinds of social forces that have underpinned a broad swath of sociological approaches to culture. Durkheim, for instance, describes moral maxims as extrapersonal forces that operate by providing or withholding sanctions: “the public conscience exercises a check on every act which offends it by means of the surveillance it exercises over the conduct of citizens, and the appropriate penalties at its disposal” (2014, 21). Later culture scholars, by way of trying to describe what culture consists of, have provided many additional examples of external ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that operate as coercive forces—Marshall Sahlins (1976), for instance, argues that culture organizes material practices like meat consumption or clothing styles by supplying norms of

material utility; Paul DiMaggio and Michael Useem (1978) suggest that consumers classify cultural artifacts based on the qualities of the social structure they're positioned within. From these perspectives, social forces, rather than people, contain all of the agency needed to explain human societies.

Recent approaches to the sociology of culture, in contrast, have questioned the idea that culture can operate coercively to constrain people's behaviour. It's these approaches that have provided a fertile ground for considering knowledge as a fundamental part of the process through which seemingly objective social structures are reproduced through people's day-to-day activities. The move in these approaches has been toward seeing culture as part of a socially contingent process that plays out in specific social settings, through the work people do to make decisions, interact with people in their environment, and make sense of what's going on around them. Instead of thinking about culture as a set of external forces operating from above to strong-arm people into structured relationships and systems of ideologizing beliefs, the trend has been to think about how people operate as agents that organize their own actions, and make sense of them, partly *in terms of* their understanding of social structures. In making this move, "bottom-up" approaches have focused more on small-scale creative acts of cultural production, serving as a useful corrective to the Durkheimian temptation to think of culture in only in terms of external forces. The question is whether structural forces "constrain" the actions of individuals from the top down, or whether people produce actions in anticipation of a theorized—or schematized—system of constraints, which produces a social order built from the bottom up. A focus on practices provides a convincing case that not taking into account actors' abilities to structure their own practices misses out on an important part of how broader structures can be produced and reproduced in and through actors' practices.

Gary Alan Fine, for instance, makes the point that “most culture elements are experienced as part of a communication system of a small group, even though they may be known widely” (1979, 734), and Howard Becker, as we’ve seen, argues in *Art Worlds* (1982) that the social organization even of fairly complicated social worlds can be derived from local cooperative activities. “In such a world, people do not respond automatically to mysterious external forces surrounding them,” Becker writes; “instead, they develop their lines of activity gradually, seeing how others respond to what they do and adjusting what they do next in a way that meshes with what others have done and will probably do next” (Becker and Pessin 2006, 278). Granular examinations of people’s day-to-day interactions have usefully illustrated the various ways that people produce not just material cultural objects, like artworks, but also conceptual ones, like ideas, that make up the array of resources that people use to make sense of and navigate their everyday social worlds. These kinds of studies have opened the door to examining the relationship between the appearance of an objective world and the subjective experience of living within it, which is to say, the way that culture is *experienced and generated* through practice.

The idea that norms, values, and other systems of meaning serve as a coercive force is belied when the actions people take are considered separately from the way they talk about their actions. Ann Swidler, for example, questioned the degree to which culture might have a deterministic influence on people by examining the way they justify their own actions (1986; 2001). In her research, people insistently referred to norms and values to explain their actions, but they tended to refer to different norms and values under different circumstances to explain even the same actions. Her observations led her to see culture more as a loose collection of habits, skills, styles, and concepts that serve as a “toolkit” people can use as needed to make

sense of past actions or to configure long-term strategies of action, whether or not those strategies are successful. Culture might have a restraining influence on people in the sense that it limits what they perceive as possible, she argued, but the resources on hand are applied in open-ended, contingent, and inconsistent ways.

Swidler's suggestion that culture provides a means for making sense of actions after the fact still failed to explain why people might take certain actions in the first place, and this problem was addressed by Stephen Vaisey's "dual process" model of culture, which grounded different actions in *practical* or *discursive* modes of cognition (2009). This perspective was drawn from scholars like William Sewell Jr. (1992) and Paul DiMaggio (1997), who had earlier explored some of the sociological implications of the discovery in cognitive science that many day-to-day actions appear to occur automatically, without any conscious decision-making. Vaisey's dual process model expressed the relationship between *practical cognition*, which occurs reflexively and automatically as a result of embodied predispositions for certain actions or problem-solutions that have been internalized under particular conditions of socialization, and *discursive cognition*, which produces deliberate and conscious actions based on explicit reasoning, often with overt reference to rhetorical resources like values, norms, or beliefs.

The emphasis on cognition in Vaisey's perspective on culture is part of a particular approach to sociology that considers meaning and action in terms of what computer scientists would call *neural nets* (e.g., Strauss and Quinn 1998). Like computer programs that are trained on corpuses of data to identify objects or make decisions without the need for programmers to articulate rules, principles, or criteria, human minds are conditioned through socialization to produce certain outputs in response to certain stimuli, and it's not always necessary for the outputs—or actions—to be explained in terms of rules, principles, or criteria. Exposure to

common stimuli—at school, for example—leads people with similar backgrounds to have similar *cognitive schemata* for producing intelligible actions in response to common situations (Zerubavel 1997). Only in surprising or unfamiliar situations is it necessary to convert stimuli into words and deliberate about decisions in terms of the concepts those words represent. In Vaisey’s view, for example, “actors are driven primarily by deeply internalized schematic processes . . . yet they are also capable of deliberation and justification . . . when required by the demands of social interaction” (2009, 1687). The dual process model suggests that seemingly unscientific processes like feelings, intuitions, hunches, and gut reactions—forms of *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi 1958) that can prompt particular actions without the need for overt consideration or articulation of rules, principles, or criteria—actually play an important role in the persistence of social structures. Rather than being arbitrary, these kinds of social senses can reasonably be considered outcomes of socialization processes in particular social locations, and can produce decisions and actions that accurately anticipate the way that other members of a given social world make similar decisions or take similar actions in the majority of the common, day-to-day situations they encounter.

Taking different modes of cognition seriously as a sociological insight opens the door to thinking about culture as part of a process that operates through people’s cognitive experiences to reproduce structured relationships between people and ideas. Richard Peterson described such a “genetic” conception of culture in 1976, arguing that “culture is the code by which social structures reproduce themselves from day to day and generation to generation” (1976, 678); a similar perspective can be seen in Sewell’s “dual” conception of structure, where “structures shape people's practices, but it is also people's practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures” (1992, 4). In this general picture, culture is the means by which patterned social

relationships (between people, objects, or meanings) are reproduced over time. Pierre Bourdieu also considered the ways that social structures can be reproduced by cultural means (e.g., 1984), suggesting that socialization at different positions in a field, with respect to possession of resources like cultural or economic capital, would develop in people a set of deeply internalized “master dispositions,” or *habitus*, that would influence all aspects of their life, including tastes, social capabilities, systems of categorization, and predilections toward certain actions rather than others in any given situation. These actions, in turn, would perpetuate the structured distribution of resources, considering that people in possession of capital would be capable of defining the value of different resources, and converting between symbolic and economic resources. Strauss and Quinn (1998) suggest an explicit link between Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and the cognitive schemata that cognitive scientists have suggested are responsible for predisposing people to produce certain outputs in response to particular stimuli, highlighting the implicit nature of much of the knowledge the predispositions are based upon:

We are always constrained by the dispositions learned from our experiences, but our habitual responses rest on knowledge that is not learned from or cognitively represented as hard and fast rules. . . . The knowledge acquired from [everyday] practices of this sort is not highly precise, but rather consists of more general categorical relations that can be realized in different ways, depending on the context. (44)

The work I’ve just described suggests ways that this simple principle can be used to explain not just how social structures persist in *roughly* the same form over time, by virtue of people’s internalized cognitive predispositions, but also how they change, by admitting the creative potential of deliberate or discursive action in response to new or unfamiliar situations.

From this perspective, the apparent existence of objective, rigid, extrapersonal structures can be explained by looking at the ways people navigate local, everyday social situations. Randall Collins made this point in 1981, suggesting that “macrophenomena”—even commonplace ones like culture, the economy, or social class—can be explained by the way people move through chains of normal, local “microsituations.” To the extent that people perceive the existence of structural forces, Collins argues, their engagement in ritual interactions is an occasion for reconstituting and celebrating the reality of these myths—something sociologists do regularly in seminars and conference Q and As with respect to macrophenomena like culture, the economy, or social class. “Such chains of micro-encounters generate the central features of social organization—authority, property, and group membership—by creating and recreating ‘mythical’ cultural symbols and emotional energies,” he says (1981, 985). The benefit of looking at macroscopic social forces as being rooted in real people’s everyday experiences is that it avoids the reliance exhibited by “top down” perspectives on structures and forces that are not even theoretically observable, except through instruments that aggregate multiple microsituations into abstracted models of “underlying” or “overarching” macro-realities. Building those conceptions up from empirical micro-events, on the other hand, as Collins suggests, has a sort of intuitive validity in the sense that we, as fellow people, can identify with the experience of moving through series of situations, some of which are routine and others of which are perplexing and unexpected. “Everyone’s life, experientially, is a sequence of microsituations,” Collins points out (1981, 987). We know from experience that we tend to see most things in a gestalt, *as* a certain type of thing, and that we are forced to reconsider what we’re seeing through deliberation when we’re confused or uncertain.

Bottom-up perspectives are especially useful for considering the relationship between cultural objects—both material and conceptual—and the cooperative activities that use those objects as resources. References to *different* macroscopic phenomena are clearly used for navigating the social demands of cooperative activity dedicated to the production of *particular kinds* of social objects. In pursuing the publication of a sociological journal article, for example, working out a mutually satisfactory understanding of a macrophenomenon like a “social class” might be necessary for the people involved—the author, the research assistant, the editor, the reviewers, and so on—to achieve what they perceive as a shared goal. But knowing about the properties of a social class is far from necessary for many of the real people ostensibly occupying that class as they navigate the social demands of *their* lives, as constituents of the social worlds that *they* occupy. Within a particular social world, in other words, knowledge of the material and conceptual things that make up the culture that members of that world are purported to share provides individual members with resources that can be used in various ways to navigate everyday situations—sometimes by rote if they’re familiar and routine, and sometimes through painstaking conflict and negotiation. When the goal of a cooperative activity is achieved, whatever macrophenomena were used end up embedded in the social object that results, because the people involved in producing it were forced to clarify their knowledge of the social world’s cultural repertoire in order to achieve it.

Summary

At issue, in general terms, is the production of social order. A magazine feature is a highly ordered account of reality, and it depends on a series of orderly interactions between—in many cases—a hundred or more people. The argument is that, at least in principle, you can watch

people produce and maintain the order of these interactions, and that the orderly account is an end-product of the work that the various actors do to produce and maintain order in their interactions. An artifact of that work is a sense for what the overarching rules are that govern everyone's collective action. A magazine feature is a product of a variety of people constantly organizing their own work in anticipation of how other members of their social world will respond based on their understanding of what are the social objects (both material and conceptual) they have in common. But the magazine feature is also an event in a chain of interactions, and it, along with the events that produced it, become antecedent resources for future interactions. At hand in all of these interactions is one or another idea of reality, which is a resource available for use in organizing one's own work in coordination with one's peers.

In contrast to a sociologist, who might consider culture, the economy, or social class to be the relevant underlying realities that they can apprehend through their flavour of cooperative work, the relevant macrophenomena for the world of literary journalism are things like rules of fairness, standards of credibility, conventions of narrative structure, criteria of organizational identity, and traits of typical readers. It would be a mistake to think of these cultural things as forces that determine people's courses of action as they work together to develop publishable articles. Rather, they're resources that people use to pursue cooperative achievements. It's always necessary to clarify one's knowledge of these phenomena in the course of getting onto the same page with numerous other people about what's publishable.

Some sociologists might fret to discover that very little of the following account concerns those ideas so near and dear to the heart of sociology—things like class, race, gender, and other macroscopic variables. In a study of a social world as fractious and prominent as journalism, surely it would be negligent to ignore the agency of the institution as a whole as it jockeyes for

influence with the powers that be; to overlook the forces of newsroom politics on what gets published; to sideline the implications of status and favouritism in the “tribal dynamics about who gets to be a writer or not,” as the writer Paul Ford described it (Lammer 2012). Perhaps this is the case, and there’s an argument to be made that examining the trees risks losing sight of the forest. But it’s hard to escape the conclusion when you look closely at the work of magazine journalism that a published article is a *cooperative* achievement, which obtains in spite of its competitive elements. While seeing journalism as a field of social classes may well be insightful for a treatment of journalism as an empirical object with certain traits and certain effects, such as Paul Lazarsfeld’s, what’s gained from putting those aspects aside is that the contours of journalism *as a process* come into view. It’s through this kind of process that social objects are built and discovered, and examining the work involved in the building and discovery provides a way of thinking about the sources and grounds for the traits and effects of empirical objects. Importantly, the relevant phenomena of literary journalism—rules of fairness, standards of credibility, conventions of narrative structure, criteria of organizational identity, and traits of typical readers—are never settled into a rigid form once and for all. They’re not an objective, external reality, in spite of being treated as such. They’re tools that are flexible and adaptable and can be used for different purposes in different situations. A perplexing situation will always require explicit deliberation about what tools will be useful for the job, or which courses of action will produce the desired outcome, and it’s novel applications of familiar tools, or familiar applications of novel tools, that lead the common stock of cultural objects to evolve. Familiar situations, on the other hand, if they work out so smoothly that no one has to think twice, preserve the relative stasis of the social world’s cultural heritage.

As much as writing might be a solitary activity, writers are deeply concerned about the social implications of that activity, and they work very hard, often for months at a time, to prepare for the inevitability of accounting for their work among their peers. As an outcome of that preparation—at the far side of a sometimes protracted negotiation about meaning and details and methods and ethics and literature and dramatic structure and personality and obligation—comes an orderly account of reality, a magazine article. The outcomes of those negotiations, including the article itself, become resources a journalist can refer to in the context of future negotiations; they indicate to the journalist what is ethical, what is normal, what is acceptable, what is reasonable, what is logical, what is true. In this way, through a chain of interactions, based on what each member perceives are a *shared* set of rules and values, a whole world of people can coordinate their work in pursuit of a common goal whose achievement—if it comes about—realizes those rules and values for the benefit of future work.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The endless debates among scholars of literary journalism about the boundaries and distinguishing features of the genre highlight the methodological difficulty of taking account of this genre as a social world—there’s no “actual boundary” around it, so who has been included in this account and who has been left out has necessarily been a matter of discretion. These kinds of choices always involve a sort of Borgesian bargain, where the larger the scale of the map, the less useful it becomes.¹ Different properties and phenomena become visible at different resolutions. An inclusive approach can be helpful in devising an account that’s general enough to apply to a wide variety of empirical cases, but this comes at the cost of lost clarity about local, day-to-day situations. As I’ll explain in this chapter, I’ve attempted to thread the needle between approaches that are instructively specific and usefully general.

The focus of this project is on the production of reported feature articles in national general-interest magazines, and out of the people involved in producing those features, my focus is on the members of the editorial team concerned with the text—the reporter, the story editor, the top editor, the copy editor, and the fact checker. This is the “sub-world” this project is about. I don’t mean to suggest that this is a comprehensive picture of the literary journalism world, because a variety of important players are excluded—not in the least the publishing infrastructure that enables any magazine to reach a public audience—but this particular focus allows for the investigation of particular processes that a broader picture would likely forfeit simply out of practical necessity. With this emphasis, it was my goal to develop a sense of how

¹ “The Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it,” writes the fictional Suárez Miranda, a Borges character. “The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters” (Borges 1999, 325; see also Healy 2017)

this work proceeds in a “typical case,” to such a degree that it’s possible to do so, considering that cases differ considerably from one article to the next, and one editor to the next, and one magazine to the next. I’ve tried never to lose sight of the diversity of this sub-world, and often my account will refer to what “many” reporters do or what editors “often” do, in light of the inherent limitations of this approach. The goal, as I’ve stated, is to understand the process of this sort of cultural production—the genesis and use of these particular kinds of social objects—in order to clarify a general cultural process, rather than to produce an account that applies accurately to the production of any other part of a magazine or to the production of any other sorts of knowledge. Even so, I’ve aimed not to be overly exclusive, and the roles of more peripheral members of the social world will play bit parts in this account when necessary for the argument.

Core Cases

Generally speaking, in qualitative research, the goal of sampling is not to recruit a sample of participants that is statistically representative of a certain population, but rather to select participants purposively with respect to how they might be able to illuminate a particular social process. To highlight the production, distribution, and consumption of artworks, for example, Howard Becker (1982) examined the conventional work of artists, artists’ assistants, suppliers, technicians, editors, agents, dealers, critics, distributors, and so on, treating each category as a role with some instrumentality in producing the artwork in question (and establishing it as an artwork).

Purposive sampling is often broken down into a variety of types, like *criterion sampling*, or *stakeholder sampling*, or *critical case sampling*, where the strategy differs depending on

which types of phenomena the strategy can justifiably illustrate. For this project, my aim was to use a *typical case sampling* strategy, with which I could examine the roles of the different members of the magazine journalism world with respect to their contribution to the production of a feature by seeking out typical cases of people occupying those roles. Robert Weiss (1994) refers to this as a “panel of knowledgeable informants,” which is to say, “people who are uniquely able to be informative because they are expert in an area or were privileged witnesses to an event” (17). In typical case sampling, a case is judged to be typical not on the basis of statistical representativeness, but on how it compares to other similar cases (and how it differs from different cases). For example, talking to three story editors might confirm one’s suspicion that most story editors do the same basic kinds of work even if they work at different magazines, and talking to those three story editors along with three radio editors and three managing editors might further confirm one’s suspicion that radio editors and managing editors tend to do different kinds of work from story editors. These judgments are necessarily somewhat impressionistic, but they gain reliability through triangulation; developing an impression of which cases are typical is also an ongoing process, and categories can develop in range or specificity as more information is collected.

Magazines

I’ll explain the core groups of participants I attempted to sample in a moment, but first it’s important to highlight that there was a limited number of particular magazines that I saw as relevant for this project, from whose staff and contributor lists I identified potential participants for recruitment. I first attempted to identify a group of magazines that appeared relevant to

literary journalism, then I attempted to identify types of actors that occupied relatively discrete roles with respect to the feature articles published by those magazines.

There are a variety of resources available for evaluating members' own perceptions of central magazines. For example, Kevin Kelly, the founding executive editor of *Wired* magazine, has published a list of "The Best Magazine Articles Ever" (2010) based partly on reader input, which includes articles from (in descending order of frequency) *Esquire*, the *Washington Post*, *Outside*, *The Atlantic*, *Scanlan's Monthly*, *Wired*, the *New York Times*, *Gourmet*, *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Portfolio*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Harper's*, and *Vanity Fair*. Similarly, Longreads.com, one of two major curators of longform magazine articles (the other being Longform.org), has also published a list of top articles from each of the past five years (e.g., Longreads 2016), which are dominated by *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *New York*, *GQ*, *Texas Monthly*, *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *SB Nation*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *London Review of Books*.

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt produces a series of anthologies called The Best American book series, where an editor who is known as a prominent member of their field selects approximately twenty-five magazine articles per year in a variety of topical areas, including essays, science and nature writing, sports writing, and travel writing. Reviewing the tables of contents of these anthologies reveals a similar distribution of magazines. For example, looking at the essays anthologies over the past five years, *The New Yorker* exhibits the highest representation, followed by *Granta*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Paris Review*, *Guernica*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, and *River Teeth*. Looking at the science and nature writing category over the past five years, despite its skew toward special-interest science magazines, *The*

New Yorker again comes out in the lead, followed by *Scientific American*, *Orion*, *The Atlantic*, *New York Times*, *Outside*, *National Geographic*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.

Another source of information are the national magazine awards (the “Ellies”), which are granted annually by the American Society of Magazine Editors. The awards honour magazines in a variety of “General Excellence” categories which take into account the whole of each nominated magazine, as well as more specific categories that honour particular articles or aspects of magazines independently of their general excellence. Awards are based on the opinions of (mostly American) members of the magazine industry. In 2016, for example, the awards were adjudicated by a panel of almost three hundred industry professionals, primarily editors but also writers, journalism professors, design directors, and consultants. Looking at the winners for reporting going back to 1970, for example, *The New Yorker* leads, followed by *The Atlantic*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Audubon*, *Texas Monthly*, *The Washingtonian*, *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, and *GQ*. For feature writing, going back to 1988, *The New Yorker* and *Esquire* lead, followed by *Harper’s*, *GQ*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Atlantic*, *Texas Monthly*, and *American Scholar*. Looking at winners and finalists for general interest magazines since 2012 (when the category was introduced), *GQ* appears three times, followed by *Wired*, *The New Yorker*, *New York*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper’s*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *VICE*, and *Politico*. For public interest reporting going back to 1986, *The New Yorker* leads again, followed by *The Atlantic*, *Time*, and *Texas Monthly*.

Looking at these kinds of information sources together, it becomes clear that there is a core set of magazines most commonly associated with literary or narrative journalistic feature articles, as well as a wider variety of more peripheral magazines that also deal with the genre but are less widely recognized as being members of the “core.” Arguably, *The New Yorker* exists

near the center of this world, with magazines like *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, *Texas Monthly*, *New York*, and *Harper's* being close by. Further out are magazines like the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, *Wired*, *Vanity Fair*, *Outside*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Washingtonian*, *The New York Times*, *Granta*, *Paris Review*, *N+1*, *Scientific American*, *Orion*, and many others, deviating from the center either because of a topical special interest (like *Wired* or *Sports Illustrated*) or a focus on criticism rather than reportage (like the *New York Review of Books* or the *Virginia Quarterly Review*).

Recently, some magazines have been established that do not produce anything in print. Because most of the core sample of magazines all produce a print edition, even if the whole magazine is available on the web, I did not purposefully seek out participants from magazines that are web-only, or writers who write only for the web. I did speak to people associated with web-only magazines like *The Atavist*, which produces digital-only issues, as well as writers who got their start writing for web-only publications like *Gawker*, but even in these cases, writers and editors for *The Atavist* have also been closely associated with print magazines like *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*, and writers for web-only publications were relevant for this project only to the extent that they also, or eventually, published in print magazines. As well, the world of radio also overlaps somewhat with the world of print magazines, as a result of a radio tradition closely associated with *This American Life* that has since spawned a wide variety of reportorial podcasts from organizations like Gimlet Media and Radiotopia. While nonfiction storytelling on the radio was no more a focus of this project than writing for the web, I did seek out a limited amount of information on radio reporting to clarify its links with magazine journalism.

People

From within the rough group of magazines identified above, a variety of roles could be identified in terms of which actors would be closely or less closely associated with the production of feature articles in particular. It is worth noting that magazines publish a variety of pieces apart from features, including columns, editorials, essays, reviews, lists, cartoons, letters, and so on, and it was not always relevant to examine the production of all of these forms, apart from situations where such an examination clarified something about the production of features; for example, it eventually became clear that short, front-of-book pieces like *The New Yorker's* Talk of the Town serve an important role in the acculturation of journalists who later go on to report and write feature articles, in the same way the *Harper's* Readings section helps to acculturate editors who later go on to edit them. However obvious this may be to a working journalist, discoveries like this were important inputs that gradually changed the scope and emphasis of the project as it proceeded. In the initial stages, the following categories were considered:

Reporters / writers: On the surface, writers are perhaps the most important, and potential participants among the pool of writers in this world were easy to identify by looking at the mastheads of the magazines listed above, by looking at lists of National Magazine Award winners, and by taking note of the bylines for feature articles in the magazines listed above.

Editors: Editors are perhaps the second most important cohort of participants, considering how closely they work with writers to produce finished pieces, from the conception stage up until printing. At most magazines, there are a variety of editors that are directly involved in the production of a feature; at the very least, there will be a story editor who assigns stories and works directly with the writer until a complete draft has been produced, and there will be a top editor who provides a second opinion on the complete draft. With few exceptions, a fact checker

(or researcher) will also examine the draft to establish factual accuracy, and a copy editor will review the draft for stylistic consistency. In many cases, there will be additional editors who intervene at various places in the process, to help evaluate a pitch or an idea, for instance, or to help resolve reporting problems, or to provide additional feedback on a completed draft. I attempted to recruit participants and gather information on the practices of all of these roles purposively, to illuminate typical cases of each type of editorial intervention—what is typical of a story editor, or a top editor, or a researcher, or a copy editor. I mainly examined mastheads of the core magazines to identify potential participants that could illustrate the role of each type of editor.

Publishers and salespeople: The focus of this project is on the editorial practices of feature writing, and editorial practices at these core magazines are often kept as distinct as possible from the business practices, at least in principle—the separation of “church and state” is an important conceptual resource for writers and editors, as I’ve mentioned, even if it fails to hold up under close examination. I did not attempt to recruit participants from the business side of the magazines directly (publishers and people from ad sales, for example), but I did gather information on these roles from secondary sources, particularly with respect to conflicts that have arisen over the independence of editorial work. Similarly, managing editors are typically responsible for the day to day operation of a magazine, including arranging for payment, and their limited influence on the production of text did not recommend them for close examination. Although I did attempt to contact several of them from different magazines, I was unsuccessful in recruiting any.

Designers and photographers: While writers and the four core types of editors—story editors, top editors, fact checkers, and copy editors—form the core participants in the editorial

side of magazine work, at least with respect to the text itself, there were a few other roles that seemed important to examine. The textual elements of a feature article are typically arranged by the design and layout department at a magazine, and I attempted to take account to a limited extent of the design aspects of editorial work for two main reasons, one being the commonly cited phenomenological role of design in giving the reader a particular experience of a text. The second reason is that the design and layout department frequently negotiates with writers and editors over space, and the amount of space allotted by the makeup department can influence how aggressively editors may cut a feature. Relatedly, photography and illustration departments also play an important role in the visual presentation of an article, and photographers or illustrators are often commissioned to produce photographs on the basis of the emerging content and tone of a developing article. This seemed useful to take account of.

Agents: Literary agents play a somewhat circumscribed role in the world of magazine journalism per se, but because many magazine writers retain literary agents to assist them with their book projects, it seemed worthwhile to look more closely into their role. Literary agents occasionally assist writers with pitching ideas and negotiating contracts, usually only once these writers are well established in their careers, and in cases where they are involved in the magazine side of a writer's work, they will often provide editorial feedback to their clients regarding ideas, reporting strategies, or drafts, depending on the idiosyncrasies of the relationship. For this reason, I attempted to seek out literary agents, partly by asking for recommendations from my participants, and partly by examining online resources like Poets and Writers or Writers Digest, looking for mentions of literary agents in acknowledgements of various books, and trying to ascertain which of them are involved with journalistic work in particular by examining agencies' websites and conducting web searches. In some cases, agents had prior experience as magazine

editors, and these agents were of particular interest, although my success in recruiting them was limited.

Book editors: Literary agents obviously play a much more important role in book publishing, which often consists not just of selling and marketing book ideas, but also in providing comprehensive first-line editorial feedback on proposals and drafts before they're submitted to editors. For this reason, agents were also of interest for their role in book publishing to the extent that book and magazine publishing overlap. As noted above, it's very common for magazine journalists to publish nonfiction books as well, and it's not unusual for book editors to have experience editing for magazines (Robert Gottlieb, for instance, was an editor at Simon and Schuster for many years before he joined *The New Yorker* as editor-in-chief, and he returned to book editing after he left). Although editorial work in book publishing is very different from editorial work in magazines, it appeared useful to speak to book editors to establish typical similarities and differences between book and magazine editing. I identified names of specific book editors by reading acknowledgements, asking for recommendations, and conducting web searches.

Professors: Journalism professors also seemed like an important cohort of potential participants, not just because they typically have extensive experience as writers and editors, but also because the requirement that they be able to teach the practical skills they developed over the course of their careers suggested that they might be able to articulate the details of their work in a way practising writers and editors might not. I identified specific professors mainly by looking at the websites of journalism schools at Columbia, NYU, and CUNY, where faculty are typically distinguished by specialty; this allowed me to target professors with particular skills or experience in magazine feature writing (rather than news or broadcast journalism).

Students and interns: Related to the idea that professors might be able to articulate their experiences in more detail than working journalists or editors, it seemed as though it could also be useful to contact students, interns, and other journalism professionals still engaged in the professionalization stage of their careers, on the grounds that they might be more aware of certain practices than more established professionals because they're in the midst of grappling with many of them for the first time. I attempted to recruit students through various channels, by asking for referrals and searching journalism school websites, but I had very little success in recruiting any of them. However, I did speak to a few early-career writers and editors, and I came away with the impression that they were not in an ideal position to give detailed accounts of their work practices because so much early learning happens through trial and error, rather than being guided through the use of rules and protocols, as the journalism school orthodoxy might imply.

Based on these categories, I developed a spreadsheet listing names, positions, recent articles and books, websites, contact information, and other information I might find useful about all potential participants I came across, and I used this spreadsheet to track my interactions with them as I attempted to contact and recruit them. In all cases, I tried to select potential participants based on their prominence in their particular niche, based on things like awards they'd received, the magazines they've worked with, or their appearance on lists of curated or most-read articles. As I spoke to more participants, certain names came up repeatedly and I tried to contact those people preferentially. I continuously updated the spreadsheet whenever I came across new potential participants or contact information for people already on the list.

Finding contact information was a continuous difficulty. The contact information for many writers could be found on their personal websites or Twitter profiles, and university

professors often had contact information on their university websites (although prominent writers often did not). Some magazines, notably *The New York Times Magazine*, publish email addresses for all of their editors, but most magazines are cagier about contact information for editorial staff. For better or for worse, a very helpful resource was a website called “Everyone Who’s Anyone in Adult Trade Publishing, Newspapers, Magazines, Broadcasting, and Tinseltown, Too: A Writer's Guide to The All-Pervasive Propaganda Network” (Jones 2016), which is a list of publishers, editors, agents, and other media professionals and their contact information that was compiled as an act of retribution by disgruntled writer Gerard Jones. Although some of the information from Jones’s website was out of date, it was often possible to use the email addresses published there to reconstruct other email addresses based on address conventions within an organization (*The New Yorker*, like Condé Nast as a whole, has a conventional address format for all its employees). I usually tried to confirm email addresses I had reconstructed before using them; for instance, some editors or reporters would tweet their contact information at potential subjects, and these tweets were discoverable through these web searches. For writers and editors, I also frequently conducted web searches using likely Gmail addresses and often discovered usable contact information that way.

Certain participants were very generous in providing contact information for writers or editors either that they recommended as participants or who I identified as desired participants. Using the technique commonly known as “snowball sampling” (e.g., Weiss 1994), I asked most of my participants for advice about who else they thought I should speak with, and in cases where they were forthcoming with recommendations, they were typically also willing to provide contact information or, less frequently, to contact other people on my behalf. In cases where I

contacted recommended participants, I referred to the referral source by name only with permission from the source.

In almost all cases, I made initial contact by email. The initial email generally contained a brief summary of the project and some basic information about what would be expected of the interview, but I changed the particulars of the email depending on who I was contacting. (A sample recruitment email can be found in Appendix A.) My approach to emailing changed over the course of the project as it became clear that it would be useful to emphasize my association with NYU and to highlight some of my prior interviewees, which I did whenever it was possible to do so under the rubric of the university's ethical guidelines. If I didn't hear back from the potential participant, I typically followed up by email several days later; it was not unusual for the second email to elicit a response claiming that the first email had gone unnoticed, which made sense in the context of the frequent complaints my participants made about the volume of emails they receive on a daily basis.

In general, participants who replied tended to decide to participate or not participate on the basis of the initial email. Only a few asked follow up questions, often about confidentiality or the nature of questions I would be asking, before deciding to meet with me. Scheduling interviews was difficult, particularly with editors, apparently because their schedules do not often permit a lot of unallocated time, and it was normal to go back and forth about potential dates and times. It was not uncommon for participants to email to reschedule as a scheduled meeting approached; both writers and editors typically scheduled meetings when they anticipated work would be slow between projects or at certain times in their production schedules, but unexpected difficulties or complications often arose and in a few cases participants who agreed to meet with me could not ultimately manage to find the time.

In total, I interviewed forty-three people, thirty-one men and twelve women. Of these, twelve were employed at the time primarily as freelance reporters, meaning that they tended to produce articles for a variety of magazines, although often with the benefit of close relationships with editors and in some cases semi-formal ties to particular magazines as contributing editors or reporters-at-large. Members of this cohort had written for *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atavist*, *New York*, *The Atlantic*, *Outside*, *Texas Monthly*, *Rolling Stone*, *Wired*, *The Walrus*, *Vogue*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The London Review of Books*, *N+1*, *T Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *National Geographic*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and many other publications. Five others were employed as staff reporters at major magazines at the time I interviewed them. On the editorial side, I interviewed two editors-in-chief, two deputy editors, two features editors, six senior editors, and one web editor, along with the heads of three checking departments and one additional fact checker. These editors worked for magazines that included *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, *T Magazine*, *The Atavist*, and *ESPN The Magazine*. Four participants, additionally, were employed as journalism professors at Columbia or NYU, and all four were either freelance or staff reporters as well. Finally, I spoke to two literary editors, one of whom had a previous career as a deputy editor, along with one book editor with a history as an editor-in-chief, one copy chief, and one curator of longform articles.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with my participants in a variety of locations—frequently coffee shops or restaurants, often in the participants' offices if they had one, several times in office building cafeterias or community centers. Several interviews took place over the phone or via Skype, in

cases where the participant could not fit a face-to-face meeting into their schedule, or where they were located in a different city from me.

Interviews were based on a set of protocols that I developed for the proposal of this dissertation that were keyed to the different reference groups I targeted in my recruitment—initially, writers, editors, and fact checkers. I wanted the interviews to be only semi-structured, because I was aware that they would develop considerably over the course of the project, as I learned new information about the social world, and because I wanted to be able to key the interview protocols to the specific participants I was talking to, and the specific projects they had been involved with. That way, rather than asking general questions like “how do you come up with ideas?”—which most writers and editors find impossible to answer in general terms—I could ask questions about how writers and editors came across specific ideas, or how they developed specific story structures, or how they rendered specific scenes, in ways that they often found easier to answer. Protocols for participants whose work practices diverged from what I initially anticipated, such as literary agents, copy editors, top editors, writers for the web, critics, and so on, had to be developed more from scratch out of questions that arose as I learned about the social world.

To prepare for each interview, I generally tried to read as much material as possible related to each participant’s work. For writers, this usually meant reading as many of their recent feature articles as possible, and for editors, reading feature articles they had been involved with, to the extent that I could discern which ones they were. (*The New York Times Magazine*, for example, has published editorial credits for some of their feature articles.) For writers, editors, and other participants, it also meant searching for any information I could find about them personally, including biographies, books containing biographical information, prior interviews,

lectures, or panel discussions. This was useful, first of all to familiarize myself with them and their work so that I could orient my questions to the specifics of their particular experiences; second, to see if these other sources of information already contained answers to questions I was planning to ask; and third, to identify additional questions that it might not have occurred to me to ask. Because many of my participants are already public figures, it was not uncommon for writers in particular to have multitudes of prior interviews and other information already publicly available on the web. As the project progressed, the value of this additional material became increasingly clear, and I collected a lot of it for further analysis (see Additional Data Sources, below).

Before each interview, as part of deciding which questions I wanted to ask each participant, I would typically record a list of questions in diminutive type on a single sheet of paper, sometimes just in point form, and then I would use that same piece of paper to take notes during the interview itself. Many interviewers across fields of research refer to the “split frame of consciousness” that’s required during an interview—as one fact checker I spoke to described it, “You have to be focusing on writing what the person said a few minutes ago; you have to pay attention to what the person is saying in the present, which is different from what you are writing; and you also have to worry about what your next question is going to be.” By having all the questions on one page along with the notes associated with those questions, the sheet of paper was a valuable resource for me during the interview that I could use to keep track of what questions had been answered, which points they brought up that I needed to follow up with, which questions I still needed to ask, and which of those questions had already been addressed by their answers to previous questions. As well, it also served as a rough guide to how much time had elapsed in comparison to what had been allotted.

In addition to taking notes during the interview on the question sheet, I also digitally recorded almost all of the interviews I conducted, except where the participant requested otherwise or in cases where I was talking to people before I had their consent to participate. In-person interviews were recorded on an iPhone using an app called Recorder, developed by a San Francisco company called Retronyms. Phone interviews were typically recorded using an Android application called ACR (“Another Call Recorder”) by NLL Apps, and Skype interviews were recorded using a Linux application called Skype Call Recorder. I uploaded the recordings to my computer as soon as possible after the interview, and backed up copies on a separate hard drive. After each interview, I also took detailed notes about what had transpired during the interview, partly to translate the notes on the interview protocol into more readable prose while my memories of the interview were still fresh, partly as a way of processing the conversation so I could identify particularly useful or novel parts or take note of questions still outstanding, and partly as a way of capturing non-discursive elements of the interview—the setting, the manner of the participant, and so on.

Privacy and Identification

It’s conventional in social scientific research for researchers to maintain the anonymity of their participants. Journalists typically do the opposite, striving to identify their participants whenever possible, and only reluctantly providing anonymity or pseudonymity if revealing the participant’s identity is likely to bring them some kind of personal harm.

Part of the reason quantitative researchers put so much thought into gathering as truly a random sample as possible is so that the possibility that any effects their analysis reveals won’t be perceptibly idiosyncratic to the sample that they gathered rather than generalizable to the

population the sample is intended to represent. A truly random sample, in theory, should be able to exhibit the same effect as any other truly random sample, because idiosyncratic effects get averaged out by the randomness of the sample. For a social scientist, individuals ought to be interchangeable in a robust sample, so their particular identities are often orthogonal to the point a scholar is trying to make. As I'll explain shortly, journalists tend to see things the opposite way, in that the idiosyncrasy of their sample is often desirable, or even the point, because that sample can illustrate something in a more engaging or clarifying way than a truly random one, but the corollary is that their research cannot necessarily be repeated with a different sample. For journalists, repeatability is not an abiding concern, but verifiability is, meaning that anyone who reads a story should theoretically be able to turn up the same information by going to the same, or at least similar, sources as the reporter. In this context, providing real names for one's participants makes a lot of sense, because whatever quotes or information are attributed to a subject in a story can theoretically, if not in practice, be checked up on by anyone who cares to contact that person in real life.

For this project, I've used a combination of the social scientific and journalistic conventions. For interviews I conducted myself, I asked the interviewees explicitly if they would consent to having their identities published, for a few reasons, the main one being that it would be easier to refer in this text to the specifics of their work, like articles published under their bylines, if they could be identifiable. As many journalists I spoke to professed, speaking about work practices in the abstract is very difficult, but answering questions about the work practices associated with specific pieces is relatively easy, to the extent that memory prevails. It was clear from the conception of this project that not being able to ask reporters and editors about specific pieces they had been involved in producing, and relaying their answers in this dissertation, would

severely limit the possibilities of this research taking detailed account of journalistic practices, so I made the request of my participants at the same time I sought consent for them to participate. (A copy of my consent form is provided in Appendix B.) Some consented freely, while many requested that I contact them so they could vet any quotes I planned to use before they were published. Only a few refused outright. Those who consented (and vetted their quotes) will be identified, and those who did not consent will be kept anonymous. For third-party interviews, like those conducted by Robert Boynton (2007) or the *Longform Podcast*, interviewees are identified as a matter of course, on the assumption that the interviewees consented to having those interviews published.

Consent to participate in a research project such as this one is always important, but it's especially important for people who are unfamiliar with what a research project typically involves, people who are in a vulnerable position with respect to the researcher, and people who may not have reason to understand the potential repercussions of their participation. Most of the journalists and editors I spoke to are not among these vulnerable populations. Many of them are well-educated and very familiar with academic research practices, and they are especially savvy about issues of consent and anonymity considering that they deal with these issues as a matter of course in their own work. Furthermore, many of them are public figures to begin with, and in some cases they are very experienced interviewees, as they are sought after by other journalists for remarks on topics they specialize in. For these reasons, getting consent from most of my participants was not a contentious issue, aside from the wariness about identification noted above. Indeed, the most common response to being asked to sign a consent form was surprise at the level of legalistic detail that was involved, and at how restrictive it would be for me to maintain their anonymity if that was their desire.

Additional Data Sources

It is much more common in quantitative research than in qualitative research to use secondary datasets (Fielding 2004), but it became clear over the course of this project that the public nature of journalism had produced a considerable volume of secondary qualitative data that lent itself well to analysis for this project.

For example, one useful source of interview data was the *Longform Podcast*, which is a series of interviews conducted by the founding members of Longform.org, Max Linsky and Aaron Lammer, along with the founding editor of *The Atavist*, Evan Ratliff. Generally produced on a weekly basis beginning in August 2012, the podcast has hosted over two hundred interviews with highly-regarded writers and editors as guests, most between forty minutes and an hour in length. While not all of these interviews were transcribed for analysis, I collected forty-seven of them in which the conversation covered topics related to this dissertation, and selectively transcribed them on an as-needed basis.

As another example, David Abrahamson, a professor of journalism at Northwestern University and member of the IALJS, has an archive of over fifty transcripts of guest lectures from journalists and editors who have visited his department, and I retained twelve of these lectures for analysis. The Arthur L. Carter School of Journalism at NYU has also hosted a number of guest lectures and panel discussions, recordings of which they have posted on YouTube; as well, The New Yorker Festival, another series of lectures and panel discussions that takes place every October in New York, also posts recordings of many of their guests and panelists online. Interviews and discussions from both of these sources were selectively transcribed for analysis. The *Nieman Storyboard* blog, which is run by the Nieman Foundation,

posts a variety of features related to the practice of narrative journalism, the most useful of which is a feature called Annotation Tuesday, where the foundation asks questions of the authors of canonical magazine stories about how they went about gathering certain types of information or the decisions they made as they structured the information into a narrative. Twenty-eight of these interviews were retained for analysis. As well, Robert Boynton interviewed nineteen prominent literary journalists for his book *The New New Journalism* (2007), a follow-up to Tom Wolfe's 1973 anthology *The New Journalism*, which was an early attempt to codify some of the terms of the genre; all nineteen of his interviews were retained for analysis. Additional sources of interview transcripts or videos included *MediaBistro*, the *Paris Review*, the *Harvard Crimson*, *Tin House*, *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, the ASME, CUNY Journalism School, *The Columbia Journalism Review*, *Slate*, *FSG Work in Progress*, *Longreads*, and *Here's the Thing with Alec Baldwin* (see Figure 1).

Another important source of secondary information was hosted by the New York Public Library. In 1991, around the time *The New Yorker* moved from 25 West Forty-Third Street to 20 West Forty-Third Street, the magazine donated its archives to the library. The archives contain a wide variety of materials, including corrected proofs, interoffice memos, correspondence between writers and editors, and killed manuscripts. Several subseries out of the 876 linear feet of files were of interest for this project—specifically, correspondence between writers and editors; interoffice communication, including communication between editors about specific manuscripts; correspondence concerning pitches and story ideas submitted over the transom; files from magazine makeup, including copy-edited galleys; files concerning editorial policies; and editors' notes and correspondence related to proofs and manuscripts. Although I examined

hundreds of pages of this material, fifty-six pages of notes were extracted from these files for formal analysis.

Finally, a wide variety of miscellaneous sources of information formed part of this analysis. The majority of these were articles in popular-press publications having to do with the work of literary journalism—reviews, opinion pieces, magazine-industry news articles, profiles of writers or editors, book excerpts, blog posts, and other things of that nature. On occasion, memos, syllabi, story proposals, emails, and other documents would be available and these were retained for analysis when they appeared relevant. A summary of the data sources is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Data Sources Summary

| Personal Interviews | | Secondary Sources | | | | | | | | |
|---|----|------------------------|-----|--|----|-------------------------------------|----|---------------------|--|-----|
| | | Interviews | | Panel Discussions | | Lectures | | New Yorker Archives | Miscellaneous Articles / Documents | |
| Reporters | 17 | The Longform Podcast | 47 | American Society of Magazine Editors, CJR, CUNY, Eastern Sociological Society, Hot Metal Bridge, Institute for Public Knowledge, Longreads, The New Yorker Festival, Nieman, Paris Review, Poets and Writers, Politics and Prose | 17 | Northwestern University | 12 | 56 pages | American Journalism Review, The Atlantic, The Baffler, The Bard Center for Civic Engagement, Bookforum, Canadaland, Capital New York, CJR, Daily Beast, Forbes, Gawker, Grantland, The Guardian, Harper’s, Huffington Post, Longreads, Media Matters, Mother Jones, The New Republic, New York, The New Yorker, New York Observer, The New York Times, The New York Times Magazine, Nieman, Northwestern University, NPR, Powell’s, Slate, Texas Monthly, The Times Literary Supplement, Vanity Fair, and others | 125 |
| Editors | 13 | Annotation Tuesday | 28 | | | Other - Punahou School, Villa Voice | 2 | | | |
| Checkers | 4 | The New New Journalism | 19 | | | | | | | |
| Other | 9 | Mediabistro | 12 | | | | | | | |
| | | Nieman | 7 | | | | | | | |
| | | Paris Review | 6 | | | | | | | |
| Other - Abe Books, The Andy Ross Agency, The Awl, Believer, Columbia Journalism Review, CUNY, The Daily Beast, davidabrahamson.com, The Editorial Review, Fresh Air with Terry Gross, FSG Work in Progress, GQ, The Guardian, Harvard Crimson, Here’s the Thing with Alec Baldwin, The Internet Writing Magazine, Interview Magazine, It’s Nice That, Kitaab, Lifehacker, Maisonneuve Magazine, The Nation Institute, The New Journal, Newsweek, normansims.com, The New Yorker, New York Public Library, NYU Primary Sources, Pando Weekly, Portrait of a Creative, The Rewrite Podcast, Stop Smiling, and Tin House | | 38 | | | | | | | | |
| Totals | 43 | | 157 | | 17 | | 14 | 56 pages | | 125 |

Interviews and Practices

For a variety of reasons, I was limited in the kinds of practical activities that I could witness firsthand. Part of this was a matter of access, since it's difficult to find participants who do relevant work, *and* who are good informants, *and* who are open to being watched. (This will be a topic of Chapter 4.) Another, related part is that this kind of work does not often lend itself well to observation—much of the work of writing and editing is sitting at a computer working through drafts of articles and comments, many of which are never intended to see the light of day. Reporting, while a more involved activity for the purposes of observation, introduces issues related to the ethics of access, as a negotiation for consent from the subject would have to be added to the reporter's own negotiations for access. For these reasons, I tended to rely mostly on traces of practical work rather than observing the work itself, and I had to reconstruct a sense for what the work would have involved based on the traces I could access.

Certain resources supplied information that could be used to understand other resources. For instance, seeing sample story proposals made it easier to understand what reporters meant when they talked about pitching their ideas, or what editors meant when they talked about what they looked for in potential stories. Seeing editors' comments on draft articles made it easier to understand what editors were saying when they explained what they looked for while reading. Watching interviews or panel discussions between reporters made it clearer how reporters would be likely to go about devising, asking, and revising questions as they talked to people in the field. Through these kinds of triangulation, reliable sources could often be differentiated from unreliable ones, thoughtful informants could be differentiated from lackadaisical ones, and typical practices could be differentiated from idiosyncratic ones. It was never lost on me that I was attempting to see through these traces to the “underlying” practices I took them to represent,

but the process of sorting disparate pieces of information into a coherent account gave me an important first-person perspective on the work reporters and editors do in trying to build their own coherent accounts out of similar traces.

It might be considered a shortcoming that this project relies more on interviews rather than direct observation, considering its ostensible focus on practices. One reason interviews are considered questionable as sources of information about practices is that people do not typically give detailed and accurate information about what they did; they prefer to talk about generalities using whatever conceptual or rhetorical resources happen to be closest at hand during the interview (see, for example, Swidler 2001; Vaisey 2009). Take this excerpt from an interview conducted by Robert Boynton with Richard Cramer, who researched candidates for the United States presidency for his book *What It Takes*:

Boynton: Do you ask peripheral characters the same questions you ask central ones?

Cramer: Absolutely. I pose the dumbest questions in the world. I would talk for six hours with some guy who had given his life over to one of these candidates, or some woman who had been their girlfriend in college. And I'd ask only one question: "What's the good thing that he is getting out of all this?" I just wanted to know that. But, hey, that's a pretty big thing to know! (Boynton 2007, 41)

Do I really believe that Cramer spent six hours talking to somebody yet asked only one question? No. It's more likely that he asked many questions over the course of the evening, but that he conceives of the many questions he actually asked as being conceptually linked together under the rubric, "What's the good thing that he is getting out of all this?" By spending six hours

talking to the brother of the presidential candidate, who's the subject of his profile, about family, business, and so on, he was able to come away with a much better sense for what his subject was getting out of his candidacy—which is to say, his ability to provide a coherent account in response to that key question had improved. So retrospectively, it might seem like the conversation—the questions that he asked and the things his subject said in response—might have cohered around different manifestations of the *same* question and answer pair. A similar thing occurs when reporters talk about asking the same question different ways until they get a satisfactory answer: in practice, the reporter is asking a series of different questions until he hits on the particular question that prompts the subject to provide the ideal response, but conceptually the reporter might think of that series of questions as being different surface manifestations of the same underlying question.

As confounding as this might be for a practice-oriented researcher who wishes he could be witnessing the questions that Cramer actually asked over the course of that six hours, the way Cramer's quote suggests that he conceptualizes questions-in-practice as surface manifestations of underlying questions seems to reflect a generality of journalistic thinking that also emerges in a close examination of everyday practices like interviewing and editing, one which has been affirmed by no less an institution than the Supreme Court of the United States (501 U.S. 496): that quotes are but surface manifestations of underlying realities, and that it's possible to judge whether or not certain quotes with different words are, in fact, just manifestations of the *same* quote with respect to their relationship to the underlying meaning. And this is a major part of the problem that the following dissertation will examine, that a variety of people can come together and by talking to one another and reading one another's work, on the assumption that words represent underlying realities, they can make the leap from what are essentially groups of words

to a belief in an underlying truth—“the record”—that holds universally in all times and places, of which those groups of words are merely representations. The important point is that the discourse that journalists use to talk about their own work, as we will see, is itself an instrumental practical component of literary journalism as a social process, because it provides a means for negotiating the meaning of discrete actions in such a way that the actions can be produced in a regular, comprehensible way.

Analysis

A number of sociologists have recently responded to a perceived gap between the rate of *methodological* development in sociology and the rate of *theoretical* development by proposing a shift in emphasis from *theory*, as a state of affairs, to *theorizing*, as a process (Swedberg 2012; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Arguably, inquiry into the methods of scientific research has influenced sociologists’ normative conceptions of sociological method. The idea of scientific method consisting of the extrapolation of testable hypotheses from previously held theory, and then the testing of those hypotheses with empirical observations, has been criticized as a poor model for thinking about how theory is produced in actual practice—if empirical observation only comes into play in the context of justification, it’s hard to imagine how theories might be developed on the basis of observations that haven’t already been anticipated. Naturally, this is a problem for journalists as well, who have to either pitch or assign stories without knowing most of the information they’ll eventually uncover, and this forces them to continuously re-evaluate not just the structure and content of their story, but often very basic ideas about what their story is about. (This will be a topic of Chapters 4, 5, and 6.)

Swedberg (2012) notes that one “epistemological obstacle to theorizing is the view in sociology and many other social sciences that empirical data should enter the research process first in the context of justification” (6). His alternative involves exploring empirical data first in an open-ended, creative way—in the context of discovery—in order to generate theoretical ideas, then to confront these ideas with data using a more methodical approach during the latter stages of a project. This kind of critique has roots in the work of Pierce (1998 [1903]), who suggested that the explanatory content of theories comes from a process of *abduction*, or making educated guesses that attempt to account for surprising, unusual, or unanticipated observations. Plausible hypotheses “abducted” from empirical observations, in the context of discovery, provide the basis for theoretical developments that either withstand further observations, or don’t. This approach to theorizing avoids the pitfalls often associated with “mindless empiricism,” on one hand, wherein data are merely described without reference to any theory, and with theory-driven research on the other, wherein data are forced into inappropriate theoretical molds. It is important to note that abductive analysis is distinguished from grounded theory (Charmaz 2000; Corbin and Strauss 2008) on the basis that abductive analysis does not necessarily aim to construct theories from scratch; instead, the abductive sociologist enters the field with a thorough grounding in the core theoretical ideas of sociology, and generates new theoretical ideas only when surprising data are discovered that cannot be explained using existing theories.

At the first stage of the research process . . . one should deal with the data in whatever way that is conducive to creativity—and then try to theorize with their help. Once some interesting theoretical idea has been formulated and worked through to a tentative full theory, one can process to the second stage, which is the context of justification.
(Swedberg 2012, 8)

He notes that the process “tends to be iterative; and its beginning, middle, and end do not necessarily follow in this order” (8). This approach accommodates the variety in local rationalities that practice-oriented studies have observed, rather than relying on deductive derivations from theory that are deterministic. Abductive reasoning, while providing explanations that are not logically necessary, are nonetheless sufficient for orienting future observations (e.g., Blumer 1954).

With this in mind, I began the project by maintaining a document in which I listed questions and ideas and thoughts as they occurred to me. Initially this was intended for use as a database of potential interview questions, but it gradually evolved over the course of the research into a general way of recording my thoughts, ideas, and observations as they occurred to me, in no particular order and without necessarily referencing any particular theory, datum, or holistic conception of the project’s developing theoretical orientation. I separated the document into sections that I produced before beginning to interview people, while I was interviewing people, after I completed interviews (i.e., after I began coding my data), and after I began writing, and as the project progressed the ideas and observations tended to become more general, more empirically grounded, and more declarative rather than interrogative. At times the notes consisted of theoretical speculation, and at other times they consisted of empirical observations that were outside the scope of my interview notes; similarly, some notes exhibited awareness of the conceptual requirements of the projects and others exhibited awareness of the practical, academic requirements.

I transcribed all of the digital recordings of my interviews, and selectively transcribed additional interviews, lectures, panel discussions, and other documents that appeared relevant to the project, as noted. Then, all the transcripts, notes, and other documents I collected were

incorporated into a MaxQDA project, and I used the document of notes and ideas described above to generate a provisional code list with which I could arrange selections of text into thematic categories. The list expanded considerably over the course of coding. (A copy of the final code list is available in Appendix C.) Based on the final code list, I developed an outline that incorporated the topics developed through coding into a reasonable thread. Then, for each section of the outline, I examined all of the relevant quotes with respect to what they appeared to reveal about journalistic practice, frequently re-coding and re-arranging elements according to a developing conception of the argument.

The dissertation was written using Scrivener, a software program that functions much like a digital corkboard in that it permits notes, passages of text, images, and other multimedia files to be imported, grouped, modified, and rearranged as needed. As I'll explain in Chapter 5, having a corkboard-style view of the project as a whole alongside the particular passage or passages of text currently being developed, it was possible to easily alternate between holistic and particular views of the developing text to accomplish the iteration that scholars like Swedberg suggest is imperative for the development of theory. Although I formally completed coding before I began working on the Scrivener project, the process of writing and rearranging elements in Scrivener frequently changed my understanding of the schemas I had used in MaxQDA, and on several occasions I went back into MaxQDA to re-code portions of the data in light of whatever schema I had developed in Scrivener. In this way, the overall picture I intended to portray with this project continuously evolved into the following account.

CHAPTER 4: REPORTING

Literary nonfiction is commonly distinguished from other genres on the grounds that its stories are derived, for all practical purposes, directly from reality. They are accounts of people, places, and events that are, for all intents and purposes, real, and the relationship between the accounts and the reality that they describe is one of direct reference. If the story refers to something, anything, the thing it refers to must be real and the story must accurately describe the reality of that thing. Being a literary genre, moreover, the descriptions of reality must also have some artistic merit—they have to be stylistic, and captivating, and enlightening, inventive, and creative. But the basic belief that literary nonfiction provides direct accounts of real things is a lens through which members of the literary journalism world judge the stories' literary achievements. Even the most poetic, vivid, and original writing cannot be held up as an achievement of the genre if its congruence with the real world fails to pass muster.

In simple terms, reporting is the practice of rendering reality in a material form to provide the reporter with a basis for producing what Buzz Bissinger, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Friday Night Lights*, would consider a “substantial” piece:

It seems to me that you have to work the reporting of a story as much as the writing, probably more so. If a story is wonderfully written but with little reporting, you can smell the holes and so can the reader. It has no weight. It feels insubstantial. Vice versa, with great reporting and okay writing, you can still come away with something terrific. (Green 2014d)

With the literary requirements of the genre in mind, a reporter can explore some portion of the world not just for important or interesting facts, but for details that will later permit them to render literary devices—hooks, plots, scenes, dialogues, characters—as facts. The material traces

a reporter prepares in the course of researching a story provide them with material links to the reality their story is required to represent, so that when they sit down to write, the choices they make in translating aspects of the real world into textual representations can be observed and evaluated by their peers specifically with respect to their congruence with reality. That the reporter's final account is expected to be factually verifiable while also reading like literature means that the reporter can neither record empirical traces indiscriminately, like a security camera, but nor can they ignore those empirical traces in favour of the story or narrative they envision. Rather, the story they envision and the empirical realities of their case have to meet in the middle, in a form that's empirically substantive but also narratively engaging. This means a reporter must use their knowledge of the "rules" of narrative structuration as a lens through which to explore and investigate the empirical details of their case, searching in particular for the kinds of details which lend themselves well to the construction of scenes and characters. Far from just being a matter of recording observations of the real world, producing these traces is more a matter of manipulating, organizing, selecting, and arranging aspects of the real world with an eye to making this congruence recognizable.

In this chapter, after explaining how reporters tend to organize the work of reporting through the lens of literary devices, I take a closer look at how reporters identify and negotiate for access to subjects, and how, having done so, they render material records of their interactions with those subjects in preparation for eventually producing a concise, structured, and self-contained account of the reality those records are purported to represent.

Structure

A feature story in a magazine is an orderly arrangement of empirical information. It differs from something like an unsorted database or a sheaf of papers in one important way: it presents the empirical information in a form that provides the reader with instructions for the correct way to go about making sense of it. Much of the analytical work that a person reading through a sheaf of papers would have to do, the reporter has already done ahead of time with their article, not just by sorting the empirical information into a particular order, but by gathering the information in the first place so that the sorting will be successful in making the information seem coherent. In other words, the orderly arrangement of the information in an article depends on the work the reporter does ahead of time to prepare for the eventual arrangement of those elements in a literary structure.

In simple terms, *structure* is a word writers use to refer to the spatial and temporal organization of story elements. Elements are organized spatially on paper but temporally in real life, and structure expresses a relationship between these two things—it allows writers to talk about the ways that real-world events can be translated into a series of textual elements. Imagine a writer working on a story depicting any series of events. In figuring out how to structure the story, the writer might want to capture the reader's attention with a moment of tension, even though that moment occurred somewhere in the middle of the series. No problem—they take this moment and put it at the beginning of their narrative, starting the story *in medias res*. In structuring the story this way, the real-world events serve as objects that can be organized textually in a multitude of ways to give the reader some meaningful value-added over a comparatively unsorted depiction of those same events.

Different genres are linked to different structures. Newspaper articles, for example, usually have an *inverted triangle* structure, with the most important information right at the front, which gives the reader the option of quitting half way through without missing anything important.¹ Most writers of literary genres, in contrast, try to avoid this kind of structure because it actively encourages readers to stop reading, as the *Esquire* writer Mike Sager describes:

I have a very distinctive feeling that the story should not begin with the climax. As reporters, we're trained to give our best stuff in the lede. As we move forward to becoming feature writers, a lot of people stick with that format; so many true crime stories start with what is, essentially, the orgasm. To me, it's like, if I know the ending of the story, why should I read anymore? The psychology of storytelling is: foreshadowing, teasing, elongating, and making it dramatic. That's what we're supposed to be doing here. (Green 2014e)

Literary writers might be more likely to describe their stories in terms of *Freytag's pyramid* (figure 2) instead, an approach based on Gustav Freytag's study of ancient Greek and Shakespearean drama (1901) that's likely familiar from any high-school English class.

¹The inverted triangle is a somewhat folkloric convention that only sometimes describes accurately what's published in a newspaper. Papers like the *New York Times* publish work in a variety of genres, and certain stories will be published in more of a narrative format than the inverted triangle would suggest. The idea of structure, like other literary terms such as *plot*, *tone*, *voice*, or *narrative*, is more clearly discernable as a gloss that refers to different textual features or practices under different circumstances. Most journalists will be able to describe how they structured a particular story, but they will have a much harder time explaining what they mean by structure in general. Rhetorical devices like the inverted triangle, however, do provide feature writers with a resource for inscribing boundaries between their work and that of newspaper journalists.

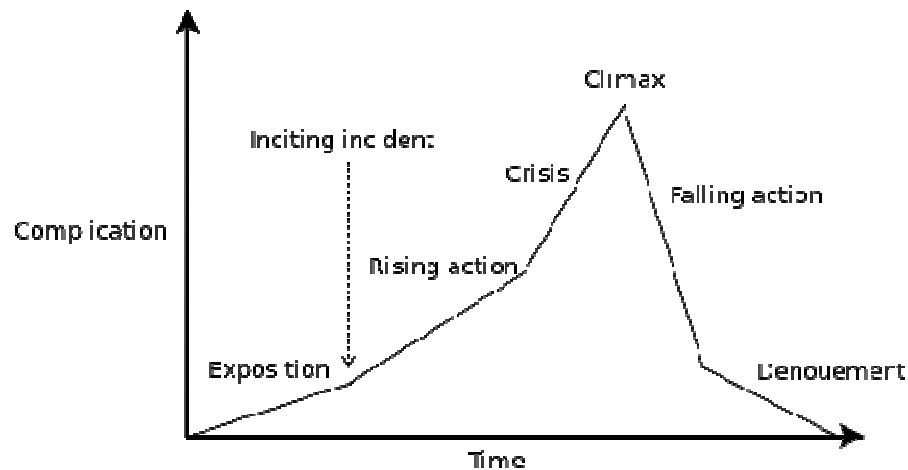


Figure 2: Freytag's Pyramid

This structure presents a series of events organized deliberately so that a reader will feel compelled read all the way to the end. Stories modelled on this structure gradually build up tension until a pivotal scene near the end where everything comes together in a cathartic climax. The discrete elements of the story—the scenes, dialogues, and expositions—anticipate this interplay between tension and catharsis in their arrangement.

Despite its usefulness as a metaphor, Freytag's pyramid does not accurately describe the structure of many magazine features. Literary journalism, after all, is a loose collection of ill-defined subgenres—profiles, essays, memoirs, reviews, travelogues, investigations—and many of them are not presented exclusively in a narrative mode; journalists might use narrative elements only as a means for maintaining a reader's attention as they're moved through a series of descriptions or explanations. But structuration is an abiding concern to the extent that the orderly arrangement of narrative, descriptive, scenic, dialogic, or expository elements gives writers a means for controlling how the reader makes sense of the *gestalt*, which is to say, the complete, coherent picture of reality that the story appears to illustrate, and which emerges in the reading through the conjunction of the story's particular parts. Any given quote might be mildly

interesting in isolation, but when it's positioned as a *kicker* at the end of an article, for example, where the reader is prepared to understand what it really means by everything that came before it, it can be read as encapsulating "everything you need to know" about the story that it concluded (Williams 2013a). This kind of interaction between elements that make up the structure is at the heart of what it means to craft a compelling literary work.

The structure of a story cannot be distinguished from its meaning. What the story is about—what is being said about the empirical case, and what the case is meant to illustrate—depends on a reader's perception that the individual story elements coalesce into a complete and coherent document, or gestalt. Even though the relationship between a real-world case and the form it takes in a given story is arbitrary,² some structures will be acceptable to a broader contingent of a reporter's readers than others, and different structures will allow a reporter to say different things with the same material. The ways a reporter will consider structuring a story depends on their intimate familiarity, as readers, with a canon of literary works—books, magazines, short stories, essays, and other genres—which each represent a consensus between writers, editors, and readers about what the rules of structure are. If a published story has achieved widespread acclaim, it can probably be used as an indication of at least one "correct" way to go about structuring a story, and using such a story as an exemplar will likely provide some guarantee of success, however limited. (I'll return to this topic in Chapter 5.) Implicit in the conventional ideas of structure that these works represent is a sense for how a typical reader will make sense of the story as they read through it, such that they come away with a coherent idea of what the story was about. To say that ideas about structure are conventional is not to say that there is something like a list of structures that a reporter can choose from, although some stories

²Janet Malcolm's *New Yorker* profile of the painter David Salle ("Forty-One False Starts," July 11, 1994) uses this arbitrariness as a device—instead of choosing only one out of a multitude of possible leads, she presents forty-one of them.

will certainly turn out formulaic; rather, a reporter's competence with canonical structures renders them capable of recognizing acceptable structures from certain arrangements of empirical materials, even if those arrangements are unique.

Ultimately, reporting is the work of gathering the material the writer will need to achieve this kind of structure. This means there's a close relationship between the needs of literary structuration and the specific course of actions a reporter takes to prepare for it. The structure a reporter envisions at any given time effectively guides their attempt to realize that structure in a material form, as Walt Harrington, a journalism professor at the University of Illinois, explains:

In documentary literary journalism the boundary between reporting and writing is permeable. You can't think of the two as separate. It is necessary to first "see" finished stories in your head . . . so you will know what you must report to have what you need to build your particular story. (Harrington 2003, 97)

A reporter must choose subjects, negotiate for access, ask questions, observe events, pick through public records, read books, take notes, and do all the other work of reporting with the explicit knowledge that the steps they take must enable them to produce a story whose structure will capture a reader's attention—knowing, as well, that the readers they're most immediately accountable to will be their editors, fact checkers, and other peers whose job it will be to evaluate the draft in terms of these literary conventions.

The trouble, of course, is that the reporter cannot foresee with any accuracy the structure of the completed story before they're done. They don't know ahead of time who is available to interview or observe; they don't know what public records are available to examine; they don't know what events are going to take place—they don't know, in other words, what building

blocks they'll have when it comes time to build their structure. Far from just providing the reporter with a series of steps to follow, aspirational structures are resources akin to what the symbolic interactionist Harold Blumer described as *sensitizing concepts*, which "give the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (1954, 7). They can very well be wrong, but they have enormous heuristic utility in directing a reporter's attention to things that are likely to be relevant. But the relevancy of any element has to be worked out through the reporting; it's never absolute.

Empirical elements that "seem" to work have to be justified in conjunction with the rest of the elements that collectively establish the gestalt. For any collection of elements to be justifiable, a reporter must constantly oversee an internal negotiation between the empirical instances they're witnessing, their intuitions about the utility of those instances in a literary structure, and the literary competence of their readers.³ With luck, a reporter's aspirational structure might be clear enough that they can recognize story elements in real-life events the moment they occur. But more commonly, especially early on, the form of the finished story will be so tentative that a reporter's impressions will have to be processed through trial and error, by setting elements side by side and thinking about how they might be read as a story, or thinking about how such an ensemble can be justified discursively in conventional literary terms, as this reporter described to me:

³Here and throughout the rest of this dissertation, *competence* is used in the manner of Jonathan Culler (1975), to refer to a mastery of literary conventions. Culler's use of competence differs from Noam Chomsky's (1965) in that Chomsky sees linguistic competence as a cognitive faculty, present from birth, rather than a product of accumulated knowledge, familiarity, or know-how. Literary competence in Culler's formulation is a matter of acculturation depending on a long-term, critical exposure to a set of texts and reading practices.

A lot of it is intuition at first, and then trying to defend the decisions that your intuition makes. Intuitively you are like, these details are interesting, this dialogue is interesting; then you are like . . . now defend this. Why do you think these details are interesting? What are they contributing to the gestalt of this?

Often, a provisional structure will be confounded by what Blumer called the “obdurate character of the empirical world” (1969, 22), and the mental model will have to be revised to accommodate it, as the journalist Alexander Stille explains:

While I have often called sources hoping that they would tell me what I wanted to hear—when they have said to me, "No, that's not the way it is. It's really not that way"—I have changed my stories accordingly. When several people in a row tell me that, I may decide that the basic thrust of the piece needs to change and I end up with a very different story, and be quite happy about it. That is in fact what reporting is for, discovering new information. (2003)

As this example illustrates, reporting is not a matter merely of identifying a story and then gathering enough information to write about it. Not knowing ahead of time the form a story will take, the best a reporter can do is to project a *provisional* or *aspirational* structure from whatever material they have in hand, and attempt to bring that structure about by looking for additional materials that would appear to complete it. But as the material in hand accumulates, so does the provisional structure evolve—the mental model directs a reporter’s attention to the material relevant to the story they have planned, seeking this material changes what they have in hand, and what is in hand changes the mental model, in a continuous circular process. As the reporter tests individual empirical elements against the possibility of their assembly into a literary structure, they discover by increments what it is they wish to say.

Structuring as you go

A. J. Liebling, a long-time *New Yorker* staff writer whose writing during the middle part of the twentieth century has been inducted in the literary journalism canon, provided a lucid illustration of the structuration process when he wrote to his editor, Harold Ross, from France in 1955.

Liebling was in the process of reporting what was called a *revisited*, where he returned to locations he had passed through during World War II while reporting a series for *The New Yorker* that was later published as *The Road Back to Paris* (1944). The events described in the letter were eventually published as “France: The Road Back to Paris,” in the May 19, 1956, issue of *The New Yorker*. As the letter illustrates, his process of reporting is decisively linked to the potential literary structures he imagines he’ll be able to produce out of the empirical material he’s gathering:

My revisited piece has expanded, like the legendary too much rice that the bride puts in the pot of boiling water, until it now looks like making two parts of 10-12,000 words each. (Don’t be frightened; one piece is three-quarters written—well written, too and the rest will come along in good style. The difficult, miserable period of squirming in front of the typewriter is over.) . . .

After several attempts at ingenuity, I dropped into the old lead that has become almost a formula: “On, etc., I attended, etc., and Gen. [Omar] Bradley said we were not going into Paris, etc.”—“but then we did, etc.” From that point I went along better and better with my narrative of 1944, but a difficulty loomed ahead, I would have to tell at least a 10,000-word story before I got to the Pertrand family at Montlhery, the first place I have revisited since. If I tried to start with Montlhery and say, casually, “the other day I happened to stop in at Montlhery, which was where I slept the night before the Liberation of Paris,” I would have to go backward from Montlhery over two crowded days that preceded my arrival there, and then forward from Montlhery over the even more crowded

day and night that followed my arrival. M. had been a stopping point, and an amusing one, as I think you will see, but not the start or the terminal or the climax. Anyway I became so interested in remembering and recording the peregrination of a fellow named Jack Roach and me from Bagnoles-de-l'Orne toward Paris that I just left that difficulty to sort itself out when we got to it—270 km. Roach drove me to Chartres and there we picked up a hitch-hiking Stars and Stripes reporter named Alan Morrison But when we got out a way beyond Chartres we found ourselves alone—the story that the road to Paris was clear was highly premature. So we stopped the night in an inn that was full of FFI [French Forces of the Interior], at a place called Bonnelles, which is only about 35 miles from Paris.

So far, so good, but the Germans held the roads leading in. In the morning, when we came downstairs, we found that [Philippe] Leclerc's Deuxieme Division Blindée had been moved 125 miles overnight and pushed in ahead of us to liberate Paris—a glorious thought, probably Bradley's, but he had to go back to London to get permission to put it through, so DDE [Dwight D. Eisenhower] can claim the credit.

As soon as I began to write about that very funny but quite wonderful division I began to realize that it, and its general, had indeed taken charge of the advance, and had become principal characters. I was doing the same thing for it that I did for the Corps Franc d'Afrique in the first part of Mollie ["Quest for Mollie," *The New Yorker*, May 26 and June 2, 1945]. (I hope you remember that.) I began to recall all the events, happy and murderous, of the day that began then, and my very precise recollection that during the whole day we gained only half the distance from Bonnelles to Paris, astonished me so that I began to check on the military history of an event that I had observed only as a man on the fringe of a large crowd surrounding a dog fight. Some slight light on what was going on when we, then, didn't know what the hell was going on improves the story greatly. Then I had a stroke of luck.

I saw in a paper that there was going to be a charity sale for the benefit of the Anciens Combattants de la 2me D.B. [Division Blindée] in the salons of the Sorbonne. Mme. La Marechale Leclerc de Hauteclouque would preside, etc. (He's dead, as you probably know).

Quel peg! Je me suis dit. Now I can start the story in the present, which makes it a revisited from the ab initio.

So I went to the sale, had a look around, bought a can of pineapple and some book matches, and, by hazard, the place was a revisited too, as you will see. I remembered a small incident there when I was a student, in 1926. You can see now how the lead goes. Comme sur des roulettes. I read the papers, I see the notice: quotes. I go to the sale, I look around, I remember the brief 1926 bit, I think of the 2e DB when I knew it, and here I cue in Bradley. The rest is a peregrination, right up to and including Montlhery. And the next morning, when we get up at Montlhery, which has a famous tower on a hill, I walk up to it and find it has been turned, overnight, into an American observation post. In the post there is a nice cornfed Signal Corps lieutenant about 21, and he leads me up to the top of the tower and shows me Paris. "There," he says, pointing to the Invalides, "is the Opera. And there," pointing to Sacre Coeur, "is Notre Dame. I've dreamed of it all my life." End of first part.

Now I can begin the next part by revisiting the Bertrands which was fun, like going back to Madame Hamel, and then tell what I did after leaving Montlhery on the morning of Aug. 25, the day of the Liberation.

He goes on to describe what happens next—trying to get into Paris, seeing the surrender, finding a hotel, and walking into a bar, La Closeraie des Lilas, that he frequented in his youth.

Naturally, since returning this time I have been walking the same streets, and have rediscovered the Hotel Neron, where the old lady who runs it remembers the big night in more detail than I do. The Closeraie had changed hands and is rather a mess. The popular feeling about Americans has changed—how could it help changing? Old Madame Ramond at the Neron says: "À ce moment, Monsieur, Americain etait pour nous synonyme de Dieu." Who the hell could live up to that kind of advance publicity? I'm going to end the whole damn thing on that. (December 6, 1955. From "A. J. Liebling," Subseries 3.2: Fact Correspondence, 1952-1981, Box 537.)

This letter illustrates the iteration between provisional structure and empirical experience. Liebling was planning at first to write a short revisited starting from the formulaic lead, “On, etc., I attended, etc., and Gen. [Omar] Bradley said we were not going into Paris, etc.” But when he arrived in Montlhéry, he saw that he would need some ten thousand words to describe the events prior to his arrival before he could move on to depicting the liberation of Paris. If he treated the scene at Montlhéry as the lead, in other words, the prior and subsequent events would have to be written out of order. Trying to solve this structural problem, he began thinking about describing the journey from Bagnoles-de-l’Orne toward Paris, and the actions of Leclerc and the Division Blindée, who popped out as central characters of *that* story; this was a cue that led him deeper into the history of the Division Blindée’s fight on the way to Paris, which he experienced only as a bystander. The material from this research, in conjunction with the scenes from the charity sale for the Division Blindée—which could serve as a *peg*, or an indication of the piece’s timeliness—led him to devise an alternative structure in which the scenes at Montlhéry could be slotted in without bending the narrative out of shape. Seeing the structure this way, as a two-part column, brought his attention to the two quotes that could serve as kickers: the quote from the American lieutenant and the quote from Madame Ramond, both of which help to illustrate the letdown after the liberation of Paris.

The letter from Liebling was only a snapshot in time, and the process of structuring continued after he sent it. Although the structure he described in the letter solved the narrative problems caused by the material he had in hand at the time, he eventually rejected this approach as additional reporting turned up new material and changed the narrative relevance of earlier events. He later wrote to Ross on April 27, 1956, about four and a half months later:

The return to Montlhery, now eliminated, was superfluous, and the return to the Neron was anticlimactic. And I can save the wonderful quote from the old lady for some future, third-person piece on Europeans and us: “pour nous, Americain, c’etait synonyme de Dieu.” It explains so much about the letdown since. (From "A. J. Liebling," Subseries 3.2: Fact Correspondence, 1952-1981, Box 542)

Under the new structure, the Montlhery scenes were dispensable, and the quotes no longer encapsulated what the story was about—because the case depicted by the new story was illustrating a different topic. For most reporters, Liebling included, reporting is dominated by this continuous process of structuring-as-you-go, in which the conception of the structure and the empirical material on hand are both used as resources for developing the other. The important point here is that reporting is a matter of gathering empirical material specifically in anticipation of making a conventionally structured literary and journalistic story. At any given time—even *when a story is merely a vague idea that has yet to be assigned by an editor*—the reporter’s mental image of the story’s final form strongly suggests how best to go about gathering the raw materials.

Choosing a Subject

Topics and cases

Insofar as the arrangement of empirical information in a story is intended to compel in a reader a specific understanding of the reality the story represents, reporters have to think carefully about how the empirical information relates to the underlying reality. What does it mean for a story to be “about” the real world?

Literary journalism might appear at first glance to be *idiographic*, concerned with the historical particulars of specific cases, but many journalists describe their work in *nomothetic*

terms, arguing that the specific cases they examine are only a means for illustrating broader issues or phenomena. In a typical example, William Langewiesche describes his profile of the notorious wine critic Robert Parker, founder of the newsletter *The Wine Advocate* (“Million-Dollar Nose,” *The Atlantic*, December 2000):

I was surprised to find that the guy who so antagonized the French winemakers was in some ways a really simple fellow—an American on a consumerist crusade all about good wine, which of course is a very unimportant matter. But the interesting thing to me was that he was also a social and economic revolutionary who was busting up this little Bordeaux cartel with his democratic, un-aristocratic American ideas. For me, the story of Robert Parker was a parable about globalization, international trade, and American influence in the modern era. (Boynton 2007, 212)

In cases like this, the specific character or event—the *case*—chosen as the focus of the story is an illustration of a larger issue—the *topic*—meant to answer a general question, like “What does it mean to persevere?” or “How does the concentration of wealth play out at street level?” or “Why are people altruistic?”

General questions like these are often much more of a motivating force behind the work of literary journalists than specific curiosities about specific people—although those are often pertinent as well—because the general questions justify why this kind of journalism serves the public interest. Structuring empirical material in a literary way allows journalists to engage with a much broader public than would be interested in a nomothetic account consisting of tables of statistics, say, because the structure does a lot of the work the reader would otherwise have to do to make sense of the material. While the narrative format keeps the reader turning the page, they learn something about a broader topic they might otherwise have ignored.

The dualistic nature of a story—the way a story’s case intersects with the topic it’s meant to illustrate—often emerges as an important pivot in the negotiation of a provisional structure. Reporters need material that illustrates their topic in a vivid and gratifying way, but the material that’s most vivid and gratifying might not easily correspond with the topic they’re trying to illustrate. A practical and moral challenge inevitably results. “The facts of a real event sometimes don’t occur in a way that lends itself to narrative elegance,” says Jonathan Harr, a writer best known for his nonfiction law thriller *A Civil Action* (Boynton 2007, 126). At the same time, cases that do lend themselves to narrative elegance can be harder to justify as representative. One reporter described the predicament this way:

The trouble then, for me always, is . . . where is the place that one can create a person in which they are both given the dignity of their idiosyncratic existence and at the same time given the role of representative of a broader phenomenon? And this to me is the greatest challenge of how you do something, because on the one hand, if you’re just erring on the side of idiosyncrasy, then you’re talking about portraiture, and portraiture can be beautiful and moving, but it’s unlikely to say something very significant about the social world surrounding that individual. . . . Whereas then on the other side, if you’re writing about somebody that’s purely representative, then this person has then been denied whatever makes him or her interesting as an individual, because you’re just making them representative of a category. So what I try to do is in every piece I think about how can I allow—how can I present this person as idiosyncratically as possible while still preserving this person as a representative of a broader social phenomenon. That’s hard to do.

The risk for a reporter is Procrustean, reminiscent of the Greek blacksmith, son of Poseidon, who would invite passersby to spend the night in his iron bed, but then stretch them out or amputate their limbs to make them the right size for it. If a reporter can’t find the right facts to illustrate

the topic they have in mind, the temptation to stretch and amputate the empirical materials to make them fit can be powerful, and so can the temptation to reshape the broader topic in view of the empirical materials.

Naturally, our obsession with story and its power to engage readers carries the pitfalls of life imitating art. The best of us try not to force people and events onto a Procrustean bed of dramatic structure. Yet we accept the risk because our deepest purpose—an outgrowth of the philosophical and Constitutional purposes of the press—is to reach readers, people who are also citizens, mothers, fathers, children, employers, neighbors, rich, poor, young, old, Black, White, and every other of the demographic and cultural categories that so Balkanize us today. The free press / free society rationale for intimate journalism is its power for bringing knowledge, understanding, and empathy to the public. (Harrington 2003, 101)

Consider this example from Nick Lemann, a *New Yorker* reporter and former dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, describing a series of stories he wrote about welfare while he was a reporter for the *Washington Post* (e.g., “Understanding Welfare,” October 5, 1980):

I did a series for the *Post* on the welfare system through the lens of one welfare mother, a woman in Philadelphia named Mary Manley. . . . I spent hours and hours and hours with Mary Manley, who was a migrant herself from Virginia, and I asked her all these questions about the welfare system. I went with her to the welfare office. But I always had a nagging sense that I was forcing her into a Procrustean bed because I was operating on this assumption that her life was about welfare. But it wasn't about welfare. When I finished the story, which I was proud of and all that, I had the feeling I'd done the wrong story. I didn't frame it as black migration, although that was in my mind. I had a very uncomfortable feeling for a reporter. She always wanted to think of her life as the life of a migrant. And I always wanted to make her think of herself as a welfare mother, which

she was. It was an uncomfortable feeling of making her talk about what I wanted her to talk about instead of what she wanted to talk about. (Lemann 2000)

Even as he describes Manley's life, Lemann equivocates between the empirical reality of her life and the narrative utility of it, seeing the narrative of her life as being an opportunity to illustrate the topics of migration or welfare. Even though his use of Manley as a character may have fulfilled his obligation to produce a story about welfare, his concern is that her life was more representative of black migration instead.

Ultimately, the topic (what the story is about) and the story (the final, structured text) have to be made to align with a real, empirical case, at the same time they have to be brought into alignment with one another. The wildcard throughout all this, as I'll explain in more detail in a moment, is the access the reporter has to potential sources of empirical material that can be rendered into a form, or structure, that satisfies these competing requirements. Because a reporter never knows what limits they're about to run up against, and what they'll have once they sit down to write a draft, reporting is a constant process of iteration between the material details of the case and the developing sense of structure. Some cases might permit the creation of an engrossing short story, and others might make for insightful social research, but to do both requires a case with the right combination of accessible empirical details.

That these elements will ever align is a gamble that reporters and editors take every time a story is assigned, and for every story there are a thousand reasons it might not work out as planned. At worst, an editor may have to choose between the emotional and monetary costs of killing a wayward story, and the reputational costs of publishing a story without the substance the genre demands. (These concerns will be a topic of Chapter 6.) But when the elements do align, the risks can pay off lavishly. One *New Yorker* editor explained it to me this way:

Michael Kinsley, you may know, I think had pieces about this in the '90s in *The New Republic* worth looking at, basically a critique of *The New Yorker*. He just thinks that narrative journalism is a mistake, that it's a redundancy that seems to have grown up for no particular reason—you know, why didn't you just read the Wikipedia entry? Some pieces you get to feeling that [laughs]. But when it's done well—. . . Did you read Peter Hessler's piece about the Cairo garbageman ["What the Garbageman Knows," *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2014]? That's the best piece we've published in five years. Because that's like, oh my God, this is sociology; it's also a short story. It succeeds on so many levels, and that's just a dream, and that's where the form more than justifies itself.

Such a story realizes the promise of the genre by compelling readers, through the use of an aesthetic or emotional payoff, to read something that makes a generalizable statement about the empirical world, thus fulfilling the purported public-interest objective journalists commonly seek—to “hit readers in the gut.” But this achievement is only visible after publication. It's never clear in the field that the right sorts of empirical material will be available for the construction of a compelling story, and reporters have to figure out how to navigate the situations they encounter so that the empirical traces they do manage to gather will suffice for the narrative they envision, without transgressing the “rules” of either empirical warrantability or literary structuration.

Aligning cases with topics

Story ideas often originate in short tidbits of information writers and editors happen across by accident—a short article buried in the *Washington Post*, a note in *Arts and Letters Daily*, an offhand mention in a *New Scientist* column. Oftentimes a reporter will take an interesting clip and file it away with the rest of their nascent ideas, ready to be probed more deeply whenever there's time to think about a next project. Whatever the idea may be, the reporter must find a way

to combine the details of a particular case into an illustration of a topic. For an idea that begins with a case, the challenge is to figure out its broader relevance. For an idea that begins with a topic, the challenge is to find a case that appears to contain the elements of a narrative that can illustrate it. The need to move from a topic to a story, by fleshing an idea out with specific plot turns, characters, scenes, and other requisite literary elements—and ensuring that empirical traces of those elements will be accessible—will be revisited in the chapter below on editing. But for the time being, the important point is that developing an idea is a matter of determining whether and how the elements of a complete story might be rendered from an empirical case.

Janet Malcolm, another canonical *New Yorker* reporter, put it simply: “Most people don’t make good subjects for journalists” (1990, 122). Characters have to be vivid, broad, consistent, and clear, but people tend to be dull, convoluted, erratic, and ambiguous. Finding a representative case that will also make for a compelling narrative, with characters who “jump off the page,” can be a major hurdle in realizing an idea. Nick Lemann elaborates:

There is a continuum from choosing characters who are perfectly the statistical median of the phenomenon you are writing about, to choosing characters who have unusually interesting stories. And people fall somewhere on that continuum. . . . People who are average in every way don't make good stories, and as long as you find someone who fits the basic model, I think that you can sell them as having to do with the theme, even if their story is somewhat unusual. (2000)

If a reporter can find a compelling character whose life already seems to contain the elements of a compelling story, the less they might have to force the empirical case into a neat narrative package, or, conversely, the less work they’ll have to do to “sell” the character as emblematic of

a theme. For this reason, finding an appropriate case is often a foundational step in launching a new project.

It's not uncommon for reporters to talk about finding characters as a matter of "casting," like a play or film director looking for an actor who can both fit into their story and carry the viewer along with the force of their personality. Seeking characters for a feature story can be a comparable process, consisting of "auditions" with a variety of potential subjects. As an example, here is Gideon Lewis-Kraus describing his casting process for a *Wired* story on Silicon Valley startups ("No Exit," April 22, 2014):

So I wrote the email, essentially a form email saying, "Your company looks interesting to me. This is what I want to do. Do you want to talk?" So from those first forty emails I sent, I probably heard back from thirty people and I talked on the phone with twenty-five of them and I set up in-person meetings with fifteen of them, and then I went out to San Francisco to have these meetings over the course of four or five days, and everyone had some things going for it and other things not going for it. You know, there was one company that would have been kind of great, but they were run by two French dudes, and my editor and I talked about it and I was like, I think in this case, I think it's an unnecessary complication that these people are foreign, that would be a slightly different story about foreigners coming to Silicon Valley, we want it to be Americans. . . . So there were pros and cons to every single person that I talked to. Then when I finally talked to the people that I ended up writing about, immediately I was like, "I really like these people." . . . But in that case when I went back to [my editor] and said, these are the people I want to write about, here is their company, he was like, "Hmm, I don't know about that company, because of X, Y, and Z reasons; we kind of wanted something consumer-facing and not something that was B to B, because we thought it would be easier for readers to understand a consumer-facing company." So in this case I had to be, well look, I realize that these people are not perfect for various reasons, nobody is going to be perfect, which [my editor] obviously knows, and part of the reason I want to write

about these people is that I really liked them and I want to spend time with them, and I think that they say smart things about their lives. And in that case I think it paid off super well, because those were really sympathetic characters that I really liked and that I believed in, which was a really big part of that piece.

In general, the qualities reporters look for in their characters are very out of the ordinary. The characters they seek might be morally and emotionally complex, they might have unusually interesting or surprising life stories, and they might exhibit deep insight into the social, historical, or political contexts of their lives. If they're in a difficult situation, they would ideally approach that situation with strongheadedness, obsessiveness, proactivity, and persistence. They might be very voluble, but also articulate, able to deliver extended oral histories with an innate sense of storytelling and a superb memory for detail. Moreover, they ought to be committed to sharing their story, and patient enough to tolerate long interviews and repetitive questions about arcane details. Because a reporter will likely spend days, weeks, or sometimes months with a central subject, they need to get along well, and good rapport, friendliness, and trustworthiness are important traits to look for. The reporter needs a personal sense of fascination with a subject so their interest will be sustained, and it helps if hearing the subject's story evokes an emotional response or a feeling of personal affinity. "If they are angry, or unexpectedly brilliant, or have an eccentric sense of humor—well, that's huge," says Jon Krakauer, author of *Into Thin Air* (Boynton 2007, 161).

Naturally, other characteristics will suggest that some subjects would be better left alone. A reporter will probably refrain from writing about subjects they personally dislike, who they find boring or evasive or unsympathetic, because they know they will have a hard time convincing a reader to care about a character they themselves find objectionable. Similarly,

subjects who are too media savvy or “camera ready” will be difficult to write about if their concern about self-presentation obscures the depth of character the reporter wishes to examine.

A person who meets these kinds of requirements will inevitably be highly exceptional, and this highlights how orthogonal a reporter’s need for a compelling character can be with the need for that same character to be representative of a broader issue. If a reporter finds a compelling character that they wish to cast, the onus is on them to explain to their readers why that character was cast in a story about the broader issue, because the reporter will inevitably be held to account by readers for that connection. Nick Lemann describes this difficulty with the way his book about the Educational Testing Service was received:

I had a lot of this problem with *The Big Test* because . . . one of the characters in *The Big Test* is somebody who is very much a creature of the system I'm writing about, the ETS system. . . . This is a person whose father is extremely rich and she goes through life and then finds out in adulthood how rich the father really is. So several of the reviewers have said . . . "You cannot use this person as a character because how they can represent meritocracy or the American Dream if they're so rich?" To me, the real reason I picked this person was because she had this wonderful, interesting dramatic life story. I liked that. But another reason is, I thought that that's the whole point. . . . The fact that these ideas about how our country works, the ETS system, are so powerful that even people who have billions of dollars and don't have to work, are just deeply, psychologically bound up in the idea of entering the testing meritocracy and getting some positions that they can feel they've earned. That tells you a lot about America. And it also tells you a lot about America that a lot of the top layer of the society that thinks of itself as totally self-made, in fact isn't. (2000)

Anticipating this kind of objection, even if it comes only from an editor, motivates a reporter to select cases where the explanation for the chosen case won’t feel too contrived in light of what

it's supposed to illustrate. Having a felicitous case in hand can safeguard the reporter from potential criticisms, and free them from the need to incorporate distracting responses to potential criticisms within the piece itself if the choice of case isn't self-evident.

Preserving a subject's agency

For a reporter beginning work on a new story, it can sometimes feel like walking into a library that has no catalogue—it might be possible to get a sense for how topics are arranged by opening a few books at random, but finding the answers to specific questions might take forever if specific books can't easily be located. The subjects a reporter chooses will inevitably serve as librarians in this metaphor, outlining to the reporter what's important and where information about those important issues can be found. (In some cases, reporters will deliberately seek out guidance in the form of fixers or interpreters, who can filter material through a local's sensibility and help the reporter navigate complicated social minefields; whether or not a guide of this sort becomes a character in the story depends a lot on the concerns described above.) Finding a subject who can also provide practical assistance in the reporting process—in the form of referrals to other subjects, theories about their social world, or feedback on the reporter's developing story—can be indispensable not just for easing the reporter's workload, but also for assuaging the moral risk of imposing a conceptual framework on a subject's life that may be anathema to their own self-perception.

Recall Nick Lemann's concern about using Mary Manley as an illustration of welfare. On one hand, Lemann might have been concerned about what his competent peers would make of his decision to structure a story around a subject who was less than ideal as an illustration of the topic he was covering. But on the other hand, he might also have worried about his

accountability to Manley herself, who clearly had her own ideas about the meaning of her life story. This is an important point that I'll return to repeatedly—the readers a reporter has in mind are not simply the strangers who buy the magazine, but also the people within the reporter's everyday social world: their editors, their peers, and the subjects who collaborate in building the reporter's account. All of these readers' anticipated reactions to the finished piece inflect the reporter's decision making as they report. In this sense, choosing a character who is a poor illustration of the reporter's topic is not just a generic transgression, but it can also be a transgression of the reporter's perceived obligations to the subjects they're writing about. Here's a different reporter describing this moral dimension of case selection:

There's a pretty clear distinction in my mind between somebody who is being used as representative of something and is not necessarily aware of broader structural forces, or articulate about them, in which you're saying that this person is an example. . . . [versus] somebody whom you trust to be giving you accurate and insightful reports about their own sphere. . . . It would make me feel more comfortable with the story, and I think it would be a better story, if I were writing about people who really had a little bit of insight into what they were going through and could be informants rather than subjects. Obviously it's a slippery distinction that to some extent one draws to shore up one's own bad conscience about this stuff, but it's a distinction that matters in practice, whether you're saying, I'm going to trust this person to say in his or her own words interesting things about their lives, versus I am going to show all the stuff that is going on over this person's head that they don't even realize.

This contrast closely mirrors the *emic* / *etic* distinction familiar from linguistics and cultural anthropology (e.g., Pike 1967)—is the researcher obligated to reproduce the sense that subjects make of their own lives, or is it more important to cultivate the perspective of an “impartial”

observer? Reporters commonly express cognizance of this distinction, if not an outright preference for one perspective or the other, based on the moral implications of preserving or overriding a subject's agency in their own representation. The more a reporter can preserve the agency of the subject, the less risk they take on as powerful stewards of the information their subject provides. But relying too heavily on the subject's agency can result in a "puff piece" that lacks the social distance that readers expect of a journalist with a *fair* countenance toward the worlds they're describing. The balance a reporter has to strike is described nicely by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz:

To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin. The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. . . . The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to. (2000 [1983])

Going about this task too ham-handedly exposes the reporter to the risk of censure if they fail to correctly apply the "rules" of fairness and objectivity, and they must work out the correct strategy bit by bit in light of their particular circumstances in the field and the way they anticipate their peers will evaluate the way they're handling them. It might be obvious that excessive partiality is to be avoided, but how partial is too partial in the eyes of one's editors? How impartial is too impartial in the eyes of one's subjects? A reporter's ability to manage this balance is often constrained by the subjects that are available to them—it might not always be possible to find a good character who's also an articulate theorist of their own social world, and where a reporter comes out on the emic / etic continuum might be a result of the options they had

to choose between. In any case, considering that the risks inherent in the publication of a compromising representation are borne mostly by the subjects themselves, reporting can often be something of a moral hazard, and a reporter must carefully consider how their account might be received by both their subjects and their peers for this reason.

Gaining Access

Aligning interests

Any time a reporter identifies a person they think might be useful—as a source of information, as a guide to a new social world, or as a character for a story—they must convince that person that their participation will be worthwhile. In conventional lore, speaking with a reporter has a lot of downsides for a potential subject and not a lot of upsides. Janet Malcolm's illustration of this point in *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990) was so widely resonant in the world of journalism that it quickly became axiomatic: because the reporter has the power to portray the subject in just about whatever light they choose, a subject participates in the exchange at grave risk to their own self-presentation:

On reading the article or book in question, [the subject] has to face the fact that the journalist—who seemed so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully, so remarkably attuned to his vision of things—never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on his story but always intended to write a story of his own. The disparity between what seems to be the intention of an interview as it is taking place and what it actually turns out to have been in aid of always comes as a shock to the subject. . . . When the moment of peripeteia comes, he is confronted with the . . . mortifying spectacle of himself flunking a test of character he did not know he was taking. (3)

To avoid a Malcolm-style paripeteia on the part of their subjects, many journalists aim to identify how their participation might work in the subject's own interest, so they can avoid the moral liability of tricking people into disclosing information they'd rather keep to themselves. One reporter explained it this way:

Any subject or any potential subject is thinking about, what can I get out of this? And sometimes they're motivated by sheer vanity. Like all I want is attention and all I want is for my life to be important enough that it's going to be written about in a magazine. That often is kind of dangerous because it puts you in this Janet Malcolm situation where they believe that what you're going to do is make them and their lives look great in this magazine. What I like a little bit better is when they have a more instrumental need to be represented, because then it makes me feel like it's a more even moral calculus.

Some subjects will certainly be eager to participate, especially if they see the reporter as a conduit to a wide audience, but the tension between the reporter as a *stenographer* and as a *translator* always makes for a difficult obstacle a reporter has to navigate with any potential subject. Is it necessary to temper a subject's eagerness at the risk of losing them as a subject? Is it acceptable to cultivate a subject's eagerness at the expense of complete honesty?

The way a reporter conceives of a subject's interests will often influence the way they go about describing their plan for the project and the subject's anticipated role in it. Many journalists feel obligated to fully disclose their intentions to any potential subjects, in the same way that academic researchers often heed the ideal-typical principle of *informed consent*—the idea being that the more a potential subject knows about the project and their role in it, the more empowered they'll be to make a decision about whether participating would be in their own interests, and the less personal liability the reporter will assume if the subject is aggrieved by the

final product. But as much as full disclosure might absolve a reporter of moral risk, it can also threaten access if the Janus-style nature of reporting as Malcolm describes it seems unappealing, for obvious reasons. So, as much as reporters will tend to uphold full disclosure and informed consent as a value, they will just as often carve out exceptions if they need to pursue certain materials to realize their provisional structure—they may disclose the nature of a project selectively to emphasize aspects that appear to align with a subject’s interests, and suppress other aspects that don’t. Many people would be put off by the prospect of an eight-hour interview, for instance, so a reporter may be vague about how much time they think they’ll need. No one would want to be described as “corpulent” or “balding,” so a reporter may not disclose their plans for physical description (if they have any). Every aspect that is suppressed, though, represents a potential issue down the line when the subject discovers just how informed they were when they consented.

Because deference to a subject’s interests is often at odds with the need to gather enough material for a “substantial” piece, to return to Buzz Bissinger’s term, disclosure is often a major complication in any access negotiation. The most immediate way to address a subject’s reluctance is to conceal the downsides and emphasize whatever upsides might seem attractive to a given subject. But this can be a double-edged sword, because too much deference to the subject can lead either to a watered-down puff-piece or to a shocking peripeteia; too little deference can blockade a reporter from the material they need. Reporters who work on a political beat, for instance, need access to the powerful figures they’re covering, and they can easily succumb to pressure from their sources to compromise their commitment to the public interest. One reporter described the problem this way:

I think that there is the feeling of slight contamination, in an anthropological sense, when you work a beat and have worked for years doing the kind of horsetrading that reporters have to do. So if you have sources that you have cultivated and you are working with over time, everything is about, well, if I don't print this, will you give me this? It's all a constant negotiation.

Journalists often discuss this problem under the heading of *access journalism*, which refers to a style of reporting that involves cultivating personal relationships with sources, usually to ensure access to the upper echelons of society. At issue, as a different reporter pointed out to me, is a subject's relative power to advocate for themselves in the negotiation:

I like to think that I don't manipulate people into endangering themselves—that's a knock on reporters that's sometimes well-deserved. *The problem is that people who are well-informed often understand the downsides of talking to a reporter*, and you've got to find people whose kindness or whose agendas correspond sufficiently with yours that will not only talk to you but tell you the truth and tell you things that are useful. (emphasis added)

Dean Starkman, an editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review*, sets access journalism at odds with *accountability journalism*, which prioritizes the role of journalists in holding powerful people to account. This is a principle that relies, at least to a degree, on journalists forswearing personal relationships with the people they cover, because “socializing with powerful people can soften reporting,” as Ross Barkan puts it in the same journal: “you’re less likely to spit in the face that’s smiling back at you from across the dinner table” (2016).

Access journalism highlights that recruitment strategies have to be weighed against the story's potential public benefit and the control a reporter is willing to forfeit to the subject in order to secure access. A major part of the calculus a reporter uses to determine how much to

disclose to their subjects is a judgment of the subject's relative power and social position. Reporters will often approach recruitment and stewardship very differently with wealthy or powerful participants versus poor and disadvantaged ones, on the grounds that different types of participants will provide them with a different set of moral yardsticks they can use to justify their decisions (cf. Nader 1972). News journalists, for instance, often use a distinction between public and private citizens in managing their sources' privacy—prominent figures like politicians and public servants have already waived some of their right to privacy, so the potential harms of public disclosure of their actions will be less severe, and reporters can approach them with more impunity.

The difference in moral yardsticks can be seen most clearly when reporters with intractable access issues resort to what Ted Conover—a well-known veteran of undercover reporting—has called the “nuclear option”: it may be morally justifiable to refrain from disclosing *anything* about the project to one's subjects—at least at first—if the material a reporter is able to render has a clear public-interest value and cannot be obtained through traditional means. Notable examples include Conover's book *Newjack*, about the world of prison guards; Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dime*d, about trying to make a living with only minimum-wage jobs; and a notorious feature by Ken Silverstein, “Their Men in Washington” (*Harper's*, July 2007), that exposed a well-connected lobbying firm's willingness to launch a massive PR campaign on behalf of a fictional company's private interests in Turkmenistan.

While undercover reporting certainly has clear advantages material-wise, it also exposes a reporter to considerable risk, not just because subjects will almost certainly feel betrayed when the true identity of the reporter is revealed, but also because the reporter's peers may easily feel that the approach is a threat to the integrity and reputation of the institution of journalism as a

whole. With this in mind, it's clear that reporting undercover might more easily be justified if it helps to secure access to powerful people whose actions it would be in the interest of the public to reveal. Mainly for this reason, such techniques are widely proscribed except in extraordinary circumstances by formalized codifications of journalistic ethics, like those from Poynter, which allow for deceptive reporting only "when the information obtained is of profound importance . . . of vital public interest," and cannot be gathered any other way (Steele 2002). A reporter who plans to use deceptive means to secure access to material usually has to be prepared to couch their actions in terms of the subject's power and its relation to the public interest, as Silverstein later did to justify his decision in the face of widespread criticism:

There is a certain smugness on the high end of the Washington press corps, indecently close personal and professional relationships between reporters and the people they are supposed to cover. *What is lost here in the interest of phony balance is any sense of right and wrong.* (Lisher 2007, emphasis added)

The important point is this: any time a reporter enters into a relationship with a subject or source, they have to balance their perceived duty to those sources against their perceived duty to their journalist-peers, based on the shared understanding that journalism has a role to play in a society's democratic governance. The effectiveness of that role is less important than that a reporter's actions remain observably consistent with it. No matter how well a reporter knows the rules of their trade, the difficulty is in figuring out how to apply those rules to the particulars of each project, where different courses of action carry different gradations of risk. Whatever action they take in a negotiation with a potential subject has to be thought through in terms of their peers' ostensible understanding of what the rules are, and how that action might or might not be

defensible. This has a major influence on the work a reporter does to answer a subject's question "what's in it for me?" in an appealing way. Janet Malcolm famously condemned journalists' conventional approach to securing access at the expense of full disclosure, insisting that "Any journalist who is not too stupid or full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does it morally indefensible" (1990, 3). Although somewhat hyperbolic, this condemnation highlights how the public-interest mythos of journalism provides a reporter with a limited amount of leeway to do things that would be impermissible under the guise of a normal interaction—an evaluation of a subject's relative power and position, formulated correctly in the terms of a reporter's peers, can partially indemnify a reporter from the need to fully realize the subject's interests in the context of a reportorial relationship; but at the same time, a cavalier disregard for those same interests threatens the access that the rest of the institution needs to do its job.

Negotiating rules

Sometimes the interests a reporter and subject identify in negotiating about access can be formalized into a sort of oral contract, which will provide them both with a resource they can use later on to talk about what kinds of actions are, or were, justifiable and which aren't, or weren't. A proposed rule is never guaranteed to be accepted by either party, nor will a rule necessarily solve any potential conflict if there's any leeway in how it can be interpreted, but reaching an agreement on some ground rules can provide a sufficient sense of protection that a relationship which might otherwise have stalled can move forward.

Subjects will often propose rules that help them preserve control over what gets published. They might propose, for example, that they'll speak to a reporter only if their

conversation is entirely off the record; that they'll be allowed to see the interview questions ahead of time; that the interview should not be recorded; that the interview should take place over email; that certain areas of conversation will be off limits; that they'll retain the right to determine how they're attributed; or that they'll have a chance to review any quotes before they're published. Because these kinds of proposals usually hinder the gathering of material, a reporter will often press for a subject who wants to be off the record to come on the record in exchange for anonymity, say, or for a subject who wants not to be identified to agree to be identified. The likelihood of a reporter agreeing to such a rule depends on what the subject has to offer and how urgently the reporter needs it for the sake of their aspirational structure. Even though anonymous sources are conventionally inadvisable, a reporter may accept the risk of censure if an anonymous source has material they need, especially if they think they can justify the contravention in terms their peers will accept.

A reporter can often speculate about a subject's interests based on the rules they propose, and information gleaned from this speculation can be recycled as ammunition in the reporter's case for the subject's involvement, or for other aspects of the story. A source might request an off-the-record conversation so they can influence the reporter's point of view, gather enough intelligence to do a "front-run" with a story of their own, or otherwise attempt to thwart the reporter's plans. A reporter might agree to such a conversation if they suspect this kind of set-up, either because that conversation might be an "in" that will give them a chance to pull the subject back on the record, or because they've prepared most of their account ahead of time and the subject's refusal to comment will itself be materially useful.

As much as reporters might be inclined to expand their access at every opportunity, there are often good reasons to restrict access if doing so can ingratiate the reporter to their subjects or

their peers. Proposing to protect a subject's interests at the expense of the reporter's can be a useful means for establishing trust, for example. One reporter described to me a rule he proposed to a wary subject whose work he wanted to shadow:

At the end of every day, I'll tell you anything I saw that raised a question in my mind, that made me wonder if you're doing the right thing. And how about we just agree, every day we'll have this conversation, and if there's a problem I'll bring it up, you'll tell me what you think. *If you decide at that point that this is no longer working, we'll call it a day. You're not bound into this.* (emphasis added)

An oral contract that protects a subject's interest at the potential expense of access can also be a way of signaling a reporter's alignment with the rules of journalism. In many cases, offering payment to a potential subject might help lubricate an access negotiation, but this might easily be seen by a reporter's peers as a stark transgression of the rules about undue influence and informed consent. At the same time, based on the moral hazard inherent in journalism as Janet Malcolm sees it, some journalists feel strongly that subjects should share in any potential revenue a project might generate. "I've made a boatload of money off of the books I've written," says Jon Krakauer (Boynton 2007, 168). "Don't you think I owe anything to some of my subjects, who got nothing for the crucial assistance they provided except, in some instances, unwanted publicity?" But the decision to enter into such an arrangement has to be made case by case, depending on the apparent likelihood that any perceived erosion of integrity will cost the reporter opportunities among their peers, even if it improves access—will the arrangement *look* corrupt to another journalist who's familiar with the rules? Will it be defensible? Krakauer, for his part, has sometimes purchased literary rights to a subject's story as a way of circumventing the prohibition, and other journalists have devised similar arrangements involving shares of

downstream book revenues or revenues from Hollywood options. But limiting access by avoiding overt payments will always be easier to defend among one's peers in terms of the rules of journalistic ethics.

Establishing trust

The beginning of an access negotiation is when a reporter plants the seeds of the self-presentation they'll cultivate through the rest of the relationship, which is a topic I'll return to momentarily. A reporter is usually a stranger to their subjects, at least at first, and many subjects will need some assurance that the apparent risks of participating are not as great as they seem. Here's Eric Schlosser, the author of *Fast Food Nation*:

A lot of the people I write about have very good reasons to be wary of journalists. Pot growers, pornographers, illegal immigrants—the stakes are very high for them. The key thing is to make them trust that I'm not going to screw them over. (Boynton 2007, 353)

Any claims a reporter makes to a potential subject, including proposals for ground rules, are effectively meaningless if the subject is not convinced of their credibility. Meeting or speaking with a subject will certainly give a reporter a chance to instill trust over time, especially if they're affable and compassionate, but the more the reporter's reputation precedes them, the better. Having a reputation that's accessible to a subject through a source other than the reporter can provide the subject with some intersubjective corroboration for their own judgment of the reporter's character. Every time a reporter stays on good terms with a subject even after their story is printed is another arrow in their reputational quiver, because indications of this success can trickle down to potential future subjects—if not orally, then at least through the absence of

retractions or angry letters to the editor, or simply through the continued success of the magazine. For this reason, it's frequently in the back of a reporter's mind that the way they treat their current subjects will, in a diffuse way, affect their potential access to future subjects down the road. Three common external indices of credibility are worth looking at in more detail: the opinions of referral sources, a reporter's published portfolio, and the reputation of the institution they represent.

It's common for a reporter to seek referrals to new subjects from people they've already met, and a journalist's reasons for doing so are the same as a sociologist's: to learn of the existence of potentially useful subjects, and to gain access to subjects who might challenge a direct overture. Meeting a reporter through a referral gives a subject some recourse if something goes wrong, and the shared knowledge of that recourse helps keep everyone beholden to their stated obligations. A referrer's mere willingness to be held to account for the reporter's actions says something to the subject about their trust in the reporter; plus, the reporter's accountability to the referrer, who has the option of demanding an explanation if anything goes wrong, doubles the risk of any wrongdoing—an obvious boon to a wary subject. Referrals are plainly of use to reporters of all stripes, not just access journalists with a relatively tight-knit pool of potential subjects. A reporter seeking a meeting with a cagey subject, for instance, might approach the subject's friends or business partners first, to implant some favourable word-of-mouth into the subject's social world.

Just as referrals might provide a subject with assurance about a reporter's character, so can the reporter's published work. If a subject has read a reporter's articles or books, and thinks well of them, recruitment might be straightforward. A subject's reasonable suspicion about what exactly a reporter is up to can be rendered moot if the subject can see what the reporter is up to in

their prior work, along with the commitment to depth of research or fairness of representation the portfolio expresses. Of course, a portfolio can just as well be a hindrance if it's at odds with a subject's interests. One reporter, for example, described to me her access difficulties in reporting a book about medicine, because her prior work was irrelevant and did nothing to bolster her credibility as a medical researcher. Her solution was to suspend the book project and turn instead to a series of shorter feature articles on the same topic, which eventually proved more persuasive than her earlier work to the subjects she needed for her book.

The main shortcoming of a reporter's personal reputation as a recruitment tool is the low likelihood of any given subject having read a reporter's work—or, if they've read it, to have noticed the author's name in the byline. Showing one's work to a subject before appealing for a commitment is always an option, but short of that, naming the organization a reporter is working for can be an effective proxy for the reporter's personal notoriety. This *New Yorker* reporter describes the particular usefulness of her magazine:

For me, for the most part, it's very easy, because I'm usually writing about people who are delighted to be written about in *The New Yorker*. And this is another huge, huge advantage for a writer in belonging to *The New Yorker* is it's a magazine that people have trust in. They don't worry that we're going to write some scurrilous, false, and gratuitously damaging piece. I'm sure sometimes subjects of our pieces have felt stung by what we've done, but there's such a trust in the magazine that that makes things much easier for all of us.

Cultivating a magazine's reputation is part of a typical editor's portfolio of job duties. A successful reporter-subject relationship, where the subject comes away unaggrieved, is a resource that's transferred to future reporters through the reputation of an institution. A

magazine's reputation is akin to a form of capital that can be invested in reporting through access negotiations like the ones I'm describing, and such investments pay off in the substance a reporter can access by virtue of it, both then and in future assignments; substantial reporting, in turn, raises the value of the institution. (In the same way, aggrieved subjects cheapen not just the reporter's reputation but also the institution's, making it worthwhile for reporters to enforce the ethics of each other's practices.) This is part of the exchange between reporters and editors that will be a subject of Chapter 6, but the intricacies are not important for appreciating the clear value of a reputable institution to any individual reporter seeking access.

Access issues

When access issues prevent a reporter from turning up some of the material they need, they need to reconfigure their mental image of the story to account for the material they have plus material they think they *will* be able to get, knowing what they now know. Most of the time there's a way to work around this missing material, and with enough alternative sources for similar materials, a reporter will often be able to realize an alternative structure without sacrificing their commitment to competent readers' expectations about the genre. Chris Jones, for example, is the author of an *Esquire* story, "The Things that Carried Him" (May 2008), which describes the repatriation of a soldier, Joe Montgomery, who was killed in the Iraq War. Jones described to *Nieman Storyboard* the reporting he did to reconstruct the scene when Montgomery's wife, Missie, and mother, Gail, were told about his death, which was complicated by the refusal of Micah, the officer who delivered the news, to agree to an interview:

I talked to the women who were in the apartment with Missie, and they're not in the story, and I talked to soldiers who were with Micah. And I talked to Aunt Vicki and Gail

about that moment. And Gail's daughter was important for this part. And Ryan was important for this part because he's the one who accidentally told Missie. *So I was sort of working around some of the limits*. I really wanted to talk to Micah. I don't blame him one bit for saying no, he couldn't do it, but I did really want to talk to Micah. (Lupşa 2015, emphasis added)

Jones achieved what was usually a reporter's goal, which is to report enough details that the missed interview or otherwise inaccessible source will not be recognizable to competent readers as a *writearound*, a term of art for stories whose authors attempt to compensate for missing material by writing as though that material was unnecessary.

Reporters can usually recognize when a story's form is a result of inaccessible material, because part of a reporter's competence as a reader is the ability to envision the practical actions that the text is a trace of (a topic I'll return to in Chapter 5), and, as I've emphasized above, generic structures suggest locations where missing material will likely be found. In the following exchange, for example, Paige Williams, a *New Yorker* contributor and professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, inquires about some material that appears to be missing from a story by Eli Saslow about a basketball player, Rumeal Robinson, who swindled his mother, Helen, out of her home ("Bringing Down the House," *ESPN The Magazine*, August 13, 2012):

Williams: It's interesting that you keep the camera wholly on Helen, and that this story works despite Rumeal's absence—we never really hear his voice. Was that a function of his inaccessibility? Even though the story is really Helen's, can you talk a bit about writing about a story subject who declines to participate? Did he testify, by the way?

Saslow: It was mostly a function of his inaccessibility. I tried to get Rumeal—wrote him a few letters in prison, and, after my third attempt, he finally wrote back. He sent a letter in legal jargon that said his name was copyrighted, and we were not allowed to print it. It was a very strange letter. He did testify, so that was helpful, and a lot of those details helped me bring his perspective and his voice into the story. (Williams 2013b)

The existence of alternative sources like the ones both Jones and Saslow relied upon can be imperative in cases where time limits and financial restrictions prevent a reporter from making any kind of wholesale revision to the structure they have in mind. Not surprisingly, when a reporter envisions a story that hinges on some kind of key scene that they either haven't secured access to or haven't yet witnessed, the perceived lack of control can be distressing—Evan Ratliff said as much while interviewing the reporter Jon Mooallem on the *Longform Podcast*: “I feel like I've done several stories like that, and it's actually incredibly nerve-wracking” (Ratliff 2014). If a key scene fails to materialize, and the reporter does not have the time or money to perform a major overhaul on the way they conceive of their story, the option of writing around the missing material can expose them to all kinds of unfortunate consequences, reputational, relational, and otherwise, especially if the story gets killed as a result.

A reporter's response to inaccessible material points to another balance reporters have to maintain: the balance between exploratory reporting that exposes them to the range of possibilities that the real-world space of their story contains,⁴ and reporting that provides them

⁴This idea is not unlike what Andrew Abbott calls “the space of possible inquiry” (2000, 30), and thinking about Abbott's explanation of the routes that different researchers take through this space, by dint of their theoretical commitments, can be a helpful context for considering the work of reporting. Compare William Langewiesche: “I put myself into complex, three-dimensional situations—call it reality—in which everything is connected to everything else. There is no inherent narrative. It's just a blob. And writing is the process of choosing the path through that confusion” (Boynton 2007, 213).

with the concrete details they need to render the story elements they've chosen out of that space. While the latter mode is imperative for gathering the kinds of details the reporter needs to meet a perceived literary standard, the former mode provides them with a broad foundation of knowledge that defines the scope of possibilities for any configuration of elements they might want—or need—to pursue.

Although these two modes of reporting happen concurrently in practice, it can be useful to think of them as discrete steps that characterize the early and late stages of reporting. In the early stages of a project, a reporter might be more concerned with figuring out what's relevant to their story and what's not, so they can direct their effort more efficiently at empirical materials that are more likely to be useful. This might mean reading as many books and articles as possible on the salient topic, wandering around and watching what people do, or having long, rambling conversations with locals or other members of the target world. William Langewiesche, a former *Atlantic* reporter now at *Vanity Fair*, explains the exploratory value of just letting people talk:

The secret is: let the guy talk. You never know where they're going, and it gets really interesting when you let people run on. Every once in a while they say something that makes me want to stop them—"Wait! Tell me more about that!"—but I resist the impulse, because I might lose the jewels that are about to fall from their lips. Instead, I make a mental note to go back to the topic later. (Boynton 2007, 216)

In the same vein, the *New Yorker* writer Tad Friend endorses the value of the interview-ending question, "Is there anything else I should have asked you?": "Sometimes people will say, 'Well, actually we never talked about Bob's childhood and how he reacted to coming down with polio,' which you never knew about" (Haire 2008). Every new discovery provides a reporter with a new

option for rendering story elements, and the value of having a wide range of options often spurs a reporter to maintain as steep a learning curve as possible, for as long as possible.

At some point, though, impending deadlines will generally compel a reporter to commit to some of the specific elements available within the empirical space of the story, which means drilling down into the details of those elements. In many stories, the literary quality of the story hinges on scenes, which provide a lot of the force that motivates a reader to keep reading. The details are gathered through what Chris Jones calls the “scene-setting questions” (Williams 2013a) that are necessary for building a story with what Jonathan Harr calls “texture” (Boynton 2007, 114), or what Justin Heckert calls “vividness” (Tullis 2015), or what Buzz Bissinger calls “atmosphere” and “substance” (Green 2014d). Many reporters endeavour to gather the kinds of details that would allow a reader to imagine “what it’s like” to be present for the events being described (Lawrence Weschler in Boynton 2007, 418). For instance, Justin Heckert describes the kinds of questions he asked to depict the experience of floating in the ocean for his *Men’s Journal* story “Lost in the Waves” (November 2009) :

The first couple of days we talked very broadly. But then I went back into that broad sort of question and I was like details, what were you wearing? What did it smell like? What did it feel like? Oh, you were wearing a necklace? What did it feel like? When you were in the water, what was happening to the key [on the necklace]? Could you see it if you looked down in the water? That is where I got those details. (Tullis 2015)

That Heckert describes his scene-setting questions as a matter of going “back into” the broad questions he asked earlier illustrates the relationship between these two modes of reporting: the “what it’s like” questions can only be asked on a foundation of “what it is” questions that the earlier exploratory work consisted of. “What it’s like” questions are a practical outcome of the

reporter's shifting sense of the provisional structure—the material in hand, filtered through a literary-journalistic sensibility, suggests where to look for more material, and never is this clearer than when a reporter is trying to visualize a scene by asking questions. “Close your eyes and assemble in your mind the scene,” says Mike Sager of *Esquire*. “Those are my questions. . . . If there's something I'm after, I ask for the scene to be painted. Who was where, what was here?” (Green 2014e). But the questions asked at any given time depend on this interplay between exploration and specification. The answers to “what it's like” questions become the “what it is” on the basis of which new “what it's like” questions can be devised.

In practice, a reporter does not complete an exploratory stage of their research before beginning specifying one. Rather, they move through a series of actions and interactions as a result of the exploratory value of each move toward specificity. Consider the following passage from Chris Jones's story “The Things that Carried Him” (*Esquire*, May 2008), where he describes two pallbearers trying not to cry while carrying Montgomery's casket:

Snell-Rominger whispered to her to look at just this one girl in the hangar—not at her face but at her pretty dress, which had flowers on it. “Pick out a flower,” she said, and both of them stared at a flower on that girl's dress until they had set the casket on the church cart.

Jones reflected on this passage later on in an interview with Cristian Lupşa for *Nieman*

Storyboard:

Jones: I didn't know there was a girl in a flowered dress. When you start—you know we were talking about the video of the funeral, how it makes you ask questions that you might not have asked, because you can see. I didn't have that for any other

scene. So it's not like I went into the scene saying, "OK, don't forget to ask about the girl with the flower dress." She sort of surfaced, very organically. . . .

Lupşa: How did you get at it?

Jones: This started with the obvious question, because the soldiers said that it's very important that you keep your game face on. You keep your emotions in check. You can't be crying when you're delivering the casket. That leads to the very obvious question: How do you not cry? Because this is really hard. I was told again and again that the moment the family sees the casket is devastating, like the wind comes out and takes their legs. So how, in this moment of extreme emotion, do you keep your emotions in check? That to me is a very obvious question. And their answer was vague: You don't look at the family. You look at something else. That leads to the question, and it's a hopeful question—I mean they can just say, "I have no idea what I was looking at." This is where the group interview actually helped. Because one of the guys talked about looking at the logo on the sheriff's car, and then these two female soldiers started sort of whispering to each other, and that's how they remembered the girl in the flower dress. . . . You have to know that the possibility is there. You have to have enough experience to know that you might get that. And you have to have the patience to understand that 95 percent of the time you're going to go down a path that leads nowhere. That's what I mean by the blunt force of reporting. Sometimes it's just "keep going." That's what I mean by labor. That's why the moments when you do get something, you remember them so clearly. . . . I can remember everything about that day, because it's so rare when you get that moment. (Lupşa 2015)

The meandering paths a reporter takes to arrive at any detail that ends up retained in the printed story depend on the interplay between specific questions and the answers they solicit—which is to say, exploratory and specifying modes of reporting. The flower-dress detail depended on a series of events, however unlikely, that included the soldiers' initial use of the dress as a focal

point, Jones identifying those soldiers as subjects, Jones convincing them to participate in a group interview, Jones asking about the management of emotion, and the other soldier recalling the logo on the Sheriff's car. As Jones admits, he never could have planned even to inquire after that detail if the prior events hadn't occurred. Years of experience may give a reporter confidence that "the possibility is there" of them happening across a beautiful literary detail if they persist in going down enough wrong pathways, but it does not give them the ability to plan out very far ahead of time, at least with any accuracy, the collection of a particular detail. And this is an important point about the aspirational structure—it is not a plan that the reporter unilaterally executes; it's a conceptual resource that guides them in managing the everyday work of reporting. The final structure the story takes is not a realization of the reporter's initial aspiration; rather, it's an outcome of the reporter using their literary competence to handle their interactions with the material environments they encounter, to work around the obduracy of the empirical world as they encounter limits to the accessibility of the story elements their provisional structure suggests.

There's a need for open-endedness because it allows for the discovery of these kinds of details. The more a reporter drills down into the details of particular scenes, the less flexibility they have to respond to the kinds of new information that the exploratory mode of reporting unearths. If a reporter spends a lot of time gathering details about a key scene, but that scene falls out of favour when they discover that Bob had polio, that's time wasted. If they commit to a structure involving a scene they personally have to witness (imagine a story about a hunter or a surgeon), but that scene fails to materialize, which of the other elements they have the details for can they retain if they rejig the structure? Or if they don't, how obvious will it be as a writearound? The more rigid the developing story becomes, the more difficult it will be to

incorporate new material if the reporter discovers they've selected the "wrong" elements from the empirical space, or that the elements they've selected are unavailable. Leaving room for some "play" in the fitting together of story elements can take a great deal of time and effort, but it's effort that pays off if the reporter discovers the kinds of details they need to realize the perceived promise of the genre.

Rendering Material

Types of sources

My account so far has proceeded as though all of a reporter's sources are people. Of course, people are only part of the picture, albeit an important one. In schematic terms, there are three main resources that supply a reporter with material: already-existing material records (books, articles, reports, court transcripts, archival records, and so on), interviews with knowledgeable subjects, and firsthand observation. For any given element of a story, such as a scene or a passage of explanation or description, a reporter might use a combination of these resources. If a reporter is attempting to describe an event retrospectively, for example, they might look for evidence of what occurred by interviewing people who were there, looking for physical records of what took place (in the form of photographs, news clippings, or diary entries, things like that), and perhaps visiting the location of the event to gather firsthand details about the setting. Similarly, they might try to establish a matter of fact, such as the political situation that serves as a background for the story's narrative, and the approach will be similar: interviewing experts, speaking to people who lived at the time, and examining news archives might provide a sufficient combination of details.

Sometimes, rather than trying to reconstruct events that happened in the past, a reporter will include scenes in their story that they witnessed personally, because they arranged for sufficient access to be present for some of the events the character's story involved—indeed, some reporters have built their careers on an immersive style of reporting where the goal is to personally observe the events that the story depicts (Jonathan Harr's *A Civil Action*, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family*, and Ted Conover's *Newjack* are among many notable examples of this style). Reporters might endeavour for this kind of access for a few reasons. One is that it allows them to personally select the details they need from their surroundings. People simply living through events without a reporter's practical competence will likely remember all kinds of details, but they may not be the kinds of details a reporter needs to develop a literary description of those events, and being there provides the reporter with the means to gather the *right* kinds of details for the purpose at hand. Another is that it eliminates many potential issues of fact that a reporter has to deal with when reconstructing events from second-hand accounts—how much can a source's account be relied upon? How might it be distorted? (This will be a topic of Chapter 7.)

These advantages mean that even when a reporter is reconstructing past events, they might use first-person observation to gather scenic elements against which the details gathered from second-hand sources can be arranged, or they might use first-person observation to produce descriptions of typical experiences or processes of the sort their second-hand sources are describing. While reporting “The Wreck of the Lady Mary” for the *Newark Star-Ledger* (November 21, 2010), for example, which went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, Amy Ellis Nutt acquired a survival suit and personally tried it out so she could produce vivid descriptions of what it was like to wear one while floating in the ocean (Williams 2012b). But

firsthand observation is not free of the epistemic problems of reconstruction that will be a focus of Chapter 7. Whenever a reporter reconstructs a scene using these sorts of observations, there is some amount of conjecture involved in asserting that the events or processes would have happened the *same* way in the specific case the reporter is describing. Take the example of Sebastian Junger, author of *The Perfect Storm*, defending his assertion that the crewmen of the Andrea Gail “talked women, talked money, talked horse racing, talked fish” on the way to the Atlantic fishing grounds at Grand Banks:

Elon Green: How do you report this? You do not hedge these details with “would have” or “might have.”

Junger: These are such general and universal activities on a fishing boat. Everyone you talk to, when asked how they passed the time, would all basically say the same thing. And, again, these are also things that have no consequence in terms of what happened in the story. They were so probable, so general, that I could just make an assertion. Which is very different from saying the Andrea Gail capsized. I can’t know that. But can you imagine me saying they “might have” talked about women? Like, of course they fucking talked about women. “Might have” would have sounded self-aware and trite. I’m trying to be very scrupulous and honest with the reader about what can be known and not known but also not make the reading experience too awkward. (Green 2013b)

Despite conjecture being unavoidable, the reporting conducted in cases like these, with the goal of establishing “what it probably would have been like,” is a form of legwork that hedges the reporter’s account against possible accusations of inaccuracy or fabrication. It may be a conjecture to assume that the crewmen talked about women aboard their boat, but it would be a

larger conjecture to provide such a description without having overheard their conversations at the bar in Nantucket and asked them what they usually talk about to kill time. First-person evidence builds up a story's authenticity, in effect, by foreclosing on the likelihood of readers complaining that the reporter's conjecture is unreasonable. The more a reporter can personally observe, the more they can develop a richness of detail, and the less they have to worry about the risk inherent in judging the reliability of second-hand accounts.

The value of "being there" is not limited just to situations where literary scenes are unfolding before a reporter's eyes. "There" can refer to any number of places and situations that a reporter might encounter in the field. The more immersed they are in the world in which their story takes place, the more of an array of details they have access to, and the more diverse the possibilities will be for making sense of them, because the meaning of the information they receive from any particular source is interdependent with the meaning of the manifold of potential details that each particular source is embedded within. What a reporter considers "reasonable conjecture" depends on the work they do to make sense of the situations they're observing by fitting together the details of those situations into a coherent concept—a story.

The work of rendering literary elements from a reporter's experiences will be the focus of most of the remainder of this chapter. In examining this work, it's important to remember that the distinction between observation and other types of reporting, like interviewing or reading material records, is indeed schematic. For instance, in addition to the substance of a subject's words, an interview also provides a reporter with an opportunity to observe firsthand details about the person they're interviewing (such as their physical appearance, facial expressions, gestural quirks, and so on), and the way that person interacts with the setting where the interview takes place, and importantly, what a reporter learns from hearing someone talk is influenced by

what they see them do while they talk. Observation is part and parcel of a reporter's work of making sense of their reporting experiences in light of their competence with literature. But a reporter's observations are only fruitful in light of their own role in the situations they're observing—the labour they do to respond to and manipulate the objects and people in their environment willfully in pursuit of usable literary material. Whatever richness of detail or factual certainty their account manages to achieve depends on their ability to turn the manifold resources of every situation into the accountably verifiable literary material (scenes, quotes, facts) that their genre demands.

Rendering

My use of the term *render* is deliberate, and it's meant to highlight that the material a reporter gathers while reporting is not picked up passively from the environment but rather is a product of the various ways a reporter interacts with the environment to produce the material they need. To understand what it means to “render usable material,” consider the following excerpt of a General Social Survey (GSS) interview conducted for the Advanced Seminar on Cognitive Aspects of Survey Methodology in 1983:

Interviewer: First I would like to talk to you, Mrs. T, about some things people think about today. . . . First, the space exploration program. Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount.

Respondent: We live in a society of persons and they feel that progress has to be made. And due to the, ah, the values of, you know, going into other territories, ah, those who are in authority feel that they're doing fine but the average person no doubt probably has some thought about it because they know that people are still starving to death.

Interviewer: Well first do, do you think we're spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on the space exploration program.

Respondent: Based upon general conversations from persons, ah, it's ah, the common view is that they're spending maybe too much money.

Interviewer: Is that what you think?

Respondent: Well, yes, they're spending too much.

Interviewer: Too much.

Respondent: Yes. (Suchman and Jordan 1990, 235)

Because the GSS is a quantitative survey, this surveyor needed a response that could easily be coded into a number, in this case a simple ordinal variable. Mrs. T's initial response to the question was complex; it expressed a concern that the judgment of the space program's value is relative to different social positions, and even though an authority may consider it a sign of progress, a person starving to death may prefer that society's resources go to them first. But this response was clearly too nuanced for the needs of the survey, and the interviewer had to prod the respondent into providing an answer in the form the interviewer needed, first by reiterating the bounds of an acceptable response, and then by asking her to identify with the viewpoint she was attributing to people in general.

Like survey administrators, reporters are not just passive receptacles of the words an interviewee produces by their own volition. They, too, need responses to come in a particular form. As an example, here is Gay Talese, perhaps best known for his *Esquire* profiles of Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra in the 1960s, describing how he tries to get subjects to produce quotes in the right form:

If there's something interesting I'll return to the person the next day and say, for example, Joe, yesterday when we were talking about your father and how you remember

helping him lay bricks or driving in the truck when he was listening to the Chicago Cubs and that's how you became such a fan of Ron Santo or whatever—here's what I heard you say, or I don't know what you mean by this. Sometimes people enlarge upon what they said and you get a better quote than the one you missed. I once interviewed a prizefighter, Floyd Patterson, and I asked him, What's it like to be knocked out? What's it really like? In comic strips you have stars over the head. He started telling me and I started writing it down. This was for the magazine *Esquire*. And I went over it again and again and again, and I'm writing it this time in front of him, and I said, Now Floyd, when you're first knocked out you don't feel anything but then you look around the room and the ring and you see people under the ropes and through the ropes—finally I had this long, long quote, and in a way it was something that was almost co-authored between us. I was writing and he became a partner. (Williams 2011)

Here, in much the same way, the subject's original answer does not satisfy the reporter's needs, so the reporter must reiterate the question in various ways until the subject says something in the form the reporter wants. Now, not all reporters get this involved in their subjects' quotes, at least at the conversational level, and the degree of a reporter's intervention that's morally acceptable is a matter of considerable contention among literary journalists. But few journalists would hesitate to re-ask a question if they think the subject's second try at an answer might be more thoughtful or more articulate, and this kind of intervention, aimed at gaining a more thoughtful or articulate response, pervades the day-to-day work of reporting.

Conversational techniques like the ones used in these two examples are just a few of the resources a reporter leverages in their pursuit of usable material, and the goal in using these resources is always to render material in the “correct” form from the situation the reporter is a part of—which is to say, in a way that anticipates potential readers' expectations for the story in particular and the genre in general. This is not to say that the outcomes of these interventions are

necessarily distortions of the subject's thoughts or beliefs—whether or not they are will be determined first in fact-checking and finally when the subject reads the finished piece—but I do mean to highlight that quotes and other story elements are outcomes of a reporter's interventions rather than nuggets of gold that the reporter merely picks up from the streambed of the empirical world. Interviews are conversations that have effectively been instrumentalized by the reporter's actions; any deviations from a “normal” conversation that a reporter uses to render material are the means they use investigate reality, in the same way that a quantitative survey instrument deviates from a commonplace, free-ranging conversation with the aim of reliably producing quantifiable information. From this perspective, information is a product rendered from the particulars of a given interaction, whether between two or more people, or between a person and a material artifact such as a survey questionnaire or an archive record. Reporters have at their disposal their in-hand material and the features of the immediate environment—the setting of an interview, their recording tools, their prepared list of questions, their subjects—and by arranging these materials in various ways based on their judgment of what's appropriate or useful at the time, reporters can improve their chances of rendering usable material from their interactions.

Using the situation

One of the obvious ways that a reporter can set the stage for the production of usable material is to carefully select the location of any meeting or interview they have with a subject. The setting of an interview, or its position in a temporal sequence of interviews, is closely tied to the reporter's ability to render the material they need from that interaction.⁵

⁵What I'm describing here refers implicitly to an idea similar to what Charles Goodwin (2000) has called the *contextual configuration* of an interaction: the “particular, locally relevant array of semiotic fields that participants demonstrably orient to” the course of their interaction:

This is one reason reporters usually prefer to meet a subject fact-to-face, at least once, rather than interviewing them over the phone: reporters need the visual details of the subject's body language, details about the subject's usual physical settings—their home, their workplace, and their places of leisure—to puzzle out the meaning of their subjects' stories. They can use the setting of an interview strategically, if not by selecting a setting where the material environment will suggest avenues of conversation, then by continuously monitoring the setting for potential interactions with the environment.

Commonly, reporters will seek out settings that are as *naturalistic* as possible; they might prefer environments the subject would “naturally be in” (Green 2013a [Amy Wallace]), and they might avoid environments that are “denatured” (Ted Conover in Boynton 2007, 20). As Susan Orlean puts it in her book *Saturday Night* (1990), meeting a subject in a natural environment is “like studying an elephant romping around in the Ngorongoro Crater as opposed to studying an elephant carrying an advertising sandwich-board in front of a used-car lot in Miami” (xiii). A subject's account might be more meaningful if it's seen in context. Meeting a subject in their home or workplace gives the reporter a chance to absorb a great deal of information from the environment, and it may help an interview if the subject feels relaxed by the surroundings. Even within a subject's home, for much the same reason, many reporters will prefer the congenial atmosphere of the kitchen over the formality of the living room. Restaurants can be a “natural” location to have a conversation in many cases, especially since the restaurant is a relatively neutral space that can minimize any perceived imbalance between the reporter and subject, and

Context is not simply a set of features presupposed or invoked by a strip of talk, but is itself a dynamic, temporally unfolding process accomplished through the ongoing rearrangement of structures in the talk, participants' bodies, relevant artifacts, spaces, and features of the material surround that are the focus of the participants' scrutiny. Crucial to this process is the way in which the detailed structure of talk, as articulated through sequential organization, provides for the continuous updating and rearrangement of contexts for the production and interpretation of action. (1519)

in a restaurant setting, some reporters are frank about the advantage of alcohol in rousing a subject to speak candidly. Although they might not encourage drinking directly, most reporters will certainly go along if it feels appropriate, and take care to steward whatever information they receive. (This stewardship will be a topic of Chapter 5).

Any setting provides a reporter with props they can use to their advantage. In a subject's home or office, photographs, books, artworks, and other objects can serve as cues or segues into personal topics, and they can provide information a reporter can use to build a sense of rapport or familiarity. In any setting, a reporter almost always has their recording devices—their notebooks or recorders—and most reporters are keenly aware of the ways these devices can help or inhibit a subject's willingness to speak openly. Subjects who are wary of the police and other authority figures might be inhibited by a recorder if it reminds them of the power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee, and a reporter might have to use a notebook, or to record surreptitiously by running to the bathroom every so often, to minimize those associations. With other subjects, the presence of a recorder might encourage subjects to talk if it meets their expectation for the exchange. A recorder might reassure a subject that their words will be reported accurately, and some subjects will make their own recording to hold the reporter to that obligation. Some reporters might even embolden their subjects by giving them control of the recorder, so they can decide what gets recorded and what doesn't.

With or without a recorder, the reporter's apparent interest in what the subject is saying can have a lubricating effect. One reporter described to me a fairly common technique:

Part of the reason that I don't use a tape recorder is that I think that actually a notebook can play a really important prop. If I'm interviewing someone and I'm like, writing down everything that they said, and then they keep talking and I put my notebook down,

virtually any human being will experience the anxiety of like, wait, he was writing down what I said a minute ago but now he's not writing it down. Am I saying something stupid now? Do I need to be more interesting? Sometimes, that is very effective—if somebody is trying not to answer a question or is being evasive, if you stop writing it down they will feel pressure to open up more.

Silence can be a powerful source of the same kind of pressure. In normal conversation, any extended silence at a point where turns naturally transition between participants are a noticeable breach of etiquette, and it's usually incumbent upon both participants to make an effort to fill the silence one way or another; but when a reporter resists the temptation to speak, the subject's discomfort often compels them to conduct the repair on behalf of both of them.⁶ This technique is common enough that it has entered the lore of literary journalism, and multiple reporters described their use of this technique as a legacy of reporters like A.J. Liebling and Joan Didion. Silence can work for some reporters who don't have the natural affability that many reporters value in their personalities as a tool of disarmament, like this reporter, who reaps comparable dividends with awkwardness:

I'm very awkward and uncomfortable and kind of stiff a lot of the time, so I try not to talk, because I noticed that if they feel I'm uncomfortable, they will fill the silences by

⁶In the language of conversation analysis, transitions between *turns at talk* in a conversation occur at *transition-relevant places*, which are recognizable by members as points in the conversation where transitioning from one turn to another is permitted. If the previous speaker declines to select the next speaker, but no-one including the previous speaker self-selects for the next turn, the *gap* between speakers might extend into a *lapse*. Generally, transitions between turns are conducted with only a minimal gap, and lapses are to be avoided. By remaining silent at a transition-relevant place, the reporter's goal is to encourage the subject to self-select, or to resume their turn if they were speaking previously. "If a developing silence occurs at a transition-place, and is thus a (potential) gap, it may be ended by talk of the same party who was talking before it; so the 'gap' is transformed into a 'pause' (being now intra-turn). This is one way that 'gap' is minimized" (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974, 715).

talking and by trying to make me comfortable, and will say everything I need them to say.

But the technique is a risk, of course, and a reporter will consider it only if they judge it to be safe based on their subject's personality, their relative power, their prior behaviour, and the anticipated need for future interactions.

A list of questions, either physical or notional, is another resource a reporter has at hand during an interview. Not all reporters write down their questions ahead of time, but many, if not most, deliberate about some key questions as a way of giving the conversation some structure, addressing the topics the reporter judges are important to cover, and arming themselves with some backup in case the conversation falters. In preparing such a list, a reporter can deliberate about how a subject is likely to respond and organize their approach accordingly. Beginning with some easy or trivial questions might give the reporter a chance to observe the subject's personality, and the way they talk and respond to questions, which can be invaluable for deciding what lines of questioning they'll be likely to tolerate, or how questions ought to be framed to encourage a useful response. A rapport developed through easy conversation early on can put a subject in a better mood for the harder questions to come, and arranging them this way leaves the reporter with at least some material if the subject gets offended and ends the interview. The same is true of a series of interviews—using earlier conversations to build a relationship with the subject, to figure out their interests and idiosyncrasies and boundaries, all works in the service of setting the stage for inquiry in later interviews into topics a subject would hesitate to discuss with a stranger.

Presentation of self

Appearing to a subject as more than a stranger is a necessity in reporting many stories. The need for the kinds of details that will justify the comparison between literary journalism and the short story (“journalism as literature,” in the words of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies) often means that a reporter must nurture a sense of intimacy with their subjects—but at a greatly accelerated pace compared to an organic friendship. This requirement leads many reporters to describe the use of a sort of Goffman-esque persona, a “front-stage” self that expedites the development of such a relationship. Susan Orlean describes hers this way:

If you asked the people I write about to characterize me, I think they’d say I was a little younger than I am, and a little bit more shy than I am. A little more naive than I am. People sometimes have the impulse to mother me, which I don’t discourage. I don’t play dumb or helpless, but I try not to come off as slick and sophisticated. (Boynton 2007, 286)

The reference here is of course to Erving Goffman’s book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which concerns the way people manage other people’s impressions of them.

Regardless of the particular objective which an individual has in mind . . . it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. (2)

If a reporter can make an interview situation seem more like a chat with a friendly acquaintance rather than an interrogation, for example, a subject will almost certainly be more forthcoming with the information the reporter needs, and it will often be in a reporter's interest to speculate about how the subject perceives the situation for this reason. Adjusting one's front-stage presentation in various ways can be invaluable for prompting subjects to voluntarily supply various kinds of quotes.

Rather than lying outright to their subjects, which would clearly contravene the rules of full disclosure, most reporters cultivate this persona by selectively emphasizing or de-emphasizing aspects of their personality that suit the situations they find themselves in with their subjects. Some situations will require different emphases than others. Bill Finnegan, for example, describing the reporting he did for his book *Cold New World* (1998), a series of profiles of youth growing up in the difficult economic conditions of the late 1980s and early 1990s, noted that his strategy of quietly observing from the background, which worked well with a group of anti-racist skinheads, wasn't a viable option with their neo-Nazi opponents:

I knew I'd never get anything from them with the passive, hanging-out method that worked with the antiracists. The mood at their "headquarters" was totally different. A lot more aggression, a lot more anxiety about authority. So I became a really aggressive inter-viewer. I'd wear a coat and tie, always. Carry a briefcase. Kind of act like I owned the place. I wanted them to see me as an authority figure. I developed a routine. I'd walk in and order everybody out of the kitchen so that I could interview one kid, alone, at the kitchen table. And they'd usually get quite meek and mild. Everybody wanted to be interviewed. They'd tell the others to keep quiet. "Turn off that amp!" This was while somebody was probably down in the basement putting together pipe bombs. I'd bark my questions, beginning at the beginning. "Sit down! Okay, when were you born? Where did

you grow up? . . .” And I’d take down their stories on legal pads. It was kind of absurd, but usually it worked. (Boynton 2007, 87)

In the same way that Finnegan’s projection of authority was more or less useful depending on the circumstances, the depth of knowledge that a reporter projects may be useful to adjust with different subjects, depending on how a reporter perceives their expectations or their anticipated reactions. Appearing to be well-informed can be particularly useful with sophisticated subjects if it suggests how careful and nuanced a reporter’s account is likely to be, but it may be better to seem naive if it’s ignorance that prompts a subject to be forthcoming with information. Reporters will often use specific information from prior research as a nucleus for later lines of questioning, if not simply to jog a subject’s memory, then to elicit a different or more detailed version of the information the subject is providing—confronting a subject with information that contradicts what they’re saying is a common method of overcoming the boilerplate responses that many media-savvy subjects prepare. According to Tad Friend,

The pivot comes when the person you're writing about realizes, not always consciously, that you know a lot more about them than they thought you were going to know. And then they begin saying, "What Larry told you only makes sense if you understand these following three things," and suddenly they begin to enlist you, trying to tell you the full backdrop so you'll have the context necessary to understand why they did what they did. So they often go from not wanting to tell you too much to wanting you to know everything. (Haire 2008)

Other reporters might use an interview as an opportunity to “member check” their prior knowledge (e.g., Lincoln and Guba 1985), by throwing out anecdotes or hypotheses and inviting the subject to confirm, deny, or correct them as they see fit.

In using material from other sources, it's not necessarily important whether the material is right or wrong, as a wrong theory or fact can be just as useful in getting a subject to talk as a right one. In any case, a subject's tendency to correct or guide a reporter when they seem to be off track is a feature of commonplace conversation that many reporters use to their advantage. As long as there's a basic level of camaraderie between reporter and subject, many interviewees will find it difficult to resist helping if the reporter appears to be struggling or confused, and reporters might feign some confusion—"fumbling and stumbling awkwardly, as I often am, shuffling multiple pages of questions," as Ron Rosenbaum puts it (Boynton 2007, 333)—if they get the sense that a subject will attempt to rescue them. But reporters may also find that asking for help outright can be useful if it taps into a subject's sense of social obligation. For instance, a *New Yorker* editor explained to me a technique he learned from the magazine's media reporter, Ken Auletta:

He said that he would just pick up the phone, and he'll be like, "I'm here with my editor, there's just something that was bothering us, because here it says this, but on the other hand there's this, and how do the two things fit together? . . . There's an incoherence here that we're all struggling with; can you help us?" And it's quite hard for the other person to say, "No, that's just incoherent" . . . they can't be like, "Oh, there are no missing facts; the nonsensical position that you've just outlined is the correct one." So they're bound to sort of step in to help, and once they've done that, where do they stop?

Reporters may lean on this sense of social obligation by asking subjects for help even with the mechanics of writing, by seeking suggestions about structure or wording, or by explaining the features of the genre or the editorial process so a subject will be prompted to anticipate the reporter's need for certain kinds of detail. The request for help, in whatever form it takes, is not

merely a ruse—a reporter invariably does need the subject’s help—but the form of the entreaty must be keyed to the reporter’s sense of the subject’s likely response.

Many reporters describe the management of their personae as a matter of affirming their subjects’ desires for empathy, openness, and credulity by selectively volunteering or withholding information—including nonverbal signals—based on how it might influence a subject’s willingness to keep talking. This might take a positive form, where the reporter agrees with what the subject is saying, or a negative form, where the reporter refrains from disagreeing if revealing their real opinions might antagonize the subject. Ted Conover explains the latter approach:

I’ve got to say it’s one of the hardest things in journalism, keeping your opinions and your true thoughts to yourself long enough to hear anybody who disagrees with you express themselves fully, right? Isn’t that the job? You want this person to speak openly without fear of being judged. And if it’s a pro-life preacher in Kansas who entertains opinions that are contrary to my own, am I going to hide my own opinions so I can hear him out? Yes. And I think that’s what a good journalist has to do. (Ratliff 2013)

But withholding self-disclosures might be too passive a way of hastening the development of intimacy with some subjects, and rather than simply minimizing any differences of opinion or outlook, many reporters will try to highlight what they appear to have in common with their subjects in order to build rapport. By bringing up *truthful* self-disclosures that demonstrate common interests or experiences, a reporter can maintain a sense of naturalism in a relationship where some reciprocity seems necessary for building or maintaining the subject’s trust.

One advantage that literary journalists often highlight as a contrast with other forms of journalism is their ability to produce detailed, nuanced accounts of their subjects’ stories. One reporter told me,

I think a big and frequently fair criticism of journalism is that it oversimplifies and elides distinctions. A reporter compresses things and . . . fine discernments that mean a lot to the subject go out the window. An advantage I have in not being a daily journalist but being somebody with a longer deadline is I can take the time to try to fully understand the difference between the shades of meaning in what a person's going to tell me. And people tend to appreciate that.

As much as it may be a byproduct of the length of the stories and the pace of the publication cycle, a reporter's intense interest in a subject is another perception that can be useful to cultivate. Reporters will often respond positively to any of a subject's overtures, whether they're simply invitations to listen actively and attentively, or invitations to meet their family, sleep in the desert, or climb into the rainforest canopy. A reporter might even go along with a pantomime of an interview to ingratiate themselves to a powerful person hoping it might help mitigate future access problems, even if they don't particularly need the information that person might provide. Many journalists speculate that subjects respond positively to these gestures because it signals a level of interest in their lives that's much more pronounced than they're used to. According to the *New Yorker* reporter Larissa MacFarquhar, "After a while it becomes, I find, almost addictive for them—it is a rare situation when a person is so intensely interested in what you have to say" (2003).

Managing social distance

The intimacy of the relationship is a feature that reporters encourage because it's in a state of intimacy that subjects are most likely to reveal things about themselves that the reporter will be able to render into a "genuine" or "meaningful" portrayal of the subject in writing. Having a

naturalistic interaction with a subject will be impossible if the subject is self-conscious about speaking to a relative stranger about intimate topics, and reporters worry that readers are savvy enough to identify a quote that feels like a product of a synthetic interview rather than a genuine conversation. Ideally, a subject will forget that the reporter is a reporter, and just talk with them as though they're another close friend and confidante, and achieving this level of intimacy requires that the reporter actively monitor every situation for opportunities to close the social distance between themselves and their subjects, whether that means responding to overtures, establishing common ground, or avoiding antagonism. If a reporter's expressed characteristics arise from the reporter's genuine feelings about the subject, all the better.

The trouble is, the accelerated pace of a relationship that results from these kinds of impression management can lead to a variety of moral quandaries for a reporter. In many interviews, even a few days after a first meeting, conversation might quickly turn to probing personal questions about things very close to a subject's heart, with the unusual corollary that whatever the subject shares is liable to be broadcast to thousands or millions of people. Larissa MacFarquhar describes this paradox:

In many ways, when you interview them, it feels like a date in a very strange and sometimes creepy way. . . . I will sometimes spend five or six days non-stop in their company. That's a lot of time; you almost never do that with anybody. Most importantly, you are asking them the type of questions that are only socially acceptable to ask on a date or in an interview. You are asking them to really evaluate their life in a sense. You are asking them what horrendous mistakes they've made, what they regret, how they feel about their families, what their beliefs are, what they were like when they were young and how they've changed since then. Do they feel that they've abandoned their younger self? You are asking them really to examine themselves in a way that people don't usually

do when they are with each other. All of which makes for a very intense interaction.
(2003)

The work a reporter does to close the distance between themselves and their subjects so that these kinds of conversations will be possible tends to result in a relationship that's very asymmetrical, particularly if the reporter is very selective about the things they reveal about themselves. MacFarquhar goes on:

I've remained friends with most of the people I've written about. But the interesting thing is it's a very strange emotional dynamic—because there's this kind of therapeutic feel to our conversations. I'm not saying anything about myself, and they're saying everything about themselves. Almost everyone desperately wants to have lunch with me after and ask me about myself. It's a kind of taboo they want to breach. So we have our lunch at the end of our time together. I don't hide, I'm not coy, I answer whatever questions they have—but I can tell that they're never satisfied. And I think that it's because there's something about the interviewing dynamic. The magic is gone, the love affair is over. And they didn't know that until we had lunch together afterwards. And they realized I'm just an ordinary person. (2003)

Reporters cannot easily escape the knowledge that the material they managed to render from their interactions with their subjects and sources came as a result of the work they did to compel those sources to produce information in a particular form. There's a considerable disjunct between the reporter's desire to develop a sense of naturalism in their interactions with their subjects, and the artificiality of their means for doing so, and reporters are commonly aware of the oxymoronic nature of *cultivating* a naturalistic relationship because of how it plays out in the moral implications of their interactions.

The moral hazard of reporting means that reporters must constantly monitor the distance between themselves and their subjects so they can ensure they're getting as intimate as their need for material requires, but not so close that the subject is entrapped into saying something they will later regret because of its negative repercussions. This kind of reflexivity helps to ensure the apparent rule-consistency of a reporter's actions: When does the relationship get too close to be naturalistic rather than manipulative? One reporter told me about this dilemma in terms of the partnership a reporter develops with their subjects:

One of the advantages and perils of long-term reporting for longform journalism, is that, on the plus side your sources will relax and speak to you more naturally, right, without weighing their words. But the downside is that they can forget you're there not as their friend but as their chronicler. . . . So it's almost like when you become a longform reporter, basing stories on extended relationships, you become a custodian almost of somebody's dignity, and how you handle that I think is going to be one of the reader measures of your piece. Readers are going to say, was that fair? That doesn't mean it becomes incumbent upon you to portray all your subjects in a positive light, it just means you, the lowly freelance writer, suddenly have quite a bit of power over somebody, and I think savvy readers will pay attention to how you handled that power.

Reporters will manage some of this risk later on by thinking carefully about the stewardship of their subjects' contributions during the writing stage, which will be a topic of Chapter 5. But during the reporting, reporters sometimes have to remind their subjects to be concerned about the reporter's role as a "chronicler" so they can moderate their own self-presentation accordingly. While most reporters will try to have their recorder or notebook conspicuous as a constant reminder of their role, they may have to draw attention to it more explicitly by, for example, gesturing to the recorder, or asking for permission to record a quote, effectively renewing the

consent to having the conversation on the record—and breaking the illusion of friendship—in cases where the reporter feels the situation has crossed a line into deception or manipulation. “It’s a strange thing because it’s a source of power not to tell someone about yourself,” says MacFarquhar, “And it can be weirdly addictive. . . . Sometimes I do so [self-reveal] because the unbalance feels so grotesque that it feels almost inhumane.” Reminding the subject of the reportorial nature of the relationship shifts some of the responsibility for stewardship of the subject’s privacy back onto the subject, lessening the moral hazard for the reporter.

The risk of excessive intimacy is a two-way street—it’s just as possible for a reporter to become so enamoured of a subject that they forfeit their impartiality. Reporters are expected by their peers to remain fair and even-handed in their treatment of their subjects, and if they’re too fond of their subjects they can easily lose their ability to consider critical perspectives on them or the material they’ve provided; no one would want to hurt a friend’s feelings by writing about them in a critical or unflattering light, but for a reporter this is an occupational hazard. Relatedly, becoming too close to one’s subjects can also mean losing sight of the larger picture that any particular subject is a part of. Reporters are expected to balance the first-person perspective of a participant with the third-person perspective of an observer—the balance between emic and etic perspectives that I mentioned earlier—and reporters have to consider whether their search for intimacy is coming at the expense of a bigger picture. “You should be able to describe and engage, but not be so immersed in the story that you can’t stand back and help explain what’s going on,” the *New Yorker* reporter Evan Osnos says (2014).

Naturalism

The desire for naturalism makes for a strange bedfellow with a reporter's meticulous management of each interview situation in pursuit of useful, quotable material, because it appears to put commonplace reportorial practices at odds with the norm of objectivity (e.g., Schudson 1978; 2001; Ward 2015). At issue in the management of social distance is the risk, on one hand, that the reporter's perspective on their subjects will become too partial, too partisan for a fair portrayal of their lives, and the risk, on the other hand, that whatever portrayal they achieve will be skewed by a sort of observer effect because of the reporter's influence on the lives in question. In practice, though, there's no distance from which a reporter can gather the kinds of material they need while also eschewing any involvement. A truly impartial observer, who refrained from any interaction with their subjects, would be stripped of the means to gather the kinds of details needed for a genuine, vivid, substantial, or atmospheric piece. But a reporter's work to gather these kinds of detail make it tough for them to couch their work as a matter of merely recording the facts, when the facts they record are in many cases a *product* of their interventions.⁷

⁷In case this isn't clear, consider the first-person narrative pieces that exist on the personal-essay end of the genre spectrum. John Jeremiah Sullivan's *GQ* story "Upon This Rock" (January 24, 2004), for instance, recounts his experience renting an RV and camping with a group of teens at a Christian rock festival. In this kind of story, the idea of the reporter being an impartial observer might seem absurd, because the story is based on situations that the reporter himself cooked up:

In an ideal scenario—the ones that go well—you're planning situations that you won't have control over, you know? Almost setting up little laboratory experiments and inserting yourself into them. You include enough elements that you can feel pretty confident that, when they start jangling together, something's gonna happen. But, at a certain point, if anything interesting is gonna happen, it's gonna need to be out of your control. . . . You're engineering opportunities for these unpredictable things to happen. (Green 2014a)

This kind of story is not an open-and-shut failure of objectivity, however, as long as the reporter can justify the value of the manufactured scenes in illustrating or uncovering some kind of truth

While conventions of literary journalism can accommodate a reporter's role in a way that news journalism generally cannot—as in the use of first-person pronouns, or the use of the reporter as a character in her own story—literary reporters still have to grapple with their influence on the story to the extent that readers—including editors and other competent peers—will evaluate it in terms of the rules of practice that claims to objectivity conventionally demand. Considering the levels of intimacy that literary journalism often requires, the question for many reporters is not (and cannot be) how to *avoid* impacting the situations they're reporting, but rather how to *moderate* the degree of impact, how to judge what degrees of intervention might be justifiable, and how to make those justifications in ways that one's peers will be likely to accept—because, ideally, the rationale for the reporter's course of action will be evident in the gestalt that emerges from the written work itself: it will *seem* ethical to a competent reader.

The contention around making payments or providing other emoluments to one's subjects is a useful illustration of this point. As in academic social science, journalists worry about the impact that payments of any kind might have on the material a subject provides, which is all the more concerning when reporters are *studying down* (Nader 1972) and the economic disparity between themselves and their subjects is conspicuous. Taking a subject out for lunch, if they're destitute, can provide a powerful incentive for the subject to produce whatever it is they feel the reporter needs. But the rules about compensation are highly mercurial, and what's acceptable in one setting might be sinful in another. A hundred dollars spent on dinner at a nice restaurant might be an acceptable expense, but simply handing over a hundred-dollar bill almost certainly would not. "*The New Yorker* . . . has a rule against paying people for interviews," Calvin Trillin

about the natural state of affairs the reporter's story, as a whole, is depicting, in much the same way that *any* reporter has to be prepared to explain how their story as a whole serves to illustrate some kind of broader thematic insight.

points out, “although it is happy to pick up the check if somebody is being interviewed over lunch—even over lunch at a pretty nice restaurant” (Boynton 2007, 393). What’s the difference?

The difference, I would argue, is that the payment itself is not inherently moral or immoral, as the “rule” against payments would suggest. Instead, the morality of the payment emerges when a reporter’s competent peers consider how the payment was used to render material, and how that material was used to generate a coherent story. The payment is part of a slate of practices that a reporter’s competent peers can observe in their work, and conventional practices that appear to satisfy the notion of objectivity (and its correlates, fairness, detachment, independence, neutrality, and so on; see Ward 2015) are observably indicative of that notion because of how they make sense in the context of the story as a whole. A payment of a hundred dollars might be acceptable if the reporter can make it clear to her readers how repudiating the rule against payments was useful or even necessary for illustrating something about her case or her topic, in which case the payment becomes just one of the multitude of interventions that the reporter used to render the material for her naturalistic account; but in the absence of such a justification, whatever material she derived as a result of that payment becomes merely an artifact of her intervention. A reporter who achieves an objective account, in other words, does so by knowing the conventions and executing their work in such a way that they can justify it in terms of them.

By way of illustration, consider the case of Bill Finnegan, who encountered a salient moral quandary while reporting his book *Cold New World*, which began as an article for *The New Yorker* (“The Unwanted,” December 1, 1997):

Finnegan: I try to maintain some distance, but I don’t always succeed, especially when I’m writing about kids. When I was reporting *Cold New World*, I

came up with some ground rules. They were pretty arbitrary. The big one was that I would not intervene in the lives of my characters until after the magazine piece I was writing about them had appeared. My reporting after that was purely for the book, and I decide I could be more lenient then—that it would be my call whether to cross, in some emergency, the traditional line separating journalists from their subjects. Books are, after all, different from magazines. They're a less fixed form, and responsibility for their contents is far more concentrated with the author.

Boynton: In the middle of reporting *Cold New World* you paid for one of your characters (Juan) to take a trip to San Francisco in order to avoid a rival gang.

Finnegan: First, it was after the magazine article ran. Second, it was a real emergency because that gang had tried to kill him, and a drive-by shooting on his family's house, where a number of little kids were living, was almost certainly going to be next. So I panicked and gave Juan money to go to San Francisco. It's pretty hard to stand by passively when some terrible thing is about to happen to a kid you've gotten to know well—or to his parents or his little brothers or his nieces. I couldn't do it, anyway.
(Boynton 2007, 91)

Notable about this passage is the way Finnegan saw fit to translate his moral conscience into practice. While writing for the magazine, he was accountable very directly to a group of peers who would ultimately have to defend his decisions in terms of *The New Yorker's* adherence to conventional standards of objectivity. Under these standards, as far as they go, journalists must not intervene on the lives of their subjects, and such an intervention as sending Juan to San Francisco would not have been defensible. While writing for the book, though, his accountability

was more to his own moral conscience, which permitted him the leeway to rescue his subject from harm. (“Professors of journalistic ethics might object,” one reviewer later said (Hitt 1998).) Both projects involved an intervention in his subjects’ lives, but the degree of intervention that he considered *acceptable* depended on who he anticipated he would have to justify his actions before, and whether those actions could be justified in terms of the story he rendered as a result of them.

Among all of a reporter’s potential transgressions, direct payments are especially fraught with moral risk, but any number of subtler influences on the course of a subject’s life might be unavoidable if the reporter approaches any closer than complete detachment. A reporter coming into a subject’s life has to navigate their potential influences by balancing their obligations to their subjects against their obligations to their peers, both in terms of generic expectations (for literary details) and moral expectations (for objectivity). In reporting for the *Wired* story “No Exit,” Gideon Lewis-Kraus found himself caught between these obligations. As he explained to me, the executives of the tech startup he was covering

knew that they were going to be going into all of these meetings with investors with a *Wired* reporter with them, and they could say, “this is Gideon from *Wired*,” and immediately those investors were like, why is a *Wired* reporter with them? They must be doing something super interesting if *Wired* is covering them. Now, did they say to their investors, “Gideon is coming along to write about the day-to-day struggle of a representative startup?” Of course not. Did I think that they should say that? Of course not. Was I perfectly happy to be used by them in that case as a kind of prop? Sure. They were letting me spend five weeks with them and go into every single meeting. I had no problem with them being like, this is a *Wired* guy. Now, did my presence fundamentally change the course of that story? Who knows. It’s certainly possible that at the end of that story they got the money that they wanted because investors were like, you know what,

they had a *Wired* guy with them, they must be doing something really cool. Do I feel bad about that? No, of course not. Because do I think that the way that those investment decisions are made is chaotic and contingent and illogical anyway? Yes! So was having a *Wired* reporter around any different from one of them having a Harvard Business School connection to the investment guy? Not categorically, no. So do I think I made that story less representative by my presence as a prop in their lives? Absolutely not. Did it make me feel better about the story? Absolutely yes [laughs].

The moral calculus here is complex. Lewis-Kraus repaid the debt he accrued to his subjects for five weeks of unfettered access by serving willingly as a prop in their campaign for funding, but his role as a prop was also justified by the truth it illustrated about the world of venture capital: decisions play out in chaotic, contingent, and illogical ways, and whereas some people have *Wired* reporters with them, and others have Harvard connections, in neither case is the funding decision based only on merit. Like any reporter, Lewis-Kraus had a clear impact on his subjects' lives, but the influence was moderated (it was a fair exchange) and it was justifiable when viewed in the context of his finished story. In the same way, when Finnegan paid for Juan to go to San Francisco, he also considered a narrative justification:

I was saying, "Okay, Juan, you claim you're this footloose, individualist American, not bound by the ties of community, ethnicity, and class that your parents are, and that they believe in. So go out, hit the American road, prove it!" My first thought was to get him to safety, but I also saw it as a kind of narrative experiment. (Boynton 2007, 92)

A risky experiment to be sure, and an expensive one, but if the readers of his book failed to notice this point, at least the responsibility would be his alone.

The important point is this: reporting involves a variety of active interventions on a subject's life, and the material a reporter derives from those subjects is a product of the situations the reporter is a part of; in no case does a reporter achieve "actual" detachment from the subjects they're writing about while also producing enough substance for a publishable work. Objectivity (and its correlates, fairness, detachment, independence, neutrality, and so on) does not come from an *absence* of intervention, but from careful management of interventions in light of how the reporter anticipates that potential readers will judge them in terms of the way practices are conventionally rendered into material. These judgments are not made on individual actions, but on how particular actions fit together into a bigger picture that includes the written work that they yield. Some interventions might be unacceptable in one project but acceptable in another, and some unacceptable practices might be rendered acceptable within a particular project in conjunction with others that appear to justify them. Building an intimate friendship with a subject—on the surface a grave repudiation of impartiality—might be okay, in other words, if the reporter makes an effort to consider critical perspectives as part of the broader picture that relationship signifies.

Ideally, the terms in which a reporter thinks about their own work will effectively mirror the terms their peers use to understand those same actions. An account is unremarkable when a reporter performs the interventions the "right" way, by the rules, with sufficient attention to the way their peers appear to understand those rules, such that the work that went into producing it in just that particular form is effectively obscured. In such a case, the appearance of a shared set of rules is reified by the achieved consensus. When a reporter goes about the interventions the wrong way, by flouting conventions and erring in anticipating how their peers will make sense of them, suddenly it becomes obvious how much influence they had over the shape their material

took, and the genre's requisite objective orientation to the case, the target, and ultimately the story will go unmet.

Preparing material records

The material a reporter amasses in the course of their research has two closely related uses. It's the means by which the reporter builds the text of her story, and it's also the means by which that process can be examined by her peers. Material is not just for convenience; for a reporter's peers, it signifies how she translated her experiences in the field into text, the particulars of which are the basis for any judgment about the text's facticity. This means that a reporter's material has to be portable, like the sociologist Bruno Latour's *immutable mobiles*—"If you wish to go out of *your* way and come back heavily equipped so as to force others to go out of *their* ways, the main problem to solve is that of mobilization," he says. "You have to go and to come back *with* the 'things' if your moves are not to be wasted. . . . The 'things' you gathered and displaced have to be presentable all at once to those you want to convince" (1986, 7). For this reason, when reporters talk about material, they really are talking about physical things—cassette tapes, SD cards, notebooks, letters, newspaper clippings, photographs, file folders, boxes, cabinets, hard drives, faxes, microfiche, and any number of other things. When a draft is submitted for checking, the reporter must hand over all this material as a record of how they arrived at their draft's final form. The series of steps between the empirical world and the text—*translations*, in the terms of Latour's actor-network theory—have to be intelligible to the reporter's peers if they're going to be judged effectively by the standards of the literary journalism world.

The material the reporter provides is a trace of their work that editors and fact checkers can "read," by virtue of their competence with literature, to learn about the reporter's actions, in

the same way that a detective might read the tire marks at the scene of a car accident to figure out the car's speed and direction. But whereas a skid mark is an incidental trace of a car crash, a reporter produces and organizes material deliberately, knowing that their peers will ultimately have to make sense of it, using the same terms that the reporter herself used to determine the moral limits of her actions. There will inevitably be translations that are obscure or unexpected or strange to the reporter's peers—how did they get the subject to say *that*? Could the subject have remembered *that* detail? Are those two subjects really saying the *same thing*? The reporter has to anticipate these kinds of questions so their material record will make sense to their peers when the time comes to account for it.

Producing robust, intelligible records of one's work while also doing that work can be a difficult physical and cognitive challenge. Reporting is a fairly low-tech endeavour, involving mostly workaday technologies like notebooks, word-processors, pens, pencils, and audio recorders, but using them effectively in conjunction with the social work of reporting is a real skill. The tools a reporter chooses to use can have real consequences for the material it's possible to create with them. With longhand notes using pen and paper, it can be tough to keep pace with a subject's speech, which may force a reporter to write very selectively or to annoy their subjects with frequent requests for repetition. Shorthand notes might improve a reporter's pace, but they require training and practice, and they can be difficult to decipher if the notes are too selective, because of the ambiguity of the glyphs. An audio recorder can free a reporter from the physical challenge of notetaking, but it might also free them from the pressure they need to focus closely on a subject's words. Recorders are the sine qua non of capturing peculiar speech patterns, moreover, but is it worth the fear of them failing or breaking down? Typing directly into a

computer can improve a reporter's speed over handwritten notes—as long as the laptop is not too much of a social barrier.

These kinds of details really matter for a reporter's ability to manage the physical challenge of participating in social settings and recording them simultaneously. “That's the biggest stress for me, is figuring out note-taking,” one reporter told me. “It wasn't the most difficult thing, but it was the thing I stressed out the most about reporting—how do I take notes? How do I record? Just figuring out, how do I not make it awkward to bring out a recorder?” Making material often requires a balance between the need for accountability and the physical difficulty or social propriety of achieving it. A reporter's obligation to endear themselves to their subjects can lead to situations where recording might be difficult or impossible, but they still must make do if they wish to meet their obligation to their peers. The head of checking at *The New Yorker*, Peter Canby, describes such a situation:

When the interview is done, you put your notebook in your pocket, you put your pen away, you walk out to your car, you do whatever you do, and then the person stops you and says the most important thing of all. And you realize that their saying that at that moment has something to do with the fact that your pen is not in your hand and your notebook is put away, and you realize that if you pull out your notebook and pull out the pen it's going to break the spell and you will wreck this moment of revelation.

So what do you do? You spin the conversation as long as you can get. You get as much information as you can get, and you go back into your car or hotel room or your coffee shop and you write it down after the fact. And again, that's not exactly what the person said to you, but it's legitimate. This is the way reporting happens. (2012, 83)

Inevitably, the practical challenge of recording material works its way into the form of those material traces. As much as a reporter might like to have a record of every possible thing they

might ever need, to cover both the known scenarios and the unknown ones, it's always necessary to distill the material into a simpler form if their work is to be manageable, in the same way a map has to simplify the geography in order to be useful—and as we've seen, looking for and selecting *relevant* material is a large part of the work of reporting. This means that reporting a structurable story involves subjecting empirical instances to a series of simplifying translations. A summary of four of these translations will help to clarify this point.

First, reporters are constantly examining their field of view, as it were, for features they think will be relevant to their story. As I've indicated above, there are many good reasons why a reporter might speak with their subjects, sometimes at length, about things that are peripheral to the story itself, whether to negotiate for access, build rapport, or explore the conceptual space of the story; recordings of these talks might be superfluous. Because excessive amounts of material can be unwieldy, reporters have to cultivate the skill of recognizing when something is likely to be useful, so they can record only what they might need. Settings, dialogues, anecdotes, explanations, all have to be subjected to this filter. No matter how comprehensive it is between the time it's started and the time it's stopped, any recording registers only a fraction of the empirical space for this reason.

Second, recordings of any kind are limited in what they register. When taking notes by hand, with a laptop or a pen and paper, a reporter has to decide whether hums and haws, false starts, parenthetical remarks, and the other dregs of everyday conversation are worth recording. Jane Kramer, a journalist for *The New Yorker*, notes that

taking notes is a kind of editing process in itself. I write down only what I must, at some level, be hearing as important or notable. The conversation gets distilled into what I think of the person I'm listening to, as I'm listening. (Boynton 2007, 197)

Even if a reporter wants their notes to be comprehensive, the pace of the conversation might force them to write down only “keywords, key phrases, sentence fragments” (Canby 2012, 82). It may seem facile, moreover, to point out that audio recordings record only audio, but a subject’s words often convey only a part of their meaning, and reporters will often take notes concurrently of their subjects’ expressions, their gestures, and other observations as a supplement. When a recording is transcribed, as well, the same dross a reporter might filter out of a live conversation will inevitably be eliminated.

Third, reporters will commonly subject their most recent material to some kind of short-term processing. For some reporters, this means running through the notes from an interview while their memory is still fresh, so they can flesh out the meaning of shorthand or abbreviated notes, for example, or include information they failed to capture live. Other reporters might make a habit of refining their notes and observations by writing up their findings every day, so they can sift through the material and test its utility by putting it into prose. Some reporters do a similar kind of processing on their audio recordings, listening for nuances or remarks they might have missed in the flurry of the moment.

Fourth, on a longer time scale, material rendered must be organized so that specific items can be retrieved when they’re needed. Often this means sorting and filing the material topically, or chronologically, so that the location of any particular item is obvious or intuitive. Systems of organization are highly idiosyncratic for each reporter, and may be physical or electronic, but the following example, from Ken Auletta, is not atypical for a book-length project:

I create three digital files: a) what I call an index of all the materials I collect; b) a file of people I wish to interview or things I need to read; c) a file of questions to be asked of

each person to be interviewed. Of these files, the most vital for me is the index. For a long piece, the index can run to fifty single-spaced pages, and consists of a cross-reference system of each interview or document. I number each notebook and document, and make a headline in the index of what someone said that I might want to use, followed by, say (A, p.30), which to me means notebook A and page 30 of the pages I have numbered; documents get numbers (10, p.64); and books get Roman numerals (IV, p.290). I break it into subjects—possible Leads, Chronology, Bio, Observations, Themes, etc.—and place each entry in these categories. I try to index as I am reporting because it is so tedious, yet is so important that I don't want to have it back up and then possibly race over this process out of boredom. As I'm indexing I see that people are mentioned I should interview, that anecdotes or facts are relayed that I should confirm with others. I skip to the questions to be asked document and type in questions, and to the people to see document and add names. At the end of the reporting, I take several days to study the index, which I hope helps me climb above the trees. (Benkoil 2007)

Being able to quickly locate notes, quotes, clippings, and other material records related to any particular topic is imperative, not just later on, to demonstrate to a checker or any other reader how the reporter arrived at a decision about particular words in the text, but also as they go, to refresh their memory about anything they've seen or heard. The text's credibility comes from the imputed connection between the material and the original events, utterances, or observations they substitute for, because all of those links are there to be examined, at least in theory, by anyone who has the competence to interpret them, including the reporter herself. It's an awareness of this utility that prompts a reporter to take account of their reporting practice in this material form. Chris Jones, the *Esquire* writer mentioned earlier, describes his preparation for answering to his peers:

Throughout the process, one thing I was really mindful of was that some poor bastard was going to have to fact check this. I mean, talk about a nightmare! So I was really mindful of keeping track of everybody, taking pictures of everybody who I talked to. I had phone numbers and e-mails of everybody I talked to. The document I delivered to the fact checkers looked like the Yellow Pages. (Lupşa 2015)

Anticipating this duty forces a reporter to figure out how best to record any situation. If a subject is a high official making his own recording of an interview, or if the subject is evidently litigious, a reporter will be liable for any edits they make to the subject's utterances and it might be mandatory to record the audio. If a reporter knows they have a tendency to daydream during a conversation, they may take notes as a way of forcing themselves to pay attention; or conversely, if a reporter knows they'll struggle with the split frame of mind needed to converse while also taking notes, they might use a recorder to free themselves from that burden. If they've suffered from technical problems with a recorder in the past, they may have to compensate by using two recorders, or recording and taking notes simultaneously. Whatever the case may be, the reporter needs that material record if their account is to be accurate enough to meet the standards of the journalism world.

By putting the empirical world through this sort of wringer, to squeeze out only the relevant material records, the reporter ends up with a simplified geography that's better suited than the raw world for translation into prose. In its raw form, it's impossible for a reporter to see what there is, what the possibilities are, what is missing, what is redundant, and so on, but by distilling the material repeatedly into a compact, portable, material form, like Ken Auletta's index, the reporter makes it possible to see at a glance what they have, even if what they have covers a year of full-time reporting and fills several filing cabinets. In effect, the reporter's material provides them with all the advantages of what Latour called a *center of calculation*

(1987), where the entire space of the story is visible from a single location. Seeing this space at a glance, a reporter can compare, rearrange, generalize, and otherwise manipulate their findings without sacrificing the integrity of the links between the material and the reality it denotes. For Jon Krakauer, these links convene at his U-shaped desk:

When I sit down at my computer, in the crook of the U, I feel like I'm at the helm of a submarine. But instead of being surrounded by dials and sonar screens, I'm surrounded by stacks of notes, transcripts, file folders, and books, all at my fingertips. (Boynton 2007, 179)

As the writer remains aware that they will soon have to account for what they write in terms of these material traces, having them as a reference close at hand ensures the fidelity of the final product. Ultimately, it's in "what they have" that they finally observe the patterns that become the finished story's structure, not in the real world that "what they have" is taken to represent.

Deciding When to Stop

In theory, the process of reporting ends when a reporter's mental model of their story converges with the material they've gathered, and they feel confident they'll be able to construct a story consistent with their mental model out of that material. Because the process is open-ended, though, it would be easy enough for a reporter to just continue reporting forever, by indulging every doubt that their material is inadequate, or by continuously revising the structure they aim to achieve, and this means that in practice, chasing this kind of congruence will usually be a fool's errand. Consider this quote from Lawrence Weschler, a former *New Yorker* staff writer,

which recalls the distinction I made above between exploratory and specifying modes of reporting:

I understand about 95 percent of what is going on. But I know that if I stay there even one more day I'll get a bit of information that will completely shake my faith in anything I do know and I'll be back down to 5 percent confidence in what I know. And it would take me six months to get back to 95 percent—a different 95 percent. (Boynton 2007, 418)

A story's tendency to shift continuously through the reporting period, beyond what either the reporter or the assigning editor envisioned, is sometimes referred to using the project-management term *scope creep*. Anticipating a story about A, the reporter discovers that it will be impossible to write about A without also explaining B, and it turns out that explaining B necessarily involves C, and so on. Because each discovery leads to new discoveries, the goal the reporter is working toward is always in flux. Instead of stopping when they *achieve* their aspirational structure, reporters must make a judgment about when the material they have in hand is *similar enough* to the structure they envision that they can produce a story without sacrificing their obligations to their editors. Editors, after all, have their own obligations to worry about and they rely on reporters to help satisfy them. It's always these kinds of practical constraints—the amount of delay an editor will accommodate, or the amount of funding a reporter has to keep going—that force a reporter to cut off the process of iterating between structure and material. The reporter's accountability to their editor's expectations, both in terms of article-length and scheduling, serves as a check on the scope of a reporter's project and forces them to produce a draft—any draft—even if it fails to achieve full coherence with the platonic form they had in mind.

Weschler describes his sense for when to stop in terms of *certainty*; we could read into this that certainty is a matter of what he is confident that he knows, as well as a matter of how confident he is that the material he has in hand can produce a verifiable and literary account of what he knows. For some reporters, when it becomes impractical to make major revisions to their aspirational structure, judgments of certainty include the reporter's growing sense of familiarity with the entirety of the story's conceptual space—as the learning curve flattens, a reporter might find that they know more about the story than their subjects, and it might become harder and harder to think of questions that they don't already know how to answer. Other reporters describe certainty as a sensation that the plot elements they need are already in hand: looking at the material they have, they can visualize how to turn that material into a complete story without any holes that would suggest further avenues for reporting.

In either case, the tenuous state of maybe- or almost-being-done is often an uncomfortable one. A lot can still go wrong after a reporter submits their first draft—what pivotal revelations might be contained in that unknown five percent? This discomfort makes for a weak incentive to stop reporting as soon as it appears possible to do so. As long as they can afford to, it's often safer for a reporter to over-report as an insurance policy against any potential problems with the material already in hand, because the more material they have in hand, the more options there will be for constructing a story out of it. Reporters inevitably end up with lots of interesting material that never makes it into a draft because it's too tangential or too distracting; in many cases, these leftovers become the germs of future stories or are saved for book-length versions of article-length stories. (Unused material also provides a reporter with a means for defending themselves, at least in rare circumstances, if they happen to be held to account for their decisions by a reader; a critique may potentially be assuaged by what the

reporter and their editors knew but decided to leave out.) But few reporters feel that gathering this material was a waste of time, even if it gets consigned to the dustbin, because all the material they gather has the effect of improving their global perspective on the story and how its particular elements fit together as parts of a gestalt. Eli Saslow, for instance, describes the work it took to make sense of the byzantine real estate deals that were involved in Rumeal Robinson's con:

It took me a lot of research and several conversations with lawyers to understand the intricacies of this stuff, and much of it was too in the weeds to include in the story. But, like always in reporting, *I had to understand it fully to know which parts to include and leave out.* (Williams 2013b, emphasis added)

How can a reporter be sure that they understand something fully—that there are no “unknown unknowns”?⁸ It's this uncertainty that compels a reporter to keep going.

However unusual it is for a reporter to achieve a hundred percent certainty, either about what is known, or about what's possible to render in words, being a disciplined reporter means being able to reach a level of certainty that's reasonable considering limits to time and length—in other words, being able to cut themselves off when they have enough to fulfill the expectations of the project, rather than the expectations for the Platonic form, since doing the latter means chasing the ideal form as it continuously evolves. Having the discipline to cut oneself off independently is a high-water mark that's rarely achieved, though, and for many reporters, it's direct social pressure that provides a much-needed alternative to independent discipline: a reporter must not transgress whatever agreement they made with their editor that the piece be a certain length and that it be delivered within a certain time frame—at least not by too

⁸This is a reference to Errol Morris's work with Donald Rumsfeld; see Morris 2010.

much—if they wish to maintain a working relationship with that editor in the future, and there’s a certain amount of goodwill they expend every time they ask for a delay, or a length increase. Reporters usually have to keep open lines of communication with their editors so they can come to a mutual agreement about where their own level of certainty meets needs and expectations of their editor, especially if the scope of the story appears to be ballooning out of control. Extreme discrepancies between a reporter’s and an editor’s preferences for when to stop are rare, particularly because stories that seem likely to balloon out of control are usually filtered out of contention before they’re assigned—and I’ll elaborate upon an editor’s ability to manage risk on behalf of their magazine, by predicting a reporter’s ability to deliver a draft within their expectations, in Chapter 6.

From the perspective outlined here, a magazine feature might never be completely finished; it rarely meets the reporter’s expectations for what it could be, if only they had more time, space, and money to continue working. Roger Angell, a long-time sports writer for *The New Yorker*, puts it this way:

I’m constantly taking things out and moving them around. The big illusion for writers, I think, is once you publish something — once it’s in type, and in the magazine or in a book — you’re tempted to think it was always meant to be that way. There’s something just right about it. It’s just the last version, the last galley. You’re changing things all the time, right up to the last second. (Green 2014c)

Finishing the reporting phase, rather, is more like making a “dispatch,” as one reporter described it to me, “that breaks the loop of back and forth between reporting, researching, and writing.” Often the point at which the loop is broken feels somewhat arbitrary, and it’s not uncommon for reporters to look back on their published pieces and see points where they would have changed

the wording, the emphasis, or the organization, or points where different scenes or details could have been found to better illustrate their story's topic. Considering the practical constraints on a reporter, it can be very satisfying when they manage to render the material that matches perfectly with their story's aspirational form, as the *New Yorker* reporter David Grann points out:

I think every story has a sort of platonic ideal that I have in my mind. And I always try to get there and I rarely ever do. I always just feel like I always see the chips or the sentence that was slightly astray or the one interview I didn't get or the one detail that eluded me, and so every once in a while you feel like you get there, and that's pretty satisfying.
(Grann et al. 2013)

A reporter is never guaranteed this kind of reconciliation, and most projects fall somewhat short of it. But recall the editor's remark about Peter Hessler's story about the Cairo garbageman that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter—"Oh my god, this is sociology; it's also a short story. It succeeds on so many levels." Like Hessler's piece, or Grann's platonic ideal, the idea that a perfect story is possible, that you can approximate it, or even achieve it, through what Chris Jones calls the "blunt force" of reporting and the "correct" application of the rules, is a major resource that's available to a reporter for the purpose of solving their day-to-day problems. For a reporter in the field, all of the possible interventions I've described above—negotiating for access, presenting a particular persona, maneuvering through settings and conversations, exploring blind alleys—are options available to lay the groundwork for the construction of an ideal structure. As the following chapters will show, reporting is just the beginning stage of the process of construction, and significant changes to the ideal structure and the material will inevitably take place as the reporter and their peers work toward an agreement.

The goal of perfect congruence between material and platonic form might seem in some respects like a mirage, in the sense that it might be worth pursuing if there's a slim chance it might actually be a lake. It's unlike a mirage, though, in the sense that death from dehydration will not come to anyone who fails to catch up with it. Reporting is a social process, which unfolds over many weeks or months, and a story is not finished when or even if it meets a structural ideal. Rather, the standard is ultimately that the story has to be good enough to satisfy all the players involved—all of whom see it as their charge, at least once they've committed to an assignment, to *make* it good enough, come what may. Some stories may have to be killed if they cannot be reconciled to everyone's satisfaction, but killed stories are no more an exception to the normal course of events than stories that achieve the Platonic ideal. What's important is that the Platonic ideal, developed through the experience of each member with the canon of works that have met or approached such an achievement (at least in the view of each individual), orients each participant to the needs of any particular story at any given time, providing them with a means to work through trial and error toward a consensus.

CHAPTER 5: WRITING

Many reporters dread writing, and the shift from the reporting to the writing stage of a project can be rough. For most reporters, reporting is fun and exciting—every day is different, and reporters have the license to talk to people they wouldn't otherwise talk to, to ask questions they wouldn't otherwise be able to ask, to explore social worlds well beyond the bounds of their everyday lives. It's not uncommon for reporters to describe writing, by contrast, in terms that are downright apocalyptic. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, the *New Yorker* writer and Pulitzer Prize winner John McPhee gave the following account of the difficulty of getting started each day:

[Joan] Didion talks about being in her living room, and looking at the door to her study—just looking at that door gives her low dread. That's there every single day, in the day of a writer. . . . The routine produces. But each day, nevertheless, when you try to get started you have to transmogrify, transpose yourself; you have to go through some kind of change from being a normal human being, into becoming some kind of slave.

I simply don't want to break through that membrane. I'd do anything to avoid it. You have to get there and you don't want to go there because there's so much pressure and so much strain and you just want to stay on the outside and be yourself. And so the day is a constant struggle to get going. (Hessler 2010)

In fact, as sensational as it might seem, such a description of writing is actually quite typical.

Why the opprobrium toward one's livelihood?

There's a clue, I think, in how difficult writers⁹ often find it to explain how they come up with specific words and phrases. At the sentence level, at least, writing is a fairly inscrutable process. Writers talk about those who have a knack or a gift for producing beautiful turns of phrase, but even writers with the knack have a hard time explaining how those turns of phrase originated. Rather than being a rational process that writers can follow stepwise to fill in the blanks of their structure, writing can be more a matter of trying to record one's stream of consciousness—and often the best writing can originate from the most liminal states of mind. Here's John Jeremiah Sullivan making this point:

All of the good stuff happens in the doing, it seems like. The things you plan, the little moves you can't wait to spring on the reader, nine times out of ten those end up sounding potted, slightly stiff. There's a half-conscious state you enter when you're actually generating prose, and you are simply a better writer in that place. In fact it's the only place where you even are a writer. (Riley 2011)

Of course, turning toward one's stream of consciousness requires relinquishing control to the more tacit and subconscious faculties of the mind, an uncomfortable move for someone so invested in maintaining control of a reader's future response. For the most part, as I'll explain in this chapter, writing consists of auditioning turns of phrase as they're produced by these faculties, selecting the ones to be retained and rejecting the others. It's only in retrospect, once a phrase has already been produced and is available to be examined by the conscious mind, that the writer can recognize whether it is worth keeping or rejecting. Whatever cognitive mechanism is responsible for creating them in the first place cannot easily be examined, let alone engineered,

⁹Whereas the journalists in the last chapter were described in the context of their reporting as "reporters," the same journalists in this chapter, being concerned now with writing, will be called "writers."

and this means there's never a guarantee of success until such time as a writer actually achieves it. Like the director of a play sorting through actors at an audition, a writer may find that their draft is only as good as the phrases that show up, and they might easily get stuck making forced choices between a variety of bad options.

A great deal of the anxiety—what McPhee called the “pressure” of writing—inevitably has to do with the fact that a writer is accountable to their readers. As much as writing may be a solitary activity, it's also a form of communication, and it must be done with an eye to how future readers will make sense of it. Writing, for this reason, is a perspicuous example of that central interest of symbolic interactionism, that even solitary actions are carried out with respect to how other people will react to them. Recall the point made by Jack Katz that I cited earlier:

An individual is often, perhaps always interacting with others over time and space distances. Herbert Blumer . . . said as much, repeatedly and emphatically. Howard S. Becker in his work on art, Donald Roy in his research on the factory floor, and Marjorie DeVault on mothers' solitary work of feeding the family made it a point to show how what may seem to be solitary action is constructed through taking into account, at Time 1, how others will respond at Time 2. (2016, 697)

Writing fits cleanly into this category of actions. The question is, how exactly do writers anticipate how others will respond at Time 2? The problem is heightened considerably by the fact that a writer often has only the vaguest idea of who their readers are, and what their competencies will be. (I'll examine this problem more closely in Chapter 6.) Certainly, the readers with the most immediate influence on a writer's choices are their editors—the story editor, the top editors, the fact checkers, and the copy editors, people with whom the writer has a personal relationship. These are readers who have the competence to evaluate writing in terms of

the journalistic and literary commonplaces that loosely define the genre, and they're readers with considerable power to make or break the project, not to mention the reporter's career, as agents of the magazine and its interests. But more importantly, perhaps, they're the readers that the writer finds it easiest to identify with, because they're members of the same social world.

To anticipate how these readers will respond, a writer must try to embody their perspectives by thinking like competent readers cast from the same mold. If a writer can respond to the words they produce in the same way as their editor-peers, they'll be able to make the *correct* choices about which phrases to retain and which to reject. In the trial-and-error process of producing and evaluating words, the writer's ability to recognize and articulate textual problems *as a reader* is their basis for bringing the provisional text they produce into alignment with the conventions of their social world. This process clearly exemplifies George Herbert Mead's idea that people learn to evaluate their own actions by taking the perspective of a *generalized other*, an abstracted perspective on one's own actions that generalizes the attitude of a group or community toward a common undertaking. "It is in the form of the generalized other . . . that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking" (2015, 155)—not the actual community, of course, but the individual's perception of the community based on their experience witnessing the behaviour of others. What I referred to in Chapter 2 as *discursive cognition* (e.g., Vaisey 2009), Mead might argue, operates through a form of internalized conversation between the subjective and objective parts of the self, which—in this case—permits a writer to revise the words they produce in light of what they understand a *generalized reader* expects of them.

Gradually, over many iterations, the interaction between a writer's production of text and their evaluation of that text in terms of conventional beliefs about their genre aligns their handiwork with whatever mental image they possess of their social world's standards—at least to a degree. Failures to achieve this alignment, when they occur, give rise to the work of editing, which will be examined in detail in the next chapter. But most important for the matter at hand is the idea that being a writer is as much a matter of being an attentive and competent reader as it is a matter of being able to produce beautiful, incisive, or evocative turns of phrase off the top of one's head. Succumbing to the routine of back-and-forth between generating and evaluating phrases, as miserable as it may be, is a necessary evil for a writer who wishes to achieve a written work that they and their peers can agree is a successful realization of the genre's promises.

Reading Contextual Clues

Before going any further, it will be helpful to clarify the idea of structure that I introduced in the last chapter. There, I tended to refer to structure as a set of textual properties that are achieved by writing according to the rules of a genre—rules that a writer internalizes through intimate familiarity with a range of canonical literary works. I intend to shift focus here to emphasize that any discussion about “rules” of structure carries an implicit notion that devising a structure is a purposive action aimed at controlling the way a generalized reader makes sense of a text as they read it. A more detailed understanding of how structure works in the *practice* of reading will be a useful foundation for understanding how structure is achieved in writing, by virtue of the iterative changes that a clear conception of the generalized reader permits.

I highlighted repeatedly in the last chapter that structuration is an ongoing process that begins around the time a reporter first identifies an idea, and continues until shortly before publication. The writing stage of a project, even if it begins alongside the reporting, is an opportunity for the writer to test their aspirational structure by experimenting with different approaches to realizing it in a concrete form. Over the course of reporting, as the learning curve flattens and the reporter moves toward a more concrete mode of reporting, the structure they aspire to gradually comes into clearer focus. But no matter how clearly the reporter can envision it, the structure inevitably resists solidity—like most plans, even the best laid structural outlines oft go awry. Bill Finnegan describes this problem:

I'm always surprised when, for instance, a major section that I've carefully placed three-quarters of the way through my outline turns out to be just three lines. Where's the big rant I had in mind? Can it all really be said in just three lines? It seems so. Then I'll come to a tiny, marginal note I've scribbled on the outline, and it explodes into an *enormous* scene. Why couldn't I see that beforehand? (Boynton 2007, 96)

Considering a structure's instability, it might make more sense to think of a structure less as a plan and more as a component of a process through which a writer *discovers* the range of possibilities that their reporting made possible. In the same way that the aspirational structure served as a sensitizing concept for the reporter, directing his attention to aspects of the empirical world that appeared to be useful for his purposes, the structure devised by the writer works in much the same way, suggesting which parts need to be written and in which order. The structure's usefulness as an instrument of discovery depends on the way a writer conceives of the interactions between its component parts. Because particular scenes, dialogues, characters, and facts *collectively* produce in the reader a sense of a gestalt—an apparent underlying reality that

the text documents—any given element or group of elements, once written, can suggest that any other might be necessary or superfluous. In the course of discovering the emerging gestalt as they write, based on the way they experience the interactions between story elements as a reader of the words they’ve produced, the writer also develops the means to control the meaning of the gestalt that a general reader might be likely to glean from them.

The sociologist Eric Livingston, a scholar concerned with exploring the mundane practices of everyday activities, produced a book called *The Anthropology of Reading* that provides a useful foundation for thinking about how a writer might examine the interconnectedness of the elements in their stories. Livingston suggests that the practice of reading might be organized on the basis of what he calls *contextual clues*, which are features of the text that a reader can use as an indication of how they ought to be making sense of it. Consider the example of a “garden path” sentence that lures the reader into an incorrect reading, such as this one:

While she was sewing the sleeve fell off her lap.

On a first pass, a reader is likely to interpret the word *sleeve* as a direct object of the verb *sewing*, as components of the phrase, “she was sewing the sleeve”; but when the reader encounters the word *fell*, the intuitive parsing of the first phrase is quickly revealed to be wrong, and the sentence has to be re-read with *sleeve* as the subject of the verb *fell*. The juxtaposition of *sewing* and *the sleeve* on the first reading suggests one way to read the sentence, while the juxtaposition of *sleeve* and *fell* suggests a second way. In noticing these suggestions, Livingston says, “we are searching, in the sentence, for the material grounds for organizing our work of reading this

sentence.” Of course, the ambiguity is easily solved if a comma is inserted into the sentence, like so:

While she was sewing, the sleeve fell off her lap.

This is because the comma provides a contextual clue that informs the reader how the elements of the sentence ought to be understood in relation to one another. “The sentence without the comma is still seen to be ‘inherently’ troublesome,” Livingston goes on; “it is not written so as to provide adequate grounds for organizing the work of reading” (1995, 9).

Different genres of writing use these kinds of contextual clues differently depending on how badly the writer wants to regulate the reader’s understanding of the text. Livingston uses a comparison between a children’s story, a textbook, and a poem to illustrate this point. In a children’s story, there is an overabundance of contextual cues; phrases are redundant and repetitive, adjectives abound, and clear guidelines are provided about the temporality of events. “Children need overdetermination of ‘contextual clues’ because they are learning how to use them,” he says. “In that children are developing the societal skills of reading pace, eye fixation, and recognition, such clues need to be repeated for them to be clear” (12). With a textbook, on the other hand, readers are expected to have a prior competence with reading that would make such a surfeit of clues unnecessary. In a textbook, “the contextual clues are more finely articulated. The contextual clues are not redundant; they do not repeatedly elaborate the same basic descriptions of how the text should be read. If the ‘gestalt texture’ of the [children’s story] overdetermines the way that we should read its story, that of the [textbook] could be said to be adequate to its reading” (13). In a poem, as you might imagine, “there are plenty of contextual clues. . . . The clues, however, seem unrelated and do not ‘go’ anywhere. The poem’s contextual

clues underdetermine the way that it should be read” (13). Part of the work of becoming a competent reader of poetry is learning to make sense of contextual clues that seem at odds with each other, which is the same feature of poetry that makes it hard for readers without such competence to “get” what the point of it is. Ultimately, the idea of *contextual clues* highlights that reading is not merely a matter of deciphering the “direct correspondence between individual words and their meanings. [Rather,] it involves the interrelatedness of the contextual clues themselves” (13).

Having the practical competence to search the text for contextual clues with respect to the developing gestalt provides a writer with a basis for evaluating their text as they produce it. A writer has to be good at evaluating whether the text they’re producing provides *adequate* clues for how it ought to be read, and they use this evaluation to inform their work as they go along. What it is the writer wishes to “say” about their topic—what it is that the story is “about,” or what they want their case to “illustrate”—hinges on their ability to maintain control of the reader’s practice of reading. An underdetermination of contextual clues will threaten to leave the reader with too much agency to make up their own mind about what the writer is saying. As Richard Rhodes, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, describes it, “You can’t ever say *only* what you mean. You always say *more* as well. The purpose of editing is to localize and fix your meaning more precisely—for yourself first of all and then for your reader” (1995, 114). In cases where a writer fails to provide adequate clues for their readers, they don’t just risk failing to communicate whatever it is they wish to say, but they might also expose themselves to unanticipated criticisms, which are a danger to a writer’s credibility. “You don’t want people to write *their* stories into your work, to find patterns that aren’t there,” Rhodes goes on. “You want people to read *your* stories, to find the patterns you designed” (115).

An overdetermination of contextual clues, on the other hand, might make the piece too ham-handed, and can rob the reader of some of the pleasure of discovery if the text reads too much like a user manual. Explicit guideposts like nut grafts, time pegs, or composed transitions can help to eliminate ambiguity, but they also come at the cost of the kind of literary seamlessness that a lot of writers aspire to when they have short stories in mind as an archetype of the genre. In an interview with *Nieman Storyboard*, Justin Heckert complained, “I’m trying to write for how I would read a story, and I don’t need for someone to treat me like I’m dumb. . . . I hear people, even at conferences who are good at this, say I have to spell it out. Well fuck that” (Tullis 2015). Ideally, writers want the structure they select to feel “natural” and “organic,” and this means that the reader has to interpret the contextual clues correctly without the clues themselves being too conspicuous.

Achieving this kind of naturalism with difficult or unusual structures usually puts a greater onus on the writer to anticipate the reader’s sense-making so that any narrative leaps aren’t too great for the reader to make them without assistance—but not too safe that the reader feels annoyed by the writer’s supervision. And this kind of judgment is complicated by the problem of figuring out what kinds of people will likely end up reading the piece (a problem I’ll describe in more detail in a moment). How intelligent are they? How familiar are they with literature? Magazines might play it safe with new writers by encouraging them to stick with straightforward, chronological structures, lessening the need for explicit clues—as Dan Baum, a former *New Yorker* staff writer, quotes his editor John Bennet saying at the beginning of Baum’s tenure: “‘This is the *New Yorker*, so you can use any narrative structure you like,’ he said. ‘Just know that when I get it, I’m going to take it apart and make it all chronological’” (2009). For *New Yorker* writers, accountability to this kind of convention will obviously suggest certain

structures over others, at least until they've published enough classically structured pieces for editors to trust them with more unorthodox ones.

The reader's experience of the text falls within the writer's grasp through careful attention to these kinds of clues. Using them creatively means that a writer can leave certain things unsaid in such a way that a reader will come away with a clear sense of that unsaid thing being an integral part of what the writer was trying to communicate. As John McPhee puts it, "If your structure really makes sense, you can make some jumps and your reader is going to go right with you" (Hessler 2010). This is the principle behind the commonplace writing-textbook axiom, "show, don't tell"—rather than telling the reader what they're supposed to be thinking, the writer attempts to guide the reader through a series of elements that "stand for" or "illustrate" the points they want to get across, so that the reader comes away with the correct reading by virtue of their competence in making the right kind of sense out of the relationships between these elements. Whereas academic writers might be more likely to try to fix the meanings of words, by defining key terms explicitly and restating key points multiple times, literary journalists are more likely to leverage the lack of direct correspondence between words and meanings by considering how meaning of a particular element might be affected by placing it in different contexts. The idea is certainly not to leave it up to the reader to make of the text what they will, but rather to work deliberately to make conjunctions and sequences of story elements meaningful by considering what each can contribute to the understanding of another.¹⁰

¹⁰The principle I'm describing here has been observed by Harold Garfinkel under the guise of what he calls *the documentary method of interpretation*. "The method consists of treating an actual appearance as 'the document of,' as 'pointing to,' as 'standing on behalf of' a pre-supposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of 'what is known' about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other" (1967, 78).

As an example, Brook Kroeger, a journalist at the NYU school of journalism, described in a 2007 lecture how she edited a student's profile of the *Newsday* columnist Les Payne. The student had included a sentence saying that Payne had missed the birth of his son while he was in Turkey chasing a story about heroin producers who were supplying the American market, and she moved the sentence about his son into the lead. "I explained [to the student] how the image of a man who would miss the birth of his child for the sake of a story said reams about Les Payne as a journalist," Kroeger said. "I told him how it spoke to an ethos; how it made startlingly concrete in six words the way that the work of the journalist is a calling, not a craft and how it sometimes both demands and exacts personal sacrifice, large and small" (Kroeger 2007). While this may not be clear just from reading that particular sentence, reading about Payne's efforts in Turkey having already encountered that fact in the lead gives the later element a heightened gravity—that story must have been *really compelling* to him!

As in this example, a key component of structuration is considering how material presented early on will prepare a reader for the correct interpretation of later material, and how later material will be understood in light of the earlier material. According to the *New Yorker* writer Evan Osnos, "In every moment of the book [or article], the reader is, ideally, both reflecting back on the things that have already accumulated—the information, the analysis, the impressions, the sentiments—and also being set up for the things that will follow" (Osnos and Osnos 2014). Ideally, early parts of the story will provide just enough detail for the reader to correctly interpret the later parts, and no more. A detail used to introduce a character, such as Payne's parental sacrifice, ought to have some relevance to the character's role in the story, while details that don't have such relevance should be left out (or cut). By the time the reader reaches the kicker at the end of the piece, they ought to have accumulated just enough

knowledge for the kicker to make sense as a summary of “everything they need to know” about the story, as I noted in Chapter 4. In effect, as the reporter and Pulitzer laureate Jon Franklin points out, “you’re writing a program that will play in the reader’s brain” (Williams 2012a).

Attention paid to the arrangement of elements in this way provides a writer with a means for managing the *momentum* of a story as well as the meaning. I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 4 that one of the oft-cited advantages of literary journalism as a genre is the writer’s ability to distribute important information throughout the piece in such a way that the suspense or tension encourages a reader to continue reading all the way to the end. “Momentum” is the metaphorical force that the structure applies to the reader to propel them through the piece. It was described to me by one writer as a matter of “shutting the exit doors” to prevent readers from giving up and moving on to one of the multitude of activities competing for their attention: “The reader is always looking to put a magazine down. A reader’s dream is to stop reading whatever they’re [reading].”

Literary constructions of journalistic material—suspense, scene-by-scene narrative progression, dialogue, visual details, and so on—are widely considered instrumental for maintaining a reader’s attention, and writers have to attend carefully to the way that placement of certain elements within a sequence might be more or less likely to sustain it. In many pieces, this means introducing information early on that brings up questions in the reader’s mind, and then continuously postponing the resolution of those questions until the end. This technique has been described by the writer Paul Metcalf:

I learned long ago, from a very wise man, that “the only real work in creative endeavor is keeping things from falling together too soon.” A corollary to that notion would be that,

having held the structural elements apart as long as possible, when they do come together, let them really clang. (O'Brien 1981)

The clanging, aside from being a point where the foregoing material finally “makes sense,” is usually described as some sort of emotional payoff or catharsis that makes the postponement feel worthwhile. The writer’s ability to invoke an emotional revelation of some kind in a reader was described by T. S. Eliot using the concept of an *objective correlative*: “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events that shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (1920). It’s through a “skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions,” Eliot argues, that particular story elements have an emotional impact, and to evoke the correct emotion through such a chain of objects or events, the writer has to carefully consider the cues a reader is likely to use to draw links between the story elements. While the lead ought to have some emotional impact to draw the reader in, for instance, it cannot have so much emotional impact that there’s nothing to build toward. But withholding information must be done carefully, to mitigate the risk that the reader will be turned off by the delay, and many writers describe the importance of inspiring trust early on that the information that’s being withheld really will be revealed eventually, and that the delay will feel worthwhile *because* of its emotional impact. Similarly, if something distasteful or unpleasant occurs in the narrative, the writer must consider where and how to insert it so the reader won’t be alienated or offended; or, if there’s a lot of material that’s expository or “merely” educational, the writer must give the reader a reason to push through to the gratification that can be found on the other side.

These are some of the imperatives of structuration that a writer uses to navigate through the process of writing. Achieving a structure that appears “natural,” without too many conspicuous signposts, almost always requires the writer to think carefully about how different

organizational schemes might make sense to a competent reader before trying to realize them, and to continuously refer back to the emerging gestalt as they go along, to identify what needs to be written to achieve the gestalt they want, and to ensure that the text they're producing contributes to a gestalt in an effective way, even as it evolves. Whatever structure a writer envisions at the beginning will almost certainly be wrong, but it will provide some guidelines for the writer to figure out how to organize their day-to-day work. At any given point in the process, a section that the structure suggests can be tackled next, as an insular component, and then read in conjunction with the rest of the draft to generate further suggestions. John McPhee, a veteran of structuration thanks to his work as a Princeton writing professor, suggests that "structure is not a template. It's not a cookie cutter. It's something that arises organically from the material once you have it" (Hessler 2010). A writer's attention to structural possibilities during the reporting phase, and their competence as a reader, allows them to recognize "natural" structures in the material they've gathered. Eventually, through a routine of alternation between local work on particular elements and global consideration of how those elements work in concert, the structure evolves into a form that makes sense to the writer as a true account of the case they're depicting.

Structuring in Practice

The theory of contextual clues that I described in the last section is the basis for the practical work of devising and realizing a concrete structure in a draft. This process, like most aspects of reporting and writing, is highly variable from one writer to the next, usually based on a life-long effort, extending back at least to one's high-school English classes, to figure out how to make writing more programmatic and less excruciating. Even the same writer might experiment with different practical techniques from one project to the next, depending on what seemed to work

for them last time, what their material seems to suggest as a reasonable course of action, and the way they feel about their material and the task of writing it up. Nonetheless, it's possible to generalize, to a limited extent, about how writers typically work their structure out.

Most writers will conduct some kind of general re-appraisal of their material before beginning to write, with the goal of identifying, or rediscovering, the components of their material record that they consider to be the most crucial or meaningful. (This is akin to what qualitative social scientists often do under the rubric of *first cycle* coding, e.g., Saldana 2009.) Often the re-appraisal consists of taking account of one's impressions of the material, and it is not usually guided by any kind of formal analytic principles—many writers describe it as a matter of looking for quotes, scenes, facts, and other tidbits of material that are the most interesting, promising, important, conspicuous, or useful; they might look for items that “resonate,” that “stand out,” or that reappear multiple times. Elements that jump out during this kind of survey may sometimes be the same ones that the reporter recognized in the field as pivotal moments, but in many cases, seeing the material with fresh eyes, or as an ensemble, or in light of the most recent sense of the gestalt, can lead to the discovery of material that did not initially appear interesting or relevant. For some writers, this might be the first time that a clear sense of the story's main themes, or the narrative thread that links the elements together, becomes apparent.

Depending on the form their material takes and the writer's preferred mode of writing, writers will often use stars, arrows, highlighters, tab stickers, or bold-faced fonts to mark the location of the elements they wish to use. They may jot down notes about ideas that come to them as they explore the material, whether or not they refer back to these notes later when writing or working out a formal outline. Some writers may forgo any kind of notation, preferring

to rely on their memory as a “sifter of what’s interesting from what’s not interesting,” as one writer described it to me. Some writers generate a very rough first draft, something Calvin Trillin calls the “Vomit Out” (Boynton 2007, 396), that is done without reference to any material records, so they can identify which elements their subconscious mind considers valuable to include. With the key events, characters, themes, and other story elements in mind, the writer can begin to sort quotes, facts, and other material elements into categories, using whatever practical strategies they personally find useful. This might be as simple as copy-and-pasting some key quotes into a series of Word documents, or it might be as complex as something like Ken Auletta’s “index,” described in the last chapter, which cross-references every quote or passage in the collection of material with a general topic or theme. In effect, reviewing the material in this way helps the writer to develop a heightened sense of intimacy with their material, to such a degree that they can begin to visualize the piece as a whole much more clearly than they could while the act of reporting was distracting them with new discoveries. At the same time, it also gives them a practical method for locating any fact or quote they might have in mind if it’s necessary to account for the source of it, allowing them to preserve the integrity of the chains of reference that connect their material to the empirical world.

This kind of review process lays the groundwork for the real work of structuration, the process of ordering the key scenes or quotes or facts in light of the projected gestalt—the overall message that the story illustrates about the particular case—that the writer wishes to have readers come away with on the basis of a correct reading of the contextual clues. After getting to a point where the writer is very familiar with “what they have,” they can consider each of the selected elements in light of all the others, in terms of how juxtapositions and sequential arrangements of these elements might produce particular experiences in the reader. Ira Glass, for example, talking

about how he structures stories for *This American Life*, says, “I find that the important first step to writing anything or editing anything . . . Is just getting the possible building blocks of the story into your head so you can start thinking about how to manipulate it and cut it and move it” (Orin 2014). In other words, once the key building blocks have been identified, the writer must play around with the order of those blocks to discover which order might permit an organic-seeming ensemble that aligns as closely as possible with the aspirations the writer developed as they identified the most important components.

Many writers treat the key scenes, facts, or quotes they identified during the initial survey of their material as nuclei that they can use to structure the rest of it. Once they have elements in hand that they know must be prominent in their piece, for whatever reason, they can consider the other elements in terms of natural relationships or affinities with the initial, mandatory one, or ones, based on the kinds of considerations I outlined in the last section. Depending on the writer and the complexity of their piece, some writers will simply begin writing from one of the mandatory components they’ve identified, as the *GQ* writer Michael Paterniti describes: “I’m always amazed that when you start writing, the words begin to gather around certain things,” he says, “and when I just allow that to happen, it begins to cohere; it begins to actually pick up momentum” (Riley 2015). Other writers begin a more deliberate process of devising a formal outline based on the same principle.

The nucleus for many writers is the lead, which carries an unusually important burden among all the story elements in establishing the foundation of the gestalt the reader is expected to glean from the story as a whole. A good lead telegraphs to the reader a lot of preliminary information in a short space—it introduces facts that the reader needs to understand upcoming scenes; it introduces key themes and characters; it explains what the story will be about; it sets

the tone of the piece; it encourages a sense of empathy with certain characters or establishes the value or significance of the case; it establishes trust in the writer; it piques the reader's interest enough to convince them it will be worthwhile to keep reading. As one writer explained to me, identifying a lead that hits most or all of these notes can provide "a really solid foundation on which you can build something really big, and it won't shift."

Other writers (or the same writers working on different projects) might identify an ending, or kicker, that serves as the nucleus around which they build their structure. An ending, ideally, realizes and concludes all of the promises set up by the lead; it ties all of the foregoing elements together, resolves the suspense built up over the course of the story, or provides the reader with a "grand payoff" (Williams 2013a). To achieve the kind of emotional payoff they aspire to, the writer can use the kicker as a goal of sorts that they can work toward as they arrange and write the foregoing sections; for some writers, the ending is the "lodestar" (Jane Kramer in Boynton 2007, 200) that keeps them on track.

Writers often develop a preference for using the lead or the ending as their nucleating element, but depending on the nature of the story, a scene that appears to belong somewhere in the middle can serve just as well as a nucleus if it feels imperative to include. Sometimes a writer will simply have a clear idea of how to render one particular element in prose, and they'll begin with that element just to develop a sense of momentum, as Michael Paterniti described.

Having selected the imperative elements, most writers render their key building blocks into a material form that can be manipulated by hand to test out different arrangements. This usually works like an index of the important parts of the piece that allows the writer to visualize how the individual parts relate to the whole. Depending on the complexity of the piece, this may mean simply creating a rough outline on a piece of paper, where each scene or section is

represented by a line—in Ira Glass’s notation, for example (fig. 2), elements appear as short summary statements: “A - he describes the old house, B - what it was like the moment he came home, C - his sister warned him, etc.” (Orin 2014).

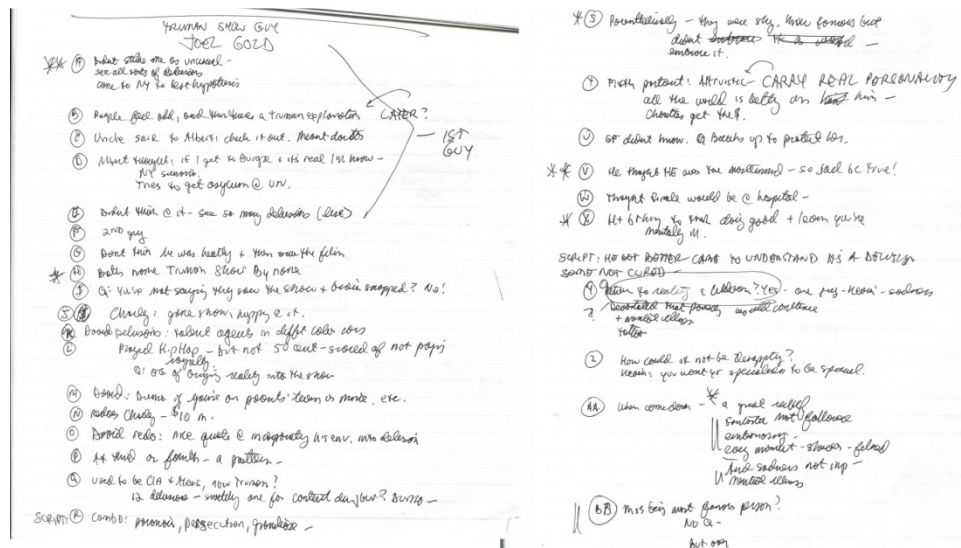


Figure 3: Ira Glass's show notes from *This American Life* (Orin 2014)

Other writers, particularly for book-length pieces, will use outlining systems that are larger and more interactive. John McPhee creates index cards with code words that refer to scenes, topics, or themes, and lays them out on a table to arrange and rearrange them (2013). William Langewiesche begins his outlines on letter-sized pieces of paper affixed to the wall, then staples on additional sheets—upwards or sideways if necessary—as the outline becomes more elaborate (Boynton 2007, 221). Bill Finnegan, for one book, made an eight-by-ten-foot wall hanging out of brown butcher paper, and stood on a chair to make modifications (Boynton 2007, 96). Gay Talese affixes styrofoam panels to his office wall to pin up sheets of paper or note cards that index elements of his story, and at one point in his career he would look at the outline through binoculars from the other side of the room to alternate between holistic and particular

perspectives (Boynton 2007, 374). Nowadays, software tools like Scrivener allow writers to perform similar manipulations on their computer screens.

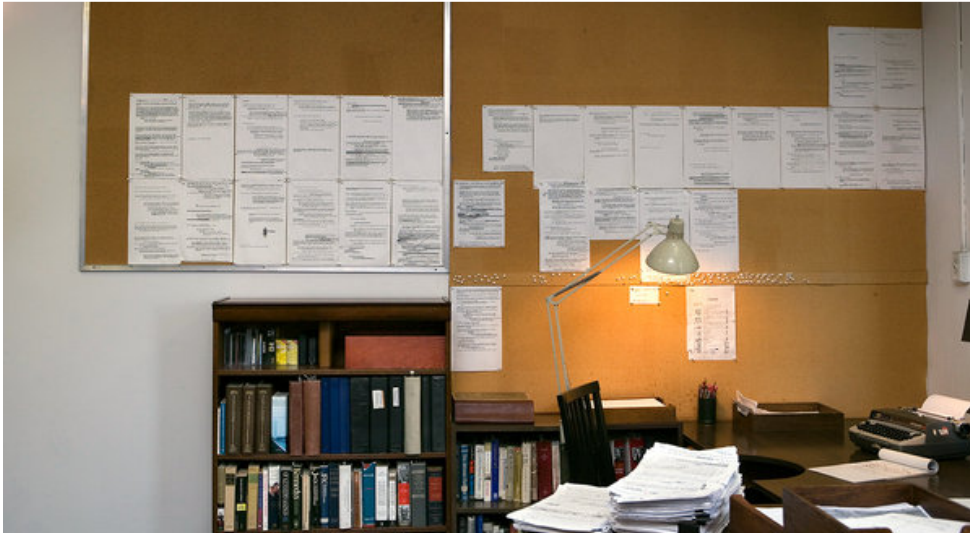


Figure 4: Robert Caro's outline for his multi-volume book project *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (Fougeron 2012)

Whatever system a writer uses, the key is that it permits them to see the entire piece at a glance, and to physically rearrange the component elements in various ways so that they can anticipate how different arrangements might produce in a reader different impressions of the piece as a whole. I referred to the writer's office as a *center of calculation* at the end of the last chapter, and in the work of outlining it's possible to see the "calculation" taking place. The individual lines in an outline are highly simplified translations of real-world objects and events, and the links between those lines and the objects and events they represent are available to be reconstructed, if necessary, out of the writer's material. But it's only in their simplified form that it's possible for the writer to see the patterns and connections that they need to render the objects and events in a literary structure. The process of discovery that began in the field as the reporter gathered their material continues through this structuration process, insofar as the experimental

arrangements of story elements reveal to the writer what it's possible for their story to "say," or what it's possible for their story to be "about," without compromising the links between their story elements and the real-world phenomena they're based on.

The center of calculation, linked to the real world by chains of reference—where each link is a trace of some social activity—allows for the strange inversion that Bruno Latour observes where the researcher is able to make discoveries about reality by examining an interior world they've created out of it. "Knowledge does not reflect a real external world that it resembles via mimesis," he says, "but rather a real interior world, the coherence and continuity of which it helps to ensure" (1999). The exploration of the material in this way involves the writer cashing in on the investments they made in the field. Although the links between the material and the real world may be unbroken, at least for all practical purposes, any patterns or coherences the writer discovers in their material inevitably emerge through the work they did in the field to render their empirical experiences into a collection of portable, purpose-built traces.¹¹

Any outline becomes a practical tool for a writer because it suggests courses of action. An outline with ten sections means the writer has a choice of ten items to focus on as their next step, and in writing whatever section they choose, they can temporarily put the overarching gestalt out of their mind, and free themselves for a while from the impossible range of possibilities that the piece as a whole might present to them. After completing a section, they can re-examine the story as a whole to determine whether or not they're on track, or what revisions they need to make to their outline so that the sections they've written make sense. As Geoff Dyer

¹¹ It bears repeating that the writer's structural possibilities are only constrained to the extent that they're unable to return to the field to do more reporting. It's not uncommon for writers to stop reporting too early to achieve a workable structure out of their material, and they will often seek out additional information *after* they've started writing, if not independently, then on the advice of their editors.

states bluntly, the outline—even if it changes from moment to moment—breaks down the vast, open-ended task of writing a book or article into a more mechanical, step-by-step process: “It’s way more difficult to structure things without the kind of scaffolding provided by chapters,” he says. “Any moron can write a book with chapters” (Specktor 2013). By continuously iterating between a particular element and the synthesis of the elements into a whole, leveraging their sense for what works in literature to identify acceptable arrangements and sequences, the writer eventually comes to reconcile the empirical world with their need to be accountable to their peers and the rest of their readers.

Considering Readers

The need to consider one’s readers affects much more than just the piece’s structure. In most cases, anticipating a reader’s response means spending a great deal of time theorizing about how a reader might interpret various formulations of material, and in doing so, a writer has to consider not just the public, but also their editors, the rest of their peers that make up the social world they’re a part of, and the subjects who appear as characters in the story or key sources of material the story is based upon.

Retrospectively, writers commonly use their readers’ responses as a way of justifying the decisions they’ve made, and I’ll outline some of these justifications in a moment. But when I asked writers directly if they write with a particular reader in mind, they often had a hard time answering, as though the idea had not yet occurred to them. Some indicated that they do write with a specific reader in mind if the topic they’re working on allows them to speak to a clear demographic, like gun owners, or Christians, to whom they would like to communicate a message, or with whom they would like to participate in a dialogue. More commonly, they cited

their spouses or their editors as analogues of an intelligent and attentive readership. Rarely did anyone indicate that they actually kept in mind the expectations of members of the public while writing, even if they later went on to use the idea of a generalized reader as an explanation for some of their decisions. In fact, writers were more likely to refer to the downsides of trying to think of a specific reader while writing, noting that doing so would tend to exacerbate their self-criticism, and hence their anxiety, in a way that would be “subtly corrosive” to their productivity (e.g., Grann et al. 2013). John Jeremiah Sullivan noted, as an example, that some of his early stories suffered from this kind of self-consciousness about readership: “I’d tried to write in a way that didn’t come naturally to me . . . and this probably came from over-anticipating the readership, worrying about what ‘a *GQ* piece’ was, or a glossy-magazine piece in general” (Riley 2011).

A few writers indicated that they only consider a reader while writing to the extent that the reader’s expectations are “implicit” or “internalized,” and that this ultimately means that the readers they’re most responsive to are themselves. It’s “your own sense of what excites you in the story,” one editor told me. As I’ll explain in more detail in a moment, writers try to align their text with their readers’ expectations by attending carefully to their own responses as competent readers, and by projecting their experience as a reader onto others with more or less similar competencies, they can theorize accurately enough about how other people might respond to the text they produce. This kind of theorizing allows them to anticipate potential criticisms and incorporate appropriate fixes into the text, but it also prepares them with some conceptual resources for talking about their text with their peers, so that they can trade theories about readers’ likely responses and work out changes collaboratively that might help to fix the

writer's intended meaning in the form the story ultimately takes. In these kinds of interactions, the idea of a generalized reader is indispensable for talking about how the text "works."

I've stated a few times now that identifying how features of the text might help or inhibit the reader's engagement is often an abiding concern. Writers often perceive their work to be in competition with other media vying for the reader's attention, and they worry that anything confusing, boring, or otherwise off-putting might prompt a reader to give up reading. (Joan Didion, for her part, reportedly aims to make her pieces so compelling that they'll be read in one sitting (Als 2006).) In addition to considering how the order of story elements might prompt a reader to keep reading, writers might also consider using unexpected vocabulary or shifts in rhetorical mode or register to keep a reader from becoming bored; they might consider how to maintain the "speed" or the "momentum" of the story by avoiding tangents, asides, or back-stories for characters who don't require it; and they might try to identify any elements that might appear too effortful for a reader to abide—this can include being too technical in explaining complex ideas, including too many named characters that a reader will have to keep straight, providing superfluous details, making rhetorical shifts that are too unsubtle, and many other things.

Writers will often try to anticipate how their writing might create in the reader a sense of the author as well, including their personality, their honesty, and their authority. Writers often consider how the decisions they're making are likely to cultivate a sense of their own trustworthiness: William Langewiesche points out that "it is crucial to establish that trust by never tricking the reader, never playing cute, never cajoling, showing off, or wasting the reader's time" (Boynton 2007, 223). Exhibiting fairness toward one's subjects—by showing that they were allowed to respond to negative criticisms from other subjects, for example—is a

conventional way of portraying the writer as unbiased. A trustworthy writer might be able to leverage their authority, in some cases, to build support for claims that might make a reader suspicious, while in other cases it might be more desirable to downplay the narrator's authority if doing so helps the reader to empathize with the reporter's experience of learning about the case; the *New Yorker* writer Roger Angell, for instance, claims, "I don't want to put the reader off by seeming to know more than he does" (Green 2014c). Being forthright about the writer's own perceptions of the situations they found themselves in as a reporter, by being open, for instance, about their fear or confusion, can help render the writer appear sympathetic to a potential reader. But at the same time, writers often express a desire to step aside altogether and let the story's characters "speak for themselves" by relying heavily on quotes and dialogue, the better to preserve the writer's appearance as a mere conduit rather than an outright authority.

The writer's authority is often a point of contention in debates about the propriety of first-person pronouns in journalistic writing. Some writers express a concern that using the first person can break the illusion or interrupt a reader's immersive state, like a microphone coming into a film shot. Some disavow the use of the first-person on the grounds that third-person writing is more objective and signals greater journalistic legitimacy, in part because it tempers the appearance of self-inflation or advocacy. Other writers argue, in contrast, that first-person writing can be more honest or transparent because it clarifies how the material in the story was gathered, especially in cases where the reporter's presence obviously made a difference in the situation the writer is describing. "I think it would be much easier for the reader to understand what was going on," one writer told me, "if the person who was mediating the whole thing made it clear that's what he was doing." Anticipating the readership matters in this kind of debate as long as journalistic purists and literary critics are among the audience.

As I hinted earlier, a writer's ability to specify certain characteristics of a generalized reader becomes especially relevant with respect to the "reading level" the writer aims to achieve. Readability, of course, depends on a reader's relative intelligence, erudition, vocabulary, and achieved literary competence, and writers often worry about the potential that their use of certain words or literary devices might narrow the range of readers interested in finishing their pieces. On one hand, writers often aim to make their story as easy to read as possible for as wide an audience as possible, without relying on readers having a lot of specialized knowledge. "A book has to work as a book for someone who just isn't going to pick up on all these clever things you think you're doing," the novelist Toni Morrison says (MacFarquhar 1994). At the same time, writers also worry that they might be perceived as "dumbing down" or condescending to their readers if their writing is overly simple or explanatory. Striking this balance is a concern with any particular choice of vocabulary. For example, Sebastian Junger, who wrote *The Perfect Storm*, says that using jargon can be okay if it's used to create a sense of atmosphere, as in his description of the Andrea Gail as a "rake-stem, hard-chined, western-rig boat," but if the vocabulary is necessary for the reader to understand a character or plot point, it has to be explained: "If this particular quality to her hull design had an effect on her sinking, I would explain what it is," he says (Green 2013b). As I indicated above, a writer's sense of their reader's intelligence or knowledgeability can influence the amount of interpretive flexibility they cede to their readers. John McPhee explains:

I'm trying to lay this thing out for the reader. Not to take the reader and rub his nose in it, and say, This is how you should think. I want the reader to do his own thinking. And why do I do that? Because I think it's a higher form of writing. (Hessler 2010)

In a similar vein, writers will need to attend more closely to details and nuances when writing about a topic their audience is likely to be familiar with.

Theorizing about a generalized reader can help a writer develop a sense for the kinds of questions that are likely to arise in a reader's mind. Anticipating a reader's questions can help a writer to cultivate suspense—a question that arises early on can compel a reader to keep reading if they anticipate that it will be answered later on. But anticipating questions can also be a way for the writer to identify points in the story when something needs to be clarified or explained so the reader won't be distracted by the question as they continue reading. “The idea is to say things just before they pop into the reader's mind,” says Jon Franklin (Williams 2012a). Since many readers are unlikely to go back and re-read, this kind of problem often needs to be addressed right away if the writer wishes to maintain the reader's attention. “You want to catch all of those moments that just feel like, ‘I got tripped up by that,’ or ‘I got bored there,’” one editor told me; “I need to tie that off so the person doesn't have to be bothered by that the rest of the way.”

Anticipating a reader's questions is also an important part of a writer's preparation for fact checking, as a checker will also be inspecting the text for questions or criticisms a potential reader might have, and failing to anticipate these questions can be costly if they're identified only during the checking process. “If there are big fact-checking problems, then your structure can—it's like a house of cards, it can collapse,” one writer told me. Another writer, similarly, said, “You can be wrong about something and then commit yourself to three columns of writing that's based on that wrong thing.” To the extent that it's part of a checker's job to anticipate potential criticisms from a magazine's readers—which can include the subjects depicted in the magazine as characters—a writer's ability to anticipate the kinds of questions a checker is likely to ask on behalf of a generalized reader can be very important for a writer's ability to preserve

the structure and the specific story elements they've committed themselves to using. "I always know that a lawsuit's possible, so I always just make sure that during the process I'm very on the ball and that I can answer to myself for each thing I'm doing," one writer explained to me. "Can I defend myself morally, ethically, and legally, with every single thing I quote? Do I have a reason to use this? Am I a bad person for using this? Will this stand up in court? Do I have it on tape? If it passes all those things, I feel okay to use it."

Since a writer's sense of a reader's likely experience of their work generally comes from a projection of their own experience reading what they've written, a writer's theories about their readers' experiences can be thrown off by their superior competence in reading and thinking about literature. For this reason, writers commonly seek informal feedback from others—spouses, friends, peers, family members, or agents—as a way of testing the accuracy of their projections. While these readers are often selected based on convenience, writers commonly describe "good" readers as people who are similar to the generalized reader they envision—typically, someone smart, college-educated, curious, and moderately well-read. Honesty about their reactions is often more important than any ability to explain what's wrong, and comments about where they became confused or bored can be indispensable to a writer. Susan Orlean reportedly goes so far as to experiment with phrasing in front of different audiences: "Sometimes I try out various anecdotes on my audience to see if they work, fiddling with them at different tellings" (Boynton 2007, 276).

Responsibility and Stewardship

One cohort of readers that has a particular influence on a writer's decision making is the group of subjects depicted in the story. As I indicated in the last chapter, reporters often wield a great deal

of power over their subjects by virtue of their ability to take compromising information and expose it to a large audience. In extreme cases, subjects may provide information that can lead to them being fired, arrested, deported, imprisoned, beaten, or otherwise harmed when those outcomes were being prevented by the subject keeping the relevant information to themselves. “Everything you write about somebody else represents possible damage to that person,” one writer told me, “and you have to think about that; you have to consider your power, even if you don’t feel powerful.” A writer’s power can be extreme enough in some cases that certain pieces are referred to without irony as “assassinations,” particularly those intended to compromise corrupt officials, arms dealers, and other abusers of power.

The writing stage of a project is the point at which a writer has to seriously consider the potential implications of what they decide to include and leave out. “You have to think very hard about everybody you’re mentioning, and all your sources, what might get them in trouble,” one writer told me. As I’ve indicated above, these decisions are often very complex because they implicate a writer’s obligations to a variety of actors whose perceived expectations might not align, and writers often describe their decision-making about what to include as a matter of coordinating their obligations to their subjects with the standards of fairness and accuracy ostensibly held by their peers. Fairness and accuracy are important orienting principles in all journalistic situations, but their importance becomes exaggerated when reporters perceive that their subjects are in precarious situations that might be impacted by the reporter’s work. While fairness means different things in different situations (for example, not misleading or deceiving one’s subjects, considering the consequences of publishing certain details, giving subjects a chance to respond to any accusations, avoiding sensationalism, honouring agreements made during recruitment negotiations, being forthright about sourcing, being available to a subject

after publication, and many other things), most reporters are aware of a range of actions that might lead to charges of unfairness, and they will continuously aim to make their work defensible against such charges, in part by considering what they feel they'll be permitted by their peers and their subjects to include.

Evaluating fairness involves considering a writer's responsibility to their subjects, and information that's gathered in accordance with perceived principles of fairness will usually be considered fair game for inclusion. Of course, in the same way that a writer evaluating their own output has to take the perspective of a generalized reader with respect to things like style and organization, a writer also has to take such a perspective with respect to rules of fairness, by theorizing about how competent readers are likely to evaluate the writer's decisions about stewardship—if it were someone else's piece, would including this quote seem fair? Would including that fact feel improper or unprincipled?

Writers describe their conventional responsibilities to their subjects in various ways. For example, a writer has a responsibility to refrain from disclosing to the public anything more than is necessary to realize the “point” of their piece, and conversely, to avoid including salacious details, even if they may be interesting or entertaining to readers, if they don't contribute to establishing what the story is about. Writers have a responsibility to honour the complexity of their subjects' lives, which means attending to details and distinctions that the subject feels are important. Similarly, they must commit themselves to accuracy, to highlight that their inclusion of even unflattering details reflects an honest expression of their hard-won perception of the truth of the situation. Writers must maintain the integrity of their subjects, by avoiding the temptation to attribute thoughts, intentions, or motivations to them that they did not acknowledge directly. Writers have a responsibility to be even-handed in their treatment of subjects they might

personally perceive to be good or bad, which can mean suspending any preconceptions—as much as possible—and portraying even disagreeable people as “whole” characters rather than stereotypes. Writers have a responsibility to remain available to their subjects after publication, which means they must refrain from including anything that they would feel unable to justify to their subjects in person, if the need to do so were to arise.

These kinds of responsibilities, among many others, are highly conditional, and what’s possible to include at the time of writing is not merely a matter of meeting each responsibility, but thinking about how the responsibilities are perceived to relate both retrospectively and prospectively to the writer’s actions, and how they are likely to be perceived in conjunction with the gestalt a reader derives from the written work. In other words, *sequences* of actions are judged by how they fit with a *network* of responsibilities. (I introduced this idea in the discussion about naturalism in Chapter 4.) The reporter and filmmaker Peter Landesman highlights that “how it is you behave on a daily basis is crucial to the architecture of your story,” including “what you get to use and what you don’t” (2004). Ground rules established during the reporting process, for example, come into play when the writer decides what they’re permitted to include and leave out, and making these decisions without having ground rules as a resource can be very complicated. One reporter described to me the difficulty of writing a memoir, using material that hadn’t been gathered in the context of an explicit reporter-subject relationship:

This book I have coming out as a memoir, it's not journalism, and it's radically different understanding, radically different ethics—you really have to just make it up [i.e., the ethics], because everything was off the record. You know, it's about family and friends and life—it's all off the record, and now you're putting it on the record. Every single line is a judgment call that way. Working as a journalist, you have your card, you know, you are asking these questions, it's all on the record, it's understood.

Even for reported pieces, as I've mentioned, a subject's familiarity with journalistic conventions will influence what's permissible to use. Subjects ignorant of these conventions will not be in a position to protect themselves from the potential implications of sharing compromising material, and decisions about which of their contributions can be included will be much thornier than decisions about material from a public official, whose awareness of journalistic convention suggests that their quotes can be included with impunity. At the same time, a public official's remarks might be scrutinized more closely by readers for their potential implications, and what might be an innocuous remark made by a civilian might be a compromising remark if it comes from a public official. As with access negotiations, evaluations of a subject's relative power can be an influential factor in these decisions. William Finnegan, for instance, indicates that "the more powerful the person I'm writing about, the less I care what they themselves may think about what I write. The public interest in their personalities, their attitudes, their activities, takes precedence" (Boynton 2007, 80). In all cases, a reporter's conception of fairness, based on how they think their actions might be judged against their responsibilities, provides a resource for deciding what to include and what to exclude, and especially for justifying those decisions to their peers as the need arises.

With a subject in a position to be harmed by the publication of a feature or book, writers may wish to include what they've said or done while also protecting them from the consequences of that decision by keeping them anonymous. Many journalists are wary of using pseudonyms because it threatens to undermine the transparency of journalistic sourcing, which is based on the principle that facts included in a story can be checked by anyone willing to do the legwork, so writers will often consider it only in situations where using a subject's name would likely lead to

considerable upheaval in their lives, like being fired, jailed, or killed, whereas they'll avoid it with subjects merely concerned about saving face. (An exception to this tendency is with subjects who play only a minor role in the story. Considering that writers will often refrain from naming minor characters simply to avoid cluttering their story with unnecessary information, they might be just as likely to avoid naming a minor character merely to avoid subjecting them to embarrassment.) With anonymous sources, writers have to carefully consider the potential for certain details to render the subject identifiable to people familiar with them, and the implications of those details being included. But if a writer does choose to grant anonymity to a subject, they might expose themselves to a different set of standards for which of that subject's contributions they're permitted to include; insulting or defamatory remarks, for example, cannot be included if their source is anonymous, on the grounds that such an inclusion would be unfair to the person being defamed.

The important point here is that responsible stewardship of a subject's contributions is not merely a matter of ensuring that each responsibility is met. Lists of reporting best practices published by organizations like the *New York Times* or the Society of Professional Journalists notwithstanding, acceptable practices are judged based on how a reporter's actions in the field square with their decisions as a writer. Acceptable actions emerge as a gestalt when the actions, responsibilities, and text are considered jointly. Something that violates the letter of the law in the field can be made moral in the text, just as something that's self-evidently moral in the field can be made immoral if the writer fails to steward the information that action produced when they build their account back home. This is not to say that a journalist has anything like free rein to make up for their moral transgressions in the field, as the limit to what's permissible is always a matter of what their peers and their subjects will tolerate; the point is that careful consideration

of what to include in a draft only makes sense as responsible stewardship in light of the groundwork the reporter laid in the field to prepare for the justification of their actions as a writer, both to their subjects and their peers.

The Mechanics of Writing

Having seen how writers aim to structure their drafts using the material they're allowed to use based on their perceived responsibilities to their readers, we can now turn to the practice of writing itself—the point at which the writer decides where to start, and begins to actually commit words to the page. Although most writers can give a reasonable account of the reasoning involved in devising a macroscopic structure for their piece, even if they admit that any structure they devise is highly provisional and liable to evolve beyond recognition, writers tend to have a harder time explaining how they manage to produce a particular word or phrase when it comes time to actually translate that outline into words. It's not uncommon for writers to describe it as a matter of “feel” or “luck.” Here's the reporter Jeff Sharlet, for example:

Elon Green: How do you generally approach section kickers?

Sharlet: Feel? That's a lame answer, I know, but you write and write and write and at some point you get to a line and you say, “there.” (Green 2014b)

And here's Roger Angell:

Things often that look planned are just ideas while you're writing. . . . Some part of you—some unconscious part of you—is doing this, or luck is putting stuff there. And

then the editor in you takes over and you look at what you've done and say, "Hey this isn't bad. Let's leave it here." (Green 2014c)

At the same time, as these examples indicate, competent writers can easily come to a judgment of whether or not something is working in the text they've produced, and if given a chance for closer inspection, they'll probably be able to explain why it works or doesn't work based on the document it's a part of. "It's just a matter of doing ten drafts of something," one writer explained to me, "until you can get to the point where you can pretty well defend a lot of the decisions you made intuitively along the way."

To the extent that writers refer to rules, principles, or conventions of literature to explain the functioning of their text, they usually appear only in the context of evaluating text they've already produced.¹² Speaking retrospectively, writers will easily explain what they were thinking when they wrote this, or how it occurred to them that they should have written that instead, and the temptation is to attribute transparency to these explanations, assuming that they constitute empirical evidence for the reasons writers did some things rather than others. But based on the tendency for writers to cite "feel" or "luck" in explaining how they produce phrases in the first place, it seems unlikely that many of the reasons a writer would give for the decisions they made would have come into play prior to the *production* of specific turns of phrase; rather, the reasons given would have arisen in the *evaluation* of text they had already produced, as a means for determining whether to keep or further revise those phrases.

¹²This distinction is broadly consistent with what Jonathan Evans has called *default interventionist* approaches to dual-process modelling of social reasoning; these approaches assume "that rapid preconscious processes supply content for conscious processing, cueing default behaviors that the analytic reasoning may approve or intervene upon with more effortful reasoning" (2008, 271). See also DiMaggio 1997, Vaisey 2009.

Writing appears to progress through a continuous interaction between production and evaluation. The writer generates textual elements through a sort of liminal, preconscious process, then selects from them the ones that appear to “work” based on the writer’s embodied literary competence. If necessary, they can develop verbal explanations for those selections for use in future interactions with their peers. While a writer’s acculturation into conventional approaches to structure, style, tone, and other textual characteristics almost certainly provides a basis for their ability to produce phrases that approximate their peers’ expectations with a high success rate relative to non-writers, the ability to evaluate and select phrases that “work,” *after* they’ve been produced, and account for why those phrases work better than others, is arguably just as important for bringing their work into alignment with the commonplaces of their social world.

The following examples might help to clarify how this process works. These excerpts are from a transcript I created from an audio recording of two of my participants, who used Skype and Google Docs to co-author a short feature article. In the process of writing and editing, the two writers would talk through their decision-making on Skype while both making changes to the shared document as they saw fit. (Some details have been changed to preserve the writers’ anonymity.) The basic process is illustrated by this example, where one writer suggests a sentence structure and the other cycles through possibilities until hitting upon a word that seems to work:

1. A: We could say, like, "Jones holds a particularly wop wop position," like—
2. B: "Fraught"?
3. A: Uh, “fraught”—

4. B: "Difficult"? "Challenging"?

5. A: Yeah yeah yeah.

6. B: "Particularly challenging position."

7. A: Sure. Okay.

In this case, both the initial sentence structure and the word needed to complete it were both produced without any explicit reasoning: the structure suggested by A is entertained by B merely by cycling through potential replacements for the category indicated by “wop wop,” and the suggestions are quickly rejected or accepted without any need for justification. The structure suggested by A was accepted only when the word “challenging” had been produced and the sentence could be seen to work as an ensemble. This excerpt effectively illustrates Jeff Sharlet’s description, “at some point you get to a line and you say, ‘there’”—conscious deliberation is not required to generate the phrase that ends up being accepted; it’s only necessary that enough variations be produced for one of them to be recognizable as the correct one.

This process proceeds through the production and evaluation of textual elements at different levels. A writer will often examine any amount of text on the page for a category of element that can be fine-tuned. If word-level replacements fail to resolve a perceived problem, the structure of the sentence can be reconfigured, and word-level adjustments can be made to the new sentence. Similarly, if the problem cannot be resolved after running through several sentence structures in this manner, then the paragraph, or even the order of paragraphs, can also be revised. The opening sentences of a sample text about reference books written by Richard Rhodes (1995), which was intended to illustrate the process of writing, exemplifies how a writer

can switch between word-, phrase-, and sentence-level changes to try to resolve perceived problems in the text they've produced:

1. Any good book
2. Many books on writing
3. The library is full of references.
4. The library is full of reference books.
5. There's a roomful of reference books at the library.
6. Reference books. Any public library is one vast reference book. I go there when all else fails, but it's nice
7. I like to
8. but I keep a
9. Any public library is one vast reference book,
10. The public library is one vast reference book, a treasure
11. vault
12. fortune
13. stockpile
14. cache
15. wealth
16. abundance
17. profusion
18. an abundance.
19. Reference books. The public library is one vast reference book, an abundance
20. The public library is a grain bin [. . .] (118)

When the sentence on line 10 that begins “The public library is one vast reference book” fails to pass muster, Rhodes discovers that running through potential replacements for the category occupied by “treasure” fails to address the problem, so he produces a new sentence, beginning “The public library is a grain bin,” that he then goes on to revise through the same process.

Higher-level revisions, especially at the paragraph level and above, are more difficult to deal with because the range of possibilities is wider, and in trying to work these possibilities out at the word level, the writer may introduce new problems in terms of how those particular elements coincide or cohere with elements elsewhere in the text. This means that higher-level

changes can lead to a cascading series of modifications where entire passages of text may be rendered unnecessary or undesirable, even if the writer was certain (during the outlining stage, for example) that the elements in those passages would play a key role in their draft. From this perspective, it's apparent why provisional structures are so difficult to realize through a series of planned steps. In effect, the writer *discovers* the form as they evaluate the words and phrases that they generate in conjunction with one another, consistent with the principle of contextual clues I outlined earlier.

The writer's ability to generate, over a series of iterations, a draft that more or less aligns with their peers' understanding of what Howard Becker calls their "conventional ways of doing things" hinges on an ongoing evaluation of the text in terms like these. Only after a passage of text is visible on the page can the writer begin to explore its properties in a way that would permit them to justify their decision to their peers. This process of theorizing about the text provides the writer with a sense of the "reasons" a given element does or does not work. The kind of reasoning I'm describing appears in this excerpt, where A identifies a problem with a sentence that began, "She'd been thinking about the missionaries":

1. A. Okay. [reading] "So the missionaries told us that if"— "She'd been thinking"—
Can we say, like— Do you think it's true to say, like, "the picture" or something?
2. B. Uh [pause] um, it's like "the visit," or something? Like—
3. A. Yeah. "The visit," "the presentation," "the something.""The children"? Like, it's—
"the missionaries" feels wrong for what her question [is indicating].
4. B. Yeah, yeah yeah yeah. Okay, "she'd been thinking about the children all day"—

5. A. Okay.

In this case, A explains in line 3 that the problem with the original sentence is that it “feels wrong” to say that the character had been thinking about the missionaries, based on her quote in the preceding sentence. This prompts the writers to cycle through possible alternatives until they manage to produce one that “feels” true. The important thing to note about this exchange is that the discursive evaluation is part of what directs the writers’ attention to the features of the text that might be revised in order to solve the problem A observed. A gloss like “it doesn’t feel true” will suggest different potential revisions than a gloss like “the speech tags are so weird,” “the order of the information bothered me,” “it just feels really abrupt,” “every sentence structure is the same,” “there’s a ‘therefore’ kind of thing missing,” “it’s not as sceney,” “the ‘the’s are not right,” and so on.

The following exchange provides a more detailed illustration of this principle. The exchange begins when the writer reading the draft comes upon an awkward transition between a passage about internet communities and another about a group of men known as the Four Horsemen:

6. A. Should this be a section break? Should Smith just float like this or not?

7. B. Um, you know—

8. A. I don't want to, because it feels like the point of that section comes later, but it does feel sort of—

9. B. Yeah, it totally feels herky jerky. And my initial— I remember, like, this is—

10. A. I remember you wanted a section break and I didn't.

11. B. And I feel like— uhuh. [pause] It's just such a weird— [pause]. Well, okay. So we have— Let's see, let's think about it. Um, we have Smith at a meetup group, and then we have her founding [an organization] with Schaffer, and then we have, "In many parts of the country"—

12. A. I think— Okay, I think we could reverse this sentence so that the groups come first.

In line 11, B proposes exploring the properties of the text to determine why the text feels “herky jerky.” This exploration indicates the possibility that the problem with the transition might be in the order of elements, which suggests to B that it might be solved by reversing the structure of the following sentence to bring the internet communities to the front. After beginning to read out the revised version, B tries to evaluate why that change failed to address the apparent problem:

13. B. Okay. "In-person atheist groups"— It's like, the thing is, I guess the weird thing is here that if we were continuing to talk about just the internet and not the Four Horsemen, it wouldn't seem— it would be like, oh, this is like a semi-natural transition, whatever.

14. A. Yeah.

15. B. But it's like, because we take a hop over to talking about the Four Horsemen that it feels like a bit of a weird transition. So I feel like, you know—

16. A. Is that not where that bit should go then? Like, the internet bit?

The lack of a natural coherence raised by B then draws A's attention to the possibility that the passage about the internet communities might be better placed elsewhere in the piece, which she offers as a second potential solution in line 16. After some consideration, B disagrees and provides a gloss for why it belongs in the original location, at which point something about the gloss prompts A to generate a third potential solution in line 20:

17. B. No, the internet bit fits there— Ah, no, it all fits here because— Okay, it closes out with Smith. "'We tend to sometimes deify certain people even though we don't deify gods anymore,' she says." Like, there's a particular reason why this is all here.

18. A. Yeah.

19. B. And part of it is, like—

20. A. Okay, I have a— Okay. "In many parts of the country, in-person atheist groups like Smith's— [typing] like Smith's are hard to find— are difficult to find."

21. B. Okay. Alright, sure.

Importantly, it's not necessary for the examination of the text's properties, or the verbal gloss derived from it, to actually provide an explanation in any real sense, only that the process of theorizing provides an input that draws the writer's attention to relevant aspects of the text whose adjustment might provide a solution. How the writer sees the text *as a reader* constrains the kinds of solutions they will be able to consider, and the verbal gloss prompts them to see connections between textual elements in a particular way. Even if the theory of what's going on

in the text never formally resolves into words, the process of thinking through potential causes of the problem will often be enough to generate a provisional solution, and more intractable problems will necessitate more well-articulated glosses that account for a greater range of textual elements, as this example illustrates.

It's not too great of a stretch to suggest that a similar kind of discursive deliberation could also characterize the work of a writer working independently, to the extent that mulling over some text that they've just produced is effectively a process of recognizing points of failure and probing for locations where a change might provide a solution to whatever problem they've identified. This exploration of the text is the basis for generating the kinds of verbal gloss that are necessary to "defend a lot of the decisions you made intuitively along the way." Seen from this perspective, it's not surprising when writers describe the act of writing as the process through which they learn what it is that they want to say, like William Langewiesche did in an interview with *MediaBistro*:

Writing is thinking. Writing is a form of thought. It's difficult for me to believe that real thought is possible without writing. I really begin to think most profoundly about a subject that I'm writing about when I write about it. The problem of expression forces the thought to clarify itself, and that's where the real work is done. (Boyd 2007)

Although I noted earlier that sociologists in the tradition of George Herbert Mead might think of writing as a sort of internal conversation,¹³ the type of thought permitted by writing differs from a mere internal conversation in the sense that having a concrete, external record of each iteration of the thought allows for a ratchet mechanism of sorts, where improvements to each iteration of

¹³Randall Collins, in particular, uses the act of writing as a way of exploring different modes of thought in his book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004).

the thought are not liable to be lost to the deficiencies of one's working memory. Improvement here, of course, refers to a movement toward consistency with a writer's perceptions of what makes literature "good," from the perspective of a reader—what makes a description vivid, what makes an idea surprising, what makes a sentence rhythmic, what makes a connection meaningful. Seeing which aspects of a passage of text fail to gratify allows the writer to replace them selectively and deliberately, while retaining the elements that work.

The process of thinking through one's text in this manner does not just move it closer to consistency with the genre, but it also provides the writer with resources they need to talk about their work with their peers. To say that an iteration between production and evaluation brings the text *closer* to alignment with the genre does not mean that the writer achieves anything like alignment—the precise way the genre gets expressed in the details of any particular piece has to be worked out collaboratively with one's peers in the course of editing. But in that process, it's necessary for the writer to defend their decisions by trying to convince their peers to see the text in the same way they themselves came to see it by thinking it through while writing. The properties of the text they discover while writing become the topics of their conversations with their editors; the verbal glosses become the vocabulary they use to discuss those topics. Their editors, for their part, once they've read the draft, will take account of their own intuitions in much the same way, by examining the text for properties that might justify them, and trying to convince the writer that their way of seeing the text, in turn, makes better sense. (This will be a topic of Chapter 6.)

By this point it should be clearer how a writer working independently at Time 1 anticipates how others will respond at Time 2. While producing a draft, the generalized reader is at quite a remove from the writer—so far as to be nearly irrelevant in most circumstances. The

readers whose responses are more critical for the writer to anticipate are their editors, and a conception of a generalized reader—to the extent that a writer conceives of one—is a resource that they’ll use in talking about their text, and working out its final form, with their editors. The way the writer responds intuitively to their own work, by virtue of their acquired competence as a reader of literature, serves as a useful, if imperfect, analogue of how a reader in general might make sense of the text. But it’s necessary to go beyond one’s intuitive sense, to devise a theory and a vocabulary of the way the text works, if the process of collaboration with one’s editors is to be fruitful.

Writing as Work

The writing process described in the last section illustrates the limited usefulness of rules, guidelines, and plans when it comes to producing words on the page; they only provide a means for drawing a writer’s attention to potential problem-solutions for text that already exists. Considering this process, it’s not altogether surprising that many writers would describe a great deal of anxiety about their ability to satisfy the expectations of their readers. “Writing is a psychologically agonizing struggle,” the writer Hamilton Nolan says (2014). Plans and guidelines inevitably come up against the mystery surrounding the production of words on the page, which any project’s success inevitably hinges upon.

Writers often describe an internal conflict between their creative, productive selves and their critical selves. While the critical self is necessary for anticipating readers’ expectations and forming judgments about the quality of one’s writing, the productive self is necessary to produce the writing in the first place, and the critical self can easily inhibit the productive self. Balancing

the two aspects of the writer's persona can present a considerable challenge. Eric Schlosser describes this problem:

Keeping the critic at bay is essential, but having the critic around is important too. The writer is always saying, "Yes!" and the critic is saying, "No, uh-uh." Often the writer is wrong, and the page you wrote, loved, and then threw away deserved to be thrown away. At the same time, when you can't write a word, it's because the damn critic is just being too tough. Ultimately the critic has to shut up so that I can get the writing out into the world. It may not be the most beautiful, perfect prose, but at least it gets out there. If I only listened to the critic, I'd be doomed. (Boynton 2007, 356)

In response, writers commonly devise strategies to distance the process of production from the process of evaluation, and this can take many forms. Some writers will try to distract themselves from the pressure of writing a magazine article by switching to a different modality of writing. This could mean writing an email to a friend, where the projected reader and their expectations are less ambiguous (e.g., Dailey 2012). In teaching this technique to a class, the *New Yorker* writer David Owen has suggested that switching to the email modality helps the writer to stop "think[ing] that they're doing something hard." Similarly, using yellow paper rather than white paper can serve as a reminder that what's being produced is just a draft, and that it doesn't have to be perfect. Writing by hand can make the written words less legible, or "stark," so that the temptation to re-read and tinker with the wording can be subdued. Writing on a typewriter rather than in a word processor also makes it more difficult to go back and revise, which can keep the writer moving forward (e.g., Boynton 2007, 121 [Jonathan Harr]).

Conversely, while revising, writers often try to make the text they've written as unfamiliar as possible, so that it seems like it was written by someone else. Jane Kramer arranges

her text into narrow columns that mimic the printed columns in *The New Yorker*; “It gives me that necessary break,” she says, “between the me who wrote it and the me who is reading it and saying, ‘God, how could anyone have written this?’” (Boynton 2007, 199). Gay Talese’s habit of looking at his drafts through binoculars, which I described earlier, achieved a similar effect. “I want to look at it fresh, as if somebody *else* wrote it,” he says (Boynton 2007, 374). He later switched to a system where he would use a photocopier to reduce the size of his draft pages by 67 percent to achieve the same effect. Reading the text aloud can be useful as well, for the same reason.

Writers will commonly put themselves in locations that are inert, free from distractions and low in stimulation: a room with no windows, a view of a blank wall, a cubicle, or a low ceiling; they might put their phone elsewhere and work on a computer without internet access. At the same time, they often find that some sort of sensorimotor stimulation helps manage the physical strain of the cognitive effort writing requires. For some writers, fidgeting while they work helps to focus their attention—Tad Friend, for one, reports obsessively chewing on pens (Haire 2008). Jonathan Harr juggles; Lawrence Weschler plays with blocks (Boynton 2007). Many writers will take a break from writing to go for a run or do some other sort of exercise, and with luck they’ll find that ideas and phrases occur to them while they’re exercising.

Most of the time, as long as they can prevent themselves from worrying too much about the quality of the prose they produce, most writers will devise some sort of work schedule that forces them to produce a certain amount of work every day, regardless of how difficult it is and how bad the prose might be, either by keeping regular working hours, or by establishing a daily word quota, often between 700 and 1000 words, and forcing themselves to work for as long as it

takes to meet it. More important than producing a large amount on any given day is producing a small amount consistently every day, as John McPhee explains:

If somebody says to me, You're a prolific writer, it seems so odd. It's like the difference between geological time and human time. On a certain scale, it does look like I do a lot. But that's my day, all day long, sitting there wondering when I'm going to be able to get started. And the routine of doing this six days a week puts a little drop in a bucket each day, and that's the key. Because if you put a drop in a bucket every day, after three hundred and sixty-five days, the bucket's going to have some water in it. (Hessler 2010)

Considering that many writers find they can only achieve a few hours of productive writing in any one day, there's often a lot of variation between writers in terms of when in the day those hours occur. If a writer finds they need six hours of "gonging around" before they can get started, as John McPhee does, they'll incorporate that into their schedule and begin late in the day; if the gonging around makes it too difficult to get started, they might drag themselves to their desk the moment they wake up in the morning and do most of their work before breakfast. To maximize the likelihood of productivity, writers will also commonly use some sort of short-term planning to guide the day's work, either by outlining what they hope to achieve over the course of the day, or by leaving off at the end of each day at a point where they're confident about what to do next, so they can easily get into the swing of writing as soon as they resume.

Using Exemplars

Seemingly intractable narrative problems have to be overcome. After all, "writer's block is an indulgence of the unemployed," as Walt Harrington points out (2003, 93). One way a writer can do this is by referring to the work of other writers who have overcome similar narrative

problems. I argued in the section before last that the kinds of theorizing a writer does while they're evaluating their own text are similar to the kinds they do while evaluating any other text—it's form of theorizing that's based on their competence with reading and talking about literature, and the way that literature works to produce meaning through the organization of textual elements. Until now I've left the idea of competence largely implicit, on the grounds that the literature on socialization has covered the idea in much greater detail than it would be necessary to use here.¹⁴ But it will be worth delving slightly deeper into the development of a writer's competence in order to understand how a writer's consumption of literature might have both a long-term impact on their work (through the development of a "voice" over many years of practice) as well as a short-term influence (through the resolution of specific narrative problems).

Most literary journalists would be able to describe not just a long-term interest in literature in general, but also key influences in particular whose work served as touchstones in their own development as craftspeople. Consistent with many claims about the transmission of cultural capital, many journalists can trace important influences back to their early adolescence, and frequently through the influence of their parents, who may have had newspapers, magazines, or books around the house that served as early sources of piqued interest in the genre. Journalists do not cite only other journalists as important influences, but also novelists, short-story writers, playwrights, poets, and filmmakers. Many journalists can also describe the development over time of their relationship with these influences; while reading may have simply been a source of pleasure or entertainment during their youth, they might have begun only later on to attend to the work of specific writers by, for example, paying attention to bylines, or to the technical elements

¹⁴The acquisition of literary competence is usually discussed by sociologists under the guise of the transmission of cultural capital; see, for example, Mohr and DiMaggio 1995; Graaykamp 2003.

of the texts themselves, such as the leads, the endings, the themes, and the characters, and how the authors developed and used these elements in clever or imaginative ways.

Many writers describe trying to develop their skill as writers, and to incorporate the writerly sensibilities of the writers they admired, through attempts at emulating them. By many of these accounts, what begins as a conscious attempt to mimic the style of an established writer gradually recedes into an embodied personal style that integrates and hybridizes each writer's unique set of influences. As Gideon Lewis-Kraus told the *Daily Beast*, "Style, in the end, is the failure of perfect mimicry—or, perhaps better, the result of trying to mimic two or more people at once, and thus to have to figure out how to reconcile disparate influences in a way that makes for some ultimate coherence" (Charney 2012). Some writers claim to perceive a broad influence that extends across the members of a generation, whose style can be compared directly to the writers who were prominent during their formative years. Over time, with more and more experience reading, thinking about, talking about, and writing literature, writers develop what some journalists call a *story sense* that permits them not just to understand and enjoy literature, but also to recognize narrative achievements or successes and to articulate what it is that differentiates them from deficiencies. "The more you read, the more you realize how stories work," one editor told me. "Some of that [story sense] is just having an inventory in your mind" of other stories that have accomplished what you're aiming to achieve. Importantly, the story sense consists of a stock of tacit knowledge that allows a writer (as a reader) to notice when something "feels" right or "seems" wrong in a way that's broadly compatible with their peers' judgments or intuitions.

The achieved coherence between different writers' or editors' story senses—especially coherence between the story sense of a writer and editor working on the same project—depends

on that internalized inventory of stories being similar enough from one person to the next that they can agree that a given textual problem has been solved. In many respects the socialization of writers into a “sense” for how stories work is similar to the “way of seeing” that Thomas Kuhn describes in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* with respect to the acculturation of scientists into a shared paradigm:

After he has completed a certain number [of problems], which may vary widely from one individual to the next, he views the situations that confront him as a scientist in the same gestalt as other members of his specialists’ group. . . . He has meanwhile assimilated a time-tested and group-licensed way of seeing. (1996, 189)

As professionals, writers have to continue to read widely in order to internalize the ways of seeing associated with the kinds of work they wish to be doing, and to keep abreast of developments occurring in the work of their contemporaries. For many writers this means balancing the consumption of work within the genre they aspire to emulate with a more diverse range of literature and other media, to prevent an inclination to merely reproduce structures and tropes that are on the verge of becoming clichéd. In fact, given the utility of reading widely, many writers (and editors) express dismay that they don’t have enough time to read everything they’d like; they often highlight what they feel they ought to be consuming—more fiction, or more nonfiction, or more podcasts, for example—to achieve a perceived or aspirational standard of cognizance about contemporary approaches to story. It’s not uncommon for writers to express open admiration for people—often editors in chief—who seem to have extraordinary powers of literary consumption.

What this means is that the writing of other writers can become an extraordinarily useful resource for writers working through narrative problems in their own work. As much as writers might find pleasure in reading, they also tend to read, or at least re-read, with close attention to how the reporter appears to have obtained their material, and how the writer rendered that material in words. Reading “methodologically,” as one journalist explained to me, is a matter of searching the text for answers to the question, “How the fuck did they do that?” Another writer observed that “part of becoming an experienced journalist is becoming a better guesser at how that article was made.” This research can pertain both to reporting problems and writing problems. If they’re stuck, writers will often search their “inventory” of resources to identify a piece or passage with some relevance to the problem they’re currently working out, and try to determine how that writer went about solving the problem that they’re currently dealing with. One writer told me that in learning to write, “you have to train yourself into this set of practices by which an hour of something you observe becomes 1200 words of something that you read. There’s no commonsensical way to do that. The whole thing is like a very elaborate contrivance.” In this kind of context, it can be indispensable to have resources on hand that demonstrate how this translation was accomplished for specific instances, especially if they’re similar to the one currently at hand.

These exemplars are often examined with reference to very specific problems. In the examples I encountered, writers referred to Joseph Mitchell as a resource for understanding how to write with an unobtrusive narrator; David Foster Wallace was cited as a source of a specific type of humour; Janet Malcolm provided one writer with the means for achieving a balance between reporting thoroughness and literary style; Malcolm Gladwell exemplified simplicity and elegance in writing about social science; E. E. Evans-Pritchard provided an example of a tone of

seriousness in dealing with subjects' outlandish beliefs; Edmund Morris exemplified the use of a single perspective for each scene; Anna Funder, conversely, exemplified the knitting together of a third-person perspective with the author's own experiences; Norman Mailer was cited as a resource for "lots of short, strong, active sentences, built of short, strong, active words" (Chris Jones in Williams 2013a); F. Scott Fitzgerald was cited as exhibiting an exemplary use of verbs; Michael Paterniti rendered a husband-and-wife dynamic particularly well; Lord Byron showed how to shift between high and low registers; and Truman Capote illustrated how to set a scene, with his description of Holcomb, Kansas, for *In Cold Blood*. Exemplars can also be useful when writers wish to mimic non-literary texts as a device; this may mean, for instance, rendering a conversation in the form of a trial transcript, or describing a baseball pitcher in the form of a scouting report, or introducing a character the way a playwright would in a script. Sometimes writers describe attempts to recreate moods or atmospheres from films or music, or they try to mimic the voice of their subjects in their own writing.

Any similarities between an exemplary resource and the prose a writer is producing can be difficult to specify, particularly considering the commonplace injunctions against cliché and plagiarism. You can't use the same words, for example, but you can use the same *types* of words; you can't use the same sentences, but you can use the same sentence *constructions*. In considering an exemplar in the manner described above, it would be unusual for a writer to specify what exactly is the similarity between their work and the exemplars in much detail; rather, reading and re-reading a particular passage that seems relevant might give them a *sense* for how to proceed with their own work, even if that sense is never specified in terms of steps for producing specific arrangements of words. One writer, in describing to me her use of a specific author's work as an exemplar, stated that it was "not so much thinking I was emulating him as

sort of programming my head to think that way.” In fact, the influence of an exemplar on a writer’s way of seeing is often subliminal enough that the style of the exemplar can temporarily “infect” the writer’s style as they go forward. This might be desirable in some cases if it’s appropriate for the task at hand, but writers sometimes complain about being infected by inappropriate styles of writing. “Every time I read a novel with a really strong style,” one writer told me, “I’m kind of thrown off my own little path and I find myself producing pale imitations of that style.” Larissa MacFarquhar, speaking at Northwestern University, gave a specific example: “If I’ve been reading a novel by Henry James, I will find myself writing sentences with six hundred clauses in every sentence—and I think, ‘Stop!’” (2003).

The use of exemplars does not present an exception to the relationship between production and evaluation that I described earlier. In examining an exemplar, the writer’s opportunity to think through the way someone else’s text works can provide an input that prompts them to see their own text in a new way, which might suggest potential avenues for revision and improvement. In general, as one writer described it to me, “you obviously notice little tricks that somebody does that you try out, and then you see—in the spirit of experimentation—you just see if it works.” Whether or not the writer can express a gloss for whatever it is they’re learning from the exemplar, the incorporation of the experience of reading the kind of work they wish to emulate into the process of production and evaluation often has a clear utility in solving whatever writing problem is at hand, in the sense that it leads the writer on a path through the “contrivance” that turning material into prose comprises. Whatever problems they fail to solve—the ways they fail to anticipate how a typical reader might make sense of the text—then become the focus of their interactions with their editors once they’ve submitted a draft.

CHAPTER 6: EDITING

After working on a draft for several days, weeks, or months, a writer can find it more and more difficult to anticipate the reactions of a potential reader. Eventually the piece becomes too familiar for the readerly part of the writer's self to judge what it might be like to encounter their work for the first time. Michael Crichton explains:

In my experience of writing, you generally start out with some overall idea that you can see fairly clearly, as if you were standing on a dock and looking at a ship on the ocean. At first you can see the entire ship, but then as you begin work you're in the boiler room and you can't see the ship anymore. All you can see are the pipes and the grease and the fittings of the boiler room. . . . What you really want in an editor is someone who's still on the dock, who can say, Hi, I'm looking at your ship, and it's missing a bow, the front mast is crooked, and it looks to me as if your propellers are going to have to be fixed.
(MacFarquhar 1994)

This is the advantage of editing to a writer: it provides a fresh, competent reader who can not just articulate their experience of reading their piece, but also theorize about how the piece works and suggest ways that it might be improved. In working through the piece with an editor, the writer and editor together achieve a story that's "more" than either of them would have been able to produce independently—more literary, more inventive, more engaging, more true.

Even though I've spoken of reporters and writers as part of the social world of literary journalism, I've tended until now to refer to them mainly in isolation. Reporters sometimes disappear into the field for months at a time, checking in only periodically with their editors, and in many respects, as they enter the social world of their subjects, the world of journalism per se becomes mainly a notional influence that impacts their day-to-day actions only through the way

they conceive of their peers' expectations, rather than from their peers expressing those expectations directly. Writers, in the same way, might disappear into their office for weeks or months at a time, struggling in isolation to produce a draft that appears to accord notionally with the expectations of their editors and other readers, while the degree to which that draft actually meets those expectations remains to be determined. This chapter marks a shift to a discussion of how magazine editors try to fit the reporter's and writer's work into a broader set of responsibilities by working directly with reporters and writers to achieve a sense of consistency at the level of the institution.

Magazine editors often have an enormous impact on the final form a feature article takes. Unlike book editors, who often spend more time acquiring marketable manuscripts than working closely on the details of particular drafts, magazine editors sometimes provide most of the driving force behind a feature article. In certain cases, an editor might identify a story idea, recruit an appropriate reporter to gather material, and then write most of the draft from the reporter's notes. Some writers, even those retained as staff members at prominent magazines, will be valuable to an editor because of their ability to generate material—by virtue of their skill as an interviewer, for example, or because of their connections with sources on a particular beat—and the editor will serve as the “storifying membrane,” as one editor described it to me, who packages the material in a form that will be likely to appeal to readers. “It’s a selfish way of thinking about it really,” that editor explained, “and I would never say this to another writer exactly, but it’s like they give you the keys to their car and you’re like, oh, I can drive this car! . . . My imagination will never be as big as theirs, my brain will never be as big as theirs, but I can step into their car and drive it to places they wouldn’t have driven it.” For many editors, a strong sense for story is among their most valuable attributes, and their responsibility is to give shape

and texture to a draft that might be too formless, too lacking in dramatic force, to capture a reader's interest in a way that justifies the genre's use of literary conventions.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, editors have a much broader portfolio of tasks than just working on the text of stories; editors have to cultivate relationships with writers, they have to make decisions about assignments, they have to establish medium- and long-term plans, they have to promote their magazine in various ways, and in many cases they might report and write stories of their own. An editor's range of responsibilities and concerns does not always match up directly with those of writers. "Writers have different intentions for their work than editors do, and that magazines need them to have," one staff writer told me. Simply put, an editor has a responsibility to the magazine, whose identity and reputation hinge on the day-to-day decisions and negotiations that consume an editor's time. A writer's concern about generalized readers—to the extent that they have any—is always mediated by the work of their editors.

Ultimately, an editor tries to use a writer's work as a resource in service of a clear organizational identity that readers can recognize in the physical form of each printed issue—an identity that incorporates ideas about genre, style, voice, accuracy, readership, and other related notions. It might be helpful to think of the reporter's and writer's work as the editor's "material": editors mobilize their material resources in pursuit of a coherent gestalt in much the same way writers do with *their* material—except editors pursue a gestalt that emerges in the conjunction of successive issues of a magazine, not just in the successive elements of a story. As I've explained, a reporter's rendering of material traces is never passive, but is, on the contrary, based on an active intervention into the day-to-day situations they encounter, with the aim of realizing a provisional structure based on the "rules" or "criteria" of their genre; in the same way, an editor also actively intervenes into the rendering of their material, by devising, selecting, assigning,

guiding, revising, and, if necessary, killing stories based on the “rules” or “criteria” that distinguish their magazine. In light of Berger and Luckmann’s query about how subjective meanings become objective facticities (1966, 18), both reporting and editing can be seen as processes of translation between these two states: a social sense developed through consumption of an “institutionalized” reality provides the means for a social actor to render their subjective experiences (i.e., the day-to-day situations they encounter) into an objective form—in this case an article or a magazine—that’s available to be consumed by their competent peers as evidence of the rules and conventions that were purported to have guided its production.

For editors, this is rarely a straightforward task, not the least because writers are all different, assignments are all different, and readers are all different. Ultimately, the printed work is a material trace that communicates the nature of those underlying journalistic activities to other interested parties in the social world of magazines, who are always prepared to “read methodologically” to pass judgment on the quality, accuracy, and morality of a given magazine and its producers.

Without a doubt—and I’ll say more about this in a moment—there is a great deal of variation in the respective roles of writer and editor from magazine to magazine and from project to project. Some magazines have reputation for being writer-focused, while others are known to be focused more on realizing the desires of their editors. The nature of a relationship between a writer and an editor, as well, will influence the way they collaborate. As a matter of fact, the remarkable diversity in backgrounds, styles, training experiences, practical techniques, and personalities presents writers and editors with a persistent problem in light of the requirement that they come to agree on the form that “good” writing must ultimately take. But this kind of collaboration is a large part of the reward for many magazine editors, who have the opportunity

to take a creative and directive role in producing the kind of writing that they admire without having to muster the head of steam it takes to create the raw material. “I dislike writing,” the former *New Yorker* editor-in-chief Robert Gottlieb says; “it’s very, very hard, and I just don’t like the activity. Whereas reading is like breathing” (MacFarquhar 1994). At the same time, most editors are okay with remaining behind the scenes, and some prefer it, on the grounds that the invisibility of the editor supplies a lot of the apparent miraculousness of literature for readers who don’t suppose that the brilliance in a writer’s use of mood, tone, and other subtleties of literature might be supplied by someone other than just the author.

Organizational Identity

Magazines in the world of literary journalism tend to have strong identities, and the diversity of magazine identities highlights the difficulty of demarcating the boundaries of the genre. As I’ve stated before, Howard Becker suggests that the boundaries of an art world are not defined in any real sense by the properties of the art that members of that world produce. Rather, an art world is a “network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce(s) the kind of art works that art world is noted for” (1982, x). At best, central and peripheral roles of art world members can be identified in the production of any particular work that has been deemed by members as an instance of the genre, even if it’s not possible to specify a set of criteria that distinguish the members inside the social world from the members outside. (In fact, establishing and reinforcing these kinds of boundaries is part of the work that members themselves engage in—see, for example, Lamont and Molnár 2002.) From this perspective, it’s not exactly reasonable to suggest that magazines are members of the world of literary journalism by virtue of a *shared* set of generic or stylistic features, only

that similarities between features are *discoverable* by readers with the competence to make sense of text in a particular paradigmatic way.

Indeed, a magazine's identity distinguishes that magazine—both as a physical object and as a set of conventional social practices—from others, and magazines and the people who work for them regularly trade on those differences. A magazine's ability to attract an interested audience hinges, in large part, on its ability to produce an object that both meets the reader's expectations—based on apparent regularities in the attributes of successive issues—and which presents enough variety to keep them interested. Unlike book publishers, whose selection of manuscripts generally hinges on a judgment of marketability in general, magazines have to present a consistent identity over the course of successive issues to maintain what they perceive as a particular constituency of readers, writers, and advertisers. “A publishing house has much more leeway, because its constituency isn't fixed,” says Robert Gottlieb. “Nobody out there is buying a hundred fifty Knopf books a year”—especially not *because* they're Knopf books (MacFarquhar 1994). But subscribers and advertisers who remain loyal to particular magazines do so because a magazine's consistent identity effectively forecasts their interest in future issues. This means that as much as magazines might differ in their outlook, politics, staff members, practices, and many other features, the way those features are used in service of identity is a component part of the social world of magazines involved in the production of literary journalism.

A magazine's identity has practical effects that are both upstream and downstream of a particular issue—an editorial staff works to achieve an identity in that issue by doing things in particular ways, and a reader works to perceive an identity in that issue by reading it with prior issues in mind. As I've emphasized before, members of the literary journalism world are

themselves readers of magazines, which means that identities they perceive as readers—even of their own magazine—influence the identity that they work to achieve in the course of any particular project.

Story and style niches

A large part of a magazine's perceived identity inheres in features of the magazine as an object—a collection of printed words and images. Because the physical form of the magazine emerges as a trace of the social activities that produced it, identity features can consist of both those words and objects themselves, in their physical form, and in the conceptual or ideational things that they are imputed by readers to be a document of. Types of stories, the style or tone of those stories, the capaciousness of styles, the mix of different types of stories, the conventions of cover design, the typeface, the use of images, the variety of staff writers, the process of editing or fact-checking, the formula of in-house micro-genres, concern or lack of concern with timeliness or news value, the presence or absence of humour, the political orientation, the uses of metaphor or first-person, and any number of other features can all be invoked as manifestations of a magazine's identity. Together, these kinds of features define a niche that differentiates the magazine from others and serves as a resource for members to evaluate the fit between that magazine and its readers, writers, advertisers, and potential story ideas.

Content, form, and tone are commonly cited as features of a magazine's identity. Content is a fairly straightforward identifier in many cases—a left-leaning magazine will be unlikely to editorialize in favour of deregulation; a men's magazine will be unlikely to cover women's fashion; and a regional magazine like *California Sunday* will be unlikely to publish a story on Texas.

Similarly, magazines are usually limited in the range of story forms they're liable to publish. As far as the feature well is concerned, one magazine might be less likely than another to publish a profile, just as another might be more likely than another to experiment with reverse chronology. But many magazines rely often on a set of endogenous genres that fill the front- and back-of-book pages in particular, where form is the defining feature that remains constant from one issue to the next. The "Talk of the Town," for instance, has been a staple of *The New Yorker's* front-of-book for many decades, and presents readers with short, gossipy, narrative vignettes concerning New Yorkers of all stripes. *New York* magazine's Approval Matrix, a graph displaying the relative rankings of topical objects, people, and events on scales of highbrow versus lowbrow, and brilliant versus despicable, also maintains a constant form across issues. *Harper's* is a magazine whose identity is particularly closely tied to its endogenous forms. According to Rafil Kroll-Zaidi, a contributing editor, "*Harper's* is very far from having anything like a house style. There are certain forms and certain postures and certain concerns that crop up again and again, but the way that the comma is used or a piece of reportage is structured from one writer to the next may vary enormously." Instead, the magazine's identity is reinforced through several very idiosyncratic sections of the magazine whose consistency inheres in the form: the Index, a list of curious and illuminating numbers and stats; the Readings, a collection of concentrated excerpts originally published (or intended for publication) elsewhere; the Annotation, a short article presented as a set of annotations, usually to a document; and the Findings, a list of published scientific findings, which Kroll-Zaidi produces for every issue. "What [former editor-in-chief] Roger [Hodge] did with Findings," Kroll-Zaidi says, "was create a further expansion of this *Harper's* voice, where you use discovery and juxtaposition, and

where the editorializing tends to consist in the ordering of things and in the choice of what to talk about” (Madden 2015).

As Kroll-Zaidi suggests, the idea of form is closely related to the idea of tone, especially in the case of particularly tonal micro-genres like *The New Yorker*’s comic-relief feature Shouts and Murmurs, or *Esquire*’s now-discontinued Dubious Achievement Awards. The *Vanity Fair* writer Frank DiGiacomo, in an article called “The *Esquire* Decade” (2007), describes how *Esquire* used a photograph of Richard Nixon to accompany each iteration of the Awards: “By using Nixon—an embodiment of the Eisenhower era—as the highbrow equivalent of *Mad* magazine’s Alfred E. Neuman, *Esquire* had declared itself a brash corrective to the square sobriety of the 50s, and [EIC Harold] Hayes had taken a significant step forward in defining his magazine.” Hayes “wanted every column inch of *Esquire*’s editorial content to reflect that tone,” DiGiacomo explains; writers and editors at the magazine even went so far as to compete with one another in converting *New York Times* stories into *Esquire* stories by reconfiguring the material from the *Times* in a way that was consistent with the tone exemplified by the Dubious Achievement Awards.

Tone is sometimes associated with the house style that’s enforced at most magazines by the copy department. *The New Yorker*, for instance, has a reputation for fierce adherence to its house style, even when it’s ridiculed for some of the archaic conventions that it continues to use, such as the diaeresis in words like *coöperate*, or the proscription against subject postposition (Pullum 2010). Although the magazine’s adherence to some of its stylistic choices has been “blatant, almost to the point of self-parody,” according to Ben Yagoda, who wrote the book on *The New Yorker* (2000, 207), many people seem to believe that those kinds of affectation are part of what makes *The New Yorker* distinctive. As the reporter David Samuels argues, “There’s

always the joke about the *New Yorker* typeface giving everyone ten extra IQ points, and there's a sense in which that's true. The typeface"—along with the rest of the stylistic rules the magazine follows—"is a visual shorthand for decades and decades of very specific things that people have learned to do with voice and story form" (Mueller 2012). Inasmuch as characteristics like tone and voice inhere in the arrangement of words, a magazine can achieve a very distinctive character through careful and deliberate attention to consistency in the way that the material building blocks of particular stories are configured.

The forms, tones, and styles that define a magazine's identity evolve over the course of a magazine's history through processes like trial-and-error problem solving and gradual revisions to prior formulas. At *The New Yorker*, as Ben Yagoda observes, innovations emerged from "an artist or writer latching onto what had already been published in the magazine and extrapolating from it something wonderful and new. In time, this process begat whole new graphic and literary genres, and enduring work . . . that simply would not have existed in the absence of the *New Yorker*" (2000, 21). Editors themselves being rabid consumers of magazines, innovations that develop at one magazine can spread to others, threatening their utility as identity markers. The Dubious Achievement Awards, for their part, were discontinued in 2008 when the editor responsible for them judged that the ubiquity of copycat columns in other magazines and online had made the feature redundant. Reporting this change in *The Observer*, Leon Neyfakh noted that "its tone (snotty, prankish) and its format (a frisky pinch of a headline followed by a succinct summary of a regrettable news item) have been copied so much that they have become not just conventional but nearly universal" (2008).

As the cases of Harold Hayes's Dubious Achievement Awards or Roger Hodge's Findings illustrate, a magazine's identity is often described as a function of the editor-in-chief,

the figure at the top of the masthead with whom the buck often stops when it comes to decisions about publishing any particular thing, whether it's a cartoon caption or a cover story. "In the end . . . it has always been about writing a piece that the editor wants to publish," one *New Yorker* staff writer told me. In a memo to his staff announcing some masthead changes, for example, the EIC Adam Moss, of *New York*, explains that "In the end, it's Ben [Williams]'s job to wake up worrying about the web, Jared [Hohlt]'s job to wake up worrying about print, *my job to worry about our entire creative enterprise*, and how the parts work together" (Levy 2014, emphasis added). As the person tasked with this responsibility, an EIC is often required to have strong opinions about the identity of the magazine—one Columbia journalism professor explained to me that "the magazine editors, the successful ones, tend to be people with big ideas, big personalities, and ability to handle other people with big personalities." While subordinate editors may have considerable discretion over particular sections of the magazine or particular day-to-day decisions, and they may be important sources of ideas and opinions that the EIC can draw on to solve whatever problems are at hand, subordinate editors generally serve as agents of the EIC's aspirations, and this means that a subordinate editor concerned with the work of assigning stories and shepherding them from conception to realization must have a clear sense of the EIC's intentions for the magazine in order to decide which of the possible options in any situation is likely to be the right one.

The important caveat, of course, is that an EIC must exhibit some loyalty to the institutionalized identity of the magazine to avoid alienating its consumers. Any EIC that assumes the role secondary to a founding editor must consider how their aspirations for the magazine can be reconciled with the magazine's historical identity, which in most cases would have been fully formed at the time they took on the role, alongside a fully formed constituency of

readers and advertisers. This historical identity recalls Berger and Luckmann's idea of the "externalized" reality—any actions performed repeatedly by a group of individuals become externalized, over time, in a way that supplies them and their social world with a restricted range of possibilities for any given situation, especially in later generations:

Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution. . . . Reciprocal typifications of actions are built up in the course of a shared history. They cannot be created instantaneously. Institutions always have a history, of which they are the products. It is impossible to understand an institution adequately without an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced. Institutions also, by the very fact of their existence, control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible. (1966, 72)

In the view of many writers and editors, the main function of a magazine's identity is to set up readers' expectations for what they will encounter in any given issue. A reader will typically subscribe to a magazine because they like the kinds of things they've seen in past issues, and advertisers (who themselves comprise a cohort of readers) will advertise because they wish to associate their brand with those kinds of things. Robert Gottlieb observes that

a magazine has to be itself. A magazine's subscribers and advertisers and owner have a right to get every week or month whatever it is they've been led to expect they're going to get. If someone becomes an *Economist* advertiser because he likes *The Economist*, and then one day opens an issue and sees his ad in a magazine that looks more like *Playboy*, he's not going to be happy. And vice versa.(MacFarquhar 1994)

Any new EIC, no matter how strongly they conceive of their magazine's aspirations, must consider how readers will respond to any changes. Major changes to a magazine's identity can be shocking for readers with clear expectations for a particular sensibility, and that includes readers who are members of the magazine world—even the magazine in question. Tina Brown's tenure at *The New Yorker* is commonly cited as an example of the pitfalls of insufficient fealty to organizational identity; a magazine that was formerly staid, highbrow, a dutifully literary suddenly came under the control of an editor who was flashy and enamoured of celebrity. In a book on marketing culture, John Seabrook notes that "Inviting Roseanne Barr to consult on a special women's issue of the magazine, for example, as Brown did in 1995, may or may not have been a good idea, but it confused a lot of readers who needed to keep the distinction between *The New Yorker* and Roseanne Barr straight in order to preserve their own place in the sociocultural hierarchy" (1999). Not surprisingly, a number of staff writers who had their own ideas about the magazine's sensibility took Tina Brown's editorial approach as an affront, to such a degree that some quit and others withdrew from contributing to the magazine until she was succeeded by David Remnick. (Under Brown, one staff writer told me, "I discovered that the subjects I really was interested in, *The New Yorker* wasn't interested in any more.")

The opposite risk, that a magazine with a strong identity will become repetitive and overly familiar, is also a worry for editors interested in preserving or expanding their readership, and it was that concern that likely prompted the hiring of Tina Brown in the first place. Ilena Silverman, an editor at the *New York Times Magazine*, suggests that "putting together a good magazine is always a delicate balance between predictability and surprise" (Beckerman 2005). Rigid adherence to an identity can lead to long-term problems other than just boredom on the part of the readership, particularly as tastes and interests among advertisers and a generalized

readership evolve. Editors often struggle to keep up with these kinds of changes to prevent their formula from rendering their magazine irrelevant, or at least to keep it solvent as advertisers' interests change for whatever broader economic reasons they're detecting in their own consumer research. Robert Draper, in a history of *Rolling Stone*, describes how that magazine encountered this problem at the end of the 1970s:

The success of magazines like *People* had business-minded editors reconsidering the old writer-focused journalistic formulas. "Overnight, it seemed, [according to former editor Roger Black,] articles in nearly every American magazine shrank to a size that could be digested while perched upon a toilet. Political pieces no longer took. People were tired of reading about how horrible their leaders were. The time had come for a sweeter diet."
(1990, 298)

The rise of digital media has forced many magazine editors to grapple with the problem of readers' apparent interest in short, easily digestible tidbits, whose popularity on the internet has been a thorn in the side of many editors—particularly those trying to conceive of an online identity for their magazine—who value long, thoroughly reported features. (In a panel discussion on digital storytelling at Columbia University, one editor complained that "these days we're more a culture of skimming. . . . The metrics tell us that people aren't watching five-minute videos. They might watch one-minute videos, and we have a lot of pressure from management to make our videos one minute long" (Navasky et al. 2014).) In this context, how does an editor reconcile their literary or journalistic aspirations with what their readers want?

Readership niches

Managing a magazine's identity ultimately requires that the editors conceive of their readership in a particular way, as a niche of the population that for one reason or another senses an affinity between themselves and the style, tone, or content that a magazine aspires to produce issue after issue. Like writers, editors are divided about the degree to which they consider their readers, consciously, while they are shaping a magazine. On one level, editors acknowledge that—of course!—you have to edit in consideration of what your reader wants, because it's ultimately the reader's interest in your magazine that keeps the enterprise afloat. Michael Kelly, former editor of *The New Republic*, has noted, for instance, that “any magazine is, in the end, what a very small, self-selected group of people—its readers—wants it to be. And the magazine is shaped to that” (Navasky and Cornog 2012, 63). But, as with writers, the rub is that editors are never quite sure who their readers are, and when pressed, they'll often admit that their editorial decisions tend to be based mainly on their own reactions to the choices in front of them. Ruth Reichl, the last editor at *Gourmet*, put it this way: “The only way to have a really good magazine is to print the things you want to read and assume that it will find its own readership” (Navasky and Cornog 2012, 34).

A common way of trying to get to the bottom of one's readership is through various forms of market research into readers and their reading habits, through methods like surveys or focus groups. (Letters to the editor also provide some anecdotal feedback and aren't often ignored outright.) Naturally, this is much more straightforward with respect to digital audiences than print audiences, thanks to analytics technologies developed mainly within the marketing industry for the sake of tracking the use of digital devices. This kind of analysis can reveal things like the amount of time spent with an article, the average percentage of an article that gets read,

correlations between readers of different kinds of articles, or trends in reading modality (e.g., phone, tablet, or desktop; or browser versus app). For print magazines, on the other hand, editors can never be certain about what happens with their magazines after they're distributed; some suspect that many people subscribe to *The New Yorker* mainly so they can think of themselves as "New Yorker readers," while probably reading little more than the cartoons (e.g., Yagoda 2000, 120).

The problem is that the kinds of inquiry available to editors rarely provide the information they would need to direct their day-to-day work toward the desires of a generalized reader, at least without sacrificing their own commitments. Focus groups often reveal that readers are interested in writing that's lighter, funnier, quicker to read, more useful, or more visual, which are all orthogonal to the features that most editors in the literary journalism world hold dear about their magazine's identity. "We've seen that shitty, short content is what people like on the internet," one writer told me; "it's probably what they like in magazines too." An editor at *New York* complained to me that as far as metrics are concerned, "you look at our site today, and probably some video that Macaulay Culkin did about the anniversary of *Home Alone* has a gazillion readers."

Based on these kinds of empirical findings, writers and editors alike often draw a distinction between stories that are popular and stories they consider "good," seeing one as a poor analog of the other. I've described already, using the idea of *competence*, how writers and editors commonly evaluate written work in terms of a phenomenal sensation—they "know" it's good when they see it, well before they're able to articulate why they think it's good. This kind of evaluation applies equally well to one's own writing as to the work of others. After publication, the stories that make writers or editors feel proud, or that feel meaningful or

important or successful, are not always the same stories that generate high numbers on quantitative metrics, that get shared frequently on Twitter or Facebook, or that generate a lot of qualitative feedback in the form of letters or emails. Conversely, stories that might have been comparatively quick or frivolous sometimes generate more interest among readers than anyone could have predicted. The *Esquire* writer Chris Jones, in an interview with the Longform Podcast, expressed frustration that one of his most popular stories was an assigned blog post about how not all women are great in bed. “Yes, I’m super proud that my first hit is a 300-word sex piece,” he said sarcastically. “That’s another thing where I was bewildered. . . . I would rather people knew me for Ebert [“The Essential Man,” March 2012] or Joey [“The Things that Carried Him,” May 2008] or the space story [“Away,” December 2014] or Teller [“The Honor System,” October 2012] or whatever. But one truth about journalism is that you never know what’s going to catch. . . . Sometimes you write a story, you work really hard on it, and you think, ‘Oh, this is going to go,’ and it’s crickets” (Ratliff 2012).

Because of this disconnect, many writers and editors have a complicated relationship with post-publication feedback. Many are heartened if a story they feel proud of gets a commensurate amount of attention. But at the same time, “if you live by the Twitter response, you have to die by the Twitter response,” a writer for the *Times Magazine* told me. More commonly, writers and editors describe themselves putting stock mainly in their own sensations about an article’s success—an “inner barometer of satisfaction,” as one editor described it—and seeing the audience’s positive response, if it materializes, as a bonus. Many editors disavow an explicit concern with what their readers want, at least in the day-to-day course of their work, for a similar reason. Too much attention to a generalized reader impairs an editor’s ability to make judgments based on their own competence with the form, since they can never be sure ahead of

time what kind of competence to expect in their readers. This is why *story sense* is often considered more of a prerequisite for effective editing than even the most sophisticated research tools. As one editor described it, “It really is a sense, because you don’t really ever know. You can kind of gather a bunch of data, but even that wouldn’t really tell you the answer.” Most editors “might have an idea [of the readership] at their magazine, but even then they’re just channeling their own sensibility into an imaginary reader that they don’t know—pretending like they represent you. That’s what you have to do as an editor, but really it’s just what you want.” Articles that end up popular may be good for the magazine, but editors are readers first and foremost, and they generally want to be able to enjoy the work that they’ve produced in the same way that they enjoy the work of others. A sociologist like Randall Collins (2004) would suggest that the reward of producing a piece that’s enjoyable to read—that feels important and meaningful and interesting—is that it provides the writer with the *emotional energy* to continue with their work.

The desire on the part of many editors—like Ruth Reichl—to do their work based entirely on their subjective judgments, rather than worrying about the abstract desires of a generalized reader, underpins the widespread ideal of a magazine finding an audience based purely on its identity, rather than on subscription promotions, playing to demographic research, using ethically questionable ad strategies, or making articles shorter and fluffier. For an EIC with a strong interest in long reported stories, the optimal situation is that the types of stories they want to do will also be the types of stories that an existing audience is already interested in reading. Several editors who had moved from special-interest magazines, directed at audiences interested in fashion or technology, for instance, to working at general interest magazines, found it very liberating that they could begin to think about their work in terms of their own

preferences rather than trying to project interests onto a generalized reader. “One of the incredible joys of working here is I am the reader, so I don’t have to think about anyone except what I would want to read,” one editor told me. During his tenure at *The New Yorker*, William Shawn felt strongly about his magazine’s natural audience:

Mr. Shawn, for his part, had believed all along that if *The New Yorker* ever fell on hard times it would be better for it to reduce its circulation and its number of pages and to stay true to itself, even if that meant eventually going out of business, rather than to dilute the editorial content and give in to gimmicks and fads. In fact, [founding editor Harold] Ross and Raoul Fleischmann [the publisher] originally did not want the circulation of the magazine to exceed sixty thousand—their estimate of total natural *New Yorker* readers. (Mehta 1999, 373)

A magazine’s financial solvency notwithstanding, having a natural readership effectively means having a readership whose sensibilities are similar enough to those of the editors that they’ll perceive the published pieces as “good” for mostly the same reasons that the editors did in preparing them, which frees the editorial staff from worrying about the inscrutable relationship between their subjective judgments and their audience’s expectations.

When Shawn claimed to want to limit his magazine’s circulation to its natural audience, *The New Yorker* was in a state of unusual financial health, however. According to Ben Yagoda, *The New Yorker*’s annual ad pages peaked in 1966 and held the industry-wide record until being surpassed by a computer publication in the 1990s, based on a variety of factors that included growth in the upper-middle-class, increasing median incomes in the United States, and increasing rates of college education, including among women, all of which worked in the magazine’s favour (2000, 311). At a magazine closer to the middle of the road, there’s usually a

greater tension between the audience who is interested in reading the same things that the editors want to produce, and that audience's willingness to pay for the costs of producing them—a concern which has ballooned considerably since the internet flooded audiences of all demographics with copious amounts of free content. In fact, many people within the magazine world are skeptical that long reported features will ever be economical to produce. Nick Lemann, of *The New Yorker*, put it particularly forcefully: “Here’s what you have to understand about the world you’re writing about,” he told me; “it never made money, and it’s never going to make money. It lives on love, patronage, and willpower.”

Inflating a magazine's readership beyond the natural audience has obvious financial advantages, both in terms of bringing in more money from subscriptions and in allowing the magazine to charge higher ad rates. But this often means trying to attract readers who are not particularly interested in reading what the EIC is interested in publishing. For most editors, short of finding an unusually prosperous natural audience, it's often necessary to support an interest in long printed features with other sources of revenue, including, in addition to ad sales, things like selling subscriber lists, hosting conferences or other events, selling merchandise, collecting donations, developing digital publishing platforms, running online “content mills,” or vertically integrating magazines into larger publishing operations (Navasky and Lerner 2010).

At issue in the tension between natural and profitable audiences is the firewall between the editorial and business sides of a magazine—what many members refer to as a separation between “church and state.” Not being able to fund a magazine simply through contributions from interested readers means that editors must worry about generating revenue, and the concern is that the need for revenue will impact their decisions about what to publish. The separation of editorial decisions from financial decisions is a strong, abiding concern that has consumed

journalists of all stripes for many decades, because it links closely to the avowed values of fairness, transparency, accuracy, and trustworthiness that journalists use as resources in evaluating journalistic work, especially when they consider their work as a foundational, Deweyan component of democratic governance. William Shawn expressed these sentiments in a letter to readers at the time *The New Yorker* was sold by its founding publisher, the Fleischmann family, to Si Newhouse's company Advance Publications, in 1985:

[Editorial independence] frees us to say what we believe to be true, to report what we believe to be true, to write what we want to write, to draw what we want to draw—to publish what we want to publish—with no outside intervention, without fear, without constraints, in defiance of commercial pressures or any other pressures beyond those of our own conscience and our own responsibility. (Mehta 1999, 365)

Financial pressures, in contrast, might force an editor to consider their advertisers' reactions in deciding what to print; it might mean an editor would be tempted to accept advertisers' contributions for the production of specific types of editorial content; it might mean sacrificing transparency about which parts of the magazine were produced independently and which were designed as promotional materials, as in the case of various types of content marketing.

Whatever the case, journalistic and creative ideals tend to suffer.

While *The New Yorker* under the Fleischmanns might have achieved a legendary degree of editorial independence, the financial reality at most magazines both then and now is that the firewall between church and state is permeable to varying degrees. Like the Freytag pyramid and other conceptual resources that journalists use, the church-state separation is a conceptual ideal that journalists only work toward, rather than a state they actually achieve; it's unlikely that an EIC could ever be totally insulated from the business side of a magazine, at least because they

have to communicate with the publisher about pay rates, printing and delivery costs, office space, and many other non-editorial issues. Even at publications that claim a strict separation, like *The New York Times Magazine* (“The *Times* is very disciplined about that,” one senior editor told me) will often do some long-term planning with advertisers in mind, by developing an annual “New York” issue that can appeal to local advertisers, for instance, even if what the magazine says about New York is left entirely up to the editors. Christmas issues, similarly, can often be a lucrative annual source of ad revenue at many magazines (DiGiacomo 2007). Some magazines with a reputation for profitability, like many style magazines, will plan editorial content around the advertisers anticipated to buy space in a particular issue. “Every now and again you have to give a round of blowjobs, basically; that’s kind of the way it goes,” one editor told me. While this might not mean that advertisers contribute in any meaningful way to the magazine’s content, it does often mean that editors will avoid publishing anything their advertisers are liable to dislike, by maintaining a “positive” orientation to the subjects covered in their stories, for instance, and assigning stories with that orientation in mind. Less commonly, some magazines will accept advertisers contributing directly to their editorial content if they disclose the nature of that involvement to readers.

The American Society of Magazine Editors has guidelines for maintaining editorial independence and they monitor magazines for compliance, sending letters to magazines for perceived offences and sometimes barring them from consideration for the National Magazine Awards for severe infractions. For example, *The New Yorker* published a single-advertiser issue on August 22, 2005, sponsored by Target, which “included *New Yorker*-style artwork in the department store’s ads, plus a cover with a red-and-white beach balls that was a thematic match for the store’s icons” (Johnson and Prijatelj 1999). ASME pointed out in a statement that “our

guidelines do call for a publisher's note to readers in single-advertiser issues, and the *New Yorker* has agreed to include such a note when and if they do this again" (Ives 2005).

Writers and editors who claim a sense of loyalty to journalism often begrudge these kinds of laissez-faire attitudes toward church-state separation; John Seabrook, for instance, notes with respect to Tina Brown's *New Yorker* that "Shawn's auteur system, under which the writers appeared to have complete freedom, subject only to Shawn's own taste . . . was replaced by a kind of Hollywood studio system, under which the writers worked in collaboration with the editors, who functioned more like producers—middlemen between the creative and the commercial processes" (1999). As I've noted above, this environment drove a number of writers away from *The New Yorker* during Brown's tenure. But church-state separation naturally suffers with financial insolvency, and a magazine's solvency rarely falls within the purview of any writer. This means that policies concerning editorial independence can cause friction between people at the bottom of the masthead and people at the top, when views diverge in how the people involved conceive of "their" magazine. Many public conflicts within magazines, such as the *New Yorker* staff revolt against the firing of William Shawn (Adler 1999), or the push to unionize the editorial staff at *Harper's* in 2010 (Levy 2015), or the mass staff defection from *The New Republic* in 2014, after the publisher forced out the editor and announced plans to turn the magazine into a digital media company (Lizza 2014), prominently implicate the ethics of editorial independence. The important thing to note is that the perception of editorial independence is part of a magazine's identity, particularly among magazine-world members for whom such ethics are existential values, and many members will express reluctance to work at a magazine where the church-state distinction is blurred because of how it might reflect on themselves as journalists.

Identity as social technology

The utility of a strong organizational identity is not limited to attracting a certain cohort of readers and maintaining their interest over time; it's also a crucial resource for managing and coordinating the work of producing any given issue. If a magazine has a reputation for thorough reporting, factual accuracy, consistency of voice, editorial independence, or anything else, that reputation reflects the magazine staff's practical methods for regularly producing an object that meets those perceived standards, and recognizably so; the *formula*, in other words, is an achievement of the editorial staff managing and directing their day-to-day work toward that common sensibility. "The editorial formula . . . is the practical application of the editorial philosophy, and it offers a blueprint for each issue of the magazine. It defines the type of content staff members will use in implementing the editorial philosophy" (Johnson and Prijatel 1999). Prospective writers have to know what kinds of story will be appropriate for a magazine long before they consider pitching an idea. Editors have to have a clear sense of that identity to evaluate which pitches might be worth assigning, or which writers would be worthwhile to pursue for an idea they have in mind. Advertisers have to have a sense of the magazine's niche so they can strategize about which consumers they'll be able to reach and how their association with the magazine will imply something about their brand.

What's more, consistency in the formula will allow for work practices to be rationalized into regular patterns that can facilitate day-to-day work; features of a consistent length, for example, will be easier to design page layouts around, just as standardized word rates, ad ratios, and page counts will make for easier accounting, and regular feature issues will facilitate long-term planning. A magazine with a highly mutable formula, like *Rolling Stone* in the late 1970s,

presents a variety of practical problems as a side effect of its originality: according to Robert Draper, “the leeway afforded writers came at the direct expense of the sanity of *Rolling Stone* accountants, production workers, and Jann [Wenner, the EIC]” (1990). This means that the limits to a new EIC’s aspirations for their magazine are not just related to the risk of alienating readers, but also to the inertia that comes from the magazine staff habitually doing things in certain ways. Conventional practices like these serve as a sort of institutional memory that provides most of the means for the staff to produce, among other things, long reported features that recognizably meet readers’ expectations for the genre.

Features like tone, form, and style are realized only superficially through adherence to formal rules or procedures. An editor cannot identify what exactly makes a story appropriate for a magazine by providing a list of attributes; they can merely identify when a story is or—more straightforwardly—is not appropriate for the magazine. In one rejection slip addressed to the literary agent Harold Ober, the *New Yorker* editor Edith Oliver admitted, “As I’m sure I needn’t tell you, our requirements are peculiar, and, unfortunately, indefinable” (Letter, Harold Ross to Mr. Weekes, April 26, 1949, from the NYPL *New Yorker* records, Box 36, Series 1). At the same time, any attributes than an editor can articulate cannot easily be used as guidelines for how to generate an appropriate story. At the pseudonymous *Big City Review* described by the sociologist Ben Merriman, for instance, “Members of the fiction staff regularly asked Alan [the EIC] for clarification about what the *Review* was looking for. Though this request was common, Alan’s responses never became more definite: he looked for stories that were ‘comfortable with themselves’” (2017, 454). Rather, editors who are deeply familiar with the kinds of stories a magazine has published in the past—and familiar with the kinds of things that have been canonized as literature by their peers and other readers—will be able to *recognize* and *justify* the

appropriateness of stories and story elements when they consider them in any particular case. In the same way that writers proceed by alternating between production and evaluation, it's often more accurate to describe editing as a matter of auditioning things on the basis of a tacit sense for appropriateness; the identity of the magazine *results* in any particular issue from the staff working out these kinds of judgments with their writers in the context of particular stories, while keeping the archive of published material in mind.

The limited utility of rules and guidelines for generating publishable works means that most of the features of a magazine's practice that might be described as standards or rules tend to be tacit, and a particular editor's sense of the rules has to emerge from a continuous reevaluation of their sense of the rules in light of what's getting accepted and rejected by their senior editors and their readers. The head of the checking department at a prominent magazine explained to me that best-practice standards at his magazine are not explicit, and certainly do not appear in any kind of manual or policy document; instead, they tend to inhere in the conventional ways that editors deal with everyday problems, and they "evolve out of practice" rather than emerging by fiat from an EIC.

New editors can only develop knowledge of these standards by working with editors who have more seniority. One *New Yorker* writer told me that he set a personal goal with each assignment to produce a "Gould proof" that was as clean as possible, by trying to anticipate the style rules enforced by the magazine's "grammarian," Eleanor Gould, even though he had never seen a formal list of style rules. Among editors, the process of learning the rules is similar: rather than being given a list of rules and trying to apply them, an editor usually derives an embodied sense of the rules by repeated exposure to specific instances where the ostensible rules have been applied by editors with greater competence with the practices of that magazine, ultimately

developing what psychologists would call a *mental set* that predisposes them to approach practical problems in a particular way. Even in cases where there are formal rules, as in the case of many style guides, editors might overrule some of the guidelines if they feel a piece is a good fit for the magazine as it's written—in which case, the editor's embodied sense of the rules trumps the formal ones. Perceived rules can also be flexible in response to apparently rule-breaking pieces that an editor personally likes. "Sometimes when an editor is looking at a piece, that's not the first thing they're thinking—'Is this a *New Yorker* piece?'" one writer explained to me. "They're thinking, 'Is this a good piece?' And I think if it was a really good piece, they would try to make whatever adjustments were necessary to make it [a *New Yorker* piece]."

There are a variety of ways an editor can acquire the embodied skills that editing requires. The first is through the development of a story sense, which I suggested in the last chapter comes through the habit of reading methodologically, with an eye to figuring out how other journalists have gone about solving particular reporting and storytelling problems; with enough experience as an attentive reader, an editor can develop a sort of internal inventory of the range of possibilities for structuring stories out of particular empirical elements. Interactive experience with activities like teaching or running writing workshops, for instance, can also help an editor to develop a vocabulary for identifying features of a text and articulating how they work in conjunction with one another. Importantly, reading methodologically can provide a prospective editor with a sense of a *particular* magazine's identity, and a reader who has internalized a magazine-specific story sense will be capable of identifying and articulating how a *New Yorker* story works, for instance, in addition to stories in general; this might serve as a means for recognizing whether work-in-progress meets the implicit standards of that magazine.

There's a limit to what a potential editor can learn merely by reading, because the methods that reading can reveal are limited only to those that the reader is already familiar with (which is why reading methodologically is itself a skill that improves with experience). One way editors can acquire a backstage perspective on the transformations a text undergoes at the hands of a competent editor is by having their own work edited by others, which is a very common experience for editors in the early stages of their careers. Being edited gives a writer an idea of the kinds of things a competent editor is noticing, the kinds of changes they're suggesting, and the techniques they're using to communicate their queries and suggestions. Depending on their range of experiences, most published authors can identify positive and negative editorial experiences from their perspective as writers, and prospective editors can use those experiences as sources of dos and don'ts in developing their own approach to editing.

Novice editors will inevitably begin editing with short and relatively straightforward pieces. In the same way that young reporters often begin by writing shorter front-of-book pieces—*The New Yorker's* Talk of the Town, for instance, was a proving ground for many writers who were eventually promoted to staff—young editors often begin with pieces that are much less consequential than reported features. At *Harper's*, for example, editorial interns are responsible for compiling the *Harper's* Index, which provides them with preliminary experience with things like sourcing, fact-checking, juxtaposition, and consistency of voice. ("The question of what rises to the level of deserving attention of a national magazine and what doesn't—that's actually a pretty hard thing to learn," one editor told me.) Assistant editors might begin by sourcing and condensing already-published work for the Readings section, which can help them to establish a sense of the magazine's taste and the skills necessary to cut a long piece into a shorter one while preserving the essential sensibility of the piece. This kind of work will be done

under close supervision from a more senior editor, whose feedback can be an instructive resource for future editing problems. This kind of supervision will continue as long as an editor remains below the top of the masthead. As assistant editors move to associate editor roles and begin working on features, top editors including any deputy editors and the EIC will continue to review their work and provide input that will continue to hone their sense for the magazine's distinctive approach. Even a deputy editor will be privy to the edits generated by the EIC, which can provide a reference for the deputy's evaluation of their own work.

Of course, there's much more to being an editor than simply passing judgment on works-in-progress. "There's the whole bedside manner component of the whole thing," one writer told me, "which is something you have to learn over time." Younger editors will often be invited to review—on a regular basis—a more senior editor's marked-up drafts, so they can get a sense not just for the kinds of changes an editor is making, but also for how they communicate their queries and suggestions to the writer. Editors with strong mentorship relationships may also be permitted to listen in on phone calls or attend meetings between their senior editors and the writers they're editing, so they can observe the diplomacy involved in guiding, convincing, reassuring, or negotiating with writers, even before they've produced a draft. Working with a variety of senior editors in this capacity can expose a young editor to a variety of approaches and editorial styles, any combination of which might be of use as their career progresses.

In general terms, the net result of these kinds of acculturation is that editors develop an internalized repertoire of practical skills that Michael Polanyi would call *tacit knowledge* (1958; H. M. Collins 2001), keyed to the specific writers, editors, and texts that they worked on in developing them. No editor will be able to specify a comprehensive list of rules that they follow in aligning a specific text with the identity of their magazine—particularly not in a way that

would permit another editor to do their job by following them—but an experienced editor will be able to achieve texts that appear consistent with that identity by responding to drafts in more or less the correct way for that magazine.

Like scientific knowledge, practical editorial knowledge travels with the editors who embody it. Although the circulation of published material can propagate practical innovations from one magazine to another by virtue of editors' capacities for reading methodologically, the embodied nature of editorial skills means that practical methods can also travel through the mobility of editors. *The Atavist*, for example, a digital magazine that produces one longform feature per month, does so at least in part as a result of the embodied practices brought to the magazine's day-to-day editorial work by editors with extensive experience at established print magazines. "Even the systems, the literal systems of how a piece moves through the magazine, including fact-checking and the way that the changes get combined—all that stuff is knowledge from magazines that have that," the editor, Evan Ratliff, explained to me. "We have these editors that are good at it, partly because they've been trained at these magazines." Publications like *Harper's* or the *Harvard Crimson* that have strong training programs can leave a considerable legacy in the magazine world in terms of the basic editorial skills they've imparted.

The idiosyncratic nature of editorial training—not all editors read the same canon or develop their skills at the same magazine—means that editorial approaches can vary widely from one editor to the next. "What happens in cubicle A is entirely different than what happens in cubicle B," a former *New Yorker* editor told me, "and what happens between the editor and you may be entirely different than what happens between the editor and writer B." That a magazine's editors manage to achieve a coherence in their magazine that's discernible as an identity, in spite of these differences, highlights the social nature of this achievement. No individual editor can

realize the magazine's identity single-handedly, but their internalized set of practical habits ought to be sufficient to produce actions that are intelligible by their peers, at least to such a degree that consensual solutions can be negotiated with the magazine's identity available as an orienting principle. Ultimately, texts appear in a printed magazine as a trace of these negotiations and provide material grounds for future negotiations about how future texts might be revised appropriately.

The important point is that as much as a magazine's identity appears to readers as a set of characteristics inherent in the magazine as a physical object, it is also a social technology that furnishes some of the practical means for producing a text or assembly of texts in that form, with those features. This is what I mean by a magazine's identity having both upstream and downstream implications—an identity is not a static list of attributes, but rather it is a *stimulus* needed for an editor to develop a tacit repertoire of skills, at the same time that it is an *accomplishment* of editors applying those skills to particular day-to-day problems and negotiating appropriate solutions with their coworkers.¹⁵ The magazine's previously printed issues are always available to the editors as a public record that can be examined for characteristics of the magazine's identity, which permits editors to work toward consensus on the styles, forms, tones, contents, and mixes of particular issues in a way that preserves the perceived relationship between the magazine and its generalized readership.

¹⁵The relationship between social and literary technologies described here has echoes of the relationship described by Shapin and Schaffer with respect to scientific practice: "By using *technology* to refer to literary and social practices, as well as to machines, we wish to stress that all three are *knowledge-producing tools*" (1985, 25).

Managing Risk

Building relationships

The diversity in backgrounds and work styles among journalists and editors, combined with the open-endedness of the average project, means that any editor assumes a great deal of risk on behalf of the magazine every time they assign a story. The magazine's reputational and financial wellbeing is effectively at stake. On one hand, the assignment must fulfill readers' expectations about the kind of magazine they've subscribed to or purchased, which is particularly important for readers who are members or enthusiasts of the magazine world and attuned to the moral implications of genre, journalistic integrity, and literary achievement. On the other hand, deeply reported features tend to be very expensive to produce. Dan Baum, as an example, reported that he received a fee of \$7750 for his first five-thousand-word piece for *The New Yorker*; later, as a staff writer, he was contracted to produce 30,000 words in a year for \$90,000. At *Rolling Stone*, he was receiving a word-rate of \$3.40 (2009). Of course, in addition to the writer's fee, the magazine is also responsible for the salaries of the editorial, administrative, and business staffs, along with the rest of the organization's overhead, which means that in an issue with three or four features, expenses just for the feature well can quickly run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. *Mother Jones*, for their part, claims that a single feature on private prisons, in which the reporter Shane Bauer obtained a job at a Corrections Corporation of America prison in Louisiana (admittedly an unusually ambitious project), cost them around \$350,000 to produce (Abbruzzese 2016).

The risk in assigning such an article means that an editor must look for guarantees that the reporter will be capable of generating the kind of story they have in mind. Ideally, an editor reserves the right to kill a story if major problems crop up in the course of producing it; having

the financial capacity to assign more stories than ultimately get published provides editors with a cushion for errors of judgment, because it allows them to postpone the decision about whether or not to print until a story until late in the process, instead of making it at the time of the assignment, come what may. But the financial costs of killing stories, especially on a regular basis, can be prohibitive. (Most magazines issue reduced “kill fees” for assigned stories they ultimately turn down.) The *New Yorker* was able to kill a significant cross-section of the stories it assigned during the height of its advertising revenue between the 1960s and the 90s; the head of checking, Peter Canby, said that under William Shawn, there was a weekly inventory sheet of fact pieces that had already been purchased and written, which was usually around a hundred pieces long. “Considering that each of these pieces was worth \$10,000 or \$20,000 to the magazine, that was a lot of inventory,” he said (Canby 2012). But now, purchasing much more than they can print is no longer cost-effective for the magazine. As one editor explained to me, “I often say *The New Yorker* only publishes four-leaf clovers, but the paddock isn’t large enough for the number of four-leaf clovers, so what happens is we have three-leaf clovers, and then someone like me tries to stick an extra leaf onto the clover.”

Lacking the capability to kill stories with impunity, editors have to be very careful about not saddling themselves with stories they feel pressured to print even though they’re not working out. “Those stories that are not that good are sort of like albatrosses and you don’t know how to make them work and it’s just depressing,” one editor told me. For stories with high financial and reputational stakes, the best guarantee an editor has is usually the prior relationship they’ve established with the reporter assigned to the project.

Most editors recognize that writers are the meat and potatoes of a magazine, and a major part of their job is to cultivate and maintain strong relationships with writers for the sake of their

magazine. Former *Harper's* editor Willie Morris says, "The core of an editor's responsibility forever remained his relationship with writers and his trust in them, for the simple reason that a magazine depends on writing, and do not let anyone tell you otherwise" (1994, 312). To some extent, a magazine's identity inheres in the writers associated with that magazine, and despite the EIC's special role in establishing and guiding the progression of that identity by virtue of the power they have to make—or veto—decisions about what ultimately gets printed, their influence extends only as far as the material their writers manage to bring to them for consideration. This is part of the reason it will often appear advantageous for a magazine to bring certain writers on as contributing editors or staff writers (the two terms are more or less synonymous)—under such an arrangement, a magazine can establish a monopoly over a writer's work, keeping it out of the pages of competitor magazines and creating a connection in reader's minds between that writer's work and their perception of what the magazine is all about.¹⁶

¹⁶The utility of establishing a stable of strong, influential writers is illustrated in the following anecdote. In a well-known takedown of *The New Yorker* that Tom Wolfe published in the *New York Herald Tribune* (now *New York* magazine) in 1965 ("Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of the Walking Dead!" April 11, and "Lost in the Whichy Thickets: The New Yorker," April 18), he provided lists of famous writers who did and did not write for *The New Yorker* in an attempt to establish *The New Yorker's* relatively low position on the literary hierarchy. As part of the subsequent fallout, *New Yorker* writers Renata Adler and Gerald Jonas wrote to the *CJR* to complain about the factual accuracy of Wolfe's essay. They noted that "It is, of course, a child's game to judge the literary merit of a magazine by the number of 'big names' who may at one time or another have contributed to its pages. (The fact that *Life* published 'The Old Man and the Sea' does not make *Life* a literary magazine, nor does it make Hemingway a '*Life* writer.')" By contrast, they went on to provide some criteria by which a writer might be considered to have a *strong* link to a particular magazine: "(1) all the writers listed were first published in the magazine to which Wolfe assigned them; (2) all the writers listed contributed their major work to that magazine; (3) all the writers listed published the majority of their work in that magazine." Naturally, they went on, "the records show that none of Wolfe's lists meets any of these criteria" (Lewin, Adler, and Jonas 1966). Inasmuch as Adler and Jonas's letter illustrates that writer associations really can be used to judge a magazine's literary merit, it also highlights the work a magazine must do in cultivating those relationships in order to profit from the associations.

From a practical standpoint, as well, having a quiver of trusted writers means that editors can be selective about accepting pitches or matching prospective stories with appropriate writers, and it means they'll be likely to have a continuous source of workable ideas that they can take to their more senior editors for consideration. As noted above, most editors spend a portion of their time monitoring what's being published in a variety of different venues, partly to hone their story sense, but also to identify potential writers that an editor might want to bring on board as part of their formal or informal quiver, based on their reporting chops or their writing style. "You can just see it, it kind of shimmers up out of the writing, when they have a certain amount of control, an ability to create a certain kind of effect on the page," one editor told me; "it's just something you can see in people." Many editors will reach out to writers they've identified in this way. Another editor explained to me, "It's not that hard to write someone an email and say, 'I really loved this piece that you did for X; I'm interested in your work.' Or, 'I loved your book; do you want to have a coffee? Let's just talk and develop ideas.' And I do that, on slow weeks, many times a week."

At the same time, many writers work on initiating these kinds of connections from their end as well; freelance writers in particular search for opportunities to meet with editors at parties, events, or over coffee to talk about their ideas, or to get a sense for the kinds of ideas an editor is interested in, so they can develop pitches for that editor and their magazine. A coffee meeting might last for only fifteen minutes, but developing these kinds of *weak ties* (Granovetter 1973) gives the editor access to a writer who might be useful for a particular kind of story, and it gives the writer an editor who will be likely to at least read their pitches, if not accept them. "Unless you have that personal connection with somebody, they can just ignore your emails," one writer noted; sending pitches "into the abyss" is such a common complaint among early-career writers

that personal connections to editors can be invaluable regardless of how perfunctory they may be.

Weak ties may be useful for all the reasons Granovetter described—in this case, mainly because it exposes an editor to a continuous stream of story ideas from people who might be capable of executing them—but it’s also in an editor’s interest to nurture these relationships into *strong ties* if the potential appears to exist for the writer and editor to work well together. In time, a strong relationship between a writer and an editor can become indistinguishable from an intimate friendship. “I think there’s an analogy to be made to a romantic relationship,” one editor told me. “It can be very intense, both parties feel vulnerable, there’s this kind of early increasing intensity that then can sort of mellow into something more stable. . . . I think the best pieces often come out of that.” Another editor described how difficult it can be to lose a relationship, as well, which might occur when a senior editor takes over even after a subordinate editor’s considerable investment of emotional energy: “That’s always really painful, when you get someone taking that relationship over.”

Like any relationship, pairings that begin as a matter of expediency or convenience will often evolve through trial and error; pairings that work out well will develop strength, while those that work out poorly will be abandoned. (Writers will sometimes get blacklisted from magazines based on truly negative writer-editor experiences. “We have a pretty hard-and-fast rule about not working twice with someone who’s awful,” one editor said.) Complementarity of working styles might be a factor in this evolution: if some editors are especially good at putting together prose from a reporter’s rough notes, and some editors are good at cutting a long piece down into a shorter one, and some editors are good at digging up facts that the writer designated as TK (“to come”), it can be helpful in an editorial relationship if the writers the editor works

with have complementary tendencies. One writer explained to me how his tendency toward prolixity and lyrical preciousness is tempered by his editor's plainer writing style: "Even though it can feel injurious, the process, we work really well together because we have opposite kinds of tendencies, so we have a great process of compromise, where he tempers my flights of fancy."

The practical advantage of such a relationship comes from the development of what Gary Alan Fine might call an *idioculture* (1979)—a local familiarity with the other's unique working habits that allow both members to coordinate their work in a way that makes sense for them, even though it might be very different from the working habits in any other pairing. There's a great deal of variation between writers and between editors, based on their particular reading habits, their histories of formal training, or the magazines they've worked with in the past, and strong, persistent editorial relationships can eliminate a lot of the surprises that these idiosyncrasies can introduce into the production process. For example, if a writer's expertise lies more on the reporting side than the writing side, an editor can be prepared to rewrite more heavily, while with a writer whose wont is to take ownership over the writing, an editor can provide more general verbal feedback and have the writer worry about the wording. With the latter kind of writer, an editor may prepare to take on more reporting-related tasks, like negotiating for access, and pieces by a writer who reliably produces "clean" copy (drafts that don't require many revisions) will be able to be scheduled sooner than those of writers who require a lot of drafts. Having clear expectations about timing or division of labour at the time of the assignment means, for example, that editors will not be surprised by the amount of work required of them, that writers will not resent the editor's degree of intervention on their work, and that editorial problems won't lead to delays and the cascading effects they can have on the rest of the production process.

These are just a few examples, but they highlight the important point that in a workplace that lacks explicit standards or processes, well-developed relationships between writers and editors become part of the means for managing the problems that might arise from the diversity of work styles. Pairings between unfamiliar writers and editors can be costly if the “internalized conventions” of the social world, which Howard Becker suggests are necessary for organizing cooperative activity, are too heterogeneous for members to easily cooperate. The risk that new writers present justifies their comparatively low rates of pay—if everything goes south for reasons the editor couldn’t foresee, the magazine’s financial exposure is at least somewhat contained. But familiar writers can be invaluable if they reliably deliver what the editors expect, without surprises. For this reason, editors who move from one magazine to another will often take at least some of their quiver of writers with them, if only on an informal basis, and these kinds of established relationships are a large part of the appeal of an applicant for an editorial vacancy because they supply editorial routines in addition to potential stories.

Considering ideas

The sources of a magazine’s ideas often form a part of the magazine’s identity. Some magazines tend to be writer-focused, in the sense that most of the stories they end up publishing originate as pitches from writers following their own interests; other magazines tend to be editor-focused, and they tend to publish mostly stories that originated as ideas of the editorial staff. At a magazine that maintains a consistency of style in the feature well, it might be hard for freelance writers to pitch ideas that are likely to make appropriate stories without a costly editorial investment, so magazines in that category might prefer that the ideas originate in-house; more writer-focused magazines might rely more heavily on formal genres in the front- and back-of-

book sections to maintain a consistent identity in spite of a motley feature well. Moreover, weeklies might be more hard-pressed for ideas than monthlies, which can push a weekly magazine to lean more heavily on writers for their ideas.

Whatever the case may be, the editorial staff will commonly meet on a regular basis to discuss ideas and assignments. Many magazines will have a weekly or biweekly “ideas meeting” where editors bring either their own ideas or the ideas of their writers to the group as a whole for consideration. Some magazines have separate meetings among top editors to decide which of the ideas from the ideas meeting would be worth assigning. Some magazines have formal rules about editors bringing a certain number of ideas to the table for each meeting, while others will rely more on informal social pressure. In any case, the expectation that editors will bring at least a few ideas to these meetings on a regular basis puts some of the onus on individual editors to search for potential ideas the rest of the time, either by reading widely and following their own leads, or by taking advantage of their social capital by meeting regularly with writers to talk about their ideas.

Magazines also vary with respect to the form that ideas are expected to take at these meetings, especially if there’s a concern about inhibiting the free flow of ideas, but editors almost always prefer that ideas come with as much concrete detail as possible. “An editor wants to have a sense for what the story’s going to be, and the confidence that it’s going to be good,” one editor told me, “which means the more information, the more material, the better.” Another editor put it this way: “Ideally, you want somebody to come to one of these meetings with, like, here’s the idea, here’s the headline I’ve been envisioning, here’s the writer I think would be great on this, here are the potential obstacles, like, this person may be impossible to get, or perhaps we could do a writearound of this story.”

Many editors distinguish between ideas that come in the form of “topics” and ideas that come in the form of “stories,” where the latter includes many of the details that would allow an editor to envision the story in terms of what I’ve called an *aspirational structure*. The informal conversations that many editors have with their writers in between projects very often involve the transformation from topic to story. “Part of my job is to say, no, let’s say no to it, let’s not do that,” one editor told me. “What it does then is it forces them to go back—if they really want to do it—it forces them to go back and find the story.” Similarly, editors generally want an idea of how the writer will report the kind of story they envision, which means the writer must provide concrete details about things like what information various sources will contribute, who will appear as a character in the story, and how the reporter plans to secure access to them.

Regardless of how well-formed a pitch might be, ideas are usually developed collaboratively in idea and pitch meetings. A *Times Magazine* editor noted, for example, “Sometimes I have a half-formed idea but someone else will pick up on an aspect of it and help me shape it. Sometimes . . . you don’t know quite how a story can assemble itself around a subject, and bringing it to the meeting can help, because another editor will see the way in that you don’t see.”

These meetings are also one of the venues where magazine editors can collectively negotiate the identity of the magazine, by working out what it means for particular ideas to be or not to be appropriate for it. In discussing what makes an idea worthy of being assigned, many editors refer to the uniqueness or the angle the story takes in comparison to other stories and other magazines—“How can we differentiate this idea from all the other pieces out there?” Any perceived similarity to a published story at another magazine, newspaper, or website will be a major demerit for that idea; potential directions the magazine might go with it will emerge in explicit opposition to the approaches other publications have taken with similar stories. As an

example, some magazines will consider story ideas that are part of a larger public conversation that's keyed to current events. Editors might notice that other publications have been "writing the same things, and repeating the same canards" (Spiers 2005), or else cursory news stories might have been dribbling out on a news story without anyone assembling the pieces into a larger narrative. These are opportunities for a magazine to produce a story with a unique perspective or insight, even for a well-trodden story, and ideas meetings will be an opportunity for editors to hash out what the angle might be in any particular case.

Ideas meetings also provide more junior editors with a way of learning about the way that senior editors, and by extension the organization as a whole, approach stories in general. Most junior editors don't have the authority to assign stories independently, so part of developing the details of an idea in preparation for a meeting is thinking about how to anticipate top editors' likely reactions. In doing this, a junior editor might seek opinions from their peers about how to make the idea palatable to the top editors: "There's quite a lot of running around and canvassing opinion, like, how do you think we should couch this?" one *New Yorker* editor explained. Later, within the actual meeting, a junior editor gets to test their theories of top editors' reactions by watching how they respond to pitches from themselves and others. This can be part of the appeal of a meeting even if an editor doesn't have any ideas in hand: "They're actually pretty interesting to just sort of see how people's minds work," one editor pointed out to me. Effectively, top editors want junior editors to have free rein to pursue the writers they like and the topics they find interesting, the better to cultivate their enthusiasm for the work, but only so far as those writers and topics ultimately fall within the range of what top editors find acceptable for their magazine, so junior editors interested in pursuing their interests must learn the parameters of their top editors' tastes, and how to pitch those stories in ways that their top editors will be likely

to find interesting. “I think there’s a sort of give and take,” one editor explained. “It’s like they want me to feel like I’m doing my job and bringing in projects that interest me, but there’s also still a sense that I’m learning the magazine and sometimes my ideas aren’t right, that I’m still learning what really works.”

Choosing writers

Any number of considerations can contribute to a decision about whether or not to assign any particular piece. Common ones might include the depth of the idea (whether it warrants thousands of words), the presence or absence of general sociological interest or educational value, whether it deserves national attention, whether the story is dramatic or absorbing, whether the characters are compelling, what kinds of scenes will likely be available and how interesting they are, how excited the editor and writer appear to be about the project, what effect the story might have on its subjects, who the story might be likely to offend, whether the story might draw a lawsuit, what newspaper or other publications might say about it, the timeliness of the story, the chances of getting scooped by another publication, the fit with existing plans for upcoming issues, the likelihood of sufficient access panning out, and how much expenses are likely to cost. As well, if any of these types of concerns are identified, is there a plan for how they might be addressed in the reporting, the writing, or the editing?

A major consideration is almost always who will report and write the story. Editors rarely pitch an idea to their peers without a suggestion for who will write it, even if that means ceding the story to another editor who has a close working relationship with the appropriate writer. This is because the diversity of backgrounds and styles means that a story can take wildly different

forms if it were assigned to two different writers. An editor at the *Times Magazine* put it this way:

There are a lot of stories that fall into a grey area where if there was a good enough writer on them, you would want to read the story, but if there was just a mediocre writer on them, you wouldn't. . . . I would say that, an outsider would probably be surprised to the extent to which we debate over the quality of the writer and the ability of them to pull off the kind of ambitious piece that we have in mind, as opposed to the story [itself].

This is the benefit of an editor's strong ties with their quiver of writers. Extensive knowledge of one's stable of writers' capabilities helps an editor to evaluate which writer might be appropriate for a given story. Some writers might be good at quickly drumming up a short opinion piece, some will be trusted to write a long reported piece from a war zone, some will be better at being funny or at rendering interesting characters. Writers also have different interest areas, and editors know that a writer has to have a certain level of interest for a story to sustain their attention long enough to persist in the reporting, and for their enthusiasm to come through in the writing.

Different writers respond differently to feedback, and have different preferences for the intensity of an editor's interventions; writers who are possessive of their work and resistant to being edited will likely be assigned some stories but not others. Different stories have different stakes, and a high-stakes story will require a reporter who the editors trust to bring back reliable, checkable material. "You get to know them very well; you work with them for years, and you feel okay about trusting them if you push them and they have proven to be correct and trustworthy," one fact checker told me.

The more familiar an editor is with their writers, the more resources they'll have to make an accurate evaluation about the fit between certain writers and certain stories. Editors talk about

“genius” or “bold” assigning as a matter of correctly forecasting the potential capabilities of a writer based on this familiarity. Being able to assign stories with “dart-like precision” is possible for a skilled editor, one explained to me, “because you’ve been cultivating that, because you have friendships with them, because you talk to them, because you know where they’re travelling for the summer, you know where they’re doing their sabbatical, you know that when they were twenty-five they wrote a weird book about travelling in New Mexico, you know, even if now they’re a professor of religion.”

Of course, an editor rarely has the privilege of assigning all their stories to trusted reporters with whom they have long-term relationships. For writers who are less well-known, an editor’s ability to “read methodologically” becomes paramount when they’re forced to evaluate a writer’s suitability based mainly or entirely on their pitches or prior clips. “The way to get an editor to trust you to do something is to have done it before,” one writer told me. Someone who has done well with a certain type of story in the past might be trustworthy for another story of the same type, but not necessarily for different types of stories. As well, editors often encourage writers to do a lot of reporting before pitching a story, and to put a lot of work into writing the pitch itself, because the pitch provides the editor with a preview of the way the writer might approach the proposed story, which can be considered along with the reporter’s prior clips to estimate the writer’s ability to handle the assignment. Even so, the relative poverty of information a new writer presents to an editor means that new writers will always be a greater risk, and new writers cannot be expected to be assigned demanding stories or paid at the same rate as more familiar writers for this reason. “You don’t want to lose a lot of money if it doesn’t work out,” one editor explained, “and if it does work out you can bump that person up for the next piece.”

Established writer-editor relationships also provide resources for exchanges of obligation over the long term. A writer who receives a plum assignment to a story they're very interested in might feel obligated later on to accept an assignment that's less appealing, both to meet the obligations that the earlier assignment seemed to set up, and to keep the editor obligated to seriously consider their future ideas. One writer gave me an example of this kind of back-and-forth:

With one in particular that I'm thinking of, when I finally agreed to do this thing, the reporting was really difficult, and I was in a difficult area at the wrong time of year, but now the editor feels guilty that I'm out there in this tough place, and so he's got all this buy-in and he's keeping track of me, and when I find a promising idea, it gets a full-throated endorsement.

These calculations of obligation mean that in the context of an established relationship, an assignment can often turn into a negotiation, where interpersonal obligations become leverage for pushing the story in a certain direction. An editor who wants a particular story to be written has to think about how they might be able to couch the idea in terms of the writer's obligations to them, or what kinds of assignments they might be able to offer in the future. A writer who agrees to take an assignment they're not crazy about to preserve good will might be able to take the story in a direction they're more amenable to by using the problems they anticipate having to deal with to heighten their editor's sense of indebtedness. The less established a writer is, the less of a relationship they have with their assigning editor, the less this kind of option will be

available to them. As one writer put it, “It depends on . . . what the perception of your status is, whether you can say no or not.”¹⁷

For these reasons, coming to a writer with a potential assignment can require a considerable amount of planning if the professional and interpersonal obligations of the relationship are to be correctly anticipated, such that the editor can have the assignment come off the way they envision without producing any lasting debts or resentments. “I think that writers forget that editors often feel anxious,” one editor told me. “Is the writer going to take this on? Can they? Are they going to fit it into their schedule? There is this sense of exchange. Even for a really prestigious publication, you want the writer to be excited, and you want to be the one to excite them and stimulate them.” Some editors will put off taking an idea to a writer until they know it’s a “slam dunk” both with the writer and with the top editors, out of a concern that the writer might turn it down, or that the idea might not pan out even though the writer is excited about it, or that the story they want written might change dramatically if they lose control of the negotiation. All of these negative outcomes of an attempted assignment can set up difficult problems that may complicate future assignments.

¹⁷Dan Baum was a *New Yorker* contract writer who split from the magazine when his contract came up for renewal in 2007; several years later, he posted a Twitter thread explaining his relationship with the magazine (2009). Considering himself at the “top of his game” around the time he was contracted, he reportedly felt justified in pushing back against David Remnick about the assignments Remnick was suggesting. To Baum’s surprise and consternation, his pushback was poorly received and it eventually led to his ouster. Baum’s case highlights that being at the top of your game at *Harper’s* and *Rolling Stone*, for example, doesn’t mean necessarily translate into deference from editors at *The New Yorker* without the prior work of building up those relationships. Seniority only works in the context of an established relationship; it’s not necessarily transferable.

Working together

Between the time a story is assigned and the time a draft is submitted, the nature of the interactions between a writer and their story editor vary dramatically depending on the relationship. Some writers, if they're experienced, will feel free to disappear into the field for several months with their editor's blessing, while others will keep in constant touch with their editors, checking in regularly to discuss the day's yield of material or prose. Whatever form the interactions take, the editor's responsibility usually hinges on monitoring the progress of the story and doing whatever is necessary to support the writer in producing the kind of story they have in mind, thus managing the risk that the assignment might deviate too much from what the editor—on behalf of their magazine—had in mind.

In many cases, an editor's intervention comes mainly in the form of encouragement, the repeated invocation to "keep going, keep going," as one editor put it. Both editors and writers commonly acknowledge that reporting and writing can be an isolating experience in some ways; the reporter might spend long periods of time in foreign places surrounded by relative strangers, and the writer might spend long periods of time in whatever low-stimulus environment best suits their ability to produce, and in these situations, the editor can be an important source of human connection and support. "I think keeping in touch throughout is really important," one editor explained to me, "because I think writing is lonely and it is really helpful to feel like someone is checking in on you." Sometimes this support involves managing a writer's neuroses and insecurities. Another editor explained, "A lot of editing is getting the writer to a place where her or his anxiety dissipates, and then they can begin to work clearly again. Sometimes it's talking them through a problem in the story, and sometimes it's just, I don't know, recognizing the ways in which they freak out and turning the dial." John McPhee, for example, described in an

interview with the *Paris Review* his experience of reaching a nadir of self-confidence while writing *Encounters with the Archdruid*, which coincided with a difficult divorce. By his account, he read his entire 60,000-word manuscript to his editor over the course of several phone calls. “I was so lacking in confidence that I needed to have somebody say, Yeah, yeah, go ahead. And he said, Yeah, yeah, go ahead” (Hessler 2010). In this kind of exchange, the line between a professional and a personal relationship often blurs, but an editor has a clear professional interest in helping their writers overcome whatever emotional issues might get in the way of their productivity.

At the same time, an editor must be careful that their support does not evolve into indulgence, because “reporting and writing pretty much fit into the time you allot for them,” as Calvin Trillin notes (Boynton 2007, 399). A reporter might continue reporting indefinitely in pursuit of a feeling of security about the accuracy and thoroughness of their material, and part of an editor’s job is to ensure that a draft gets submitted in a timely manner.

In other cases, an editor will make specific practical interventions that contribute to the development of the form that the story takes—whether it’s a matter of pushing for additional sources of material, discussing the outcome of specific interviews or other avenues of research, encouraging critical thinking about the material being gathered, or discussing practical or logistical strategies for generating the kind of material they still need. Working out problems as a pair can trigger the discovery of solutions that neither part would have been able to generate on their own. Following the changes to the provisional structure over the course of the project allows an editor to guide it in the direction they want it to go if it appears to be going astray, or to evaluate whether new directions that are appearing as possibilities are worth pursuing, or, if necessary, to cut the project off before the reporter and the magazine have invested too much in

it. This way, editors can avoid encountering surprises late in the process that might throw it off in disruptive or expensive ways. “Sometimes after a story is written and while you’re editing it, you’re talking to a writer and they’ll tell you something that’s so interesting you kind of can’t believe it wasn’t in the story,” one editor described, as an example. Speaking to the writer on a regular basis allows the editor to think the project through in parallel with the writer so the range of opportunities for tailoring the story to their needs, and the needs of the magazine, can be kept in hand.

Editing Stories

Taking account of reactions

In general terms, editors can be distinguished from lay readers on the grounds that they have a greater facility in thinking through and talking about text than mere readers. Whereas a lay reader who comes across a difficult or boring passage might just skip to the next page, an editor must produce some kind of account of why that passage was difficult or boring, to address their attention to aspects of the text whose revision might provide a solution. Robert Gottlieb describes his typical process like this:

I read a manuscript very quickly, the moment I get it. I usually won’t use a pencil the first time through because I’m just reading for impressions. When I reach the end, I’ll call the writer and say, I think it’s very fine (or whatever), but I think there are problems here and here. At that point I don’t know why I think that—I just think it. Then I go back and read the manuscript again, more slowly, and I find and mark the places where I had negative reactions to try to figure out what’s wrong. The second time through I think about solutions—maybe this needs expanding, maybe there’s too much of this so it’s blurring that. (MacFarquhar 1994)

Making the step from the first read, in Gottlieb's example, where the reader merely has reactions to the text, to the second read, where the reader accounts for those reactions in terms of how the text works, is something many editors would probably claim they share as a defining characteristic. One editor described it to me this way:

Where does the heat of the story lie for you and where does it go cold? If you can reduce it to that then you're just a reader responding to it, right? You're like oh, somehow when I hit this section it flat-lines. . . . And then you can start to ask, well why? What's happening here? And in that moment you're acting like an editor.

In both steps the editor's implicit reaction as a reader provides the basis for identifying problems and developing solutions. Insofar as the editor identifies problems with the text on the basis of their intuitive impressions, textual problems are not exactly inherent to the text itself, but rather they emerge when the editor encounters text in the context of whatever background knowledge they happen to have, not just about the "topic" of the text but about how stories work in general and how stories work at their magazine in particular.

As I described in the last chapter, writers generally attempt to organize their drafts so that readers will make sense of them in the "correct" way, so that the impression they come away with will be close to the impression that the writer intended to communicate, and they do this by organizing and signposting the text with clues that provide adequate grounds for making sense of the text in a particular way. Individual textual elements provide a means for making sense of the text as a whole, and the text as a whole (or at least the portion already encountered) provides a means for making sense of particular elements. Consider this anecdote a reporter related to me:

A friend of mine who is a *New Yorker* writer wrote to me and said, ‘I realize that I’m not very good at physical description. How would you describe this person?’ And she sent me two pictures of this guy she was writing about. And I actually wrote back and said, ‘I can’t do this in a vacuum, because . . . so much of my ideas about physical description have to do with my feelings about a character. . . . I couldn’t actually provide you with a neutral physical description of this person because it would have everything to do with, like, is this person a sympathetic character to me? Does this person have to be a sympathetic character in this piece? Why would I or somebody else feel sympathetic toward this person?’ So there’s no way to make any one of these decisions without involving all of the other decisions, which is why it’s necessarily an experimental process of creating that gestalt.

Organizing the text successfully means that the clues, as they’re encountered, appear to seamlessly coalesce into a coherent, consistent whole—the physical description of a character, for instance, rather than being an objective description of their appearance, has to appear consistent with the role the character plays in illustrating the topic that the story is about. Any part of the text that appears to conflict with the impression the reader is developing as they go along will likely jump out as a problem as an editor makes their way through the text.

The easiest way to think of this is in terms of a story’s internal consistency. If a writer introduces a setting in section one, and then returns to that setting in section three, any inconsistency between the descriptions of the settings will appear to the editor as a problem. Similarly, if a character is described as having certain traits in section one and they take an action in section three that seems inconsistent with those traits, that will likely be flagged by an editor as a problem. The problem in both cases is that the text fails to provide the right contextual clues for the reader to easily derive a sense of the underlying pattern that the text is purported to be a

document of; it may or may not be true that the character both has those traits and took that action, but selecting some different traits, or including an intervening scene that shows how those traits changed or that explains why the action might deviate from the traits, might provide better grounds for the reader to understand the action as part of the same underlying reality.

The interrelatedness of story elements means that problems are not localized to the particular words that jumped out to the editor as red flags, nor would a solution necessarily involve addressing those words directly. Even if the editor identified the problem when they came across the action in section three, a change to the characterization in section one might be preferable to changing the description of the action in section three, if that action seems particularly pertinent to establishing the point of the story. In the same way, the revision of a specific element can have a cascading effect on other elements that are linked together by a reality they're perceived to illustrate as an ensemble. As a result, commitments a writer or editor has to certain scenes or details can constrain the kinds of changes they'll consider throughout the rest of the text. The following exchange is fairly typical:

A lot of times, I'll get a ten-thousand word manuscript from a writer for a piece that can only be 6000 words long, and I'll send it back to them and say, you know, here's the rough 6000-word cut of this that I would do; and then sometimes the writer will come back to me and say, "Oh God, I really miss this section about so and so, I think it's really important because such and such." And then sometimes I'll look at it and say, "Okay, you're right; maybe what you should do if you include that is you should cut this instead because it serves the same function," or maybe like, "Oh, I see if you feel like that's the real emphasis of the piece, then maybe that means that this other theme doesn't really merit inclusion anymore."

A section that appears irrelevant because the editor perceives the story to be about A might appear indispensable to the writer, who feels the story is about B, and if they wish to preserve that section, they have to convince the editor that the text is actually a document of B by demonstrating how that section, in conjunction with the others, contributes to that gestalt. But the way the editor reads the text as a document of gestalt B may suggest that a different section is irrelevant, and in support of cutting that section, they have to convince the writer how gestalt B might be generated without the support of that section—especially if the writer feels *that* section is important for documenting gestalt B rather than gestalt C.

This is the reason several editors explained to me the necessity of coming to some kind of agreement about the gestalt *in general* as a means for negotiating changes to *particular* textual elements: “It fundamentally comes back around to this question constantly of, like, what is the story really about? What is it that we’re really trying to say?” A clear idea of the underlying story the article is documenting suggests to a competent reader what kinds of elements might be necessary, or what kinds of elements might be superfluous, and this is the basis the writer and editor use to negotiate difficult decisions about what to cut or revise in any particular case.

Internal features of the text supply only some of the editor’s means for evaluating the plausibility or propriety of any given textual element. The editor’s own experience, their acquired knowledge about the world, also provides them with resources to evaluate the consistency of any textual element with the underlying reality it documents. An editor’s reactions are often commonsensical in a way that’s incumbent on that particular editor’s sense of what’s common, independently of what they’ve already learned from the text they’re editing. If an editor happens to know something about military history, or rates of HIV infection, or masonry

construction, that knowledge will surely influence their judgment of the plausibility of any textual element having to do with those topics.

This means that the developing gestalt builds on the intersection of the reader's prior knowledge with the contextual clues within the text that they've already encountered. A word will "seem" wrong or a phrase will "feel" untrue because it makes a suggestion about the underlying reality that's at odds with something the story set up earlier, or with something the editor already knows, or both at the same time. The following example, a query from the *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross on a draft of John Hersey's story "Hiroshima" (August 31, 1946), in which Hersey describes Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge's encounter with a victim of the bomb, illustrates this point:

13. Should be said that one of the other Fathers identified the wound as being a severed artery, or such. The author shouldn't just say it himself. But was it an artery? The man went on and on living for hours, and I've always thought that an unattended artery would kill a man in short order. Maybe they got it bound up somehow, but story doesn't say so. It doesn't come to think of it, even say they tried. And, important point, here the man is "terribly pale", from bleeding. He reappears several times in the story with no mention of his complexion at all and then sway [sic] over on Galley 15 (15a) he's only awfully pale, which doesn't show much progress in lack of pigmentation. Maybe he shouldn't be quite so pale here. (It doesn't sound like artery to me.) (Mr. Ross's notes on "Reporter - Some Events at Hiroshima - Part II" August 6, 1946, from the NYPL *New Yorker* records, Notes on Writings 1946, Box 39)

In this query, Ross brings in his prior knowledge about what a severed artery typically involves to come to the judgment that the man living for hours seemed implausible; at the same time, he observes that prior parts of the story failed to supply the necessary clues that would allow the

readers to understand that the man living for hours and hours is consistent with the fact that he suffered a severed artery. Ross's conflicted understanding of the developing gestalt leads him to flag specific textual elements, like the phrase "terribly pale," as potential problems. Importantly, the description of the man as "terribly pale" has no inherent truth or falsity, nor is it inherently problematic; nor, indeed, would a solution to the problem even necessarily involve that particular phrase. Instead, Ross's attention was drawn to that phrase because of how it appeared to deviate from the developing gestalt.

The role of commonsense knowledge in making sense of a gestalt highlights how easily different editor's readings of a particular text can differ. The text itself never provides a sufficient array of contextual clues to constrain the interpretations of every possible reader, because the text always relies on the reader to supply some of their own background knowledge in making sense of it. Hamilton Nolan, writing for *Gawker*, suggested the following thought experiment to illustrate this point:

Go find a story published a few years ago in *The New Yorker*, perhaps America's most tightly edited magazine. Give that story to an editor, and tell him it's a draft. I guarantee you that that editor will take that story—well-polished diamond that it presumably is—and suggest a host of changes. . . . You would never find an editor who read the story, set down his pencil, and said, 'Looks fine. This story is perfect.' (2014)

This often means that communicating a desired change successfully involves providing the writer with the means to "see" the text in the same way the editor does, in spite of each person's idiosyncratic sense of what's common.¹⁸ A successful query is one that produces a change both

¹⁸Sociologists working in the phenomenological tradition might describe this as a matter of reproducing a *phenomenal field* or *salient field of social relevances* that renders the issue and the

the writer and editor can agree resolves whatever problem was observed, because it provides adequate contextual clues to constrain the range of readings that *both* people are capable of producing based on their respective stocks of tacit or explicit knowledge. As long as editing involves the input of multiple editors, editing must be a matter of trying to establish how the text permits a range of readings and trying to narrow that range as much as possible by accounting for the varieties of background knowledge potential readers might bring to the act of reading.

The input of multiple editors provides an intersubjective grounding for judgments about textual problems or proposed changes. It's always possible that any individual's reading is based more on their own idiosyncrasies than on the way a majority of a generalized readership might be likely to make sense of the text, and having more than one competent reader examining the text for impressions, it's possible to test the range of impressions that the text permits, at least to a limited degree. "There are certain things that are sort of six of one, half a dozen [of the other], and if it's a six of one half a dozen situation, the writer should get their way," one editor told me. "But if it gets flagged by my copy editor or the top editor or anyone else who's [also] having the same whatever the issue is, then we'll revisit it." Multiple readers flagging the same problem might be more convincing to a writer that the way they happen to read the text might be unlikely to be shared with many of their readers, or that an aspect of the text really is problematic even if they don't see it that way.¹⁹

solution visible to one's peers in the interplay between the particulars of the text and gestalt those particulars document. See, for example, B. Evans and Reynolds 2016; Fele 2008.

¹⁹MacKenzie Funk, one of the founding members of the reporter's collective Deca, which was modelled on successful photographer cooperatives like Magnum, described to me how their development of a production process involved what was effectively an experiment in group editing—for each piece the group published, a panel of about ten competent writers was available as a sort of focus group of readers. As it turned out, there were very few cases where the group split evenly on a particular editorial point. Most of the time, a majority of the readers identified the same problems or described the same impressions as readers. In those cases, it would be hard for a writer, or any dissenting editor, to argue that it was just the reader's

Negotiating changes

An editor's suggestions regularly conflict with a writer's commitments, but to preserve good will, to deepen the writer-editor relationship, the parties must usually work together to pursue a consensus rather than accepting the hurt feelings that would inevitably result from editing by fiat. Any queries, comments, or suggestions an editor makes to a draft have to be *made* acceptable to the writer, and the top editors, through negotiation. Both writers and editors tend to have strong feelings about their work, and any question from the use of a comma up to the thrust of an entire article can become points of vehement disagreement; reputations, livelihoods, and feelings of self-worth often hang in the balance.

In some cases, differences of opinion can lead to considerable ill will in the relationship. Writers complaining about their editor's interventions has been an abiding tradition in the literary world for decades; Harold Ross had already called it "the same old problem" in a 1949 letter to his editorial staff (April 26, 1949, from the NYPL *New Yorker* records, "Editorial Policies: Editing," Series 1 (Editor), Box 36). As an example, Renata Adler (1999) recounts writing a piece for the *National Review* that was changed so drastically, without her input, that she convinced the magazine to publish it under a pseudonym and then wrote a letter to the editor, under the same pseudonym, complaining about it. When Robert Caro's book *The Power Broker* was adapted into a three-part series for *The New Yorker*, the tense negotiations between him and William Shawn about how to cut it down devolved into a standoff that led to a gap between the publication of the second and third parts. "Those fights were not nice fights; they were bitter, angry fights," Caro later recalled (MacFarquhar 1994). From a writer's perspective, having some

idiosyncratic frame of reference that was leading to the perception of a problem: "This isn't one editor not getting my genius," Funk said, mimicking such a writer; "this is a lot of people I respect."

leeway to push back against editorial suggestions that feel wrong or damaging is an important part of a fulfilling relationship with an editor. Josh Dean, a freelance writer, says that “there are few more painful experiences for me than abiding by edits that I know are bad and wrong and making the story worse” (Holland 2016).

A few editors described to me the curious power dynamic that typically exists between a writer and an editor. On one hand, the editor is in a powerful position as a gatekeeper with the authority to print or kill the story that the writer’s livelihood depends on. On the other hand, as the source of the magazine’s meat and potatoes, the writer has the power to withdraw their work, along with their future work, if they feel mistreated. Both have an interest in publishing any given piece, but they can use their power to influence the form the printed story takes. This feature of the writer-editor relationship means that discussions about the text itself rarely comprise the sum total of an editor’s efforts to pull the text in the direction they want. Instead, an editor has to make their queries and suggestions carefully in light of the potential risk that heavy-handedness might complicate future projects. An editor has to win a lot of arguments for the sake of their magazine, but they cannot do so by being domineering or confrontational or otherwise risking their relationships with their writers. “It’s basically like trying to get something from somebody who is refusing to commit to you without clamming them up,” one editor told me. Every time an editor takes a stand, and refuses to consider a writer’s argument or complaint, they risk souring the relationship, and this can present difficulties down the line when deadlines are looming, space is limited, and other tasks are coming down the pipeline.

As I indicated in the last chapter, writers devote a great deal of emotional energy to the work of producing a draft, and the form it arrives at can be the endpoint of a protracted period of painful struggle; in many cases, the real risk for an editor is that the writer will feel that the

proposed changes trivialize that emotional investment by forcing the piece into a shape that's at odds with whatever the writer came to feel was important and imperative for the piece to get across. As one editor described it to me, no writer wants to feel like their editor is "tromping all over their stuff." Janet Malcolm suggested in an interview with the *Paris Review* that part of what made the *New Yorker* editor Gardner Botsford an effective editor was that "His changes on behalf of the reader always read as if the writer rather than some crass interloper were making them" (Roiphe 2011).

In most cases, to indicate to the writer that their emotional investment is being taken seriously, editors have to cede enough control to the writer that they'll be able to retain their sense of ownership over the piece, but not so much that the editor's responsibility to the magazine is compromised. If an editor can explain their complaint with enough fluency and passion that the writer comes to agree with them, for instance, they'll be able to get the change they want without alienating the writer or producing any lasting resentment. One editor described working with Bob Silvers at the *New York Review of Books*, who reportedly had a tendency to compile a "dossier" complete with news clippings and journal articles to make a case for the changes he was suggesting. "If you're going to oppose their idea or try to shape their idea," the editor told me, "you have to really make a strong case for why you want to do that. I feel like it shows utmost respect for the writer and their piece if you do it that way." Another editor told me that instead of rewriting directly, he would write some intentionally bad copy, alongside a note saying, "like this, but better." This way he could express the nature of the desired change but leave it to the writer to make the change in their own voice. Another editor described this approach as a matter of "greasing the wheels": "Then they go, 'Oh yeah!' And then they're off."

Inevitably, an editor will be more successful in greasing the wheels if they're capable of accurately anticipating how a writer will respond to different kinds of feedback, so they can tailor their feedback accordingly. This is a point where an idiocultural arrangement with a writer, as a result of long-term collaboration, becomes an invaluable resource. Intimate familiarity with a writer's personality, working style, sense of humour, biography, social circle, and any number of other things allows an editor to calibrate their feedback to their writer's anxieties, commitments, and states of mind, the better to improve their chances of pushing the piece in the direction they want.

One way this matters is in predicting the kinds of changes a writer will abide, and the kinds that might make them riled up. If a writer has some sort of grievance about a particular stylistic thing, like the use of appositive clauses or em-dashes, this preference might come up as a point of contention early in a writer-editor relationship; but if it comes up frequently enough, an editor can recognize the limits of the writer's tolerance and suggest changes accordingly. One writer, in describing her relationship with her editor, noted that "some of the things he believes I've probably internalized, and other things that I used to beg for in the early days, he's probably just decided to let me get away with." Knowledge of these kinds of inclinations, on both sides, can also be used as bargaining chips, if there's an opportunity to negotiate a trade of elements they feel strongly about in exchange for elements they're willing to accommodate.

Another way it matters is in predicting the form of feedback that will be likely to make the most sense to a writer. In the same way that a draft might permit a range of readings, an editor's feedback can be similarly ambiguous depending on the writer's background, and what might be a clear directive for one writer might be nonsensical to another. Robert Gottlieb describes this problem:

If you are a good editor, your relationship with every writer is different. To some writers you say things you couldn't say to others, either because they'd be angry or because it would be too devastating to them. . . . One writer I worked with . . . got absolutely nothing out of the one meeting we had. Some time afterwards . . . he wrote something like: He told me to let it breathe. What does that mean? A completely useless, stupid remark. Now I knew exactly what I meant, and another writer would have known exactly what I meant, but the comment was useless to him. . . . My ways of communicating were never going to work with him. (MacFarquhar 1994)

The editor's way of communicating does not just concern what a writer is likely to understand, but also what they're likely to tolerate based on their temperament and their attitudes about being edited, and by that editor in particular; an editor with prior knowledge about a writer's temperament allows them to regulate their feedback so as to avoid triggering any animosity. One editor described to me, as an example, the importance of "gauging who's going to be able to take it and who isn't"; she stated that "there's a kind of writer—usually a well-known male writer—when I know I've got one chance." Knowing this ahead of time gives the editor a chance to prepare their queries to take as much advantage of that opportunity as possible, while similar preparation might be unnecessary with a writer who's more amenable to a collaborative back-and-forth. With writers who might be resistant to an editor's suggestions, appealing to the veto power of top editors can also be used to apply pressure if needed; an editor at *GQ* told me, "Sometimes I can say to a writer, 'I know you think that this is good, and I think it's probably fine, but [the EIC] Jim Nelson's not going to—he's going to hate this, or this isn't going to fly, or whatever.'"

Ultimately, the more prior knowledge an editor has of their writers' idiosyncrasies, the more effective they'll be in making a convincing case for whatever changes they think are necessary based on their commitment to the magazine and the genre. The more accurately they can predict their writer's capabilities, the less risk the magazine will be exposed to if the costs of reporting a story turn out to be wasted, or if the magazine is forced to print a three- rather than a four-leafed clover. The more clearly an editor and a writer can visualize the identity of the magazine, the more familiar they are with the EIC and the archives, the more successful they'll be in working the magazine into a form that readers can recognize as consistent and familiar, while also surprising them with "original" ideas and "creative" takes, issue after issue after issue.

CHAPTER 7: FACT CHECKING

In conventional terms, checking is a matter of ensuring that the factual claims in a magazine article are warrantable based on the empirical evidence. As much as journalists tend to speak about facts as discrete, hermetic units of knowledge, whose accuracy can be determined one by one, closer inspection of the details of checking practice suggests a different story: the meaning of a particular claim is contingent on the work a reader does to make sense of the piece as a whole in light of what they already know about reality.

The process is inevitably complicated by the range of readers who are likely to consume a magazine piece, each of whom has a particular stock of knowledge and a propensity to see the piece in their own particular way; the sense made of a fact depends on the endemic realities that supply the methods each reader uses to apply their knowledge to the act of reading. A member of the literary journalism world might be attuned to literary features like characterization or structuration; a subject might be looking to see that their story was reproduced accurately and faithfully; a specialist from a scientific field might be looking for a valid summary of their field's state of knowledge; a political figure might be reading in terms of potential help or harm the article might bring to their ambitions. If, as Berger and Luckmann suggest, the "man in the street" knows that his world "possesses such and such characteristics" (1966, 1), how will that knowledge accord with what's written in the text, for that reader and all the rest? Because of a magazine's relatively wide readership (compared to an academic journal, for instance), the criteria of warrantability are likely to be highly variable from one article to the next, depending on the topic and the characters depicted, and on what various readers might have to gain or lose from the persistence of certain claims on the public record. One person's innocuous mistake

might be another's existential crisis, and each person will respond accordingly to what they've read.

This means that a checker's job consists of trying to anticipate the gamut of methods readers might use to make sense of an article, and the range of possibilities for readers to overturn or undermine the piece's factual claims. A checker has to know, or at least figure out, the "rules" that are purported to govern the evaluation of factual claims within a *range* of social worlds represented by different cohorts of readers. They typically approach this task by breaking the piece down into discrete units, according to their knowledge of conventional sources and standards of credibility, and by testing each unit's ability to withstand various attempts at rebuttal or refutation, learning as they go which facts are too weak to be included and what kinds of changes might make them stronger. The more clearly a range of readers' sense-making methods at Time 2 can be theorized at Time 1, the more opportunities there will be before publication to work any ambiguity or weakness out of the text—to neutralize criticisms the moment they arise in the reader's mind, or else to prepare evidence of sufficient doggedness in pursuit of the truth that charges of libel will be indefensible. At stake in all this, of course, is a magazine's reputation for accuracy and fairness.

Why Bother with Checking?

The record

Most journalists in the world of magazines perceive a moral obligation to ensure that the facts they put into print are correct. Journalists are stewards of *the record*, which implies that their job is to record reality in much the same way that a tape recorder records sound. A tape that introduces lots of hiss into the recording will likely upset any listener who relies on the tape for a

faithful reproduction of the sound they weren't around to hear in person. For a journalist, in much the same way, working to produce a reliable record inevitably means doing a great deal of work before publication to ensure that factual claims will remain unassailable after they're printed—that they'll satisfy their reader's interest in the reality those claims represent—because avoiding criticism of one's factual claims is a large part of a magazine's method for building and maintaining its authority with respect to the public record. A magazine whose claims remain fixed after publication can be relied upon by readers developing their own accounts of reality—and importantly, as I've emphasized repeatedly, members of the magazine world *are* readers of magazine journalism. Producing a reliable public record is a moral imperative not just because it provides generalized readers with a means for learning about the real world, but also because journalists themselves depend on a reliable public record to produce their own accounts, which is their means for negotiating their position within the world of journalism and what that position permits them to do in the context of future projects.

In conventional terms, the idea of the record hinges on the Deweyan conception of journalism as a pillar of democratic governance. In order for citizens to make informed decisions about how they ought to govern themselves, they have to have available some kind of documentation of real conditions and events, both past and present, that are beyond the realm of their personal experience, which can serve as the evidentiary basis for their deliberations. As a democratic resource, the record needs to be reliable because it provides a means for a common, objective touchstone around which the populace can debate normative proposals for action, and as stewards of the record in this scenario, journalists are morally obligated to ensure the accuracy of the record because the public's democratic decision-making ability depends upon it.

For many journalists, this view of journalism's role in democratic governance underscores the risk of entering falsehoods into the record. Walt Harrington puts it this way: "When you make up a quote, fake a source, fabricate a scene, you aren't committing an individual act. You are committing a social act. You are ripping a small tear in the contract of trust that the public must have with journalists and . . . journalistic institutions" (2008, 498). A lack of trust in journalistic institutions means that communities are likely to become more insular, because they can no longer outsource their fact-finding and must rely more on whatever known quantities they have close at hand. In such a setting, journalism becomes an incursion on public debate rather than a resource, as the former *New Yorker* and *New York Times Magazine* fact checker Sarah Harrison Smith describes:

If authors and publishers let too many errors slip through, the presumption of the good intentions and integrity of the author—particularly the investigative reporter—will begin to disintegrate and the public will begin to wish that we had a libel law more like that of the United Kingdom, which presumes that a contested statement is false unless proven true by the defending author or editor. There, journalism is often regarded as an irresponsible profession for dilettantes, and cynicism runs high. . . . Checking can save the press's reputation from becoming tainted by cynicism when readers become hardened to errors, both large and small. (2004, 7)

From this perspective, stewardship of the record becomes a moral imperative with nothing less than the functioning of democratic society at stake.

In large part, the problem with letting errors slip through is that there's no independent way for a member of the public to evaluate the objectivity of a purported fact except through the reputation of the publication they found it in. In many respects, facts that appear in print gain

their authority more by virtue of their appearance in print than by virtue of the work that went into discovering them, which as I've mentioned, is delivered to most readers in a black box. Errors that make their way into print can, and do, circulate for years as facts, for no reason other than that they appeared in print. (Norman Mailer coined the term *factoid* in 1973 to refer to false claims that are widely accepted as facts merely because they were printed (Dickson 2014).) Because journalists working for powerful institutions—powerful by virtue of their reputation—run the risk of even their inadvertent falsehoods circulating as facts, their word ends up carrying much more power than they might be comfortable with, and decisions about what to put into print become morally hazardous. “If you work for a publication that’s generally trusted, you realize that if we print something, in many ways it will just become circulated as fact forever,” a *New Yorker* staff writer told me; “That’s why you have to be incredibly careful about getting it right.”

Errors are inevitable, and aside from doing what they can to avoid publishing errors in the first place, editors can try to attend carefully to correcting themselves after the fact, the better to preserve their reputation as conscientious stewards of the record. This responsibility is the principle that motivates apparently self-flagellating acts like the *Rolling Stone* publishing a *CJR* inquiry into their botched University of Virginia rape story (“A Rape on Campus,” November 19, 2014), in which the magazine published an account of a frat-house rape that was later revealed to have been fabricated by the story’s subject; or the *Wall Street Journal*, after discovering a columnist trading stocks he was promoting in his column, printing an inquiry into the incident on their front page; or *This American Life* inviting Mike Daisey back onto their show to atone for his sins after he duped the radio show into airing an account of his time at the Apple manufacturing plant run by Foxconn, which was later revealed to be a composite of real,

exaggerated, and fabricated details. The same responsibility is also behind the acrimony many print journalists direct at digital editors who correct stories online without any indication to readers of the change, making it difficult for readers to ascertain which version of events they were privy to or to feel confident that the document they're using as a touchstone really is held in common with their peers. "I do fear that it's going to be very hard to make the world work if there's no permanence like that," says the novelist Jonathan Franzen. "That kind of radical contingency is not compatible with a system of justice or responsible self-government" (Singh 2012).

The simple principle that the impact of a printed claim does not originate necessarily in the truth or falsity of that claim, but rather in the authority of the printed word and the institution's ability to trade on that authority, is at the heart of many journalists' discomfort with their purported power to generate truth, in a Deweyan sense, rather than just facts, in a Lippmannian one. Recall the point I cited earlier made by Gideon Lewis-Kraus: "Given our anxieties about what we can ever really know about another person, how can we ever have any confidence that the journalist's account deserves to become official? The best we can do is make sure the journalist is playing by the rules" (2013). Playing by the rules, and doing the "right" amount of legwork to check facts the way members of the journalism world feel facts ought to be checked, insulates journalists from whatever damage might result from the power of their printed word—whatever negative outcomes come to pass at least are a result of things being the way they are, rather than being a result of the journalist's questionable intervention between reality and its representation. Effective stewardship of the record means being scrupulous about learning, using, and enforcing the conventional practices that permit the distinction between facts and falsehoods to be maintained.

Reputation as capital

It's hardly within the scope of this dissertation to judge the impact of journalism on democratic society, and it's certainly not a foregone conclusion that the body politic cares much about objective facts. But as consumers of their own work, magazine journalists have a much more immediate interest in the reliability of journalism as an institution—it influences what it's possible for them to achieve in their own work. Not only do journalists rely quite heavily on other people's contributions to the public record as sources of information upon which they base their own accounts, but the reputation a magazine carries among a general readership provides a journalist with a wider scope of possibilities when it comes to access, influence, narrative experimentation, revenue, and many other things that might seem appealing. For many magazines that publish literary journalism, accuracy—which is to say, the persistence after publication of one's factual claims—is a major component of the organization's identity, both as an aspiration of the editorial staff and as a property perceived by the readership, which includes potential writers and editors, potential advertisers, and potential subjects. A magazine's good reputation means that relationships with people such as these begin on a prior basis of trust and respect, which can be a valuable asset in all kinds of interactions and negotiations a journalist or editor might engage in.

One way in which this reputation is particularly useful is in recruiting potential subjects, which is a topic I introduced in Chapter 4. Magazines with a reputation for fairness toward their subjects will have an easier time recruiting subjects, especially subjects that are wary of journalists because of negative experiences with other publications. I've explained in detail above that reporters tend to be very concerned, at multiple points in the process of reporting and

writing a story, about the potential impact their story may have on the subjects depicted in it, and they usually try to mitigate this impact by being as forthcoming as possible about the nature of their project, by trying to establish clear ground rules, or by offering pseudonymity if they perceive a risk to their subject's wellbeing. These measures, however, take place while the piece is in a very fluid form, and fact checking presents the magazine and the writer with an opportunity to consider the potential impacts of the story as it approaches a final, concrete form. By introducing the subject to their depiction before it appears in print, the editors can effectively test the subject's reaction before their capacity to manage the fallout—interpersonally, in print, or legally—is foreclosed. The head of checking at *The New Yorker*, Peter Canby, says that “I often think of the fact-checking process as setting off a series of controlled explosions, where it's much better to have people go off before publication than afterward” (2012).

Allowing subjects to respond to allegations about them before those allegations appear in print is commonly cited as a component of a reporter's or a magazine's obligations in the interest of fairness. *The New York Times* “Guidelines on Integrity,” for example, indicates that “when the criticism [in the story] is serious, we have a special obligation to describe the scope of the accusation and let the subject respond in detail. No subject should be taken by surprise when the paper appears, or feel that there was no chance to respond” (2008). The reporter Richard Ben Cramer put this more directly: “If you're going to have to fuck 'em, then you let them know man-to-man ahead of time how you're going to fuck 'em so they can be prepared” (Boynton 2007, 43). By giving subjects this opportunity, and having the story take account of that response if it hasn't already, the subject's potential concern that they were deceived or misled or taken advantage of can be assuaged before the unflattering claims reach a general audience. “It never feels to me like if somebody's pissed, they are right to be pissed because we were inconsiderate

of their point of view,” one editor told me. “As long as people feel like they've been honestly prepared for something, then they can be bummed about it, but they don't feel like you've screwed them.” At the same time, by incorporating the subject’s response into the text, the publication’s fair treatment of that subject can be *exhibited* before the general audience. Hence the stated goal of *The New York Times*, “to treat readers, news sources, advertisers, and others fairly and openly, *and to be seen doing so*” (2017, emphasis added). The general effect of these checking calls, over and above the mere checking of facts, is to preserve the magazine’s reputation for fairness and demonstrate to readers their adherence to standards of journalistic morality, so as to capitalize on that reputation in attracting readers, subjects, or advertisers.

As far as readers are concerned, a magazine developing a reputation for accuracy might seem largely like a negative action—a magazine’s sterling reputation usually comes from the avoidance of major errors over long periods of time. In practice, of course, such an achievement comes on the back of a great deal of hard work on the part of reporters, checkers, and editors, but this work is rarely available for public inspection. Mike Sager, a long-time writer for *Esquire*, compares the social contract between a magazine and its readers to an elevator inspection certificate:

It’s like when you go up in the elevator, and there’s a piece of paper that says the license for this elevator is in the manager’s office. That’s a contract. Well, this is the contract between the reader and the *Rolling Stone* journalist. That’s why the *Million Little Pieces* guy got so fucked by the masses when he broke the confidence. Because you don’t know what’s true or not. That’s why Janet Cooke, Jayson Blair and [Stephen] Glass are considered such high criminals. You have to be able to read this shit and know. (Green 2014e)

It might never matter whether there's an inspection certificate in the office until the elevator fails, in which case the existence or absence of the certificate is sure to come to light.

In much the same way, avoidance of errors becomes a proxy for robust editorial practices in the eyes of the general reader; there's no real way of distinguishing between a magazine whose avoidance of error is a result of deliberate editorial work and a magazine whose avoidance of error is just a fluke, at least until an error does occur and some of the magazine's inner workings get opened up for public inspection. This was the case when the *CJR* examined the editorial practices that prevented the *Rolling Stone* from confirming the story of their main character in "A Rape on Campus"; this was the case when Stephen Glass dramatized a nonexistent teen hacker for *The New Republic*, and was discovered to have gone so far as to build a fake website to mislead his editors; this was certainly the case when Janet Malcolm and *The New Yorker* were sued by Geoffrey Masson for what was purported to be a libelous depiction of his time as head of the Freud archives, and it was revealed that Malcolm had stitched together quotes from different conversations into long monologues. Editorial practices may be a black box for most readers, but when the box is opened, it best not be empty.

A magazine with a fabled fact-checking department has a lot to lose in cases of error or especially fabrication. In Geoffrey Masson's case against *The New Yorker*, the Ninth Circuit court's suggestion that the magazine ought to be held to a higher standard than "even daily newspapers" proved to be a liability when Malcolm's quote-doctoring was exposed. As the Supreme Court later indicated, "The work was published in *The New Yorker*, a magazine which at the relevant time seemed to enjoy a reputation for scrupulous factual accuracy. These factors would, or at least could, lead a reader to take the quotations at face value" (501 U.S. 496). Ben Yagoda, the historian of *The New Yorker*, suggested that incidents like Malcolm's quote

manipulation, along with other infractions like Alistair Reid's use of composite characters, also in the 1980s, led *The New Yorker* to deplete a lot of the "creative and commercial capital it had banked" (2000, 403). Peter Canby, the magazine's checking head, has noted that readers regularly point out mistakes with explicit reference to the magazine's eroding reputation: "Often the mistake letters we receive explain that the letter's writer has been reading *The New Yorker* for years and he's never seen anything like this, that [William] Shawn and Harold Ross must be turning in their graves, that the writer didn't realize that as a cost-cutting measure *The New Yorker* had eliminated its fact-checking department, and did we know that there used to be fact-checkers in the old days?" (2012).

The point of fact checking, in simple terms, is to avoid criticism—to produce claims that remain unassailable even after they're printed—as a form of insurance against these capital losses. Published work that doesn't draw any criticism, or at least that avoids criticism for the factual basis of its truth claims, effectively meets the bar for accuracy. A magazine whose claims "stand" will maintain its place among readers as an authoritative record of the events it describes, thus preserving their capacity to spend what capital they've accrued on future projects. This means that magazines must prepare, often with great effort, to defend the claims they put into print against every conceivable criticism, by producing in the course of the reporting and editing stages of production an account of where all their claims originated and why those sources were judged to be reliable. "We try to connect the story to the general world," says Peter Canby (2012). Ideally, indications of the sourcing will be encoded into the piece itself, especially for contentious claims, so that readers will be less likely to object. If they do, the preparation will doubtless prove valuable for defending any disputed claims, whether casually in an email or formally in a court of law.

Identifying Facts

Changing conventions

The trick in defending the magazine's claims against criticism, of course, is anticipating possible criticisms, which is not an easy task when the scope of the generalized readership is uncertain and when certain readers within that readership are almost certain to have much more expertise in a story's topic than the reporter or the fact checker. Reporters rely on the expertise of others to make sense of the empirical worlds under examination, but outsourcing expertise always leaves the reporter exposed to criticism from other experts who disagree with the first experts, especially if it's for reasons the reporter has a hard time understanding because of their comparative lack of expertise. Usually, the best a reporter or fact checker can do is become as much of an expert as they can in the short period of time they have available, and not just in terms of the "content" of the facts, but also in terms of the way researchers of all stripes might typically go about rendering facts from the empirical world. Knowledge of how researchers normally, conventionally, or ordinarily find and confirm facts gives a fact checker an idea of the range of possible ways a reader might try to overturn one of the magazine's claims, and this knowledge is a prerequisite for devising fortifications against such an attempt. Of particular concern are the readers with the competence to read methodologically, who are likely to ask, "How did the reporter come up with *that* fact? What's the reporter's source for *that* claim?" A clear idea of how readers like this conceptualize the reporting and editorial process gives a checker some resources for thinking about potential factual disputes and preparing for them, which means that a checker must look inside the black boxes of knowledge production at every

opportunity, and watch how people respond to the same contents whenever they get the chance to see them.

The correct approach to ensuring factual accuracy has never been unanimous, either over time or from magazine to magazine at any given time. Though the advent of fact checking is usually attributed to *Time* magazine and *The New Yorker*, both of which implemented checking departments in the 1920s (e.g., Shapiro 1989, 4; Yagoda 2000, 202), the actual practices denominated by that term at those magazines and others have been very fluid, evolving alongside the practices and conventions of journalism in general. What checkers check, and what counts as fabrication rather than just an unremarkable Latourian translation from one form to another, has always been relative to the internalized conventions of members of the literary journalism world at any given time. Like Michael Schudson (1978) observes with respect to the norm of objectivity, which only emerged as a journalistic value in the United States toward the middle of the twentieth century, reporting and storytelling techniques that were once commonplace and unremarkable in the first half of the twentieth century would be grave transgressions today. Some of the most canonical pieces from the early *New Yorker*, for instance, were revealed to be based on composite characters that the authors argued were typical of the times and places they were reporting from. Joseph Mitchell's character Mr. Flood, an elderly, yarn-spinning retiree with a plan for living to 115, was stitched together from a variety of old men whom Mitchell encountered in his time spent at the Fulton Fish Market in the Bronx in the 1930s. When Mitchell revealed his composite technique in the book version of his Mr. Flood essays in 1948, Ben Yagoda points out, "no one complained" (2000, 401). The *New Yorker* editor David Remnick later observed that "what is now a hanging offense was then a risible misdemeanor" (2004).

At the time, techniques like constructing composite characters would not have occurred to a fact checker to check because a composite character was still within the realm of acceptable practice in the production of nonfiction. When that black box was opened in 1948, no one complained. This shifting standard can be seen clearly in the case of Truman Capote's book *In Cold Blood*, a narrative account of a quadruple murder in Holcomb, Kansas, billed by Capote as the first "non-fiction novel," which was published as a four-part series in *The New Yorker* in 1965. A multitude of commentators have since questioned the "non-fiction" aspect of Capote's claim on the grounds that closer inspection revealed, for example, "the ways that Capote changed timelines, invented scenes and exaggerated the role played by Detective Dewey, his hero, among many other examples of fact-fudging, many of them departing from Capote's own 6,000 pages of notes" (Hayes and Weinman 2016). This included a fabricated scene at the end of the book where Dewey encountered one of the victims' friends in a graveyard, which Capote later admitted he made up to satisfy his desire for a poetic ending that the real events never provided (Mendelsohn 2005).

In 2013, Ben Yagoda examined the checking documents for the magazine version of Capote's narrative that had been included in the New York Public Library's *New Yorker* records archive, and found that the checker responsible for the piece, Sandy Campbell, apparently did not have within his purview a responsibility for checking aspects of the narrative that Capote adjusted for Procrustean reasons. "Fact checking, as Campbell and *The New Yorker* conceived it at that time, was mainly a matter of checking facts that pertained to dates, distances, spelling of proper names, and the like. . . . But verifying the 'nonfiction novel' aspects of the article does not seem to have been part of Campbell's brief," Yagoda says (2013). At the time, Capote's account didn't need to be buttressed against the kinds of criticism it might encounter today. It was only

later, in light of a greater range of public conversations questioning the bounds of acceptable modification to a reporter's empirical materials, that the publication of Capote's account could clearly be seen as a moral transgression.

By *public conversations*, I mean events where a public reaction to specific editorial practices, and their potential ramifications, can be observed for anyone who cares to look. This is meant as an inclusive term, referring to just about any evidence an editor might find as to the way readers might attempt to contest a magazine's claims. For example, Kathy Roberts Forde recounts an early confrontation between *The New Yorker* and the architect of a building that had been critiqued in a short, pseudonymous article published October 16, 1926. Under libel laws at the time, the burden was on the defendants to prove the truth of the claims they printed. When the architect sued, *The New Yorker's* editors found themselves in the awkward position of having to defend as *true* claims like, "Every proportion appears to be unfortunate." Forde recounts the correspondence between the managing editor, James Thurber, and the magazine's counsel:

"Whether the article could have such an application and meaning as charged by the plaintiff would ordinarily be a question of fact for the jury," the lawyer explained.

"Therefore, we should be prepared [sic] to prove, by expert testimony, that the design of the building was without proper proportions and grace and that the facts stated with respect to the design were true." *The New Yorker* realized that proving the truth of what was clearly an opinion was a nearly impossible task. (2008, 91)

The need to prepare defenses for libel complaints like this one influenced the *New Yorker's* approach to editing, and, after settling with the architect, they began reading all copy for libel risk before publication. After the landmark libel case *New York Times Co. vs. Sullivan* in 1964 (376 U.S. 254), which editors across the country followed intently, the burden of proof was

shifted to the plaintiffs, who now had to demonstrate that any false claims were printed with “actual malice” to reach the bar for libel. After that decision, magazines like *The New Yorker* could adapt their checking practices accordingly by preparing, in the course of editing, to defend themselves against a charge of “reckless disregard for the truth,” rather than preparing to defend the truth of the claims themselves.

In a similar way, Geoffrey Masson’s suit against Janet Malcolm and *The New Yorker* had a palpable influence on the way magazine editors could approach the question of acceptable modifications to a subject’s quotes. Malcolm’s stated justification for her use of composite quotes hinged on her preservation of the original statements’ meaning: if altering the wording or stated location of a series of conversations “doesn’t change the meaning,” she stated from the witness stand, “it’s O.K. to do it” (Gross 1993). In reversing the appellate court’s decision to block a jury trial, the Supreme Court acknowledged that some modification to a subject’s quotes is often a necessary part of journalism simply because people don’t often speak in complete sentences. But they agreed with Malcolm that the acceptability of a modification to a quote would depend on a commonplace judgment about how well the subject’s original meaning had been preserved:

Technical distinctions between correcting grammar and syntax and some greater level of alteration do not appear workable, for we can think of no method by which courts or juries would draw the line between cleaning up and other changes, except by reference to the meaning a statement conveys to a reasonable reader. . . . If an author alters a speaker’s words but effects no material change in meaning, including any meaning conveyed by the manner or fact of expression, the speaker suffers no injury to reputation that is compensable as a defamation. (501 U.S. 496)

Predicting what a “reasonable reader” might make of a quote could never be a straightforward task, but the case provided magazine editors with at least some information they could use to evaluate the work they were producing in their own offices.

Largely as a result of the Masson case, composite quotes became unacceptable at most fact-checked publications (see Yagoda 2000, 402). Forde argues that in the Joseph Mitchell era, “the conventions of daily journalism were not as entrenched in the culture [of magazine journalism] as they later came to be” (2008, 42), and journalism may not have been under as much widespread public scrutiny at the time. Ben Yagoda in *About Town* noted that “the lines between fact and invention had traditionally been quite blurry” at the time (2000, 401), both in American journalism in general and at *The New Yorker* in particular. But as journalism became increasingly professionalized (e.g., Frith and Meech 2007), and as the literary variant associated with *The New Yorker* and other magazines moved toward the mainstream of American high culture, acceptable standards evolved alongside. By the time Malcolm was revealed, very publicly, to have stitched together composite quotes, Forde points out,

the journalism community exploded with criticism. Something had changed in the professional culture of journalism, and conventions that were practically a tradition in certain kinds of *New Yorker* fact writing (though certainly not mandated or even formally articulated)—the use of composite characters and compression, for example—had become anathema in mainstream journalism. (2008, 43)

Being able to see how people responded to the disclosures of the Masson case gave editors a view of the risk they might be taking by permitting their reporters the kinds of leeway in quoting that Malcolm enjoyed, and by applying those lessons to their future work they could mitigate that risk.

In the same way, it goes almost without saying that the introduction of the internet into the mix has had a clearly discernible impact on the way that editors have to think about facticity. Digital resources like those provided by LexisNexis, which allow reporters and editors to search through troves of sorted and indexed public records, have provided fact checkers with the ability to source and confirm factual claims in a way that would be impractical or impossible with analogue records. While checkers still have the same problem of evaluating a source's credibility as before, the number of sources that are easily available has ballooned, and so have the practical possibilities of checking—what it's possible to do with only one checker, or in only one week. But this is a double-edged sword for a magazine, because digital resources are not exclusively the property of fact checkers. As one reporter put it, "Journalists can learn so much more so quickly than ever before just by Googling. However, so can readers—so if we have errors, they will be uncovered and publicized, sometimes almost instantly." As I'll explain in more detail in a moment, anticipating potential readers' practical capacity to produce a contradictory claim by doing their own research is and has always been a foundational part of the work of developing claims that can withstand this kind of scrutiny.

Magazine editors attempt to publish stories that are true, but their judgment of what it's acceptable to refer to as "true" always hinges on the perceived standards of their social world. Only by predicting how other members will be likely to apply those standards can journalists effectively insulate themselves, prospectively, from criticism; and successful insulation from criticism gives a magazine a chance to build the reputation it needs to be widely known as a credible source of facts on the public record. As much as editors might try to apply what they perceive as the existing rules of warrantability to the particular claims in each piece, their predictions of how readers will evaluate their adherence to the rules is only ever visible in

retrospect. A “correct” application of the rules is exhibited by the positive valence of an audience’s response—the claims stand for posterity rather than being refuted. An incorrect application, on the other hand, might lead to criticism, censure, legal bills, and an erosion of credibility. In either case, the outcome provides members of the journalism world with evidence of what the extant rules are. Predicting potential criticisms “correctly,” and adjusting the work so that the text itself anticipates and neutralizes those criticisms, may produce a material record of reality, but also provides a resource for future judgments—on the part of individual members at the same publication and others—of what the world considers acceptable practice and what it doesn’t.

The checker's regress

Being effective in anticipating readers’ potential criticisms often hinges in large part on the checker’s ability to estimate what kinds of sources readers are likely to consider reliable, because factual criticisms are likely to either contest the reputability of the sources the magazine chose to use or to turn up contradictory information that originates with sources the reader judges to be more reliable than the ones used by the magazine. Because reporters and checkers are almost always outsourcing expertise to others, evaluating the truth of facts themselves often takes a backseat to evaluating the sources of them.

Conventional rhetoric about fact checking often enjoins checkers to trace information back to its original source. But what does it mean for a source to be “original”? In her fact checking handbook, the former *New Yorker* and *New York Times Magazine* checker Sarah Harrison Smith (2004) uses an excerpt from a John McPhee book on the Pine Barrens aquifer (*The Pine Barrens*, 1968) to illustrate sourcing for what she considers “straightforward” facts.

McPhee refers in his book to the Neversink, Schoharie, and Croton Basin aquifers. To ensure that the names are correct, Smith suggests that a checker might be inclined to look up the names in a good atlas, like the *Columbia Gazetteer of the World*. But considering that the names in the gazetteer likely came from, for example, the U.S. Board of Geographic Names, which might have been adopted from the U.S. Geological Survey, or from a proposal submitted to the Domestic Names Committee, based on a name that was in use among local residents for an indeterminate amount of time, it's not necessarily clear that the *Gazetteer* is an original source for the name. McPhee claims that the Pine Barrens aquifer is at a constant temperature of 54 degrees Fahrenheit, and Smith suggests that this figure can likely be found in a USGS report. But can a checker be sure that the figure printed in the report was the correct one? Which hydrologist measured the water temperature? Was their instrumentation working correctly? Was the measurement transcribed correctly from their notes, or checked against a measurement by a different hydrologist or in a different location?

The difficulty multiplies with facts that have an obvious element of subjectivity. For example, Susan Shapiro (1989), who conducted a detailed study of magazine fact checking in 1986 and 1987, points out the difficulty of checking comparative statements that claim a character did something more, harder, or earlier than anyone else:

One checker I observed paused at the statement that no one had ever before tried to do something. "How can you possibly know that?" he asked. After checking all the reliable sources that suggested that—whether or not anyone had tried—no one had succeeded, and after some informal epistemological soliloquies, the checker decided he was "picking nits" and dropped the matter. . . . While these assertions may be relatively objective with respect to the salient actor (that he or she has accomplished something x number of times

or is of a given size), the comparative portion draws upon data regarding the status of every possible counterpart—and considerably clouds the possibility of assessment. (27)

Generalizations like “fans of a football team felt betrayed by the sexual misconduct of one of its players” (11), or a comparison between the organizational form of a sports franchise and the United Way (11), present similar difficulties, because the sources of the information can’t easily be specified. In cases such as these, the idea of tracing the claim back to an *original* source quickly approaches impossibility.

Because in most cases a checker has available as resources only traces of other people’s work, they inevitably encounter a regress in tracing the origin of a factual claim back to an original source. With a nod to Harry Collins’s notion of the *experimenter’s regress* (1985), this *checker’s regress* occurs in the absence of any “universally agreed criterion” for establishing the reliability of a source, whether for its originality or any other standard. The *Columbia Gazetteer*, for example, might be so widely accepted as a reliable source of geographic names among members of the magazine’s projected readership that it will be irrelevant what practices the cartographers used to verify the names; a reader disputing the *Gazetteer* based on information prior to the Domestic Names Committee might have a point—if, for example, the feature had an indigenous name for thousands of years before the USGS arrived on the scene—but it’s extremely unlikely that readers at large would impugn the magazine for relying on a source as reputable as the *Gazetteer*. Similarly, rather than tracing the aquifer temperature all the way back to the physical measurement, which might involve determining whether the thermistors in question were calibrated and used correctly, the checker can end the regress by going only as far back as a source—such as the USGS—whose reliability appears to be recognized widely enough that its determination of fact will not likely raise any eyebrows.

This means that a checker's judgment of reliability depends on their knowledge of how members of the social worlds that constitute their audience will tend to *conventionally* judge reliability, and in many cases it's members of specific social worlds—cartographers and geographers, in this case—whose conventions of warrantability have to be considered. A “universally” agreed-upon source like the USGS or the *Gazetteer* will always be preferred as a source, but more obscure sources, if they are to be used, have to be justifiable in terms the audience will understand and accept. The judgment of reputability, in other words, is dependent on acquired ideas about what will be needed to mount a defense of the sourcing in terms of the conventions of the relevant social worlds, in case the need arises.

Knowledge of which sources are conventionally reputable and which aren't is an important resource for a checker's day-to-day work. Sarah Harrison Smith's guidance in evaluating the reliability of a reference book depends on this knowledge: “Consider the reputations of the author and publisher. What does the author description say about the writer or editor? Is the author affiliated with a university? Does she teach the subject about which she's written? Has she written on this subject before? Does the university have a good reputation?” (2004, 150). This is why Axel Pult, a fact checker for the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, highlights that a checker's familiarity with reliable sources is a qualification for the job: “In the German press, there's newspapers that are more reliable than others, and of course [this knowledge is part of] the qualifications of good fact checkers—to know the sources in his field and rely on these” (Silverman 2010). While knowledge of typical practices at a newspaper might be accessible to a fact checker just through personal connections, judging something like an academic journal in an obscure field might require layers of deferred reliability judgments—if

not the researcher, then the organization; if not the organization, then an expert familiar with the organization; if not the expert, then the organization the expert is a part of.

Rather than tracing every claim back to an original source, checkers can use their knowledge of the reputability of a wide variety of sources as a means for judging when the account they've produced is *good enough*.²⁰ In other words, the reporter and their checkers have to collectively do enough legwork in sourcing a fact that a potential critic would find it too costly, in time or effort or technical skill, to do the additional legwork it would take to produce an alternative account. If the checker finds support for John McPhee's assertion about the temperature of the Pine Barrens aquifer in a USGS report, this might be considered a sufficient amount of legwork if they judge it unlikely that someone else might have the wherewithal to go even further, by inquiring about the hydrologist's reputation among their peers, by securing copies of the hydrologist's notes to ensure they were transcribed correctly, by looking for an alternative account of the temperature in documentation from another organization, or—God forbid—by going to the aquifer and taking a measurement themselves. As long as every publication shares similar practical limitations, the checker does not have to worry too much about these possibilities; they only need to feel confident they did all the legwork any

²⁰The idea I'm proposing here has a counterpart in scientific practice. Andrew Pickering, in his book *Constructing Quarks* (1984), makes an analogous point with respect to high-energy physicists:

Experimental reports necessarily rest upon incomplete foundations. To give a relevant example, one can note that much of the effort which goes into the performance and interpretation of HEP experiments is devoted to minimising 'background'—physical processes which are uninteresting in themselves, but which can mimic the phenomenon under investigation. Experimenters do their best, of course, to eliminate all possible sources of background, but it is a commonplace of experimental science that this process has to stop somewhere if results are ever to be presented. Again a *judgment* is required, that *enough* has been done by the experimenters to make it probable that background effects cannot explain the reported signal, and such judgments can always, in principle, be called into question. The determined critic can always concoct some possible, if improbable, source of error which has not been ruled out by the experimenters. (6)

“reasonable reader” might be capable of doing, and maybe a little extra, so the likelihood of anyone doing even more becomes comfortably minuscule. Personal experience as a journalist, secondhand accounts from one’s peers, and public spectacles that open the editorial black box to inspection all help to calibrate a checker’s judgment of how much legwork is enough.

Inevitably, checkers and editors will err in their judgment of how much checking is enough. After printing a story, they will discover that someone else can produce a conflicting account by going to sources that they left unexamined or that are more widely accepted to be reliable. This is what occurred when *Washington Post* reporters began looking into the *Rolling Stone* story “A Rape on Campus” (e.g., Farhi 2014), or when *The Smoking Gun* started looking into the James Frey book *A Million Little Pieces* (Bastone and Goldberg 2006), or when *Forbes* reporters started looking into Stephen Glass’s *New Republic* story “Hack Heaven” (Penenberg 1998). In these cases, rival reporters succeeded in producing a conflicting account that included either a broader or a more conventionally acceptable network of sources, and in none of the cases had the original publisher prepared a sufficient account of their own that they could use to defend the basis of their original claims. In none of the cases did a reporter get to the bottom of the issue, epistemologically speaking, but the rival reporters did manage to produce accounts that cited a more expansive network of reputable sources—that enlisted, as Bruno Latour would say, a broader network of *actants* that helped to “tip the balance of force in their favor” (1987, 90). Just as scientists attempt to tweak the configuration of their supporting networks in anticipation of potential future critiques, so do journalists, and whatever network of sources withstands public scrutiny becomes the basis for the claims that ultimately remain on the record as facts.

Transparency about sourcing

Building a network of reputable sources helps the editorial staff to defend its account against a reader's attempt to dispute it based on their own network of sources. In many cases, editors will want to forestall a dispute altogether by encoding information about the sourcing into the text itself. Including information about sourcing effectively invites readers to look into the claims themselves, with the understanding that such an inquiry will confirm the magazine's original claims. With enough prudence on the part of the editorial staff about the use of reputable sources, a reader who can see where the information came from will ideally conclude that an attempt to dispute the account would probably be futile. Any time a reader is satisfied by the article's professed sources, and thus discouraged from disputing them, is another opportunity for the editors to avoid the risk of having to open the black box of the editorial process for inspection by readers.

Transparency about sourcing is closely linked to the commonplace idea that journalistic findings ought to be repeatable by any reader with the competence to read methodologically. The *New Yorker* reporter Richard Preston puts it this way:

The truth is that nonfiction writing, at least as I practice it, . . . borrows heavily from the scientific method, which is based on the requirement that a successful experiment have repeatable results. Journalists understand this because our work has to be subject to fact-checking and independent verification, which is exactly what a scientist expects when he reports his results. If a piece is accurate and has been properly reported, another journalist should be able to conduct the same interviews and arrive at a fairly similar result.
(Boynton 2007, 321)

In general, reporters prefer to avoid anonymous subjects for this reason: subjects are sources for a great deal of information, and including their name provides readers with the option of following up with them to confirm that they really did provide the reporter with the information they're credited with providing, or that they really did say the things they're quoted as saying. Even if readers never attempt these types of confirmation, the reporter's willingness to use a subject's real name signals their confidence that any attempt at verification would be successful. According to Gay Talese, "When I use a person's real name, I'm saying to the reader, You can check me out. . . . So many journalists and writers are liars. You know who they are. I wanted to distinguish myself from them" (Roiphe 2009).

In some cases, transparency about sourcing can be used as a gambit that shifts responsibility for certain facts onto the source that provided them. By crediting a fact to a source, the substance of the printed claim becomes the idea that the source said a certain thing, rather than that the certain thing is indeed a fact. If there's a dispute about what the source said, the magazine cannot be culpable—if the source did in fact say it—because, strictly speaking, they were correct about the fact that the source said it. This gambit is particularly useful in cases where there is some lack of certainty about the claim the editors wish to print. Rather than stating the fact outright, the editors can refer directly to the lack of clarity about that fact. Calvin Trillin puts this succinctly: "Unless what happened is absolutely indisputable, I usually try to indicate where I got the information" (Boynton 2007, 392). Using this kind of gambit makes clear to a reader where the editors decided to terminate the checker's regress. If a magazine claims outright that the Pine Barrens aquifer is at a temperature of 54 degrees, a competent reader might assume that the fact came from something like a USGS report, but they might just as well assume that it came directly from the hydrologist's notes or that it was simply made up. The transparency

gambit removes this ambiguity—the fact clearly came from the USGS, because it says so right there in the text.

I call this kind of transparency a *gambit* because including information about sourcing can easily involve a sacrifice of the smooth seamlessness of what is supposed to be a literary narrative. Instead of “this happened, and then this happened,” it’s “this happened, according to sources, and then this may have happened, although this other source disputes it.” The result, in Ben Yagoda’s words, is “ungainly prose” (2000, 328). These kinds of hedges are anathema to writers who consider their work in strongly literary rather than purely journalistic terms, because they break the fourth wall and jar the reader out of their immersion in the imagery of the narrative. Mike Sager, for example, complains about this kind of transparency to the *Nieman Storyboard*, on the grounds that reliable sourcing is supposed to be already implicit in journalistic writing:

The end of my life at the *Washington Post* came when I had a big fight with Bob Woodward’s second-in-command, with Walt Harrington at my side. I was trying to run dialogue. And he said, ‘How do you know this dialogue?’ So I told him. He wanted me to say, ‘He recalls he said’ and ‘She recalls she said’—and we both thought that was stupid, me and Harrington. And we argued against it because we got the notes, it’s here. Well, the newspapers wouldn’t do that but *Rolling Stone* would. . . . What rankles me is, ‘He told me.’ That’s like so much bullshit. Shut the fuck up! You know what? Shut the fuck up. That’s this whole New York affectation of I’m there, even in a third-person piece. Clearly everything there is from me or from some source that I’ve checked out, because this is the real world. . . . When we call it journalism, we mean it’s journalism. (Green 2014e)

But if an editor feels that referring to the sourcing could head off a potential factual dispute, especially one that could involve legal costs, they might advocate for it as a way of signalling their magazine's adherence to journalistic best practices. Using the gambit effectively and elegantly takes some work, especially if it's to be done to everybody's satisfaction, and a checker who wishes to hedge a factual claim by deferring responsibility to a source may have to exercise some diplomacy in the ensuing negotiation, as I'll explain in a moment. "We do a lot of dancing within the story to make [the sourcing] clear without it punching somebody in the face," one editor told me; "even when we do, there's a lot of conversation about whether we can run that."

Negotiating changes

At most magazines, fact checkers occupy a position near the bottom of the editorial hierarchy—at many magazines, the bulk of the checking might be done by interns or freelancers for whom disputes with their employers might threaten what little job security they have. What's more, feature articles are published under the reporter's byline, and most editors try to respect the reporter's desire to regulate what gets published under their name. What this means is that fact checkers rarely have the autonomy to make unilateral changes. If they identify a problem—a point where a reader might conceivably be able to overturn one of the reporter's claims—they can only resolve the issue by convincing their peers that it's necessary to make a change. To effectively shield the magazine from what they perceive as a risk to its reputation, in other words, a checker doesn't just have to consider what readers might potentially do to find contrary evidence, but they also have to anticipate how the reporter and their editors might respond to a suggested change so they can obtain the consent they need to make it.

From a reporter's perspective, being fact checked is not particularly enjoyable. According to Ta-Nehisi Coates of *The Atlantic* (2012), "good fact checkers have a preternatural inclination toward pedantry, and sometimes will address you in a prosecutorial tone. That is their job." It's very common for a writer to resist a checker's proposed changes. It may be that the reporter feels they were diligent in triangulating their claims and that the checker's questioning of their conclusions feels like an annoying intrusion. It may be that the reporter is a stylist with a strong commitment to getting the wording of their piece just so; they may resist being asked to "kill their darlings" because of all the time they've spend crafting them. The science and humour writer Mary Roach observes, "I wonder if fact checkers realize what a bucket of cold water their discoveries can be. I appreciate their work, but so often it means losing something you're extremely fond of" (Williams 2013c). Occasionally a reporter will even ask a checker to leave facts in the story unchecked, or "on author," if they feel particularly worried that they'll be forced to excise them. Roger Angell, for instance, describes doing so to preserve a great quote:

If you get a great quote, you say, Don't check!, because you don't want the checkers to take something out that's in there. I was doing a story about Horace Stoneham, the owner of the Giants for years and years. A wonderful guy. He was just leaving baseball. One of his old scouts, a Hispanic guy, told me that he'd scouted Castro and said he was "a good little left hander." And I wrote, "Don't check!" I don't want them to say that he'd never scouted Castro, which is quite possible he never did. But I've got the quote! Leave it there. (Green 2014c)

Naturally, this kind of request puts a reporter in direct conflict with a checker, whose job it is, as we've seen, to "check all the facts"—checking all the facts will be time wasted if the factual issues the checkers discover aren't resolved to their satisfaction in subsequent drafts.

Checkers are generally expected to suggest solutions to any problems they identify, rather than just presenting the reporter or story editor with a list of the article's flaws, and they often think carefully about potential fixes before presenting them to the reporter or the story editor, because convincing them of the importance of the change is a prerequisite to fulfilling their responsibility for the article's facts. A checker has to develop techniques for approaching writers or editors with proposed changes, like downplaying how badly they want the reporter to accept the change, to avoid making the reporter feel threatened or pressured, or flattering the writer's sense of stylistic prowess so that even if they don't accept the proposed change, they will be stimulated to come up with their own solution that takes into account whatever issue the checker identified. Here, as in the case of an editor proposing changes to a writer, the checker's familiarity with the writer's or editor's idiosyncrasies as a person and as a journalist can be indispensable. "To be able to present that to an editor or a writer I think is a good skill," one checker explained to me, "taking into account the piece, the context, the voice of the writer, the fact that needs to be corrected, or what needs to be reflected for accuracy." A checker who can propose changes based on an accurate perception of the writer's style and voice might tend to be more successful in getting those changes accepted. In fact, one checking head described to me how he develops a sense for different checkers' "batting averages" with respect to how many of their proposed changes get accepted.

In cases where there's a conflict between what the writer or editor wants and what the checker thinks is important to address, most checkers appreciate having some kind of independence to go around their writers or above their story editors. In the *CJR*'s terms, "To be effective, checkers must be empowered to challenge the decisions of writers and editors who may be much more senior and experienced" (Coronel, Coll, and Kravitz 2015). A story editor

will often arbitrate a dispute between a checker and a writer, making a unilateral decision on behalf of both of them if it's necessary to do so, but the checkers that made a case to me for the independence of their departments expressed appreciation for the freedom to go above the story editor—to a top editor like a deputy or an EIC—if they feel it's imperative to make a change. One editor explained how this freedom is essential for a checker's sense of ownership over issues of facticity. "In our operation," he said, "you can be stetted on something, but if you don't want to live with that, it's not good enough to me [i.e., you need to defend your suggested change]. If the editor isn't understanding your change, and isn't compelled to make it, and you believe in it, and it's important, you've got to figure out a way to get it fixed. . . . It's our responsibility to get them to understand our concern." When the changes a checker thinks are important contradict with a writer's or editor's commitment to style, drama, or whatever else, their ability to defend the magazine against factual disputes is inhibited in a way that threatens their accountability to readers and exposes them to potential liability for errors.

Checking all the facts

A checker's ability to manage the checker's regress—to do enough checking, and to get enough of their proposed changes accepted, to safeguard their magazine while also meeting their deadlines—depends on thorough knowledge of conventional research practices, at their magazine and others, as well as the personalities and work habits of the coworkers whom they have to convince of the urgency of their proposed changes. On this basis, it might be clear by now that what a checker considers a *checkable* fact is closely linked to this knowledge. Simply put, a checker checks facts that they think are susceptible to being overturned by readers, and they suggest changes that they think they'll be able to convince their peers are important.

Consider the description of *The New Yorker's* checking standard under Tina Brown, according to the head of checking at the time, Martin Baron: “To come as close as we can to verifying independently every fact in every issue of the magazine” (Shugaar 1994, 14). From a formulation like this, it might seem like itemizing the facts in a magazine is merely an administrative task, no more exacting than counting beans. But we’ve seen from the last chapter that the facticity of any particular word or phrase is linked inextricably to the gestalt of the piece as a whole, which is only *purported* to be shared among members of a generalized readership, and we’ve seen in this chapter that judgments of what facts need to be checked implicates a checker’s sense for how they might need to defend their particular decisions—to their readers and to their peers—in terms of conventional ideas about sourcing and credibility. The checker’s sense for the reliability of a wide variety of information sources—what Susan Shapiro calls “fine-tuned experientially based opinions about the accuracy and reliability of particular kinds of information covered by each source” (1989, 17)—suggests not just how they ought to go about checking anything they identify as a fact, but also how to identify the facts in the first place. In other words, what counts as a checkable fact is not an inherent property of the phrases on the page, but rather it’s an outcome of a competent checker’s sense for what kind of checking will satisfy an adversary’s expectations for a robust network of reliable sources.

This means that for experienced checkers, the process of going through the text to identify checkable facts is inseparable from the process of identifying *how* those facts will be checked. As an example, many checkers use some kind of notation system to identify checkable facts and to keep track of which ones have been checked and which are outstanding. Such a system helps them to establish a plan for who needs to be called or which sources need to be consulted first, what order to conduct the calls in, what will be easier to check and what will be

more difficult, or what topics they need to brush up on before making certain calls. According to Shapiro, “underlying these [marking] conventions . . . is some operational code that defines what constitutes a checkable fact, a rather subtle distinction that, according to one research director, takes at least a month to learn” (1989, 6). One checker, for instance, described to me how she uses different coloured pencils to separate facts that could be checked by calling people, facts that could be checked from documents or reference books, and facts whose sourcing is unclear; these kinds of distinctions can be made very quickly by experienced checkers, with enough clarity that groups of facts can be delegated to other checkers based on the type of source needed to check them (e.g., Smith 2004, 50).

When it comes to “checking all the facts,” a checker’s *sense* for reputable sources and standard research practices becomes a more useful resource for identifying checkable facts than even the most detailed policies. In fact, many magazines avoid codifying their checking policies altogether, because the requirements of checking can vary so widely from one project to the next, or one fact to the next—considering not just the facts themselves, but the potential ramifications of getting them wrong, and thus how motivated readers might be to contest them.²¹ “There are few, if any, absolute rules in fact-checking,” Smith says. “Each piece requires a checker to take a slightly different approach. So many variables exist: the author, her reputation, her knowledge of the subject, the thoroughness of the reporting, the subject, the sensitivity of the subject, the

²¹In some cases, codified procedures can be a legal liability, because when practices inevitably diverge from the policies, critics can use that divergence as evidence of recklessness. Sarah Harrison Smith puts it this way: “Department heads are caught in a bind. Checkers could assimilate more advice about checking methods if some recommendations were written down, but written protocols are a legal liability. Media lawyers have an aversion to seeing checking advice on paper. One says, ‘I don’t like written guidelines. They can cause real problems because eventually they won’t be followed’ (2004, 14). In fact, one head of checking that I spoke to asked not to be quoted, explaining that people tend to take statements about normal practices as evidence of internal policies, and then to criticize the magazine whenever practices diverge from these purported policies.

quality of the source material provided by the author, the availability of other sources, and the time the schedule allows for checking” (2004, 14). The more specific the policies, the more likely the checker will encounter a situation that the policies didn’t anticipate.

For instance, after the *Rolling Stone* story “A Rape on Campus” unraveled, the ensuing *CJR* investigation revealed three policies that the editors could have used to avoid the error: avoiding the use of pseudonyms (so readers can evaluate the sourcing), checking derogatory information preferentially (because it will be more likely to generate disputes), and confronting subjects with specific details when attempting to triangulate (to improve the chances that subjects will catch discrepancies the reporter is unaware of). As useful as these actions might have been in that particular case, implementing these actions as global policies can prevent checkers from diverging from them in situations where it’s warranted to use pseudonyms, to keep certain details from certain subjects, or to focus efforts on complimentary claims. The *CJR* itself noted, for instance, that “there are cases where reporters may choose to withhold some details of what they plan to write while seeking verification for fear that the subject might ‘front run’ by rushing out a favorably spun version pre-emptively. There are sophisticated journalistic subjects in politics and business that sometimes burn reporters this way” (Coronel, Coll, and Kravitz 2015). Checkers would certainly wish for the right to contravene these policies if they felt the situation warranted doing so.

The difficulty of formulating universal directives often leads checkers back to the broad principle purported to underlie any specific actions they take—what one checking head couched as, “be careful, be skeptical, check everything.” When I inquired about the hiring and training of new fact checkers, it appeared that cultivating a checker’s ability to apply a general sense of skepticism to the *specific* claims in *specific* projects was almost always prioritized over requiring

that the checker internalize a formal list of policies that would cover checking practices in general. “There wasn’t a strict training program or anything at all,” one checker said, characteristically, in describing her early experiences as a checker. Rather, as in the training of editors, acculturation to checking practices tends to be hands-on, with new checkers just trying to check the facts in a simple story under close supervision from a superior. “My boss . . . was kind of gentle with me,” another checker said, recounting the work he did on his first piece; “he was just like, read this, tell me what you think, tell me what you think needs to be checked, and he gave me some ideas about how you’d go about that. And very gently he sort of steered me into looking at what I forgot—‘What about this?’” With this kind of hands-on practice, a checker will develop a *tacit* capability to identify the elements in a given story that need to be checked, and to check them correctly, regardless of whether they can specify the policy or rule that checking each element might demonstrate.

When I queried about the qualities that checking heads look for in new hires, I was given a very diverse set of what one checker described to me as “all those wonderful job interview adjectives”: attention to detail, breadth of personal interests, curiosity, intelligence, experience in the industry, sense of diplomacy or bedside manner, sense of humour, knowledge of different languages, commitment to the accuracy of the record, life experience, writing skill, and many others. But in much the same way that checkers tended to emphasize that best practices boil down to one rule (“carefully check all the facts”), they also emphasized that the quality they tend to look for in new recruits is above all else a sufficient doggedness to “go the extra mile” in developing an unchallengeable network of sources. What they try to avoid, in other words, is a checker who will come to the judgment that their account is good enough *too early*, without anticipating the myriad ways their account might be overturned. A checker with boundless

motivation to keep going can always be reined in if resources run out—they are near the bottom of the masthead, after all—but a checker who stops too soon cannot be trusted to have “checked every fact,” even if it’s their impression that they’ve done so.

In general, when a checker takes into account how they plan to go about checking a given fact—what sources they’ll use and how they’ll be able to convince their peers of the reliability of those sources—they are powerfully influenced by a concern that misjudging the way readers might go about disputing their sources, or misjudging their peers’ willingness to assent to making a change, will expose them to culpability for error. When the magazine’s facts get overturned by readers, Peter Canby says, “the cry goes out not for the writer or for the editor but for the fact-checker. In the department, we refer to that as the Shoot-the-Fact-Checker Syndrome, which is one of our occupational hazards” (2012). In Susan Shapiro’s view, this risk motivates checkers to identify as facts the portions of the text they feel they’ll likely be held responsible for:

Fact checkers concentrate . . . on errors that, if made, would be “on” them. *They vigorously pursue facts about which they are capable of finding contrary evidence.* . . . A silly mistake that they should not have made is more of an affront than a subjectively serious but reputable error. . . . It is what they should have known and didn’t, more than the egregious errors that standard fact-checking methods would not have uncovered, that horrifies the fact checker. So researchers ritualistically abide by routine procedural norms. (1989, 24, emphasis added)

They pursue, in simple terms, the facts that they know how to pursue based on their knowledge of how readers might pursue them. If a checker doggedly pursues contrary evidence through “standard fact-checking methods”—using sources that are conventionally considered reliable—

and still comes up empty-handed, it's probably safe for them to conclude that the likelihood of another of their competent peers finding contrary evidence through their own use of standard practices is negligible. (Non-standard practices, on the other hand, might be unlikely to produce accounts that a critical mass of the checker's social world will take seriously.) The leftovers, the facts that can't easily be checked using standard methods or conventionally reputable sources, can probably be relegated to the editors' wheelhouse without assuming too much personal risk:

Although the subjective misstatements, the stupid opinions, the unfair characterizations, the inappropriate analogies, the risky inferences based on flimsy evidence clearly galled and preoccupied them as I observed their work, it was on these matters that they ultimately capitulated or compromised. (Shapiro 1989, 7)

While a reader who disagrees with the subjectively serious claims might castigate the story's editor for their poor judgment with respect to politics, thoroughness, perspective, fairness, style, or any number of other things, at least the censure won't be over a matter of fact.

Sourcing

Working with subjects

As I indicated in Chapter 4, people are usually the source of a great deal of a reporter's material. People are often more difficult to work with than sources like the *Columbia Gazetteer of the World*, because they lack the "universal criterion of validity" that written or printed sources obtain by virtue of their fixity. People can be reliable on some topics and unreliable on others, just as they can be reliable in some situations and not in others, even on the same topic. With a human source, the interaction becomes two-way, and journalists have to think much harder about

how the source's end of the bargain might be influencing the substance of the information they're providing. People are all the more complicated when they're subjects in the story as well as sources of information, because the information they provide to the checkers (and reporters) becomes a resource they can use to gain back some control over their representation that they effectively forfeited by allowing a magazine to mediate between themselves and the ultimate audience. Reporters and editors need to stay in a source's good graces as much as possible, because an amicable relationship provides the reporters and editors with more dependable tools for evaluating the reliability of the information the source is providing. In effect, the work of checking information with a human source is a matter of managing the relationship between the source and the editorial staff so that details of the relationship—what the source is like, what they want, what worries them—will remain available as resources for evaluating their reliability.

There is no shortage of reasons for a source to be annoyed by the checking process. Some subjects are annoyed by having to devote more time to going over the same topics they already discussed with the reporter. "Those fact checking interviews are actually harder than a regular interview," one editor told me; "because the person's already talked to someone, they're kind of like, 'You fucker you, why are you calling me back? I've already talked about all this.'" Some subjects don't fully understand the purpose or process of fact checking, and they may find that the details they're being asked about are obnoxiously trivial. One fact checker explained to me, "My five questions might be really silly and stupid, and give someone the impression that, 'This is what you're writing about?! My shoe size?' So I always want to prepare them [by explaining] that these are not indicative of the tenor of the article, blah blah, these are just odd bits that I would hate to get wrong, and you are the only source for them, or they're not easily verifiable with someone else." Checking can also be intrusive and distressing for certain sources if it forces

them to return to subjects they find emotionally difficult, especially since the checker is a stranger. “You’re at a disadvantage because the writer cultivates relationships,” one checker told me; “you’re just some idiot on the phone making them cry or asking terrible questions.” Plus, as I indicated earlier, with sources who appear in the story as subjects, checking calls are often the first time they’re introduced to the way they’re being represented, and they can be an uncomfortable moment of Janet Malcolm-style peripeteia if the portrayal is less than flattering. All these annoyances can easily turn into affronts if the checker cannot manage the source’s reactions with extreme tact. The journalism professor Judith Sheppard, writing in the *American Journalism Review*, quotes Peter Canby explaining this difficulty: “A fact-checker who is clumsy can become a ‘wrecking ball’ on a story, says Canby, alienating writers and sources alike. ‘It requires a huge amount of diplomacy’” (Sheppard 1998).

A major risk in checking is that the subject’s discovery of the nature of their portrayal might threaten the security of the consent that they originally provided to the reporter, especially when the consent was obtained only as a result of a delicate negotiation. Not uncommonly, subjects who are unhappy with the way they’re being portrayed, or who perceive that the checker is being callous in their approach, will attempt to sandbag the project by refusing to cooperate with the checking process, by denying what they said to the reporter, or by making threats of legal action. A subject’s ability to withdraw can give them a great deal of leverage over the magazine. In the *Rolling Stone* story “A Rape on Campus,” for instance, the main character, Jackie, proved to be a difficult subject who would sometimes fall out of contact with the reporter for weeks at a time. Because of an abiding concern that she would withdraw altogether, the reporter and editors refrained somewhat from pushing for verification, at least to a degree that they might have with a subject that had not been a victim of rape:

Social scientists, psychologists and trauma specialists who support rape survivors have impressed upon journalists the need to respect the autonomy of victims, to avoid re-traumatizing them and to understand that rape survivors are as reliable in their testimony as other crime victims. These insights clearly influenced [the reporter Sabrina] Erdely, [and the editors Sean] Woods and [Will] Dana. "Ultimately, we were too deferential to our rape victim; we honored too many of her requests in our reporting," Woods said. (Coronel, Coll, and Kravitz 2015)

When checking occurs at the end of a months-long reporting process that costs tens of thousands of dollars, the pressure to force a story into print can be real, and the potential that a subject will pull out at the last minute can be very concerning.

To avoid such a costly outcome, checkers have to think carefully about the source's perspective on the story and try to account for any concerns that might appear to give the subject pause. Part of this is being able to make a case for why the subject was portrayed the way they were, based on what their case is intended to illustrate, what the evidentiary bases for their claims are, what the magazine's responsibility is to its audience, what standards of fairness obligate the magazine to do, and other things of that nature, in terms that the subject is likely to accept. Part of it is listening to and probing for details about the subject's concerns, and being open to working out compromise solutions that both parties can find acceptable. Ideally, by explaining the editorial decisions and responding to the subject's concerns in this way, the subject will assent to the representation—even if it's unflattering—rather than withdrawing or becoming oppositional, and the editors need that assent as a resource for evaluating the source's reliability for the information they're providing.

Triangulation and intersubjectivity

Triangulation is the classic way of evaluating the reliability of any given factual claim. The chance of one reputable source being wrong is much higher than the chance of three or more reputable sources being wrong, so a checker, like a reporter, will tend to look for as many sources as is possible or reasonable before coming to a conclusion that the most widely supported version of events is the correct one. Indeed, checking is sometimes couched as a matter of re-reporting the story using different sources from the ones used by the reporter, in order to ensure that the reporter's assertions of fact weren't merely artifacts of the sources they used. One checker described it to me this way:

I'm going to take that manuscript and I'm going to want to know everything the writer knows and see all his research and reporting, have a list of his contacts, and then I'm going to rebuild it myself, contact everybody, read as much as I can, check it line by line but also become an expert in the topic. And then I'm going to line up his version of the story against mine and be like, okay, where are our drawings a little bit different?

By triangulating as many of the reporter's claims as possible using independent sources, the editorial staff can avoid the problems associated not just with taking the reporter at her word, but also of re-reporting using the same sources, a form of what Susan Shapiro calls "ritualized redundancy"(1989, 24) that has burned magazines like *The New Republic* and *Rolling Stone*, when certain of the reporter's assertions were verified using only the reporter's own notes. Although checkers will undoubtedly defer to the reporter in certain cases, particularly if the reporter is describing her own experiences, checkers will generally endeavour to check independently all the checkable facts it's possible to check within the scope of their deadlines. "I'm going to trust him on certain things, describing his experience," one checker told me, "but

on other things, [I need] kind of sense of what do we have to rely on him about, and what can we check independently?” Not surprisingly, reporters will be given more leeway to describe their own experiences as they develop a relationship of trust with the checker and the rest of their editorial peers.

At first glance, the phone calls a checker makes to the reporter’s sources might appear to be an example of the same kind of ritualized redundancy as checking a reporter’s claims against their own notes—if the source lied to the reporter, what’s stopping them from telling the same lie to the fact checker? But the checking calls provide an opportunity for a different type of triangulation, what might be called, for lack of a better term, *reverse triangulation*—it allows multiple members of the editorial staff to compare their impressions of the *reliability* of the source for the assertions the reporter is citing them as having provided. Ultimately, the facts in a story are a collective responsibility, and the costs for printing erroneous assertions will be borne not just by the reporter or the checker but by the magazine as a whole, whose members use the organizational reputation as a resource for obtaining things like access, readers, and revenue. In this sense, the checker’s role is not just to confirm that any given fact is support by multiple sources, but that the reliability of those sources can be supported by the judgment of multiple peers. A discrepancy between the checker’s and reporter’s judgment of reliability is just as much of a problem as a discrepancy between the accounts supplied by different sources.

Accounts from human sources are rarely taken at face value, for a variety of reasons, of which I’ll briefly explain two. The first is that, as I mentioned above, interactions between a source and a journalist are bidirectional, and in the same way that a reporter might be trying deliberately to control the interaction so that they can render the material they need out of it, a subject might also be trying to control the interaction in pursuit of their own goals. In many

cases, this takes the innocuous form of a subject simply trying to get the reporter's story to portray them in a favourable light, which might mean that they tell the reporter that they quit smoking when in fact they're still a smoker, or that they work for the phone company when in fact they're unemployed (e.g., Boynton 2007, 145). Sometimes a conversation with a reporter becomes a more substantial resource that provides a source with an opportunity to accomplish some kind of goal within their own social world, whether it's throwing an adversary under the bus, increasing the value of their brand, or pursuing a political action. (Access journalism is often a clear example of this, when politicians and other powerful figures use the press as a means for accomplishing their political goals; celebrity journalism is another.) Mike Sager summarizes it this way:

Anyone telling you their story is self-serving. Every time you do journalism you could get several people tell you different stories from several angles. It's your job as a journalist to figure out who's got what axe to grind. The stuff is all laid out there to make sense, or not. (Green 2014e)

Part of a checker's job is to ferret out information that can help them identify various reasons a source might be prevaricating. Are they engaged in any kind of conflict with the people they're talking about? How might they benefit from getting this information published in a national magazine? What do they stand to lose that they might be interested in protecting? Probing these kinds of conflicts helps a checker decide which parts of a source's account might be reliable, and which might be suspect.

The second reason a source's information might not be taken at face value is that people are often certain of things that are wrong, and even if a source has no reason to prevaricate, they

can easily be expressing beliefs that don't have the kind of evidentiary basis that would satisfy a checker or her readers. This means that examining how a source knows what they know is also imperative for judging whether the source's account is reliable. How much expertise does the source have to talk about what they're talking about? Was the source a personal witness? Is the source a professional in this subject area? Are the *source's* sources of information reliable? More often than not, someone who is very reliable in one subject area will be unreliable in another, and checkers have to evaluate what domains a source is likely to be reliable about and why.

Judgments about sources' apparent interests and the apparent origins for their beliefs are made routinely by reporters, editors, and fact checkers, and they highlight how imperative it can be for checkers to keep sources in the magazine's good graces. If a source's orientation to the magazine or its editorial staff becomes hostile, the source's actions toward the magazine itself might become an axe he or she is trying to grind, and that complicates the editors' judgment of how the source might be prevaricating. Similarly, a source who refuses to participate forthrightly in the checking process won't be available for the probing that a checker needs to do to evaluate whether the source is in a position to know what they're talking about, even if what the source said is available in another form, like a recording. If a source's reliability can't be confirmed to the editors' satisfaction, his or her contributions can be used only at a risk to the magazine's credibility.

This is why journalists often profess admiration for peers who demonstrate an effective "bullshit detector" in attempting to sniff out potential points where a reporter's claims might be susceptible to falsification. The kinds of judgments a journalist makes about a source's reliability are always impressionistic—they're not ultimately based on any explicit criteria—so a strong bullshit detector is considered a useful bulwark against credulity. Before he became an editor of

The New Yorker, for example, David Remnick considered what went wrong with the editor Ben Bradlee's decision to publish Janet Cooke's fabricated story about a child heroin addict in *The Washington Post*, and chalked it up to a failure of instinct:

Bradlee had too much faith in his sense of the authentic even to question that fraud might appear in his midst. "To me, the story reeked of the sights and sounds and smells that editors love to give their readers," Bradlee writes. "The possibility that the story was not true never entered my head. After the fact, some reporters, particularly Courtland Milloy, a streetwise black reporter, told me that they had questioned the story. Milloy had taken Cooke in his car to look for Jimmy's house. When she couldn't find it, he shared his doubts with Milton Coleman. . . . Coleman told others he thought Milloy was jealous." Bradlee wanted to believe Cooke's résumé, and he wanted to believe her story; he had lost, if only for a moment, his instinct for skepticism, his bullshit meter. (1995)

Reporters will often find that they cannot identify or articulate why a source's claim might be untrustworthy until *after* they've experienced such a gut feeling: the feeling is the signal that they need to look further into explicit reasons why a source's account might be suspect. "I think if you—to be honest—if there's a little voice in your head telling you not to trust it, chances are there's something going on," one reporter told me.

Although the judgment of reliability is always impressionistic, using the same sense for reliability in a positive valence—to indulge a sense that a source is forthright and well-positioned to know what they're talking about—carries with it much greater risks. Hinging the decision to print something on the perception of a source's reliability is much more fraught than making the decision to dig deeper or cut a weak passage based on a perception of a source's *lack* of reliability, and for this reason journalists try to develop a general sense of skepticism so that even claims that appear obvious and sources who appear unimpeachable will be rendered *checkable*,

or worth looking into even further. In effect, it was a failed bullshit detector that was cited as source of some of the *Rolling Stone*'s factual mistakes in the story "A Rape on Campus." In the *CJR* postmortem (Coronel, Coll, and Kravitz 2015), the reporter, Sabrina Erdeley, and the checker and editors, were revealed to have waived the opportunity to triangulate the claims of the main character, Jackie, because they judged her to be believable:

Erdely believed firmly that Jackie's account was reliable. So did her editors and the story's fact-checker, who spent more than four hours on the telephone with Jackie, reviewing every detail of her experience. "She wasn't just answering, 'Yes, yes, yes,' she was correcting me," the checker said. "She was describing the scene for me in a very vivid way. . . . I did not have doubt."

It was only after the story was published that Erdeley began following up with the signals that made Jackie's account appear suspicious:

A week after publication, on the day before Thanksgiving, Erdely spoke with Jackie by phone. . . . Erdely chose this moment to revisit the mystery of the lifeguard who had lured Jackie and overseen her assault. Jackie's unwillingness to name him continued to bother Erdely. Apparently, the man was still dangerous and at large. "This is not going to be published," the writer said, as she recalled. "Can you just tell me?"

Jackie gave Erdely a name. But as the reporter typed, her fingers stopped. Jackie was unsure how to spell the lifeguard's last name. Jackie speculated aloud about possible variations.

"An alarm bell went off in my head," Erdely said. How could Jackie not know the exact name of someone she said had carried out such a terrible crime against her—a man she professed to fear deeply?

Presumably, had Erdeley indulged the sense of suspicion that had “bothered” her while she was reporting, she would likely have discovered the problem with Jackie’s account, but she and her editors invested their magazine’s credibility in their source and left it to readers employed at *Slate* and *The Washington Post* to develop a stronger network of sources. As this example illustrates, the risk of looking further into a source’s account, of questioning the ways in which an account might be wrong or distorted, is that the sources the story relies upon will be alienated and frustrated by the journalists’ disbelief. But that risk is realized before publication, and with a skillful, diplomatic editorial team, the fallout can usually be contained. The greater risks always inhere in stopping the investigation, in stopping the regress, too soon, so that claims find their way into print that readers are able to overturn with better evidence.

At the best of times, by both triangulating and reverse triangulating their claims, an editorial staff can insulate themselves several times over from the possibility that their sources might be providing them with an account that won’t be able to withstand a reader’s attempt to overturn it. Even if a source’s claim satisfies one or two of the editors involved, the triggering of a third editor’s bullshit detector always has the potential to prompt enough additional investigation that a problem might be discovered. While triangulation is a hedge against the source being wrong, reverse triangulation is a hedge against the journalists being insufficiently skeptical. Ken Auletta illustrates this duality in simple terms:

Q: What's the trick to digging up all the details you use throughout your pieces? (For example, you peg Lou Dobbs' compensation at \$6 million per year, with no hedging. How do you get that so precisely?)

A: I'd be a schmuck to tell you how I got something that did not have a named source. I

had three sources for the \$6 million, and my editor and the factchecker who called the sources or listened to my digital recording were satisfied. (Benkoil 2007)

By explaining the usefulness of reverse triangulation, I do not mean to infer that this method does anything like uncover the truth of the case the reporter's piece is describing. Rather, it helps the editorial team, as a bloc, to effectively take the place of a wide variety of potential readers who might be motivated to overturn the magazine's account, and think through the kinds of alarm bells that *they* might use to develop a contradictory account. Checking, from this perspective, is a collective action aimed at predicting the ways that readers might respond to the text. Any point where a member of the editorial staff feels "scared" or "worried" or has a "nagging feeling" that something in their account might be susceptible to being overturned by additional research, that represents a point where an enterprising reader might potentially find a "way in" to criticize the magazine's commitment to facticity.

Ideally, the staff will be able to follow the regress as far as is necessary to exhaust the parts of the story that might present such an opportunity to a reader—which is to say, to reach the point where they collectively feel comfortable with the durability of their claims. But it's always at least theoretically possible, no matter how far the editors go, for a reader with more time and more know-how and more access to produce an alternative account. When to stop is always a judgment call, based less on whether "all the facts" are "correct" than on how likely it seems that a contradictory account will be possible to construct given the kinds of resources that readers are like to have. If all the journalists involved are satisfied, it might be a safe bet that the magazine's readers will also be satisfied, in which case the claim will stand as part of the record—a fact, for all intents and purposes. Even so, it's still a bet. "Everything is subjective, but if you're diligent, if you're dogged and determined to, you can get enough subjective points of

view to really build something objective,” one checker explained to me. “That's kind of what we're trying to do.”

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

After James Lord had sat for several days for Giacometti, their conversation turned to a book that presented a series of side-by-side comparisons between painted and photographic portraits.

Giacometti expressed his approval of a “very academic” portrait of Marshal Foch.

“Anyway,” he added presently, “it’s impossible to reproduce what one sees.”

“But is even a photograph really a reproduction of what one sees?” I asked.

“No. And if a photo isn’t, a painting is even less so. What’s best is simply to look at people. . . . People themselves are the only real likenesses. I never get tired of looking at them. When I go to the Louvre, if I look at the people instead of the paintings or sculptures, then I can’t look at the works of art at all and I have to leave.” (Lord 1980, 21)

Giacometti and Lord are hardly the only producers of culture for whom “real likenesses” have proven elusive. It’s a tall order—phenomenal experience is rich with infinite detail, but any material rendering, whatever the medium, must necessarily consist of a small selection of the details that are at hand (Becker 2007). What’s worse, in a *collective* effort at rendering a real likeness, there’s never a guarantee of agreement on which details are the most relevant for a “true” representation. But the simplifying processes involved in any such rendering have their use: they filter down the infinite range of possible details involved in phenomenal experience to just the ones that people can agree are present and relevant, so they can be packaged in a mobile form. It’s from that collective work that a *useful* sense of mutual reality emerges—useful because it provides a means for people to cooperate. When reporters manage to “hit readers in the gut,” they’ve communicated something about the experience of being there without sacrificing the foundation of agreed-upon facts that’s necessary for collective self-governance, using art in the service of what Dewey calls the “creation of adequate opinion on public matters”

(1927, 183). But this comes on the back of all the labour needed to ensure that the work of reading will be done correctly by a broad cross section of the public readership, so that what the reporters and editors wish to communicate comes through unadulterated. To communicate what one sees, the medium of transmission has to consist of social objects that are *mutually* intelligible—and “just to look at people” is never sufficient for establishing a mutual sense of reality. Observation is laden with theory (Kuhn 1996), and theory is endemic to particular social worlds.

Much of the foregoing account has been dedicated to examining the discovery and re-production of the “theory” endemic to the world of literary journalism—the rules and criteria by which literary journalism is established as a genre and a professional practice in and through every published article. It has not been an account of the theory itself, but the practical ways that the discovery and mobilization of the theory necessarily runs alongside the production of knowledge about the “external” empirical cases the feature articles examine. Early in my discussion of reporting, I used a quote from Buzz Bissinger to suggest that a major part of what literary journalists look for in the work of their peers, and themselves, is *substance*—meticulous, intensive reporting that fills in the “holes” that readers would be able to smell if all there was to the story was beautiful prose or sharp insight. Good stories have to be true, but to make a true story a *good* story requires a great deal of work to build the broad foundation of empirical material upon which the stylistic devices of literature can rest. Even so, as I’ve hopefully managed to demonstrate, the relationship between the empirical events and the final story is anything but linear: the real events that a story depicts are heavily mediated by all of the work done by the reporter and her editorial team to select, translate, arrange, and interpret traces of those events so that they meet the needs or expectations of a prospective audience (Becker 2007,

20). In contrast to simply looking at people, the way a finished story represents people is not regulated merely by the way things really are out in the field, in other words, but by the choices and actions of a world of people collectively working out the needs and expectations—the “rules”—they’re purportedly trying to anticipate. This process narrows the range of possibilities for what can be done with the empirical details the reporter encounters in the field.

For this reason, it ought to be clear by this point that a magazine feature is much more than a reporter speaking their mind to a reader. The finished article is the outcome of a complex series of social interactions, and the form the finished article takes effectively encodes those interactions in text. People must do things in a certain way for a work of art to appear in any given form, as Becker points out in *Art Worlds*, “but the work need not occur in that way, or in any other particular way. If one or another of these activities does not get done, the work will occur in some other way” (1982, 5). In the case of literary journalism, not all of the ways the work can possibly occur will have the same impact on a public audience—doing things one way might lead to a magazine being showered with adulation and awards, while doing things a slightly different way might gravely erode the magazine’s credibility through a series of ruinous lawsuits. Figuring out the way things ought to be done so the public audience will have a reaction that’s more like the former than the latter is what I described in the introduction as the “simple problem” of literary journalism—the problem of predicting how members of an abstract public will likely respond to the finished product so that the desired outcome will be achieved.

Discovering properties of the world

To call it a simple problem is not the same as calling it an easy problem, of course. Predicting the range of possible responses is in fact an exceedingly difficult problem, especially when the *array*

of people trying to *collectively* solve the simple problem is taken into account. Regardless of how clear an idea of a prospective story the reporter and story editor may have at the time a story is assigned, the contingent series of events that the assignment inaugurates is much too complex for either of them to predict with much accuracy. By living through that series of events over the following weeks or months, both the reporter and editor make a variety of discoveries about the world as their conception of the story evolves—they learn things they didn't know at the time of the assignment that make them capable of seeing, in retrospect, why their original vision of the story was unrealistic. But importantly, these discoveries concern not just the people and events that constitute the *case* that the story is depicting, but also the social reality *within* the world of literary journalism that impinged on the realization of the initial vision.

Over time, these intra-world experiences provide information members can use to figure out what they're supposed to be doing in any given situation as they're working to realize the vision they have of a subsequent assignment. At any point in the process, members are expected to carry out their work in a way that will appear to their colleagues as appropriate, competent, thorough, ethical, or otherwise consistent with whatever they perceive are the shared values of their social world—particularly if they wish to pursue their work as a remunerative career. This can be seen most clearly in the variety of obligations a reporter has to meet in rendering material from the field: a reporter has to gather details about the kinds of scenes their editor will expect them to have; they have to produce material records that will satisfy a checker; they have to treat their subjects with the right kinds of deference to stay in their good graces; they have to produce a plot that's irresistible enough to propel a general reader through the sections of exposition that same reader needs to understand what's going on. These obligations, when they conflict, lead to difficult dilemmas: How does one get close enough to gain a subject's trust but not so close that

the subject forgets the nature of the relationship? How does one manage a situation to render quotable material without appearing to have influenced the course of events?

These are dicey determinations to make, because the rules and values a reporter ostensibly holds in common with their peers are abstract, and every formal rule that can be consulted is undermined by a multitude of exceptions. The most reliable reference a reporter has for understanding which actions are appropriate, competent, thorough, ethical, or otherwise value-consistent are examples of past actions, both their own and those of others, which have provided them with opportunities to see how certain actions play out at the point of consumption. Clearly, some actions are ethical if a journalist gets widely lauded for them, while others are just as clearly unethical if they lead to widespread sanctions. With luck, a reporter's current problems will resemble a situation whose effects they've already witnessed, that they can use as a basis for speculating about what to do. Recall Becker's argument in favour of his concept of a *world*: "People do not respond automatically to mysterious external forces surrounding them; instead, they develop their lines of activity gradually, seeing how others respond to what they do and adjusting what they do next in a way that meshes with what others have done and will probably do next" (Becker and Pessin 2006, 278).

Refining one's social instincts

Sociologists influenced by psychology, as well as those influenced by Bourdieu, have converged on the idea that experience provides people with embodied predispositions for carrying out actions in particular ways in response to situations they commonly encounter (e.g., Strauss and Quinn 1998). For cognitively oriented sociologists, these are *cognitive schemata*, or networks of synapses that have been programmed by experience to produce certain outputs in response to

certain stimuli; for Bourdieusians, these are *habitus*es, or “system[s] of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action” (Bourdieu 1990, 12). These acquired predispositions encapsulate what Michael Polanyi called *tacit knowledge* (1958)—the knowledge that people may be unaware of possessing and which may be difficult to express in words, but which is imperative for carrying out the day-to-day work of participating in a social world. In their book *Laboratory Life*, Latour and Woolgar point out how much competence is required to participate in the work of an efficient laboratory: “A wealth of invisible skills underpin material inscription” (1986, 244); for a journalist, as well, rendering material from the field requires a great deal of physical, verbal, and intellectual finesse if it is to be useful for the construction of a good story—finesse that only comes with experience. In many cases, a reporter won’t be sure right away why they took a certain action in the first place, or why that action led their subject or their editor to respond in a certain way; sometimes the basis for an action is just that it “felt right” at the time, and the reasons have to be puzzled out after the fact. “It’s very informal and instinctive,” one journalist said to me, describing the work he does. “Nothing’s written down. You’ll find a lot of people will answer questions by saying, ‘I just do it by instinct.’”

Developing an instinct that produces the right outcomes most of the time depends on a deliberate exposure to opportunities for trial, if not error. A journalist *must* read widely if they wish to internalize the shared heritage of literature that will serve as their toolkit for dealing with narrative or stylistic problems. A journalist *must* pitch incessantly if they wish to develop a sense for what editors want. A journalist *must* read the magazines they wish to write for if they want to get an idea of what structures potential stories need to take. A journalist *must* be open to their

editors' feedback if they wish to know what they're doing right, or how to account for what they're doing in the right terms. A member of the world must *consume* as much as possible of the work they're trying to do if they're going to *produce* that work in a way that appears consistent with the work done by others. Randall Collins refers to the embodied competence this kind of participation produces as a *social sense*:

High degrees of intellectual creativity come from realistically invoking existing or prospective intellectual audiences, offering what the marketplace for ideas will find most in demand. This requires that the individual creator must know his or her audience well, through reading and above all through face-to-face contacts which ramify into the crucial junctures of the network. . . . This does not mean that intellectuals must be self-conscious about whom their ideals will appeal to. They need not think about thought collectives at all; they can concentrate entirely on the reference of their thoughts—in philosophy, mathematics, sociology, [journalism,] whatever—and try to work out the ideas that seem to them best. The social sense of their ideas is present nevertheless, and it is this that guides them in constructing new idea combinations. (1998, 52)

From this perspective, consumption and production are not separable in practice, because consumption enables production to happen collaboratively. A writer who reads mostly romance novels will not likely have the competence with structuring empirical material in a way that will satisfy the editor at a general-interest magazine. Someone with experience editing a scientific journal will be hard-pressed to provide meaningful feedback on a literary journalist's drafts. The common experiences provide the foundation for doing things in the right way for this particular world because they permit each collaborating member to make sense of what their counterparts are doing.

Developing mutuality

An instinct for doing things is only part of the picture, though, because the social sense for what's appropriate in a given situation is almost certain to differ from one person to the next. Working toward a collective achievement of publishability requires that members eventually make their instincts explicit, by trying to rationalize them in terms of perceived commonplaces, so that ideas can be exchanged and compared. That people see things differently, or that one person's instincts differ from anyone else's, should not be an especially contentious assertion. If a habitus is grounded in the conditions of one's socialization, or if a system of cognitive schemata is grounded in firsthand experience, it stands to reason that embodied senses will diverge between any two individuals who don't share their conditions of socialization. Andrew Abbott makes this point while examining the diversity of social scientific schools of thought in *Chaos of Disciplines*: "When there are many different epistemological routes to one place, people who have taken them will 'see' a different thing when they arrive. What is universal about social science knowledge is the project of getting there and of mutually decoding our routes" (2000, 32). In some respects (certainly not all of them), literary journalism is a very diversified field. Some people cut their teeth in newspapers or at alt-weeklies. Some dropped out of high school, some attempted law degrees, some have graduate degrees in English literature, or American studies, or political science. Some obtained MFAs and originally aspired to write poetry or postmodern novels. Some began their careers as computer scientists, or carpenters, or investment bankers, or grade-school teachers, or personal assistants, or musicians.

The manifold acculturative experiences that produce a member's instincts inevitably mean that any two people will see the same thing in a different gestalt. Reaching an agreement about what to do with any given pitch or draft or character or quote, in spite of these differences,

often requires that members develop some sort of consensus about what they're working toward and what kinds of action will be mutually acceptable moves in that direction. In Vaisey's terms, there are both practical and discursive components to a journalist's collaborative work. The practical component consists of seeing and doing things in a way that feels right, while the discursive component consists of accounting for those actions and ways of seeing in a way that renders them intelligible to one's peers, in case they're not already. While producing a first draft might be a matter of a writer "clumsily moving forward one step at a time, trying to do something that makes sense," as one reporter described it to me, a prerequisite for producing a mutually acceptable second, third, or fourth draft is to justify or explain the decisions made during that initial stumble in the dark in terms of the principles of journalism or literature that they are purported to share with their peers. In other words, discursive accounts of one's own work are the basis of converting subjective or instinctual actions into collaborative ones.

A reporter who is surprised by how their editor responds to their draft, or who is confounded in trying to convince their editor that what they were trying to do is the correct thing to have done, might have to reconsider their understanding of literary or journalistic "rules." If a reference to literary or journalistic commonplaces is insufficient to carry a reporter through the interactions they need to get through to be a successful reporter, they're probably the wrong commonplaces—which is to say, they're not as commonplace as the reporter might have assumed. When an assumption of commonplaces works, on the other hand, and the reporter and their editor do appear to share a common understanding of what's ethical or fair or true, they can be said *in retrospect* to have coordinated their work on the basis of what Becker calls "conventional ways of doing things" (1982, 57). For collaboration to work out, in other words,

people's assumptions of what they have in common have to be commensurable with those of others, if not right away, then at least after a period of discussion.

In this sense, the conceptual resources a member uses to articulate the reasons for their actions to their peers operate like theories of how their peers are likely to respond to what they're doing. Dramatic structure is a theory about how a reader will make sense of a story as they read through it. Magazine identity is a theory about how a reader will perceive consistency in the gestalt of successive issues. Facticity is a theory about how a reader will think to challenge an article's claims about reality. These conceptual resources are honed through practice because their accuracy can be seen in the way people respond to actions that are based upon them. In a meeting to discuss pitches or assignments, an editor might explain why a story is appropriate for the magazine because of A, B, and C reasons; if the others disagree, the first editor's theory was effectively inaccurate, and the ensuing discussion helps to clarify to everyone what it is about the magazine that makes that story inappropriate. But if the others agree, and the story gets assigned, the first editor's conception of the magazine's identity was the correct one, and the theory that was applied to that decision will likely be useful for future ones.

In considering a provisional story, the differences between different members' ways of seeing are a useful resource, because members of an editorial team have only their own perceptions available for predicting how a generalized audience will respond to the finished piece, and person A is likely to notice things about the provisional story that person B would not. Having a slate of competent readers encounter a piece before it's published encourages opportunities for members to anticipate the range of readings a generalized audience might bring to a story after it's published, readings that might never have occurred to the reporter on her own. A structure that feels natural to a reporter might seem contrived to an editor; what appears to be

in good style to a writer might be objectionable to a copy editor; a source that seems credible to an editor might seem suspicious to a checker. Each reader can respond only according to their competences, which prompt them to look for and notice different features of the text, and each reader will thus be useful for providing different kinds of insight. A trained editor can identify literary or journalistic weaknesses that a lay reader may overlook, and provide precise recommendations for addressing them, but a lay reader may be more effective in simply identifying places where a story becomes slow, boring, or difficult to follow. Having a range of competences bear on the story in development, in other words, allows a complementary range of edits that shore up the draft against a range of criticisms.

Theorizing a range of readings

Nowhere is this clearer than in discussions of fact. A checker's competence is to preemptively defend a magazine from criticism by developing an account of a story's sources that a range of public readers will be likely to find credible. Journalists subject original empirical instances to a range of translations in converting them to *material*, the compact, fixed, and mobile traces of those events that the reporter uses to discover themes, structures, and other narrative elements. Performing these translations always involves some judgment about what kinds of selection or what degrees of modification will be permissible, based on what the social world is purported to share in common. When it comes to rendering a person's appearance in words, or editing false-starts out of a subject's quotes, what are the boundaries of moral action? Making such a judgment is a matter of theorizing about what might prompt criticism from readers, whether those readers considering journalistic, or scientific, or phenomenological standards of facticity. A checker has to consider the range of standards that readers might bring to the story if they want

to insulate it from public criticism. To accomplish this Herculean task, checkers have to break the story down into facts and experiment with how well those facts hold up when exposed to people with a range of competences. Does a surgeon think a description of a surgical procedure is accurate? Does a local agree with a reporter's description of their place of residence? Does a subject dispute that they said what they're quoted as having said? Judgments in this process are piled upon meta-judgments: does anyone on the editorial team see a reason that a source's account might be suspicious? Can anyone identify another way this point might be disputed? What might the consequences be? If everyone involved can agree that a claim is publishable in spite of their keen eye for bullshit, the claim might just stand among the reading public as a fact after it's put into print.

But the limits of a magazine's claims to facticity are also the limits of their members' capacities to imagine how diverse a range of readings might be possible among a generalized readership. Diligence only increases the likelihood of their claims withstanding scrutiny, it doesn't produce certainty. Members are limited to seeing their provisional stories the way they know how to see them; they don't necessarily know what other ways there are—the things readers might know that they don't. There are always “chance consequences” of their stories that can throw a wrench into things, as Robert Merton wrote in his landmark essay about “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action”: “The exigencies of practical life frequently compel us to act with some confidence even though it is manifest that the information on which we base our action is not complete” (1936, 900). Reporters and editors do, after all, work on deadline, and limits to the resources they have on hand force them to outsource their expertise to others on the basis of trust, leaving room for deception, misunderstanding, and errors of judgment.

In spite of their best collective efforts, the members of an editorial team might easily be surprised by the way their story gets received by the reading public. A story that seems certain to be a hit might flop. A story designed to stoke outrage might fall flat. An editor's trust in their writer might turn out to have been misplaced. Unintended harm might come to a source who wasn't sufficiently protected. Sometimes subjects will feel so betrayed by how they were depicted that they'll sue the magazine and its employees. Sometimes the *CJR* will be called in to find out how things went so wildly wrong. Outcomes like these are costly to the reputation of a magazine and the people who work for it, especially when they involve deliberate deception that erodes the system of trust; the genre relies on readers believing that what they're reading is true if the requisite rhetorical force is to be achieved. Preventing the erosion of trust by accurately predicting how readers will respond comprises a great deal of the work reporters, editors, and checkers do to render a story publishable.

Reading for evidence of propriety

It's when it withstands the scrutiny of a generalized readership that a claim effectively enters the public record as a fact, or when a story enters the canon as a paradigm of the genre. This achievement realizes something about the world of literary journalism as well—a story that withstands public scrutiny offers evidence to members of what counts as good literary journalism, especially members with the competence to read methodologically. At least in one particular case, members learn from such an article what audiences seem to like or dislike; what subjects seem to consider fair treatment or mistreatment; what kinds of actions might trigger a lawsuit or insulate from one; what kinds of stories a given magazine will consider, or what kinds of structures its editors might impose; they learn how much figurative language they'll get away

with and how transparent they need to be about sourcing; they learn about the use of commas and appositive clauses and subject postposing; about characterization and pacing and scene-setting and perspective. They learn how experienced writers differ from novices, and how *New Yorker* writers differ from *Rolling Stone* ones. If audiences revolt, they learn about one thing that might make future audiences revolt, and what might be done to prevent that—were sources treated poorly? Was the story lacking in depth? Was it rushed into print? Was it politically insensitive? Were sources taken at their word when they shouldn't have been? Are there sources that should have been consulted but weren't? Are there editors who dropped the ball, or who were ignored when they should have been listened to?

All of these things, observable from reading methodologically and paying attention to public discussions about published work, serve as evidence for readers of what the boundaries are of proper, acceptable, typical, or moral practice—what the features of the genre are, what it means to treat sources or subjects fairly, what features contribute to the voice or the identity of a magazine, what kinds of structures have natural affinities with which types of stories, what counts as a checkable fact. These commonplaces are both *inputs and outcomes* of the achievement of any consensus. As inputs, conceptual commonplaces permit people to coordinate their work, and overcome their subjective differences, in a common pursuit of publishability; and the conceptual resources for performing this kind of coordination become visible as each published story communicates a consensus to other members of the social world about what's appropriate or permissible. This process allows reporters and editors to achieve some alignment, however close, between what they subjectively feel is good writing, and what the consumers of their work appear to appreciate, and the closer that alignment turns out to be, the more members

of the journalism world can just do their work without feeling like they're being restricted or directed by commercial or political concerns on the far side of the church-state firewall.

The Upshot

The upshot of this account is that a feature article in a magazine is not just the conclusion of a series of actions, nor is it merely a resource available for use in future interactions; it's not a mirror image of reality with anything like a one-to-one relationship with the people or events it depicts, but nor is it merely an abstraction of those events—it's something else that's quite concrete, that you can hold in your hands and examine in detail with your own eyes. As I mentioned at the outset, it's an object that Clayton Childress, speaking of the novel-in-the-making he examined in *Under the Cover*, would put in the category of “things that are many things” (2017, 4). The multiplicity of social objects is a feature that sociologists overlook when they limit the extension of *culture* to the objects themselves, or when they shear off acts of production from acts of consumption, or when they treat some social objects, like facts, as ontologically distinct from other social objects, like artworks. Social objects can be different things in different situations, and it's this multiplicity that allows consumers of the objects to take them up as resources for achieving whatever purposes their own social worlds require.

As social objects, published articles permit the passage of structured relationships between people, organizations, objects, and meanings from Time A to Time B through the work people do to scrutinize the objects for evidence of conceptual commonplaces, and to organize their interactions with their environments (including their peers) in accordance with their understanding of those concepts. As much as reporters and editors work to fix the object they're creating in a particular form, with particular properties, in order to propagate their conception of

the genre or the magazine or the reality of their case through time, they cannot help but surrender control once the object is distributed to the public and put to use for whatever aims it seems to suit.

It's not outlandish to suggest that most journalists do what they do because they want their work to have an impact—they think the stories they're telling are important, they want their readers to be enlightened, and in many cases they want their stories to be a catalyst for social action, however proactive that action might be. This is commonly expressed in terms like those of the aforementioned Pam Colloff, who wanted her story "to really hit readers in the gut" (Williams 2013d). But it's clear that as a social action, an article of literary journalism won't always have the intended impact—people might ignore it, or read only halfway through, interpret it in an unexpected way, perceive it as a personal affront, or dispute the main thrust or the particular facts. Out in the world, a printed article takes on a life of its own that can be quite unrelated to what the editorial team intended for it. Addressing literary journalism as a purposive social action, as many members of the literary journalism world tend to do, means trying to take stock of what went wrong in any given case so that those problems can be corrected in the future. I would argue that a project such as this can help to provide some diagnostic clarity in at least two ways.

The first is a matter of recognizing that communication with a generalized reader is subordinate to the interactions that take place within and among the members of the reporter's social world in the course of producing the article. A reporter, for example, might have a generalized reader in mind when deciding how to structure their draft or which scenes to include, but their immediate responsibility in that situation is to their editor, who mediates between the reporter and the generalized reader. Indeed, as I've tried to demonstrate, the generalized reader

often serves as an abstract conceptual resource that helps the reporter and editor work toward a consensus by establishing what goals they have in common. A similar point can be made about the relationship between a story editor and a top editor, or between a checker and a story editor, or any kind of editor and the EIC. If achieving publishability is a prerequisite for communicating with a generalized reader, the interactions that take place in pursuit of publishability are likely going to be a propitious place to look when it comes to identifying problems and their solutions, rather than looking at the relationship between the reporter and the public reader, which is an *outcome* of those interactions.

The second, related source of diagnostic clarity is in considering the obduracy that those intra-world social interactions produce in the pursuit of a true or factual account of reality. Often, when things go wrong, insufficient attention to the external reality is cited as the culprit—the facts weren’t checked thoroughly enough, bullshit alarms were ignored, errors went uncorrected, willful deceptions were taken at face value. In the *Rolling Stone* case, for example, the reporter and editors were accused of unreasonable credulousness, by allowing excessive deference to the abused subject to get in the way of discovering the real truth about the situations the subject was describing. The emphasis in formulations like these is how real facts could have been accessible to the researchers, and transmissible to readers, had those errors not been committed. (This might be familiar from early approaches to social studies of science that attributed erroneous claims to “social factors,” while true beliefs could be attributed to the nature of reality.) What gets lost in this kind of account are the “social factors” that pervade the production of any kind of social object, including facts. The social processes of collectively developing an account of reality present as many obstacles to the “uptake” of a belief as the natural ones, as Latour noted pointedly with his quip, “Reality is what resists” (1987, 93). Taking social obduracy seriously

means considering what it means for actions to turn out right as opposed to wrong in terms of what the social reality contributes to the criteria of rightness and wrongness. In other words, a reporter's "correct" actions aren't correct because that reporter has a privileged access to reality by virtue of them, but because they're the right actions for the purpose of the social world the reporter is a part of.

As I've indicated, a large part of accurately predicting the uptake of one's work is being voracious in consuming information about one's social world by participating in it as a full contributing member—in this case, reading widely, interacting regularly with other members, and doing things deliberately so their effects can be observed. One outcome of this kind of full participation is an accurate social sense for how members of that world are likely to make sense of the social objects they encounter. Simply enough, a journalist will likely be able to predict with reasonable accuracy the responses of anyone who shares a commensurable social sense based on shared conditions of socialization. This presents a problem, however, when members have to take into account how people outside their immediate social world are going to make sense of things, and this is where a fact checker's need to "check all the facts" becomes somewhat problematic, not just because identifying "all the facts" begs the question, but because a checker's social sense for what the facts are is limited by the knowledge of the social worlds they're a part of. Whereas an investigation like the *CJR*'s into the *Rolling Stone* case might suggest that a solution to factual errors is to check the facts more thoroughly, and to institute policies that help ensure that checkers will be more thorough, there's an inherent shortcoming to that approach because it focuses only on the checker's access to the external, material world, and their deliberate actions in attempting to access it. My analysis suggests, alternatively, that an

additional way of addressing this kind of problem is to consider how *upstream* experiences can influence the way a journalist's social sense will be capable of anticipating reader's responses.

In case this isn't clear, consider the story "Dr. V's Magical Putter" (Hannan 2014), published by the digital sports magazine *Grantland*, about a physicist, Essay Anne Vanderbilt, who claimed to have invented a revolutionary putter. In the course of investigating the story, the reporter Caleb Hannan discovered not only that Vanderbilt's physics credentials appeared to have been fabricated, but also that she was a trans woman. Doing what he perceived as his due diligence, Hannan provided the information he had discovered to one of the investors who had been supporting Vanderbilt's research on the club, and Vanderbilt committed suicide soon after, apparently related to a fear of being widely outed as trans. Not surprisingly in retrospect, the story prompted a great flood of criticism, most of it related to the magazine's evident ignorance of trans issues and the callous equation in the story between Dr. V's fabricated credentials and her gender identity.

In a mea culpa published shortly after the story, the magazine's editor Bill Simmons acknowledged that although numerous people had read the story before it was published, no one was familiar enough with trans issues to realize that outing Vanderbilt against her will was a bad idea. "Somewhere between 13 and 15 people read the piece in all, including every senior editor but one, our two lead copy desk editors, our publisher and even *ESPN.com*'s editor-in-chief," he said. "All of them were blown away by the piece. Everyone thought we should run it" (Simmons 2014). Hopefully it's clear that what went wrong in this case was of the same order as what went wrong in the *Rolling Stone* case, even though the *Grantland* incident was not a problem with facticity. Whereas in the *Rolling Stone* case none of the editors anticipated how readers at the *Washington Post* would be able to overturn their account, the *Grantland* editors failed to

anticipate how readers would respond to their account not just in terms of the risks associated with exposing private information to a public audience, but particularly in terms of “rules” of propriety related to trans subjects (e.g., GLAAD, n.d.), because no one familiar with trans issues read the piece before it was published. “That speaks to our collective ignorance about the issues facing the transgender community in general,” Simmons said. *“I read Caleb’s piece a certain way because of my own experiences in life. That’s not an acceptable excuse; it’s just what happened.”* And it’s what happened to Caleb, and everyone on my staff, and everyone who read/praised/shared that piece during that 56-hour stretch from Wednesday to Friday,” when it was published (2014, emphasis added). The responses of readers who were familiar with basic trans etiquette was among the unknown unknowns that the editors could not have taken into account because of the incidental limits to their competence.

The point here is that there is a limit to the usefulness of policies in preventing surprising outcomes of purposive action. Because policies are always the *response* to a negative reaction directed at a past mistake, they don’t anticipate negative reactions that are new or unfamiliar. Policies can only be devised with respect to practices that the policy writers are explicitly aware of. If a major part of a journalist’s day-to-day actions is based on a tacit sense for how readers will react, there’s a limit to how useful explicit policies or rules will be in widening the range of readers who will agree with the editorial team that any given story is “good.” The usefulness of policies extends only to the door of the editorial office; policies don’t regulate the interaction between the reader and the text.

This kind of problem that occurred at *Grantland* is a common reason that members of the literary journalism world complain about a lack of diversity in the ranks of reporters and editors at major magazines. If the demographic of an editorial staff trends toward white males, the range

of readings that the staff will be able to anticipate will be narrow. The same is true if the demographic trends toward people with private-school education, or people from major cities instead of rural areas, or people with enough wealth to forgo income while they develop the craft skills required for remunerative reporting. If the trend toward digital distribution has led to magazine features travelling independently to readers who aren't necessarily subscribers, the kind of public an article brings about (e.g., Warner 2002) is effectively malleable by editors and publishers deciding whose readings they're interested in anticipating. To realize the Deweyan ideal of journalism as a conversation with the public, journalists have to intersect actively—in the sense of full participation—with whatever worlds they want to converse with. This means that instead of responding to things going wrong by “gaming the outputs” and trying to direct action through policy, it will probably be effective to *also* “game the inputs” by bringing full participants of a broad range of social worlds into the editorial team, the better to narrow the range of unknown unknowns the team will collectively be capable of anticipating.

That this is useful will certainly not come as news to the editors of many magazines, whose virtue is already that they're capable of anticipating a wide range of reader responses in exactly this way. What makes these pieces effective as social actions is that editors leverage the pre-publication experimentation with readers so that they can anticipate a wide range of possible readings. But what I am suggesting is that this insight provides a qualitative distinction between literary journalism from other forms of writing and research, particularly forms that don't involve the same degree of editorial intervention despite being intended for a generalized public.

I mentioned in the introduction that Harry Collins and Robert Evans (2007) have embarked on a project of evaluating expertise, so that the views of people who “know what they are talking about” can be given more prominence in collective decision making, and I suggested

that this project might serve as a way in to considering different kinds of expertise within the worlds of journalism and how they might be differently adequate for different purposes. Where I diverge from Collins and Evans is in emphasizing the accomplishment of literary journalism not just as an outcome of the reporter's expertise—although that's certain part of it—but in the “superhuman” expertise that results from a team of experts *collectively* building an account of reality by experimenting with the range of readings that a text permits—by building a text from the combined expertise of people with different skills and people competent with the language of different worlds. An individual's expertise, no matter how influenced it might be by the collective procedural memory passed down by their forebears—the “decades and decades of very specific things that people have learned to do with voice and story form,” as David Samuels put it (Mueller 2012)—always has a major tacit component. And by allowing a text to incorporate the divergent ways of seeing that different individuals' experiences predispose them to, the expertise of the collective exceeds what would be possible for any individual.

Jad Abumrad, who created the podcast Radiolab with Robert Krulwich, described his work in terms that would be familiar to anyone with experience collaborating on a creative endeavour, literary journalists included. “A lot of it is solo; it's just you locked in a room wrestling with something,” he says.

You get to a point where you feel like, Oh, this is good! I think this is amazing! And then I'll send it to Robert and he'll send me these classic seven-page emails where he points out with brutally fierce insight exactly why it's not working. . . . It's very humbling when you feel like you've got it and you realize that you don't have it. Someone else needs to complete it. But then it's quite beautiful, I find, when you walk across the line and realize, we actually have something that none of us could have done alone!" (Rose 2014)

Future Directions

This project doesn't come close to being a definitive or comprehensive account of the practice of literary journalism, for a few reasons. One is that the preponderance of data that this account is built on came from interviews, which are limited in the information they can provide. While reporters in an interview might be able to demonstrate what Collins and Evans call *interactional expertise*—the ability to *talk* about their work—access to the *contributory expertise* required for them to actually do that work calls for a much more immersive form of data collection. Another reason is that one major cohort of people involved in the production of a magazine article is missing from this account—the cohort of subjects and sources whose contributions deeply influence the reporter's understanding of the social worlds their empirical cases consist of. In the production of a feature article, subjects occupy a curious liminal position in social world of the journalists telling their story. They're certainly a part of the social world necessary for a story to take its final form, as far as Becker conceives of a social world, but the competence they bring to their interactions with a reporter are derived from whatever social world they hail from, and have very little to do with the competences a reporter needs to be a contributory member of their own world. As I've explained, this leads to a moral hazard if the subject's lack of familiarity with the reporter's world leads them inadvertently to take on risks that they're not in a position to control. This is a sociologically interesting state of affairs to be sure, but the subjects' perspectives play only a cursory role in this account because of their relative inaccessibility. A third reason is simply an outcome of the nature of social worlds as Becker describes them: the boundaries I've chosen for this account are fairly arbitrary, and a different account could easily be conceived which would expand the social world to include a broader range of participants. Based on these kinds of shortcomings, there are a variety of potential future directions this research could take.

The first might involve taking a more microscopic look at various types of interactional work that reporters and editors engage in with one another in the course of producing a feature. For example, one way of doing this would be to observe and participate in interactions such as the meetings in which editors evaluate pitches or ideas or decide which stories to assign to which reporters. This kind of project would be somewhat akin to Ben Merriman's (2017) account of the evaluation of story submissions at a small literary journal, in which he was able to observe the production of criteria for rejecting—but not accepting—inadequate manuscripts. Although this kind of research would link explicitly to work on cultural evaluation (e.g., Chong 2013), it would also be fruitful to consider the development of consensus, not necessarily in a pitch meeting, but in something like a closing meeting, where the intent of the meeting is explicitly to reach agreement on whatever points of contention remain outstanding before publication. Another type of interactional work that would undoubtedly be worthwhile to examine would be the training and mentorship relationships that help tacit understandings of identity and best practice to propagate from experienced members to less experienced members, such as when new fact checkers are encouraged to just try checking a straightforward front-of-book piece and directed in what they might have missed, or when assistant editors are given feedback about the feedback they're providing to a reporter. With enough access, any number of interactions could be examined to provide a closer look at various aspects of this process—coffee meetings between editors and writers about potential future ideas, discussions about the feedback provided on particular drafts at different stages in the story's development, or the nature of the conversations that take place in phone calls between reporters and editors while the reporters are in the field, to name a few examples.

Any of the “typical cases” mentioned in this account would be worth examining in more detail, even without an explicit focus on the interactional work that they involve. One thing that makes this kind of research difficult is that so much of the work consists of people working alone in front of a computer. I’ve tried to highlight that this work is social nonetheless, but the independent work of any of these members would be worth examining further. For example, a top editor’s work is clearly different from a story editor’s, and examining the substance of their respective day-to-day work tasks would help to illuminate their respective roles in the form of the finished piece. Managing editors, as well, are responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the editorial office, particularly with respect to scheduling, payments, hiring, and other managerial tasks, and their contribution has gone largely unexplored in this account. The role of copy editors has also been mentioned here in only a cursory way, but they can often have an outsized influence in their attention to the consistency of the “internal world” of a story, and they’re often responsible for enforcing the style components of a magazine’s identity, and for these reasons their work would be interesting to examine more closely.

Access would be a major hurdle of another possible avenue of investigation, taking account of the role of subjects in the production of an article. As I’ve explained, the relationships between a reporter and a subject can be very substantial in the context of certain kinds of pieces, like profiles, where numerous significant encounters between a reporter and subject might take place over a period of weeks or months. Examining this series of interactions from the perspective of the subject would provide insight into the work that a subject does to try to manage the interactions in their favour, as a way of maintaining some control over their representation, and in particular it would allow for a comparison of sorts between the

expectations that the reportorial interactions set up and the subject's later encounters with the piece both in the fact-checking process and after publication.

Such a project would touch on the consumption side of a published article, but other approaches could be more explicit about the ways that a published article might be taken up by various kinds of readers. For example, I've indicated that a journalist's consumption of journalistic or literary exemplars provides much of the basis for their judgment of what qualifies as "good" literature or journalism, but the ways that journalists consume this material has been largely unexamined in this account. At the most basic level, a simple examination of members' reading habits would be fruitful for illuminating this, as would a more longitudinal examination of formative influences, although the design of such a study might be difficult to formulate.

Two additional avenues would also be worth pursuing. The first is to zoom out, and examine broader organizational questions. Whereas this account has tended to focus on just the editorial work involved in producing a feature article, equally interesting work is done by the wide variety of additional people involved in the production of a magazine in general—the people involved in design and layout, for example; illustrators or photographers tasked with making visual representations of textual stories; and printers who are responsible for the technical details of producing a magazine as a physical rather than conceptual object. Of particular interest is the work that happens over the boundary between the editorial and commercial sides of a magazine. As much as editors try to maintain their independence from commercial influence, the members of a magazine staff who are responsible for selling advertisements and cultivating commercial relationships with other kinds of revenue sources are obviously imperative to a magazine's continued existence, and would be worth studying. The boundary between the commercial and editorial sides of a magazine is clearly permeable, but the

nature of that permeability and the work that's involved in trying to enforce the boundary, if not the appearance of the boundary, would be very interesting to examine. Magazines that are components of larger publishing organizations would be particularly auspicious cases; *The New Yorker*, for instance, is part of a larger organization, Condé Nast, just like the news and longform components of BuzzFeed are parts of a larger BuzzFeed platform. It would likely be enlightening to examine how longform features, or a magazine organization, plays a role in a larger commercial organization in spite of the church-state divide.

The second avenue would be to use a similar process-oriented framework to examine different cases that involve the collaborative production of accounts or other related social objects. One particularly salient case would be the production of narrative radio stories of the kind associated with podcasts like *This American Life*, *Radiolab*, or *Ear Hustle*. Although there are a lot of similarities between this kind of work and the work involved in literary journalism, in that they both present true stories through the use of narrative devices, there are a variety of important differences. One is that stories have to be constructed out of recordings of participants talking, which eliminates some of the opportunities for translation that are available to print reporters for overcoming imperfections in a subject's speech, and thus introduces a different set of criteria into a reporter's (or producer's) approach to recruiting and interviewing subjects. Legal proceedings would be another auspicious case, considering the investigative work that attorneys do to establish the facts of the events under dispute, where precedent legal interpretations and conventions of legal reasoning provide details of the social reality the attorney must be able to anticipate in preparing a case. A third potential case would be the investigative work conducted by auditors or inspectors general, who are tasked with evaluating an organization's adherence to the statutes and guidelines intended to regulate it. Alternatively,

cases that lack an explicit concern with natural reality, but which involve a similar process of collaboration in pursuit of a final draft, might also be interesting to examine, if only for comparison's sake; these might include the production of animated television shows, for example, where the idea a writer proposes in a pitch undergoes a complicated series of revisions and refinements with input from other writers, showrunners, actors, directors, storyboard artists, layout artists, timers, mixers, and so on.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hi [participant],

I'm a PhD candidate in sociology from UBC (and a visiting scholar at NYU), and I'm working on a project on magazine journalism—basically, trying to understand it as a form of empirical social research. I'm curious if you might consider meeting with me at some point to chat a little about your work at [magazine]. I'm particularly interested in some of the practical, day-to-day details of your work.

I understand you're probably very busy, so I would be happy to meet with you wherever and whenever it's convenient for you.

The project is being supervised by Neil Gross and Gianpaolo Baiocchi [with links], and I attached a short (although mildly outdated) article describing the project in a little more detail in case you're interested. Please let me know if you have any questions!

Many thanks,

Will Keats-Osborn

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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Tel: (604) 822-6683
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Researcher: Will Keats-Osborn
Organization: Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia
Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
Project: True Stories

Part 1: Information Sheet

Introduction

I am a PhD student from the UBC Department of Sociology, and I'm doing research on the social world of literary journalism. I've invited you to participate in this research project because of the unique insider perspective you have as a result of all your experience in this field. The intent of this letter is to highlight the purpose and procedure of the study, what would be expected of you as a participant, and your rights as a participant should you choose to contribute. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to decide right away whether you'd like to participate, and I encourage you to take as much time as you need and to ask me any clarifying questions you may have before you make your decision.

Purpose of the research

As you know, long-form journalism plays a very important role in producing knowledge about the social world. Far from merely entertaining audiences or keeping them up to date on the latest news, many long-form journalists provide the public with concrete, empirical insights into the causes, effects, and underlying processes associated with a wide range of issues, and many important public conversations are influenced—if not predicated altogether—on their observations. While people often turn to academia for the authority of “scientific” knowledge, long-form journalism is in many respects a parallel method for creating knowledge about the social world, with its own set of procedures and conventions. Considering the role of long-form journalism in informing and influencing public understanding, I feel that it's important to understand—from a sociological perspective—how exactly this knowledge is produced.

Type of research intervention

This research will consist mainly of one-on-one interviews. During the interview, I will sit down with you and ask questions about the work that you do. Most of the questions will focus on the

process of producing a work of literary journalism, including questions about coming up with ideas, finding and interviewing subjects, taking notes, organizing files, meeting with writers or editors, and other tasks. I may also ask you broader questions about the role of journalism in producing or circulating ideas, or questions about your career, including how you first started out and where you learned the skills that you currently use. In some cases I may ask you questions about specific written works that you've already published. You do not have to answer any of the questions if you don't want to.

Confidentiality

The conversation will be digitally and manually recorded, and some of this information will be used in the published research report. However, by default, your identity (along with any information that could identify you) will remain confidential and will never appear in any publicly-available research report. I may ask to use your identity in a public report if I feel it's necessary for clarification, but I will only use your identity if you provide express written permission. Digital files and hard-copy notes will be stored on an encrypted laptop or in a locked cabinet without your name attached to them, and destroyed at the end of five years.

Duration

Individual interviews will probably last one or two hours. In some cases, I may have additional questions to ask after the initial interview, but it will be up to you to decide whether or not you'd like to continue participating with additional interviews or conversations.

Potential Risks

There is a chance that you might share information during these interviews that you wish to keep secret or confidential, or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about certain topics. Again, you'll never be expected to share any information you don't want to share, and you will always be free to not answer individual questions or to terminate the interview altogether if you wish to do so. Your participation remains voluntary throughout the duration of the project, and if you decide to stop participating, you can choose whether you would like me to disregard or destroy any information you've already given me.

Benefits

While the benefits to you personally for participating in this research are likely to be minimal, I would hope that you find my questions stimulating and that you learn something about your work and the work of your colleagues through these conversations. I will happily share with you any of the final products resulting from this research, and it would be my aim to make these interesting and insightful to you as well as to an academic audience.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided with any incentive to take part in this research.

Sharing the results

The results of this research will be published as a PhD dissertation. As well, one or more articles may be published in an academic journal as a result of this research, and findings may be shared more broadly in popular publications or at conferences.

Important points:

1. Your participation remains voluntary throughout the research, and you have the right to withdraw at any time.
2. By default, you will not be identifiable in any publicly available research report unless you give me advance written permission to identify you.

Contact

If you have any questions at any time, please contact me, Will Keats-Osborn, at XXXX@gmail.com or at XXX-XXX-XXXX. My research supervisor, Dr. Neil Gross, is also available to address any concerns you may have; he can be reached at XXXX@XXXX.com, or through the UBC Department of Sociology at 604-822-6683. If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or, if long distance, e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Part II: Certificate of Consent

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been explained to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it, and the questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____

Date _____
Day / month / year

☐ I give my permission for the researcher to reveal my identity in publicly-accessible publications _____
(initials)

APPENDIX C: CODE LIST

| Code System | # |
|---------------------------|------|
| Code System | 6264 |
| Roberta Myers | 1 |
| Meta / accounting | 7 |
| Good random quotes | 48 |
| Specifics | 0 |
| Other | 0 |
| Longreads.com | 1 |
| People | 0 |
| Auletta, Ken | 1 |
| Caro, Robert | 1 |
| Conover, Ted | 1 |
| Gottlieb, Bob | 1 |
| Hodge, Roger | 1 |
| Lemann, Nick | 1 |
| Shawn, William | 3 |
| Wolfe, Tom | 2 |
| Magazines | 1 |
| Atavist | 22 |
| Atlantic | 2 |
| The Big Roundtable | 1 |
| Boston Globe Ideas | 1 |
| Deca | 1 |
| Competitors / competition | 1 |
| Participants | 4 |
| How it started | 2 |
| Business model | 5 |
| Admin roles | 2 |
| Division of labour | 1 |
| Tech | 1 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Process | 7 |
| Checking / copy / publicity | 2 |
| Der Spiegel | 2 |
| Elle | 1 |
| ESPN The Magazine | 1 |
| Esquire | 2 |
| Gawker | 1 |
| GQ | 2 |
| Harper's | 17 |
| Findings | 1 |
| Unionization | 1 |
| Lingua Franca | 3 |
| McSweeney's | 1 |
| New York | 2 |
| New Yorker | 26 |
| Newhouse takeover / dissent | 1 |
| NY Observer | 2 |
| NYRB | 1 |
| NYT Mag | 6 |
| Rolling Stone | 0 |
| UVA story | 1 |
| This American Life | 3 |
| Reporting for radio | 3 |
| Editing for radio | 11 |
| Time | 1 |
| Vanity Fair | 2 |
| Vogue | 2 |
| Walrus | 2 |
| WaPo | 1 |
| Wired | 1 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Books | 0 |
| Anthologies | 3 |
| Organization of publishing companies | 2 |
| Books as future of longform | 3 |
| Books as more in-depth articles | 14 |
| Proposals | 4 |
| Evaluating proposals / manuscripts | 1 |
| Selling the idea / proposal | 9 |
| Contracts | 1 |
| Time / timing / deadlines | 2 |
| Role of agent | 5 |
| Editing | 20 |
| Acquisitions | 3 |
| Keeping tabs on social geography | 1 |
| Backlists | 1 |
| Checking | 2 |
| Marketing | 11 |
| Agents | 0 |
| Good vs bad agents | 2 |
| Competition / status / seniority | 2 |
| Fiction vs nonfiction | 2 |
| Monitoring industry | 6 |
| Taste | 2 |
| Clientele | 3 |
| Relationships with clients | 4 |
| As brokers in selling pieces to magazines | 3 |
| Evaluating ideas / manuscripts | 9 |
| Tailoring to editors | 4 |
| Selling scripts | 6 |
| Working with editors | 4 |

| | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|----|
| | Publishers / houses | 1 |
| | Successful manuscripts | 4 |
| | Work tasks | 12 |
| | Becoming an agent | 2 |
| | Success | 3 |
| | Business | 0 |
| | Subscribers | 1 |
| | Importance of business expertise | 2 |
| | Corporate ownership | 1 |
| | Multiple revenue streams | 4 |
| | Basic lack of profitability | 6 |
| | Paywalls | 9 |
| | Hollywood optioning | 5 |
| | Singles | 1 |
| | Distribution | 2 |
| | Advertising | 22 |
| | Personal identity | 4 |
| | Being a writer | 5 |
| | Being an editor | 1 |
| | Craft | 2 |
| | Influences / idols | 66 |
| | Beats / themes | 79 |
| | Typecasting | 7 |
| | Style | 8 |
| | Careers | 0 |
| | Awards | 2 |
| | Wanting to become a writer / editor | 18 |
| | General progression comments | 72 |
| | Typical career progression | 6 |
| | Education | 0 |
| | Mentorship | 34 |
| | Internships | 14 |
| | Fellowships | 7 |

| | | |
|--|---|----|
| | Informal | 2 |
| | Learning conventions | 1 |
| | Learning on the job | 28 |
| | Lessons from experience / trial and error | 22 |
| | Fact checking as training | 10 |
| | Transitioning to longer pieces | 4 |
| | Formal | 37 |
| | Freelancing | 1 |
| | Advantages | 7 |
| | Disadvantages | 14 |
| | Hustling | 12 |
| | Working up the ladder | 1 |
| | Reputation among editors | 4 |
| | Taking coffee | 8 |
| | Twitter | 4 |
| | Multiple projects at once | 6 |
| | Staff / contract writing | 19 |
| | Networking / personal connections | 1 |
| | Horizontal relationships | 17 |
| | Relationships with editors | 22 |
| | Competitiveness | 20 |
| | Between magazines | 4 |
| | Diversity | 5 |
| | Gender | 14 |
| | Race | 2 |
| | Class | 9 |
| | Money | 29 |
| | Rates | 4 |
| | Copyright issues | 3 |
| | Negotiating | 3 |
| | Expenses | 4 |
| | Benefits | 2 |

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|--|---|----|
| | Day jobs | 5 |
| | Journalism general | 0 |
| | Infrastructure | 2 |
| | Patronage / art-world comparison | 1 |
| | Size / scope of feature-oriented magazine world | 2 |
| | History of longform | 11 |
| | Innovation / progression | 7 |
| | Geography of longform | 20 |
| | Reporting overseas | 3 |
| | Genre | 0 |
| | Types of journalism | 17 |
| | Essays | 3 |
| | New Journalism | 2 |
| | Profiles | 2 |
| | Radio / podcasts | 3 |
| | A-heds | 1 |
| | Cultural journalism | 1 |
| | Reviews | 3 |
| | Ideas journalism | 3 |
| | Data journalism | 1 |
| | Hierarchies | 11 |
| | News vs longform | 37 |
| | Academics vs journalism | 19 |
| | Longform vs fiction | 19 |
| | Advantages / appeal of longform | 0 |
| | Narrative / literary possibilities | 2 |
| | Size of readership | 1 |
| | External effects / changes / influence | 2 |
| | Time | 17 |
| | Depth / detail / immersion | 22 |
| | Meaningfulness / emotional impact | 15 |
| | Empathy | 5 |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|----|
| | | | Opportunities for exploration / adventure | 18 |
| | | | Freedom / self-direction | 4 |
| | | | Collegial culture | 5 |
| | | | Intimate friendships / connections | 1 |
| | | | Answers specific types of questions | 2 |
| | | | Illustrating larger issues | 0 |
| | | | Tension bt representativeness and idiosyncrasy | 4 |
| | | | Skepticism about representativeness | 2 |
| | | | Linking to aboutness | 1 |
| | | | Stories illustrate larger ideas | 14 |
| | | | Examples of larger issues being illustrated | 39 |
| | | | Narratives help readers absorb info | 4 |
| | | | Narratives structure theoretical stuff | 1 |
| | | | Changes | 4 |
| | | | Less interest in editing | 1 |
| | | | Normalcy of colour / narrative in news writing | 2 |
| | | | New access challenges | 1 |
| | | | Less experimentation | 5 |
| | | | Changing review infrastructure | 3 |
| | | | Editing on computers vs paper | 1 |
| | | | More qualified job applicants | 1 |
| | | | More meta-journalism (incl method discussion) | 1 |
| | | | Hollywood connection | 4 |
| | | | Professional demographics | 1 |
| | | | Impoverished apprenticeship system | 5 |
| | | | Timeliness / news pegs | 10 |
| | | | Increased pace | 8 |
| | | | Shorter pieces | 16 |
| | | | Trend toward branding | 3 |
| | | | Media convergence (i.e. multiple | 2 |

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|--|--|--|---------------------------------|----|
| | | | platforms per outlet) | |
| | | | Different audiences | 1 |
| | | | Golden age of longform | 11 |
| | | | Lower editorial standards | 5 |
| | | | Quoting practices | 2 |
| | | | Composites | 2 |
| | | | Less money / advertising | 22 |
| | | | Normalcy of internet | 15 |
| | | | J schools struggling to keep up | 1 |
| | | | Being part of online culture | 1 |
| | | | Metrics / feedback | 4 |
| | | | Stories move around as singles | 14 |
| | | | Online longform platforms | 1 |
| | | | Research possibilities online | 6 |
| | | | Journalist characteristics | 19 |
| | | | Good writers vs good reporters | 11 |
| | | | Practice | 0 |
| | | | Teaching | 7 |
| | | | Interfering with writing | 1 |
| | | | Learning from students | 1 |
| | | | Syllabi / example texts | 4 |
| | | | Talent vs achievement | 2 |
| | | | Ideas | 0 |
| | | | Editors | 0 |
| | | | Following curiosity | 1 |
| | | | Need for ideas / difficulty | 8 |
| | | | Idea meetings | 21 |
| | | | Mustering support | 8 |
| | | | Networking / social capital | 14 |
| | | | Reading widely | 9 |
| | | | Different angle on news stories | 10 |
| | | | Propagation of ideas | 4 |
| | | | Personal interests (as source) | 2 |

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|--|--|--|--|----|
| | | | Editor-driven magazines | 6 |
| | | | Writer-driven magazines | 4 |
| | | | Writers | 10 |
| | | | Luck | 8 |
| | | | Keeping tabs on people and places | 8 |
| | | | Poking around | 11 |
| | | | Following up previous stories / themes / interests | 16 |
| | | | Reading widely | 25 |
| | | | Networking / social capital | 13 |
| | | | Keeping lists / files | 15 |
| | | | Evaluation criteria | 24 |
| | | | Timeliness | 1 |
| | | | Idiosyncratic feelings | 3 |
| | | | Gestation period | 5 |
| | | | Having access | 1 |
| | | | Personal interest | 6 |
| | | | Holy shit detector | 2 |
| | | | Narrative thread | 5 |
| | | | Topics / ideas vs stories | 18 |
| | | | Uniqueness / angle / surprise | 25 |
| | | | [Magazine]-like ideas | 8 |
| | | | Societal value | 3 |
| | | | Assigning for the readers / audience | 7 |
| | | | Pitching | 1 |
| | | | Competition with other mags as leverage | 3 |
| | | | Differences depending on relationship | 1 |
| | | | Research | 21 |
| | | | Pitch contents | 11 |
| | | | Pitching in person | 9 |
| | | | Successful pitches - qualities | 16 |
| | | | Convincing editors | 1 |

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|--|--|---|----|
| | | Pitching a sensibility / reputation | 1 |
| | | Pitching vs taking / giving assignments | 38 |
| | | Choosing a magazine | 4 |
| | | Choosing an editor | 1 |
| | | Pitching finished pieces | 3 |
| | | Spec | 3 |
| | | Rejection | 3 |
| | | Reporting | 0 |
| | | Planning / anticipating | 25 |
| | | Sensitizing research | 12 |
| | | Unknowns | 13 |
| | | Scope creep | 6 |
| | | Preconceptions confounded by reality | 19 |
| | | Forcing into procrustean bed | 1 |
| | | Expecting certain kinds of scenes | 4 |
| | | Structuring as you go | 32 |
| | | Sources / subjects | 1 |
| | | Guides / fixers / interpreters | 24 |
| | | Being well connected | 7 |
| | | Recruiting / getting access | 25 |
| | | Paying for access | 7 |
| | | Negotiating rules | 26 |
| | | Sending questions ahead of time | 6 |
| | | Offering pseudonymity | 1 |
| | | Film rights | 1 |
| | | Aligning interests | 27 |
| | | Making a case | 13 |
| | | Establishing rapport / trust | 27 |
| | | Transparency about intentions | 33 |
| | | Getting referrals / introductions | 16 |
| | | Getting access through referrals | 11 |

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|--|--|--|---|----|
| | | | Finding tokens of a type | 25 |
| | | | Finding characters | 5 |
| | | | Characters to avoid | 4 |
| | | | Qualities of good characters | 17 |
| | | | Representativeness | 3 |
| | | | Description of process | 9 |
| | | | Celebrities | 16 |
| | | | Personal reputation among sources | 11 |
| | | | Institutional reputation | 11 |
| | | | Reporting / writing around noncompliant subjects | 21 |
| | | | Interviewing | 0 |
| | | | Number of interviews | 7 |
| | | | Order of interviews | 8 |
| | | | Preparing | 21 |
| | | | vs. ad-libbing | 5 |
| | | | Following subject's lead | 1 |
| | | | Split-frame of consciousness | 3 |
| | | | Location / setting | 35 |
| | | | Subjects' knowledge of conventions | 5 |
| | | | Types of questions | 8 |
| | | | Concretization | 14 |
| | | | Exploration | 11 |
| | | | Letting people ramble | 6 |
| | | | Disagreeing | 20 |
| | | | Getting a sense of character | 9 |
| | | | Partnership with subjects | 11 |
| | | | Managing social distance | 0 |
| | | | Unnatural intimacy | 6 |
| | | | Disliking subjects | 1 |
| | | | Preserving relationship with sources (for future) | 1 |
| | | | Forgetting / obscuring journalistic presence | 11 |

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|--|--|--|--|---|----|
| | | | | Eroding distance | 3 |
| | | | | Self-revelation | 17 |
| | | | | Maintaining distance | 6 |
| | | | | Power imbalance implications | 10 |
| | | | | Asymmetry | 2 |
| | | | | Balancing friendliness with confrontation | 1 |
| | | | | Maintaining perspective | 17 |
| | | | | Influencing events / behaviour | 15 |
| | | | | Encouraging subjects to talk | 8 |
| | | | | Respecting boundaries | 6 |
| | | | | Persistence | 7 |
| | | | | Order of questions | 6 |
| | | | | Preparing / being informed / knowledgeable | 10 |
| | | | | Showing depth of prior research | 1 |
| | | | | Developing a persona | 8 |
| | | | | Being affable / gregarious | 3 |
| | | | | Being empathic / nonjudgmental | 9 |
| | | | | Being interested + committed | 17 |
| | | | | Repudiating traditional journo-subject relationship | 2 |
| | | | | Establishing common ground | 6 |
| | | | | Asking for help | 10 |
| | | | | Empowering subjects | 1 |
| | | | | Spending time being present | 11 |
| | | | | Sharing info from other sources | 7 |
| | | | | Being honest about perceptions / observations | 1 |
| | | | | Silences | 6 |
| | | | | Keeping the recorder running post-interview | 2 |
| | | | | It's strange that people talk to strangers | 1 |

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|--|--|--|--|-----|
| | | | Shaping quotes | 19 |
| | | | Describing internal states | 17 |
| | | | Following up | 16 |
| | | | Interviews lead to scenes | 2 |
| | | | Evaluating / triangulating / trust | 24 |
| | | | Social contract b/t journalist and reader | 1 |
| | | | Videos / pics / other sources | 1 |
| | | | Gut feeling | 3 |
| | | | One-source sources | 1 |
| | | | Evaluating "position to know" | 6 |
| | | | Goffmanish eval of expertise | 2 |
| | | | Self-preservation | 1 |
| | | | Axe grinding | 3 |
| | | | Triangulating | 12 |
| | | | Conflicting accounts as part of the story | 1 |
| | | | Questions to ask | 2 |
| | | | Textual / background research | 100 |
| | | | Research assistants | 4 |
| | | | Trials / courts | 4 |
| | | | Observation / participation | 0 |
| | | | Reconstructing scenes | 22 |
| | | | Getting specific details | 7 |
| | | | Naturalism / unadulteration | 14 |
| | | | Vs interviews | 4 |
| | | | Sense of character | 3 |
| | | | Maintaining distance as participant | 2 |
| | | | Observation as a source of questions | 2 |
| | | | Misc | 16 |
| | | | 1st p experience provides confidence / authority | 8 |
| | | | Importance of hangout time / being present | 5 |

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|--|--|--|---------------------------------------|----|
| | | | Getting quotes by hearing them | 2 |
| | | | Being "on" re. observation | 2 |
| | | | Setting up scenes | 13 |
| | | | Recording information | 0 |
| | | | Written notes | 0 |
| | | | Tools | 13 |
| | | | Shorthand | 3 |
| | | | Noting extra-conversational things | 7 |
| | | | Editing as you note | 8 |
| | | | Dailies / Notes as prelim analysis | 8 |
| | | | Deciding what to write down vs ignore | 5 |
| | | | Awkwardness / social grace | 2 |
| | | | Subject's reaction (as resource) | 9 |
| | | | Keeping up | 7 |
| | | | Remembering and noting later | 8 |
| | | | Translating written material | 1 |
| | | | Audio recording | 0 |
| | | | Video / photography | 4 |
| | | | Concerns about reliability | 6 |
| | | | Subject's response | 10 |
| | | | Better for accuracy / thoroughness | 17 |
| | | | As backup | 8 |
| | | | Able to focus on convo | 4 |
| | | | or vv | 3 |
| | | | Transcribing | 14 |
| | | | As prelim analysis | 1 |
| | | | Misc | 4 |
| | | | Organizing notes / files / scripts | 17 |
| | | | Feedback / social support | 3 |
| | | | Pace / timing / taking breaks | 33 |

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|--|--|--|--|----|
| | | | Difficult / traumatic experiences | 3 |
| | | | Security / safety issues | 2 |
| | | | Knowing when you're done | 18 |
| | | | Flattening learning curve | 1 |
| | | | Knowing the answers | 6 |
| | | | Overreporting | 3 |
| | | | Having a complete story | 5 |
| | | | Time management / deadlines | 13 |
| | | | Iteration between reporting and writing | 1 |
| | | | Unused material | 19 |
| | | | Material | 23 |
| | | | Quitting / getting killed | 8 |
| | | | Writing | 0 |
| | | | General | 16 |
| | | | Anxiety doesn't diminish | 2 |
| | | | Analysis / themes / devising a structure | 3 |
| | | | General comments re structure | 8 |
| | | | Thinking visually (of scenes) | 1 |
| | | | Considering readers - structure | 25 |
| | | | Surveying the material | 11 |
| | | | IDing themes / scenes / evaluating importance | 18 |
| | | | Structure determined by subj matter / material | 31 |
| | | | Writing nucleus (e.g. leads or key scenes or quotes) | 15 |
| | | | 1st draft as outline - "vomit out" | 4 |
| | | | Outlines | 11 |
| | | | Outlining too early / getting it wrong | 5 |
| | | | Paper-shuffling approach | 11 |
| | | | Leads | 33 |
| | | | Sections / chapters | 11 |
| | | | Juxtaposition | 9 |

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|--|--|--|---------|----|
| | | | Endings | 15 |
| | | | Kickers | 6 |
| | | Actually writing | 5 | |
| | | Order of writing | 25 | |
| | | Selecting details | 41 | |
| | | Tone / voice | 53 | |
| | | Line-level sound / cadence / aesthetics | 24 | |
| | | Subject determines style | 4 | |
| | | Keeping it fresh | 4 | |
| | | Tailoring to specific mags / eds | 8 | |
| | | Considering readers | 0 | |
| | | Considering reader distinguishes LJ | 2 | |
| | | Reader in mind? | 4 | |
| | | Thinking about subject | 2 | |
| | | Thinking about editor | 4 | |
| | | Generic public readers | 0 | |
| | | Anticipating engagement / interest | 16 | |
| | | Readability / language / vocab | 10 | |
| | | Anticipating level of prior knowledge | 1 | |
| | | Reader's level of interpretive autonomy | 2 | |
| | | Anticipating questions / confusion | 19 | |
| | | Reproducing subject experience in reader | 8 | |
| | | Anticipating reader's perception of author | 4 | |
| | | Downsides to thinking about reader | 2 | |
| | | Getting informal feedback | 34 | |
| | | Preparing defenses / for checking | 17 | |
| | | misc | 14 | |
| | | First / third person | 46 | |

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|--|--|--|----|
| | | Narrator persona | 3 |
| | | Writing based on personal experience | 2 |
| | | Reconstructing scenes secondhand | 8 |
| | | Rendering characters | 17 |
| | | Physical description | 2 |
| | | Analysis / exposition | 15 |
| | | Footnotes | 1 |
| | | Length | 3 |
| | | Location / setting | 20 |
| | | Organizing one's day | 29 |
| | | Getting blocked | 7 |
| | | Pace | 13 |
| | | Drafting / revising | 38 |
| | | Tools / software | 20 |
| | | Exemplars | 1 |
| | | Developing voice / style | 1 |
| | | Reading habits | 22 |
| | | Formative | 17 |
| | | Combining exemplars | 5 |
| | | Limit to conscious improvement | 1 |
| | | Conscious vs unconscious | 2 |
| | | Communicating methods / reading methodologically | 6 |
| | | Generational heritage | 1 |
| | | Reading tonally / stylistically | 5 |
| | | Specific didactic resources | 6 |
| | | Lists of specific models | 17 |
| | | Mimicking voice of other docs | 7 |
| | | Getting infected | 8 |
| | | Responsibility / stewardship | 12 |
| | | Writers wield power | 8 |
| | | Deciding whether to include or not | 1 |
| | | Evaluating power differentials | 13 |

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|--|--|--|----|
| | | Responsibility to subjects / portrayal | 11 |
| | | Hinting rather than saying | 2 |
| | | Anonymous / pseudonymous sources | 23 |
| | | Checking with subjects about material | 15 |
| | | Commitment to "getting the story right" | 4 |
| | | Detachment / even-handedness | 2 |
| | | Going undercover | 3 |
| | | Multimedia components | 9 |
| | | Editing | 0 |
| | | Importance of | 29 |
| | | Top editing / executive concerns | 0 |
| | | Institutional identity | 0 |
| | | EIC role | 11 |
| | | Conceptualizing | 5 |
| | | Readership niche (market) | 2 |
| | | Finding a natural readership | 14 |
| | | Phenomenological sense - popular vs good | 25 |
| | | Market research - learning about readers | 8 |
| | | Expanding readership | 1 |
| | | Story / style niche | 14 |
| | | Manifestos | 5 |
| | | House style / copy editing | 1 |
| | | Predictability vs surprise | 10 |
| | | Story types | 19 |
| | | The formula | 3 |
| | | Competition / differentiation | 13 |
| | | Differences / uniqueness | 4 |
| | | Reputation / trustworthiness | 0 |
| | | Accuracy | 7 |
| | | Masthead / stable of writers | 4 |

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|--|--|--|--|--|--------------------------------------|----|
| | | | | | Legacy | 6 |
| | | | | | Hiring staff | 10 |
| | | | | | Competition for talent | 3 |
| | | | | | Institutional memory | 7 |
| | | | | | Tradition | 9 |
| | | | | | Different standards at diff mags | 4 |
| | | | | | Coordinating departments | 4 |
| | | | | | Being a managing editor | 4 |
| | | | | | Permissions / reprints | 1 |
| | | | | | Web and print sides | 5 |
| | | | | | Church / state separation | 26 |
| | | | | | Business and promotion | 2 |
| | | | | | Working with owners | 2 |
| | | | | | ASME guidelines | 1 |
| | | | | | Political neutrality | 3 |
| | | | | | Editing for the web | 11 |
| | | | | | Limits of | 2 |
| | | | | | Division of editorial labour | 15 |
| | | | | | Organization | 7 |
| | | | | | The mix | 24 |
| | | | | | Pipeline / scheduling | 21 |
| | | | | | Workflow | 15 |
| | | | | | Learning how | 22 |
| | | | | | Teaching / mentorship | 4 |
| | | | | | Qualities of an editor | 15 |
| | | | | | Strong ideas / convictions / visions | 3 |
| | | | | | Thoroughness / attn to detail | 2 |
| | | | | | Competence / experience | 3 |
| | | | | | Different editorial styles | 4 |
| | | | | | Willingness to question / critique | 1 |
| | | | | | Being well connected | 1 |
| | | | | | Journalistic / reporting skill | 1 |

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|--|--|--|--|--|---|----|
| | | | | | Reporting skills | 2 |
| | | | | | Writing skill / technique | 1 |
| | | | | | Being well read | 3 |
| | | | | | Curious | 1 |
| | | | | | Ear for language | 1 |
| | | | | | widely knowledgeable | 5 |
| | | | | | Story sense | 9 |
| | | | | | Being a writer and / or an editor | 15 |
| | | | | | Working together / collaboration | 24 |
| | | | | | Establishing good taste | 2 |
| | | | | | Juggling tasks | 1 |
| | | | | | Enforcing deadlines | 2 |
| | | | | | Turnaround | 1 |
| | | | | | Relationships with writers | 0 |
| | | | | | Staff objecting to ed changes / decisions | 6 |
| | | | | | Knowing idiosyncrasies / needs of writers | 18 |
| | | | | | Fit / compatibility | 2 |
| | | | | | Intimacy | 10 |
| | | | | | Writers' reputation / trust | 30 |
| | | | | | Persistent relationships | 26 |
| | | | | | Editors status linked to writers' success | 3 |
| | | | | | Assigning | 25 |
| | | | | | Negotiating story ideas | 11 |
| | | | | | Timing | 1 |
| | | | | | Good at assigning / acquisition | 1 |
| | | | | | Rejections | 12 |
| | | | | | IDing an appropriate writer | 21 |
| | | | | | Approach to text editing | 34 |
| | | | | | Editing on paper | 3 |
| | | | | | IDing what the story is "about" | 6 |
| | | | | | IDing missing elements | 5 |

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|--|--|--|--|--|--|----|
| | | | | | Conceptual edits | 5 |
| | | | | | Considering readers | 23 |
| | | | | | Considering top editors | 4 |
| | | | | | Considering the magazine | 3 |
| | | | | | Voice | 4 |
| | | | | | Structure | 15 |
| | | | | | Tying things together | 2 |
| | | | | | Kickers / endings | 2 |
| | | | | | Line editing | 10 |
| | | | | | Evaluating text / making judgments | 20 |
| | | | | | Cutting / getting cut / space | 39 |
| | | | | | Making / suggesting changes | 6 |
| | | | | | Working / negotiating with writers | 3 |
| | | | | | Pushing / guiding reporters | 16 |
| | | | | | Being supportive | 14 |
| | | | | | Changing nature of story (while reporting) | 1 |
| | | | | | Communication skills | 13 |
| | | | | | Disagreement | 10 |
| | | | | | Give and take | 11 |
| | | | | | Resistance to being edited | 7 |
| | | | | | Negotiating | 8 |
| | | | | | Taking charge | 3 |
| | | | | | Rewriting | 9 |
| | | | | | Edict vs advice | 2 |
| | | | | | Diplomacy | 6 |
| | | | | | Specific examples of changes | 2 |
| | | | | | Other editorial tasks | 2 |
| | | | | | Display copy | 3 |
| | | | | | Record keeping | 1 |
| | | | | | Killing | 18 |
| | | | | | Checking | 0 |

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|--|--|---|----|
| | | General comments | 7 |
| | | History of | 2 |
| | | Differs between magazines | 3 |
| | | Linked to timeliness | 1 |
| | | Checking for the web | 8 |
| | | Rarity | 5 |
| | | Lifespan of a Fact | 1 |
| | | Political / independent fact checking | 1 |
| | | Fabrication | 11 |
| | | Rolling Stone | 6 |
| | | Alice Goffman | 9 |
| | | Malcolm case | 2 |
| | | Lehrer, Jonah | 1 |
| | | Goffman, Alice | 1 |
| | | Cooke, Janet | 1 |
| | | Mike Daisey | 1 |
| | | Advantages | 2 |
| | | Intra-magazine issues | 0 |
| | | Encourages writers' thoroughness | 4 |
| | | Sense of relief for writers | 9 |
| | | Fear of fucking up | 2 |
| | | Being motivated by not having checkers (or not) | 3 |
| | | Institutional reputation | 20 |
| | | Preventing libel suits | 5 |
| | | Lawyers | 16 |
| | | Record keeping | 6 |
| | | Records / annotating | 1 |
| | | Warning sources / previewing | 10 |
| | | Fairness | 4 |
| | | Extra-magazine issues - the record | 20 |
| | | Corrections / retractions | 12 |

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|--|--|--|--------------------------------------|----|
| | | | Feedback from readers | 8 |
| | | | Expert readers | 2 |
| | | | Division of labour | 0 |
| | | | Organization | 6 |
| | | | Scope | 3 |
| | | | Div of labour - facts vs truth | 4 |
| | | | Facticity / truth | 32 |
| | | | Checking art / captions / other copy | 5 |
| | | | Additional research / reporting | 7 |
| | | | TK | 3 |
| | | | Intersubjectivity - multiple eyes | 5 |
| | | | Workflow / coordination | 16 |
| | | | Planning / scheduling / pipeline | 3 |
| | | | Assigning / work distribution | 9 |
| | | | Pace / timing | 16 |
| | | | Working with other editors | 4 |
| | | | Checkers' independence | 6 |
| | | | IDing checkable facts | 27 |
| | | | Bullshit detector | 2 |
| | | | Planning / underlining | 9 |
| | | | Fact vs opinion | 4 |
| | | | Information sources | 41 |
| | | | Checker's regress | 28 |
| | | | Standards | 2 |
| | | | (Lack of) policies | 11 |
| | | | Training | 5 |
| | | | Hiring / qualities of checkers | 20 |
| | | | Working with subjects | 5 |
| | | | Paraphrasing | 8 |
| | | | Diplomacy | 11 |
| | | | Anonymity | 4 |

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|--|--|--|---------------------------------------|----|
| | | | Sandbagging | 4 |
| | | | OA | 6 |
| | | | Dealing with conflicting sources | 5 |
| | | | Triangulation | 25 |
| | | | Working with writers | 19 |
| | | | Diplomacy / negotiation | 6 |
| | | | Suggesting fixes | 16 |
| | | | Transparency about sourcing | 28 |
| | | | (Theoretical) transparency | 2 |
| | | | Quoting | 37 |
| | | | Acceptable revisions | 12 |
| | | | Copy editing | 0 |
| | | | General comments | 10 |
| | | | Examples | 1 |
| | | | Fiction vs nonfiction | 2 |
| | | | Usefulness of | 1 |
| | | | Knowing magazine's sensibility | 3 |
| | | | Magazine style | 6 |
| | | | Voice | 3 |
| | | | Developing style guide | 2 |
| | | | Qualities of a copy editor | 5 |
| | | | Job descriptions / division of labour | 1 |
| | | | Organization | 1 |
| | | | Workflow | 3 |
| | | | Work distribution | 1 |
| | | | Working with others | 2 |
| | | | Working with writers | 3 |
| | | | Suggesting fixes | 3 |
| | | | Line editing | 2 |
| | | | Design and layout | 24 |
| | | | Management | 1 |
| | | | Tradition / identity | 2 |
| | | | Competition / competitors | 1 |

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|--|--|---|----|
| | | Personal qualities / traits | 1 |
| | | Ideas | 2 |
| | | Matching design to text | 2 |
| | | Workflow | 1 |
| | | Pace | 2 |
| | | Post-publication | 0 |
| | | Making mistakes | 8 |
| | | Feedback from subjects | 41 |
| | | Feedback from readers / metrics | 59 |
| | | Learning from metrics / responses | 4 |
| | | Feedback from other writers | 4 |
| | | Reviews | 7 |
| | | Reevaluating based on response | 5 |
| | | Practical outcomes / real world influence | 11 |
| | | Feeling successful | 7 |
| | | Coverage by other media | 5 |
| | | Developing into a book | 4 |