What does the press cover? The off-the-cuff answers come quickly. What it feels like covering. What sells papers. What the competition is covering. What it can get into the paper by 10 P.M. What it has always covered.

A few more dignified answers also come to mind. The news. Facts. Government. What's important.

Each answer implies a philosophy about the nature of news that rarely gets fleshed out in the newsroom. Journalists don't have the time to get philosophical, and no self-respecting managing editor would hire Bertrand Russell if he could steal a sportswriter instead. Managing editors occasionally cave in on hiring an ombudsman, but that's about it.

Does this mean the question isn't capable of a rigorous answer?

Not at all. But the variety of responses should remind us that no authoritative public standard, no philosophical Supreme Court, can rule on right answers to the question. If we accept the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's view that the meaning of a word depends upon its use, and upon the language game in which it operates, we have to recognize that the language games in which the words "news" and "facts" operate do not include rigorous investigations into the meanings of the words themselves—alogous to the way lawyers, for instance, dissect the word "negligence." Nor is journalism a legally recognized profession like psychiatry or medicine in which authorized official bodies may decide what "neurotic" means, or judge the status of homosexuality as an illness or a "sexual preference." The closest thing to such an authoritative body in the United States, the National News Council, received little support from the institutional press. It was, in the title of a postmortem published on its short life and death, "Spiked."

In the absence of standards for journalistic concepts, the old-fashioned view that "news" is simply a mirror placed before reality still lives. Many daily newspapers continue to place the word "analysis" or something similar across a story judged to involve opinion—as if all the unlabeled stories surrounding it didn't also arise from opinion and analysis. In an editorial complaining about the CBS docudrama *The Atlanta Child Murders*, the *New York Times* opined, "All storytelling involves some distortion. But the difference between news and fiction is the difference between a mirror and a painting."

Unfortunately, public attempts by newspaper people to explain how the mirror works frequently turn into embarrassing fiascos. In its August 10, 1985, issue, the industry magazine *Editor & Publisher* reported on a panel about privacy led by Harvard Law School professor Arthur Miller before the Arizona Bar Association. "The discussion," wrote E&P's reporter, "also uncovered a surprising ignorance among lawyers and lay people about the definition of 'news,' and the journalists were unable to explain adequately how they judge an item newsworthy."

Before you sneer at their incompetence, however, consider the two types of entities that the press claims to report—"news" and
"facts"—and try answering some of the conceptual questions yourself. Ask yourself, for instance, whether everything a newspaper reports is "news." Is the weather news? How about the sidebar detailing the best routes to the Bruce Springsteen concert? Or the filler telling you Hartford is the capital of Connecticut? If everything in the newspaper is news, why do newspaper people on the features staff, or in the sports department, commonly refer to the city, national, and foreign desks as "news-side," or just "news"?

If the safest definition of news is what a newspaper deems to be news, and everything in a newspaper is news, how can we explain the difference between newspapers on a given day? Why do any two newspapers run scores of different stories each day? Are they missing more news than they report? If the test for news is that every newspaper would print it, many of the stories available each day are not news. But if we're pushed to the principle that news is what some newspaper would print, the floodgates open to anything from weddings in Des Moines to bingo games in Alabama.

Easy answers, even off-the-cuff ones, don't jump to mind. Tom Brokaw may know how to sign off from the "news," and reporters may succeed in getting it, but "news," unlike "Maryland" or "pineapple," is a vague word on the cusp between the undefined and the self-contradictory.

The questions about "facts" are no easier. Are facts, for instance, states of affairs? Events? Situations? Objects? You can't get off easy by choosing one. It is, unfortunately, a logical axiom that synonyms ought to be interchangeable in a declarative sentence without changing the sentence's truth or falsity. In other words, if "bachelor" and "never-married single male" are synonymous, any statement that contains one ("President James Buchanan was a bachelor") should stay true if one synonym replaces the other ("President James Buchanan was a never-married single male"). "Fact" and its supposed synonyms don't meet the test very well. The philosopher Alan White states the problem powerfully:

Despite what some philosophers say, facts, unlike events, situations, states of affairs, or objects, have no date or location. Facts, unlike objects, cannot be created or destroyed, pointed to or avoided. We cannot be overtaken by, involved in, or predict facts as we can events. We can find ourselves in, transform, or be rescued from nasty, serious, or ticklish situations, but not facts. Facts, unlike states of affairs, do not begin, last, or end. Although there are innumerable facts, facts, unlike situations or states of affairs, don't exist. A distinction can be drawn between the occurrence of an event or the existence of a state of affairs and the fact that such an event occurred or that such a state of affairs exists. Contrariwise, facts, but not events, situations, or states of affairs, can be disputed, challenged, assumed, or proved. Facts can be stated, whereas events and situations are described. There may be facts about an event, situation, or state of affairs, but none of the latter about a fact.

Confused? Ponder some of the ways we talk about facts, and White starts to make sense. While you're at it, ask yourself whether every claim in a newspaper is a fact. Consider the following lead: "For the nation's pastime it is the best of times and the worst of times." USA Today reported that about baseball in September, 1985, after Pete Rose broke Ty Cobb's hit record and baseball players testified about cocaine use. A logician would label the sentence necessarily false—whatever Charles Dickens might think—and a false claim can't be a fact. Or consider another lead from USA Today: "Investors are nervously anticipating a sub-i300 market." If only one investor was not anticipating a sub-i300 market, or not anticipating it "nervously," the statement is false. Is it still a fact because, in newspaperese, it really means "some" investors? Who determines the relevant criteria for nervousness?

If you're not even mildly humbled by these questions, you're probably a newspaper journalist. Be that as it may, the conceptual obstacles facing "news" and "facts" are just some of the factors that complicate any explanation of what the press covers. Because the two concepts remain the twin props of mainstream American journalism, it is best to mention their frailty early and yet postpone close inspection until the enterprise they support—all that everyday coverage—comes into focus.
In the main, this essay makes five key claims:

1. "What does the press cover?", taken in its most concrete sense, is a straightforward empirical question with a straightforward empirical answer: box scores, beauty pageants, press conferences, Richard Nixon, and so on.
2. The decisions that govern press coverage are rational, not simply habitual, haphazard, or ad hoc.
3. The principles that govern those decisions, while rational, aren't "scientific" or logically compelling. No one need accept them, or even deal with them, the way one must accept the rules of gravity.
4. What the press covers, therefore, isn't what the press must cover. Nothing in the nature or meaning of "news" or "facts"—both notions whose meanings, in particular circumstances, depend on accepted conventions—requires the press to cover what it currently does.
5. If journalists understood—as some philosophers and scientists increasingly do—that what they present to the reader is not a mirror image of truth, but a coherent narrative of the world that serves particular purposes, what the press covers could become more flexible and better suited to our needs as readers and writers.

To justify these claims, however, one must satisfy both the Lippmanns and the Stewarts, two types of press pundits definable by how they'd expect to see the main question answered. The Lippmanns take after their spiritual father, Walter. In Public Opinion, his classic work on the press, he distinguished grandly between truth and news: "The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act." The Lippmanns strive to think big thoughts about their trade. The Stewarts, on the contrary, reckon in the spirit of the late Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who announced that he couldn't define pornography but knew it when he saw it. The Stewarts prefer to steer clear of large principles.

Refining their opposition to each other in this context requires weighing claim number one a bit. Suppose we submit that answering "What does the press cover?" can be done because, with agreement on which publications count as "the press," we could examine all their issues, organize the stories into categories, and produce an airtight inductive statement of press coverage—a "kitchen-sink" answer that included everything from temperatures to obituaries. What would this inductive, kitchen-sink answer look like? In the language of logicians, an enormously long conjunction ("The press covers the president and the Congress and the baseball teams and . . ."). To some, this kind of answer may seem obvious and irrelevant. To others, it may seem questionable but relevant. Enter our two groups of journalistic thinkers.

As noted, the Lippmanns tend to be press theorists with a philosophical agenda for their subject—they object to the kitchen-sink answer. They believe "What does the press cover?" requires not an inductive survey, but rather an abstract statement of principles. They'd like to see and discuss possible candidates, such as "issues important to public discourse," "news," "signalized events," "key trends," "important processes," or what have you.

The Stewarts, for their part, tend to be press critics who simply want more of A covered and less of B, or hard-boiled newspaper people for whom Stewartism is the only intellectual reflex available. They object to that course because they believe any such statement of principles must involve the arbitrary definition of abstractions and thus trigger the intrusion of subjective values. They'd prefer to keep close to what's on the page—Tass covers factories, the Miami Herald covers the Caribbean, and so on.

Both groups rightly seek answers that suit their purposes. Their rival interests determine the intellectual neighborhood in which an answer to "What does the press cover?" must set up shop. The Lippmanns must recognize that the more any answer sets forth abstract principles, the more it falls victim to the second group's complaint. Saying the press covers "matters that are politically important to the community" requires a definition of the community in question (does it include bag ladies and Rosicrucians?), the meaning of "political" (does it include religious controversies that have
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an upshot for civil elections?), and what is "important" (does it include news of formal electoral propositions, like bond issues, that, while officially important to all, actually bore many voters?). The Lippmanns need to accept that specific answers to the question at least provide the data on which to build the principles they seek.

The Stewarts, in turn, must recognize that the vagueness of "news" or "facts" is no argument against addressing that vagueness and perhaps tightening up the conceptual content of the words, whatever the stubborn exceptions. As Wittgenstein suggested, a blurred concept is still a concept.

Both the Lippmanns and the Stewarts deserve a piece of the action. We start in the newsroom, with a look at what the press actually covers. We then return to the seminar room—to the analysis of "news" and "facts." That leads to a concluding "pragmatist's sermon" on why what the press covers matters less than how the public reads.

What the Press Covers

Guest Drowns at Party for 100 Lifeguards

I first spotted that Philadelphia Inquirer headline while flipping through pages of the next day's early edition. With my own deadline at hand, reading stories wasn't on my shortlist. But I stopped and scanned the lead graph.

NEW ORLEANS—Although 100 lifeguards were present, a fully dressed man drowned at a party being held to celebrate the first summer in memory without a drowning at a New Orleans city pool.

I reread it. "How," I asked myself, "could that happen?" I flew through the story. One question I didn't ask myself was, "What is this doing in the paper?"

Any American editor who saw that story come over the wire, and could fit it into the paper, would have done so. Reporters call it a "Holy shit!" story, the kind that freezes the reader's cup of coffee— or at least the arm holding it—in midair. The genre keeps wire editors sane and sensation sheets healthy. Third World journalists see it as the "aberration fix" in American news judgment, the instinct that makes our African correspondents care more about whether Idi Amin ate the liver of one of his opponents than, about Africa's agricultural dilemmas. Longtime Washington reporter Arnold Sawislik nicely exploited it in a book's title: Dwarf Rapes Nun; Flees in U.F.Q.

If it's true that you can find some reason why any story appears in a newspaper, "Guest Drowns at Party for 100 Lifeguards" boasted several. It recounted an event too unusual, too unbelievable, to be true. It expressed the extreme and sometimes cruel irony of life, a matter American newspaper editors find difficult to ignore.

If you examine your daily paper story by story, you'll find its content completely rational in this narrow sense: principled reasons, not merely practical ones (e.g., it was the only story available on the wire) explain a story's appearance. We can loosely define "what" the press covers as those matters that fit the various principles we can articulate for particular stories. Consider some headlines and the stories with them.

"Governor Approves 3 Executions," another Inquirer headline, was accompanied by the smaller subhead "Would Be the First in Pa. Since 1962." Several principles come to mind.

First, routine American journalism calls for newspapers to report the actions of their chief local governmental figures. That alone, however, might not have gotten this story into the paper. If the governor had routinely hired three clerks for his staff, no story could be expected. A second principle involved, the quintessential one, is "The press covers changes from the norm," Yet this principle, taken alone, does not get everything new into the paper. Little Billy's new paper route does not make the paper.

Even these two principles together do not guarantee the above story any column inches. The governor's writing of a book review for a local newspaper would be a public act, and a departure from the norm (since governors don't usually review books), yet no one might report it. Writing a book review isn't controversial. So a third principle supporting this story's publication is "The press
covers controversy”—because many groups still clash over the death penalty. Newspapers report issues on which people vocally contend and seek action. Strong feeling doesn't suffice. Most people probably feel more strongly about unfair parking rules than about capital punishment, but they generally fail to organize opposition to them. Opposition to parking rules, unless it builds to action, goes unreported.

Consider another story, headlined "Israeli Jets Retaliate, Hit Militia," which the Los Angeles Times syndicated. It recounted an attack on pro-Syrian militia in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Here several principles could be offered in diminishing level of abstraction. "News includes violent actions between states" would be too broad—not every Iran-Iraq battle gets reported, nor every Cambodian-Thai exchange, and some countries get completely ignored. A narrower principle tied to specific countries predicts news coverage better: "News includes violent action by Israel."

"Jetliner Crashes Near Dallas" might be broadly explained on the principle that "Events that cause a large number of unexpected deaths are news." But not always, or, in some cases, just barely. The public notices this. In the August 8, 1985, issue of the Inquirer, the following letter appeared, headlined "Less Is More":

To the Editor:

A July 20 headline screamed: "Dam Bursts in Italy, Killing 220." We got a four-column photo on the front page, and on page 7 another photo and a map of the affected area.

On the same day, buried at the bottom of page 10, was an inch and a half on floods and mud slides [in China] that killed 275 and affected 1.5 million others.

Just what is it that determines news? Access? Availability of good photos? Skin color of the victims?

Or is it simply that natural disasters occurring in the Third World are considered commonplace, expected and quietly accepted?

The letter writer knew his principles. In Coups and Earthquakes, the finest recent account of foreign correspondence, former International Herald Tribune editor Mort Rosenblum refers to this as the "well-understood sliding scale: a hundred Pakistanis going off a mountain in a bus make less of a story than 3 Englishmen drowning in the Thames." Cultural familiarity usually determines the scale. The more victims resemble Americans or mean something to them, the fewer have to die to justify news space. Rosenblum cites a memo from a "British "press lord that once hung in the newsroom of his London daily: "One Englishman is a story. Ten Frenchmen is a story. One hundred Germans is a story. And nothing ever happens in Chile."

That memo plainly needs a rewrite today. With closer communications among Europeans, the numbers would fall, and South America's greater prominence on the world and British scene—try replacing Chile with Argentina in that memo—undercuts the last sentence. So the sliding scale itself can't be absolutely counted on, at least as usually formulated. The more than five hundred deaths originally feared from a Puerto Rican landslide in October, 1985, should have drawn widespread front-page coverage—Puerto Rico, after all, is part of the United States. Instead, many newspapers played the story inside, provoking anger among Puerto Ricans that the mainland press, perhaps out of racism, had treated Puerto Ricans according to the sliding scale. Here again we find that events force one to narrow principles, and narrow principles predict coverage better.

Thus, "Newspapers cover jet crashes in the United States" edges out "Newspapers cover jet crashes," for some papers hardly cover "those in South America and Asia. Even this principle can change, though, if a trend develops. The series of plane disasters of mid-1985, resulting in the most casualties of any year in aviation history, heightened the press's appetite for "malfunction news" to the extent that a few stories ran on valves being replaced on planes with 737 engines.

As the examples above indicate, fashioning principles of news coverage can be a pretty freewheeling and endless business, one requiring constant attention to breaking events. Getting some practice at it helps before drawing larger conclusions. Most of us know the principles covered in high school civics courses: "The Press

The Press Covers Symbolic Events. The press sometimes covers an ordinary event, or gives it greater prominence, because it purportedly carries great symbolic importance. Despite the principle that the president's ordinary activities are newsworthy, not every horseback ride makes the paper. But after President Reagan's 1985 operation for removal of a cancerous colon growth, a story ran announcing that his return to the saddle would be a heavily reported symbolic event. Sure enough, in late August, "Reagan Returns to the Saddle" stories appeared.

The Press Covers the Formerly Famous. Andy Warhol claimed that everyone is famous for fifteen minutes in America, but newspapers work on the rule that once famous, always famous. The doings of once prominent news figures, if they are in any way out of the ordinary, or clash with the figure's public image, become news. The writing of a cookbook is not ordinarily news, even in a food or book section, but the press swarmed over former Black Panther leader Bobby Scale when he announced plans for one. Here a separate principle undoubtedly fanned interest—the "social trend" principle. It urges coverage of examples that support social trends in which the press has invested, such as the yupification of America, student quietness on campus, and the fading of sixties social consciousness. Newspapers gave that spin to the Scale story despite Scale's repeated claims that he hadn't significantly changed his political ideology from his Panther days. The high level of coverage accorded Scale and former yippie Jerry Rubin, now running networking parties, can be contrasted to that given former associates like David Dellinger, who provides a picture of greater consistency.

The Press Covers Anniversaries. Anniversaries offer reporters the opportunity to be historians, and that invitation to social climb usu-

papers, and they usually bring little or no background to the complex events that they are expected to cover. Even under ideal circumstances, it would be physically impossible for such a small band of journalists, most of whom concentrate on the same stories, to simultaneously cover
more than twenty countries in a region and milieu they do not fully understand; and the conditions under which foreign journalists are forced to work in the Arab world are far from ideal.

Chafets argues that the thirty or so American staff reporters in the Muslim Middle East on a full-time basis "don't divide up the region in order to provide thirty different news items each day; rather, they tend to compete with each other in the same places for the same daily story... They share the same conventions of what constitutes news and go after the same stories; they also live in dread of being scooped by the competition, and in foreign situations that means they tend to keep a close eye on each other. Often they cooperate, share information and, in doing so, reduce the risk of missing a story—but also the possibility of discovering one."

Beyond this, Chafets adds that "a good part of the Arab world is physically off-limits to Western journalists." Slice-of-Life stories from Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, or Yemen are few, and dictatorial regimes control much of the information.

The Press Copes the Easy. In some areas, information flows so fully that the "possible" segues into the "easy." Washington information, churned out by thousands of public relations specialists for government officials, officeholders, lobbyists, and corporations, constitutes the foremost example. Leaks and press conferences abound. Because current journalistic practice demands that reporters not simply reproduce press releases, they don't just sit back in their offices and retype the material into their VDTs. But they could. When the Columbia Journalism Review accused the Wall Street Journal of frequently reprinting company press releases with few changes, the newspaper resented it. Decades ago, the practice occurred more frequently.

Michael Schudson, tracing the rise of public relations and its effect on newspapers in his book Discovering the News, wrote that journalists resented the new industry because "news appeared to become less the reporting of events in the world than the reprinting of those facts in the universe of facts which appealed to special interests who could afford to hire public relations counsel." Skepticism toward the slanting of facts by so-called "flacks," strengthened by the growth of wartime propaganda and the public relations industry, have served to balance Lippmann's observation that "the publicity man" often got to shape the facts of modern life by default in a world of busy, overworked reporters. But the percentage of the news that directly arises from press releases and public relations—estimated at more than 30 percent in 1930—is probably higher now. This may be most true in cultural and entertainment "news." Whereas the ordinary political or local editor often establishes an agenda at odds with the government's—spotlighting a corruption story, for example, on a day that the government invites coverage of an inflation report—entertainment editors often adopt the entertainment industry's agenda in full. Tying their stories to cultural products imminent on the market, editors offer skimpy profiles of actresses, musicians, or writers instead of stories with an investigative or conceptual bent. I've heard a reporter defend the denial of coverage to a local performer with the remark, "He doesn't even have a PR person."

The Press Covers Tasteful Matters. Most American dailies see themselves as family newspapers. Like many journalistic notions, the "family newspaper" concept is just a pretense. Editors who cite the concept usually envision a model that reflects the families of a few God-fearing ministers and no one else. In this family, no one curses, no one discusses nonmedical aspects of sex, everyone who can be offended will be offended, and the immediate response to any offense is a letter to the editor and a canceled subscription. As a result, newspapers excise news on taste grounds alone. Families offended by insipid celebrity chat, macho postgame analysis by football coaches, hunting and fishing columns, society coverage, genuflection to organized religion, and endless local neighborhood minutiae are not taken into account.
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Press Covers Its Ass for Lawyers. With investigative stories, a gaining maxim holds that 10 percent of the story is for readers and 90 percent for lawyers. A reader may wonder why in the midst of a critical story the paper devotes so much space to a dubious person's background or to some attractive character trait. In fact, the story is being written with the jury in mind, so the paper will be able to demonstrate during a libel trial how it bent over backward to be fair.

The Press Covers Stories That Can Win It Prizes. In the busy modern world, attention spans are short and life works by shorthand. Journalistic prizes win cachet for one's paper from people who may not read it but who know that it has received prizes. A look at the most prominent journalistic prizes, the Pulitzers, indicates how they affect coverage.

To award them, journalists from around the country come to the Columbia Journalism School for a few days each spring. During that short time, they're expected to assess the quality of hundreds of submissions and suggest a few possible winners to the Pulitzer Prize Board. Often the jurors have no special expertise for the kind of coverage they assess—frequently, they are prize-winning reporters who have since become managers within their papers. Thus, a fine city editor from Kansas and a couple of fine assistant national reporters from the Northeast and the Southwest may decide on the excellence of a series about the Everglades. Or a few editors who have specialized in ascending through newspaper management may judge critical writing about classical music or architecture.

The journalistic conceit holds that good newspaper people can recognize top-notch reporting whatever the subject. But if the grading of good reporting, logically speaking, requires evaluating what was reported against what might have been reported, nonexperts will be at a loss. As the Janet Cooke fiasco demonstrated—an award to the Washington Post reporter had to be revoked after the discovery that she had made up the main character in her story—neither the jurors nor the board members can always sniff out the quality of the reporting before them (whether the writer has piped quotes, omitted important elements, or misreported key facts). The jurors may get lucky, but they may not. For many of the judgments made, the equivalent in the academic world would be the English faculty determining tenure for the Asian studies faculty. In evaluative situations like these, where awards are made without true expertise on substantive criteria, formal factors play a greater role in determining excellence. That's where the effect on coverage comes in.

Editors know what kind of stories win prizes. Series, for instance, win prizes. One-part stories don't. Stories that provoke government reaction, or policy changes, permitting papers to cover the reaction and include it with their applications, win prizes. Stories that provoke little response do not. While the introduction of a Pulitzer Prize for "explanatory journalism" may change things, it has been true that investigative stories about government corruption, no matter how routine the scenario, win prizes, and explanatory stories about culture don't, no matter how fresh or difficult the reporting.

As a result, a story that fits the Pulitzer profile—say, the malfeasance of a corrupt local official—may turn into a five-part series. The prize game requires it, even though the public, if polled, might prefer that the paper just report the corruption and leave the background, history, and sideshows to the DA's office (presuming the official isn't the DA). Again, American newspaper journalists tend to be copycats, thinking more in terms of "What things are covered?" and "How are these things covered?" than "What should be covered?"

Press Covers Political Friends Favorably and Enemies Unfavorably. Recall how many strictly upbeat stories you've read about the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, or South Africa. Even if we concede their sordid politics, is it possible that no positive news exists to be reported from these countries—no human interest angles of the sort that fill our feature pages and end our evening news shows? In other words, if they are tickled, don't they laugh? Can you remember the last time any quote out of these countries was followed by "he said happily"? Comparing coverage of the People's Republic of China during the worst period of the Cultural Revolution and during the Westernizing reign of Deng (Time "Man of the Year") Xiaoping...
shows how our newspapers report more positive stories about a culture once Western values ate on the upswing.

Principles that explain what the press doesn’t covet are often just the flip side of those keyed to what it does cover—e.g., it doesn’t covet the impossible. But articulating some factors fills out the picture of how reasons operate on news coverage.

The Press Doesn’t Cover Events if Doing So May Cause the Death of Innocents. Just as reporters may cover a story out of moral obligation (bringing attention, say, to the plight of homeless street people), so morality may constrain the press to exclude or hold a story. Moral constraint can both overlap with and differ from political constraint. The latter is best exemplified by national security requests such as the one that led the New York Times to mute its reporting of the upcoming Bay of Pigs invasion. There the Times did not withhold coverage to save lives so much as to permit an operation to take place that would, inevitably, cost some lives. Moral constraint applies when the press does not report facts in its possession in order to preserve human life. It takes a moral stand that certain people should not die because it reports particular facts.

A widely covered example of this was the news blackout on the Israeli airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel by way of the Sudan in 1985. A number of reporters knew of the operation for some time but did not report it for fear the airlift would be stopped by the Sudanese. Thomas L. Friedman explained in the New York Times that the self-imposed ban was lifted after a reporter for a Jewish newspaper broke the story: "Once the outlines of the story appeared in the Jewish press, major news organizations that knew of the rescue and had held back publication felt they should no longer sit on it."

A more common case has been the reporting of kidnappings. At the request of police, newspapers withheld reports of the kidnappings of heiress Patricia Hearst and former Atlanta Constitution editor Reg Murphy in the 19705. After the incidents, a poll of newspaper editors showed that 260 of 328 approved of the cooperation.


At the Times, I was forbidden to write about probably the best story I knew—the close relationship between Irving Kaufman, a Federal Appeals Court Judge, and the Times. . . . the Times flattered him in its news columns and frequently had him write for the paper. The tightness of the bond was well known to many leading lawyers, and the overwhelming praise and absence of criticism of the judge in the newspaper’s pages gave evidence to these lawyers that the coverage by the Times was far from objective.

On the other hand, subjects dear to a paper’s senior editors may enjoy unusually regular attention. Careful readers of the Times’s cultural news coverage know that scarcely any information relating to the playwright Eugene O’Neill goes unmentioned by the paper and that productions of O’Neill receive lavish and almost always positive coverage. They also know that Arthur Gelb, the paper’s deputy managing editor and cultural czar, is the coauthor, with his wife, of an O’Neill biography.

The Press Does Not, on the Whole, Cover the Press. These personal and institutional predilections may affect whole subject areas and institutions. Although press coverage of the press has increased, it is largely a phenomenon restricted to a few major dailies, such as the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and, more recently, the Washington Post. Many newspapers (including my own) do not assign a regular reporter to the beat. This situation endures even though papers routinely cover institutions with unquestionably less effect.
on the general public. If one compares the number of Americans who read newspapers to the number who go fishing, or care about hockey, or fashion, the newspaper readers win out. But you'll find few papers without regular hockey, fishing, or fashion coverage.

One reason given is that newspapers can't cover other newspapers objectively. Here the objectivity argument sanctions the ultimate lack of objectivity—a journalistic institution that considers every institution fair game for examination but itself and its brethren. Every newspaper journalist can cite cases of a newspaper's coverage being affected by its own involvement. If I note instances from the New York Times here, it is not because the paper does any worse than others in that regard. Times editors sometimes feel that press critics envious of the paper's power gang up on them. The real reason for the close scrutiny lies in the paper's combination of greatness and sanctimony. On a day-to-day basis, the Times'^ fact gathering surpasses that of all rivals. Perhaps because it so clearly aims at and achieves an illusion of pure objective reportage at a level above other American dailies, the paper hates to acknowledge anything that clouds the image. As a result, coverage of its own role in public life suffers.

Nineteen eighty-five alone offered several examples. The Times, for instance, gave no attention to its lengthy labor dispute with reporter Richard Severo. Severo had reported the case of Lisa H., a young woman afflicted with the so-called "Elephant Man" disease of neurofibromatosis, for the paper. The Times maintained that it had some rights to the intellectual fruits of his labor—the book in which he expanded upon his reporting. Severo disagreed. Other papers and magazines covered the dispute.

Later in the year, the Times publicly upbraided a reporter, Jane Perlez, in an editor's note. She had written an unflattering profile of real estate executive Mortimer Zuckerman that the Times criticized for containing "opinionated wording," "pejorative phrases," and other ills. That, in turn, produced stories elsewhere asking whether the Times was offering special treatment to Zuckerman. The Times did not acknowledge the controversy.

Then, after several columns in which its Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Sydney Schanberg took the paper to task for inadequately covering New York City's Westway controversy (a longstanding dispute about a massive road project), the Times relieved Schanberg of his column. Other newspapers, such as the Washington Post and the Village Voice, speculated on the reasons, noting that a relative of the Times's publisher was an active supporter of the project (which Schanberg opposed). Again, the Times, apart from announcing that Schanberg would no longer be writing his column, did not report the controversy. Schanberg eventually resigned and later joined News day.

The Press Does Not Critically Examine Privileged Cultural Beliefs. Consider coverage of religion. Although the foundational beliefs of the major traditional religions in the United States—Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic—all fly in the face of modern scientific knowledge, the American press avoids any critical examination of their doctrines. Newspapers cover the issue of religious freedom, but coverage of, or debate on, the actual tenets of a religion is rare, unless it concerns "cults" such as Scientology, the Rajneesh clan that alighted in Oregon, or the Reverend Moon's variant of Christianity. Papers barely mention the activities of organized atheists. Only when religious beliefs clash with civil law, as in Catholic opposition to abortion, do papers highlight religious tenets. But even then, little critical focus is brought to bear on religious foundations. All sorts of interest groups in American society undergo such scrutiny, but when was the last time you read a daily newspaper article or editorial that questioned the authority of Jesus, or—more to the point—reported the belief in Jesus as Christ to be, in the opinion of so-and-so, mere primitive superstition. Some topics are taboo for the daily press.

They're taboo, in part, because they're the religions of the editors and their readers. The same rules seldom apply to religions without strong representation in the American press. In his book Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World, Edward Said calls attention to the heavy Western coverage of the Iranian revolutionaries' attachment to Islam. "Ironically," he writes, "only a few commentators on 'Islamic' atavism and medieval modes of logic in the West noted that a few miles to the
West of Iran, in Begin's Israel, there was a regime fully willing to mandate its actions by religious authority and by a very backward-looking theological doctrine.” Said adds: "Israel's avowedly religious character is rarely mentioned in the Western press."

Perhaps the only sweeping principle that subsumes the reasons why the press does or doesn't cover something is the cliche principle —coverage conforms to the reigning journalistic cliches. Thus, the press will cover a petty crime that affects few, but ignore a book addressed to millions. It will cover the polar bear club that goes swimming in the winter, but not the socialist labor club that gathers every week. It can't resist—and didn't in 1985—a real "man bites dog" story.

The string of reasons could go on and on, and suggests an objection. Can't reasons be articulated for covering any piece of information, any event, that would be both tailored for the occasion and yet also boast some precedent—namely, some earlier news story that covered information or events for roughly those reasons? The answer is yes, so long as we treat "roughly” roughly. While coverage rules lack the formal authority of legal rules, they resemble the "holdings” that lawyers are expected to extract from case decisions—they're adaptable, modifiable, and stretchable. Reasonable journalists can phrase them in different ways and (like reasonable lawyers about holdings) disagree on their scope. All of which raises the issue of whether stringing out reasons makes much analytical sense. Perhaps the most wide-ranging modern attempt to map the reasons for which American news organizations cover the news is Her-bert Gans's *Deciding What's Neivs* (1979), which focused on the practices of CBS, NBC, *Time,* and *Neu'sweek.* Gans's reasons span the spectrum between abstract principles (Gans calls them values) that would satisfy the Lippmanns (ethnocentrism, individualism, responsible capitalism) and more specific reasons that would satisfy the Stewarts ("firsts and lasts" news about innovations and demises, or "Foreign news has a sentimental attachment to European royalty, particularly those who serve as figureheads in otherwise democratic countries.")

Gans ranges across the landscape, and his observations are often right on target:

The incomes of rich criminals may appear in the news; those of the poor do not.

While breakthroughs in the sciences are covered, those in plumbing or auto repair are not. Members of high-status professions, such as lawyers or doctors, are newsworthy, whereas members of less prestigious professions such as accountants and nurses are rarely mentioned.

Plane crashes are usually more newsworthy than the winter breakdowns of tenement furnaces, even if they result in the same number of deaths.

Anyone who is serious about pondering what the press covers must read Gans's book, which is especially sharp on how class distinctions affect the news, and the tilt toward events over processes. But *Deciding What's News,* published less than a decade ago, also demonstrates how events can overtake many reasons and examples stated as commonplaces. Gans writes that "while corporate mergers are often newsworthy, there is little news about corporations per se, with the notable exception of multinationals." Since Gans wrote his book, however, newspaper business sections have proliferated. Even taking his book's specific focus into account, his truism about business coverage, like the British owner's truism about Chile, no longer rings true. Similarly, Gans's observations of how news from China tends to be negative or how nonviolent conservatives get little coverage in the United States are both dated.

This is not to fault Gans—he pays the price of his specificity. The five traditional news values cited by journalism educator Curtis MacDougall and familiar to generations of journalism students—timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence, and human interest—may have greater endurance, but at the price of airiness and vulnerability to countetexarnples. Principles that satisfy the Stewarts succumb to rapid change faster than those that satisfy the Lippmanns. By mixing previously separate coverage
gle events exert enormous influence on news. If Rock Hudson had not collapsed in public and acknowledged having AIDS—allowing the powerful principles of celebrity coverage and the weaker ones of medical and homosexual coverage to converge—the subsequent mass of AIDS stories would not have appeared.

The Stewarts' kind of answer, therefore, can't be learned by rote and then trusted without further attention. Like legal holdings, rules for press coverage must always be weighed in light of the circumstances of the instant case. The managing editor must decide whether he wants to distinguish the event he faces, which seems to fall under a principle applicable to an earlier event, or not. The difference between American law and American journalism, however, is that while the legal profession must accept the Supreme Court's decision that Case B falls within the principle of Case A, no managing editor has to accept the New York Times decision that the hijacking of the cruise ship Achille Laitro must be covered like the hijacking of the TWA airliner. Journalists enjoy greater freedom than lawyers in this regard, being wholly responsible for what they choose to cover. A list of what the press covers, and its reasons for doing so, thus provides at best a snapshot of current news practice—as reliable as information on the enemy's current position in a war. That snapshot can fade, which may be the most important lesson to be learned from it.

If the Stewarts' answer cannot be permanent, the Lippmanns' answer is even more frustrating. All these reasons and principles leave us in an unattractive theoretical bind. Granted, press coverage is rational in the sense that reasons exist for every story published ("Whatever the president does is news"); "People care about Cyndi Lauper's health"; "We always run his stuff from Pakistan") and every story spiked ("No one cares about Canadian politics"; "We couldn't substantiate it"; "Let's wait for the place to simmer down and send in Woodstein") even though journalists, unlike appellate judges, depend on implicitly understood reasons rather than regularly stated ones.

But we are also stuck with an anarchy of reasons, a potpourri of principles as unconnected as the passengers who board a random plane flight. These reasons, as we've seen, crisscross, or gang up, or clash, in the context of particular events, without having clearly weighted presumptions in their favor. So decisions or habits contrary to those we've described (for instance, "The press does not cover major disasters") could be supported with equally articulable reasons ("We just get in the way, and the government can report them better")—i.e., be equally rational. All of this remains true, it should be noted, even if one concedes to the Lippmanns that grand theories of the press—the social responsibility theory, the marketplace of ideas theory—are also at work in the American press. True enough. But it is precisely because rival theories roam the American market that a kind of rational anarchy rules.

Consequently, we come to a third conclusion mentioned at the outset—the rational principles that govern coverage decisions are not "scientific." Unlike scientific laws, they can't be assumed to apply uniformly or to permit accurate predictions of future cases. Far from having the same force for all decision-making members of the press, they operate as rules of thumb whose persuasive force varies among various editors. In editor Fleet's newsroom philosophy, novelty may pack a generally higher value than community service. Editor Fleet might fill a news hole with a wire story about policemen who yodel rather than with a stringer's piece about a perfunctory school board meeting. Editor Grub, with contrary values, might run the stringer's story.

Put more philosophically, no sufficient conditions exist that guarantee the running of a particular news story on any given day. There is no "nontrumpable" set of reasons. It is imaginable, though unlikely, that even the report of a president's assassination could be withheld on national security grounds. Because the press does not codify or rank coverage rules the way casinos rank poker hands, or courts rank legal rules, no clear-cut guidelines exist for which principle preempts another. While the Supreme Court's understanding of the law overrides a circuit court's inconsistent view as a matter of American legal theory, a story about an African coup pushes a soft feature story off the front page only as a matter of journalistic cliche. Our familiarity with the habits of American journalism, and little else, lends the field its air of objectivity.

If the Lippmanns find the answer disrespectful of American journalism's hard clarity and soundness, one can only reply—that's just the half of it. What are hardness and soundness, after all, but worn-away metaphors of touch, with little relevance to language's pitfalls? Those pitfalls extend especially deep in the case of American journalism's prize quatruples—"facts" and "news." If we just imagine what an assigning editor would say to a reporter who inquired, "It's not news and it's not a fact, but do you want to use
it?", their centrality to "what the press covers" becomes plain. That centrality demands separate attention.

**What the Press Claims to Cover: "Facts" and "News"**

It is no longer enough to report the fact truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the fact.
—Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947

Reporters have company in thinking that facts are like sea shells to be scooped up and taken home. Western medical students since the nineteenth century have learned that they had better master a core set of "facts" in their syllabi even if they ignore mushier theoretical materials. Wall Street speculators risk vast sums of money on what they take to be facts coming over the ticker. Copyright law advances a similar black and white view, holding that courts can draw a bright line between literary "expression," which is creative and copyrightable, and "facts," which rest out there in the public domain and are not.

That kind of clarity, however, is a tough obligation to hang on a word whose root (Latin, *factum*, the past participle of *facere*, to do or make) means "made by man." A few journalistic aphorisms capture the sense of human shaping involved. "A fact merely marks the point where we have agreed to let the investigation cease," wrote a Canadian journalist and poet. Rosemary Righter begins her fine book *Whose News?: Politics, the Press and the Third World* with an unusually sharp chestnut: "Facts are the shadows that statements cast on things." But most of the trade takes comfort in the "hardness" of facts.

Sloppy ontological language may be part of the problem. Ernest Gellner, the British anthropologist and philosopher, defines "fact" in one social science dictionary as "anything described by an assertion which is true." Assume, however, that the statement "The late President Lyndon Johnson came from Texas" is true. On Gellner's account, LBJ is somehow a "fact," even though we would never talk that way, and nothing in the world at present corresponds to LBJ. Although some of our metaphors regarding facts seem to support Gellner—"digging" or "searching" for facts, or "discovering" them—all those uses are compatible with facts as statements, the sort of things for which one must search (or research) in books.

As we've already seen in Alan White's observations above, the preliminary reports on fact's ontological status (that is, its place in the process by which language represents the world) indicate what journalists seldom acknowledge or even articulate to themselves—that in the crucial distinction between language and the world, "fact" is a word that describes language *about* the world, and not the world itself. Ludwig Wittgenstein called attention to this in the appendix to his *Philosophical Remarks*, where he examined the word "fact."

He recognized that you can't point at facts the way you can at trees or flowers. ("You can of course point at a constellation and say: this constellation is composed entirely of objects with which I am already acquainted; but you can't 'point at a fact' and say this.") In keeping with his general program of dissolving philosophical difficulties by focusing on language use, he identified the misleading ways we often use the word "fact."

He noted, for example, that while the phrases "to point out a fact" and "to point out a flower" seem grammatically similar, the appearance deceives. When we say "to point out a fact," we always mean "to point out the fact that . . . " But when we say "to point out a flower," we don't mean to point out *that* the flower is one thing or another. As twentieth-century philosophers have shown repeatedly, the surface grammar of our language can create unnecessary philosophical puzzles.

If "facts" are shaky sorts of objects in the world, referring at best to statements or sentences about the world, then the shakiness inevitably has to travel down the conceptual line to "news." There,
we'll see, problems of selectivity among putative facts independently weaken the notion. But first, other points ought to be made about the softness of "fact" as a journalistic concept.

Perhaps the simplest involves the resolution of disputes when rival "facts" arise from multiple reports of single events. Many journalistic disputes come without clear-cut umpires, and a paradigm case is the eyewitness report. Curtis MacDougall has kept alive a legendary one: the reports in New York newspapers of a woman's assault on Russian statesman Aleksandr Kerensky at the Century Theater. According to the News, she struck him on the left cheek with her bouquet. According to the Times, she slapped his face three times with her gloves. According to the Mirror, she struck him a single blow.

It happens a fair amount, as do discrepancies in quotations. To the profession's lasting embarrassment, it can't seem to agree on who uttered the classic formulation of news, "When a dog bites a man, that is not news; but when a man bites a dog, that is news." Journalists sometimes admit to cleaning up quotes for grammar and syntax, thus softening their hard "factuality" even more. Eyewitness accounts notoriously clash in legal cases, but there a court and the law of evidence are present to help sort things out. In many journalistic cases, no official organization—a court, a government, a scientific society—ever clears up the matter.

The frailty of reportorial perception increases when confronted with foreign cultures, and information-processing studies indicate that it is a general condition. Back in 1932, an English researcher named Sir Frederick Bartlett found that English audiences, if asked to repeat Kwakiutl folk stories, altered derails in ways that made the stories more British. Bartlett hypothesized that putting unfamiliar facts in familiar contexts aided their processing. So the possibility of built-in accuracy, at the most rudimentary level, impairs the notion of "facts" straight off.

A more profound flaw in the notion of "fact" concerns the principle of induction. In its broadest sense, inductive reasoning refers to inferences that make it reasonable to accept particular conclusions on the basis of particular premises. Reasonable—but not safe. Inductive inferences lack the certainty of valid deductive inferences of the form:

Premise 1: All men are mortal.
Premise 2: Socrates is a man.
Premise 3: Socrates is mortal.

The most common form of journalistic inductive reasoning is what logicians sometimes call "induction by simple enumeration"—the idea that if all observed objects or people of one kind have some property, then all objects or people of that kind have the property:

Premise 1: Crow A is black.
Premise 2: Crow B is black.
Premise 3: Crow C is black.
Conclusion: All crows are black.

In its journalistic form, inductive reasoning often involves asserting a claim about a whole set of individuals on the basis of a handful of observed members of the set. It shouldn't be confused with speculative generalization—e.g., when a paper claims that "100,000 people descended upon Central Park" without counting them. Inductive judgment, especially in its journalistic form, involves assumptions about unobserved matters on the basis of observed matters. We're all familiar with these judgments—they can appear in straightforward language ("Filipinos are a democratic people") or journalistic shorthand that borders on absurdity ("It is understood in India that . . . .").

The problem is fairly clear. Since inductive judgments can't, / strictly speaking, be verified as true, how can they be reported as facts? One can object that scientists face the same logical problem of the justification of induction. In fact, the philosopher W. V. Quine once joked that all scientific research should be stopped until the problem of induction is solved. But philosophically oriented scientists have long recognized that scientists must assume the regularity of nature if they're to devise revisable laws, and the natural world —helpfully—has thus far played along. Unfortunately for reporters, the "human" world isn't always so cooperative—sources tend to be much more atypical than crows. So when we come to inductive judgments about human phenomena (e.g., voter mood), assuming
regularity is quite a stretch and inductively arrived-at "facts" are even harder to justify.

Yet inductive judgment remains one of journalism's chief handmaidens. The credibility of all polling rests on it. Whenever we are told that "55 percent of Americans believe" something on the basis of 1,000 people interviewed, we are getting the pseudofacts of social science induction. They are facts only if general judgments not strictly confined to examined individual cases, and outside the natural sciences, constitute facts. The most ludicrous journalistic case is the common reporting feat of anthropomorphizing the whole nation. The tactic is taken to extremes by USA Today, which is constantly telling us that "We Like Chocolate Shakes" or "We Are Going to go to Europe more often." Strictly speaking, the claims embarrass American newspaper journalism, and no journalist, placed under the more rigorous fact-finding procedures of science or law, could bring these Hegelian consciousnesses to the witness stand. While the practice may be innocuous in the case of USA Today, it can be invidious and destructive elsewhere. Said scores the Western press for describing "Islam" as a monolithic culture or political entity in the world. He points out that "it is both wrong and foolish to regard 'Islam' as a block, just as I think it is bad political judgment to treat 'America' as if it were an injured person rather than a complex system."

Understanding the difference between an event and a fact also underscores the weakness of the latter as an unimpeachable part of independent reality. In his book Medical Thinking, which probes the role of "fact" in medicine, Lester King asks us to consider the famous historical fact that "Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C."

King argues that for anyone familiar with Roman history, the statement contains an enormous amount of historical meaning. By crossing the Rubicon, Caesar defied the Roman Senate's command and thus provoked the civil war that changed Rome's history. The statement thus elliptically conveys multiple facts about Roman history. Even if we leave out the general Roman history, the statement, like virtually all statements, is capable of as much ambiguity as we choose to seek. Does it mean that Caesar and his army crossed the Rubicon—an event including many thousands of describable sub-actions? Suppose some of the soldiers didn't make it across. Is the statement a fact? Even if several soldiers died, and the statement is in some sense untrue (because of his army did not cross the Rubicon)? How many men must drown in the Rubicon before the ones who make it across no longer constitute Caesar's army?

The possible falsifications of the statement grow when looked at from another angle. The contours of the Rubicon have changed over the centuries, so how do we know what movements Caesar really made? The date of Jesus' birth, given the inaccuracy of early timekeeping, is unclear, so how can the date 49 B.C. place an event for us on the scale of historical time?

While questions such as these can strike the working journalist as frivolous, they highlight a point White makes—that a "fact" of this sort is a statement based on inferences from traces of the events. Any self-critical reporter will recognize how that phrase, "inferences from traces of the events," fits many facts in his pieces. Unfortunately for English speakers, their language is not especially well suited for reporting by inference. The anthropologist Franz Boas enjoyed pointing out that English makes a rather weak language for journalism compared to Kwakiutl, a Northwest Coast Indian language. Kwakiutl grammar requires the speaker of an assertion to specify whether that assertion is based on direct observation, on hearsay, or on something that appeared to the speaker in a dream. Boas observed that we would read our newspapers with greater confidence if they were written in Kwakiutl.

Instead, our journalistic assertions, like the claim about Caesar, often amount to disguised inferences from present evidence—hardly an epistemological Rock of Gibraltar. Of all American newspapers, the New York Times best shows its appreciation of this, particularly in controversial descriptions of political events. The signal is such constructions as "So-and-so could not be independently confirmed." Even the Times, however, can't do this for the vast majority of its claims, and independent confirmation would be vulnerable to the same problem.

The conceptual enemies of "hard" facts—as you may suspect by now—are technical sense, be considered made by him. This especially holds true for quotes. If Seymour Hersh had not questioned Colonel X on a particular day,
and elicited from X the statement that Memorandum A did indeed discuss
the assassination, then the fact that X claimed Memorandum A discussed
assassination would not exist. No one but Hersh, presumably, and in this
case X, could attest to that particular fact. In journalism, questions often
create the news, and neither questions nor interviews mosey around the
world, waiting to be reported. When Third World press critics complain
about distorted Western reporting, they frequently toss in the corollary
complaint that Western correspondents ask the wrong questions.

Journalists can also make facts in a different way by manipulating the
vagueness of language and choosing one word rather than another, one
construction over another. Noam Chomsky has been a particularly astute
critic of this from the left. He has noted, for instance, how headlines such as
"Are the Palestinians Ready to Seek Peace?" in the New York Times
contribute to a vocabulary in which the phrase "peace process" comes to be
identified with peace according to one side's terms. Yet linguistic
manipulation serves the left as well as the right, and many shades of opinion
in between.

Take the press's use of the phrase "Star Wars" to describe President
Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative program. The New York Times, in a
brief September 25, 1985, article headlined "'Star Wars Plan': How Term
Arose," described its genesis. The Times reported that President Reagan first
outlined his program during a televised speech on March 23, 1983, and then
the paper gave this account of the aftermath:

Democratic reaction to the speech was critical, with Senator Edward
M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, calling the program
"reckless 'Star Wars' schemes."

The term "Star Wars" has since gained currency as a nickname for
the space-based defense program despite protests from President
Reagan, who appears to think it denigrates the effort and has
connotations associated with science fiction, perhaps because of the
movie of that name.

Note the explanation's clever syntax. Every action described, with one
exception, comes with an identification of the actor or
actors responsible for it. The Democrats produced the critical reaction to the
speech. Senator Kennedy initiated use of the movie-title tag. President
Reagan protested. The only action that goes begging for an actor is the
widespread adoption of the phrase. The phrase
"gained currency," a passive construction, does not identify who
gave it currency. Perhaps we're to believe that the phrase, like some
ambitious Washington careerist, simply arranged to be seen in all the right
places at the right time.

The missing actors, of course, are the institutional media, who specialize
in taking fresh phrases and beating them into the ground (we have been, at
least, spared "Star Wars-gate"). Always friendly to simpleminded tags that
can represent complicated issues, the media jumped on it. Yet consider all
the reasons why the press should not use the phrase. The administration
does not officially describe the system that way. The description came
from a political opponent of the administration and the program. The
phrase itself begs the central question of the program — whether the
system would produce war or peace amid the stars. No one has proven that
the weaponry would lead to star wars, rather than star peace, though much
remains to be said. The ambit of activity involved, even if the weapons
were used, would have nothing to do with stars — it would be in the orbit
of this planet. So not the slightest literal rationale exists for describing the
program with the phrase.

The press has not been oblivious to its creation of a fact — that the program is
a "Scar Wars" program. Both the Times and the Washington Post now put "Star
Wars" in scare quotes when they use it, with the meaning "so-called." The
tricky part is that the media the so-calling. The press has simply excised the
press's participation. The Times account suggests other irregularities in
reporting the matter, such as its reference to the phrase as a "nickname." It is
unlikely the Times would use a nickname for a person who disavowed it, deemed
it disparaging, and could show that the usage stemmed from political motives.
Moreover, the remark that Reagan "appears to think it . . . has connotations
associated with science fiction, perhaps because of the movie of that name" comes across as disingenuous. This is, after all, the unusual case of the press,
rather than the president, calling upon the movies first. A clearer example of
stacking the deck can scarcely be found.
The press's adoption and propagation of slanted or inaccurate descriptions, which are then charged off to common usage, is a regular occurrence. Another 1985 example involved the well-publicized case of Bernhard Goetz, a New York City man who shot four teenagers aboard a New York City subway train. Before Goetz was apprehended, some New York newspapers envisioned the gunman as a subway "vigilante" inspired by the Charles Bronson movie Death Wish, about such a character. After Goetz's arrest, when the facts indicated that the "vigilante" label didn't fit, the press once again resisted giving up its identification label, whatever the cost to accuracy. A typical story, from UPI, referred to Goetz as the "so-called subway vigilante."

But the practice surfaces most frequently in political news. In her book Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family, Shirley Christian notes how headline writers in Nicaragua insisted on labeling the insurgency against the Sandinistas "la Conta—short for counterrevolution in Spanish"—even though many of the anti-Sandinistas denied being counterrevolutionaries. Because political facts, such as the character of the anti-Sandinistas or the status of the PLO as a political entity, are a matter of much weaker consensus than, say, the name of the largest city in Japan, newspapers monitor usage there more carefully. Linguistic minefields are everywhere because governments and other political interest groups do not make matters easy. As Thomas L. Friedman of the Times has reported, "The Israeli Army refers to all individuals who forcibly oppose their occupation in Lebanon—be they Lebanese or Palestinians—as 'terrorists'..."

In the Saturday, October 12, 1985, issue of the New York Times, for instance, in a story about the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro by four Palestinians, Samuel Freedman, a Times reporter who at that time usually wrote about the arts, described the terrorists' "execution" of the wheelchair-bound hostage Leon Klinghoffer, who was shot in the head and thrown overboard. "Execution," of course, connotes a legal punishment imposed by a political authority holding legitimate power. It requires a victim who has been convicted of an act triggering such punishment. It is language that terrorists and freedom fighters alike employ in the hope that the media will adopt it. Every time that word is used in reference to such an event, instead of "murder" or "kill," a different fact is being stated.

Sometimes the creation of a fact depends not on a journalist's choice of words, or clear alternate meanings of a word, but on reaction to an ambiguous word. A widely publicized press incident during the 1982 Israeli bombing of Beirut was a cable sent by Thomas L. Friedman, then the Times's Beirut correspondent, to his editors. Friedman objected to their elimination of the word "indiscriminate" from the lead of his previous day's story about the bombing. As published, that lead read as follows:

BEIRUT, Lebanon, August 5—Israeli planes, gunboats and artillery rained {indiscriminate} shellfire all across west Beirut today, as Israeli armored units pushed toward Palestinian refugee camps and neighborhoods on the southern outskirts of the capital.

Further down in the published piece, Friedman wrote that "no place was safe in west Beirut yesterday" and detailed how the gunboats had blasted the hotel district and beachfront areas, and Israeli rocket and artillery fire had "poured onto buildings, homes and offices everywhere in west Beirut."

Friedman argued that the previous day's bombing had "the apparent aim of terrorizing" Beirut's civilian population, and was "fundamentally different from what has happened on the previous 63 days." He argued that "the newspaper of record should have told its readers and future historians" that fact.

The word "indiscriminate," however, is ambiguous. Friedman clearly used the word in its intentional sense, which would require knowledge of actual Israeli intentions during the bombing. Only if the Israelis (or the commander of the bombing) had no reasons for bombing one place rather than another could that strictly have been true. Strictly speaking, it couldn't have been true, unless Friedman believed the Israelis might have bombed Tel Aviv as well. Friedman should have argued that "indiscriminate" can be used nonintentionally, as the description of the effects of an action, and written that the effects were indiscriminate, taking in the innocent and guilty
Alike. Because Friedman chose a word with truth conditions that, on one interpretation, require knowledge of intentions, and acknowledged his uncertainty of the intentions by describing the aim of the bombing as "apparent," Friedman undermined his argument for the word. He'd have been better off choosing another. The result, in any case, was a "fact" in the paper that did not reflect the reporter's sense of the event at the scene.

Word choice thus creates facts. The new journalists accepted such responsibility, but mainstream journalists often resist the idea that there is a choice. John Hellmann, in his book *Fables of Fact; The New Journalism as New Fiction*, calls it the difference between "the disguised perspective versus an admitted one, and a corporate fiction versus a personal one."

Where does that put us? In some ways, back with one of our first off-the-cuff answers—that what the press covers is what it feels like covering. For if facts are made of words, and words are soft and vague, and journalists control their softness and vagueness, then the journalist's freedom of coverage expands. Regardless of the events he attends, his flexibility in characterizing them remains.

From the exercise of this freedom, and from such influences on his decisions as habit, ideology, and his understanding of what readers want, come the "facts" that we conventionally accept as such in the press. The standard organization of an American daily exerts its influence. Copy editors put the brakes on departures from truisms, cliches, and standard formulations. Managing editors rule on disputes between subeditors. Rebels against mainstream journalistic beliefs don't rise to managing editor and don't get to arbitrate these disputes.

"Settled" historical truths such as Caesar's Rubicon crossing, and standard statistics from official organizations, make it into the paper. So do the myriad facts that so-and-so said such-and-such—assuming the paper considers the reporter reliable (the speaker need not be reliable, as was demonstrated by Senator Joseph McCarthy's many baseless but objectively reported accusations). So do innumerable dubious generalizations and presumptions.

Those generalizations and presumptions, of course, needn't involve momentous world issues. You can find them embedded in the modest domestic dispatch as readily as in the politically charged "special." In a New York Times story headlined "Dispute in Denver Pits Pinstripes Against Jeans," Iver Peterson reported on a battle in that city over a proposed convention center. Deep in the story, he wrote, "Denver is already suffering from a severe oversupply of office space." From the point of view of the prospective Denver renter? Not likely. He might think the supply equaled just what a fair market ought to supply. As with many "facts," this one depends on background assumptions.

On the whole, the best definition of a journalistic fact may be that it's an assertion with visiting rights. If cogently challenged, the guest will probably be kicked out by any reputable paper. Newspaper facts tend to be unchallenged claims rather than unchallengeable ones. We characterize them—not vice versa. Facts are "incomplete" because we want more. "Bare" facts are bare because we refuse to describe their clothes. "Brute" facts aren't bare because we refuse to describe their clothes—they have bruteness thrust upon them.

When we leave the conceptual problem of "facts" and come to that of "news," all the individual moments of factual creation multiply thousands of times, and the need to select among facts increases the problems.

In a much quoted 1980 essay, the journalist and novelist John Hershey wrote: "The minute a writer offers nine hundred ninety-nine out of one thousand facts, the worm of bias has begun to wiggle." Yet while perhaps logically unavoidable, bias presents a greater danger when it arises from fiendish exactitude. Reinhold Niebuhr, the noted Christian theologian, recalled a daunting example in his "The Role of the Newspapers in America's Function as a Great Power." It was a film by Dr. Joseph Goebbels's Propaganda Ministry, "intended to discredit us as a nation of morons." It consisted of shots of mud fights, pie-eating contests, beauty contests. "Every shot was taken from an authentic newsreel," Niebuhr noted, "but the total effect was a complete libel on our life in the mind of anyone who could not put these facts in their setting." Observed Niebuhr: "Facts consist of hardly more than names and dates. There
identification of the "news" becomes clearer. Communist states, in effect, have Supreme Court—like institutions to determine news—sometimes a Ministry of Information. As Paul Lendvai points out in his book The Bureaucracy of Truth, it is commonplace in Communist countries not to report, or to report very skimpily, domestic disasters such as earthquakes and plane crashes. He quotes N. G. Palgunov, former director general of Tass, the Soviet news agency: "News should not be merely concerned with reporting such and such a fact or event. News or information must pursue a definite goal: It must serve and support the decisions related to fundamental duties facing our Soviet society."

In American society, the threads of news judgment, as we have seen, are not so easily pulled together. Knowing that the dictionary calls news "a report of a recent event" will not help one make specific assignments. Traditions therefore rule, including minor ones such as not giving Canada much attention. "Even Canadians who move to the United States lose interest in Canadian news," the managing editor of Canadian Press once remarked.

What results is a hodgepodge in which individual news judgments can be traced back to elements of various overarching press theories. The social-responsibility theory that the press should act as a watchdog on government fuels both incisive and boring political coverage. The theory that the press should, or at least is entitled to, respond to the tastes of its audience drives coverage toward the spectacular and sensational.

American journalists may be inclined to dismiss Palgunov's words, but similar views have gained rapid adherence among some Third World governments. Western journalists possess arguments to defend their practices, but they err if they consider them knockdown arguments that only the foolish or malicious can resist. Theories of press activity ultimately depend on deep assumptions in political theory about how the state and its subgroups should operate. The conventional Third World criticisms of the Western news system—that it perpetrates colonial values, focuses on disasters rather than achievements, favors the abnormal over the normal, events over processes, violence and conflict over peace, and reports the Third World to the Third World (because of the domination of news distribution by the four major agencies) through the eyes of poorly trained Western reporters—challenge the complacency of Western news thinking. As Anthony Smith and Rosemary Righter respectively argue in their fine books on international news distribution, legitimate criticisms of Western practices lie behind the often transparent political objectives of the Third World leaders who voice them.

The upshot, then, of our two inquiries—into what the press covers, and into the core sense of both "facts" and "news"—can be capsulized. As a matter of philosophical and intellectual principle, the American journalist can pretty much cover what he wishes. As a matter of tradition and convention, he currently performs like a skater signed on for familiar routines. "Breaking" news breaks when we let it break. "Spot" news implies that we've decided where the spot is. A "scoop" takes place when enough people think that it matters who runs a story first. As in the case of facts, we characterize news—it does not arrive on some divine daily budget .

an this quasi-existentialist denouement offer any hints about what the press should cover? The question is politically provocative, because America's democratic experiment hasn't been tried under different models of news coverage. By the time large waves of immigrants started to enter the United States, the older European model of partisan journalism no longer flourished. It may be that our mixed society maintains relative internal peace only because so many differences are masked behind a journalism that discourages the vocabulary of class, race, and ideology. If every newspaper here took an openly partisan position, closer to the model of Italian and French journalism, we might face a far more conflict-ridden society.

Yet certainly there should be no fear of change. The belief that the press covers what it "naturally" must cover, and operates as it has to, rests on more than journalists' lack of interest in the kind of
analysis offered here. It is also based on a poor knowledge of journalistic practice elsewhere, in Italy, with few exceptions, no newspaper copy editors exist. Editors assign writers a length for stories, and much material goes straight into the paper. In France, the press law distinguishes between facts more than ten years old and those more recent. In Thailand, radio stations have been known to change their call letters and frequencies during the course of a broadcast day. Our ways are not the only ways.

So reporters who look at other styles or theories of journalism and think, "It can't or shouldn't happen here," ought to reconsider. Some recent changes in American newspapers bode well for open-mindedness, such as the growth of trend and background reporting, and the increase of specialists on beats like law, business, design, media, and science.

On the other hand, nothing dictates changing the habits of American journalism for the sake of change. Philosophy, which urges us to be skeptical about press objectivity, also suggests we not worry about it. In both philosophy and the sciences, the notion of a hardbound truth in the world that researchers "find" or report has fallen on hard times. Ever since Kant argued in the Critique of Pure Reason that the nature of human thought makes it impossible to perceive things in themselves without shaping by the mind's categories, the idea that language or thought can precisely mirror the world has been skeptically received. In the twentieth century, that doubt about "naive realism" seems to have gained the upper hand in every field except American journalism. There the American journalist's belief in the possibility of objectively representing reality seems as naive as thinking the whole world operates in English.

In the hard sciences and social sciences, the most influential theory of scientific procedure in the last two decades has been the notion of "revolutionary paradigm" put forth by historian of science Thomas Kuhn in his book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. According to Kuhn, we've traditionally misunderstood how scientific knowledge progresses. In the traditional view, scientists gather discrete facts through unbiased observations. As they fall into patterns, scientists formulate generalizations with predictive power. Nothing is assumed at the outset except for a few basic laws of thought and nature. The view squares nicely with the notion of an objective reality, waiting to be conquered.

Kuhn, however, argued that this picture of scientific procedure fits only periods of "normal science," when no one challenges fundamental assumptions and scientists operate under the rules of a given "paradigm," or model. The history of science, he asserted, also includes revolutionary periods, such as the era in which Einstein's paradigm of the universe replaced Newton's. One's objective reality, in other words, may depend on one's paradigm. Another radical philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend, has noted that normal science's ordinary process allows data that do not jibe with scientific theory to be ignored, or ascribed to faulty procedures. According to Feyerabend, who sees scientific method as a kind of anarchy, the description of every fact depends on some theory, and "no single theory ever agrees with all the known facts in its domain."

Similarly, in the humanities, a variety of philosophers and critics in recent years have focused on the difficulties of rendering reality in prose. In Germany, Hans-Georg Gadamer, the father of hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, has argued that reason and truth are historically conditioned concepts, though understandable in their cultural contexts if we're willing to put in the intellectual spadework. In France, the late "archaeologist of ideas" Michel Foucault argued that various notions whose "natural" content we tend to take for granted, such as "sexuality," are conventional constructs that arise out of power relations in society. The American philosopher Richard Rorty, in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and other works, has emphasized that what we do at best is tell stories about the world that become the histories of ideas and theories.

Journalists should take a cue from all this. If even philosophers and scientists—the intellectuals among us charged with delivering full-fledged descriptions of reality—are coming to accept their work as a kind of useful storytelling, then no beat reporter should get upset at the thought that his ten-thousand-word takeout on toxic waste didn't capture the subject whole. When asked whether his exhaustive history of the Nixon-Kissinger years, The Price of Power, caught the whole story of what had happened, ace reporter Seymour Hersh replied, "Maybe 5 percent."

On the contrary, if what the press covers should change, it should
change for other reasons—to shake up our conventions, or to facilitate political, moral, and aesthetic progress—not because of some felt need to come closer to objective truth. For all we know, such change would bring greater happiness—a world of "good news" newspapers might be a happier and more productive world.

Yet change itself could never be enough to make reading the news a passive occupation. For what the press covers matters less in the end than how the public reads. Effective reading of the news requires not just a key—a Rosetta stone by which to decipher current clichés—but an activity, a regimen. It requires a tough-minded, pragmatic nose for both information and nuance that alerts the reader to when a new key is needed. Instead, the very uniformity of American journalism tends to lull its readers into complacency.

Awestruck readers abound everywhere. Even smug Ivy League English graduates, trained to dissect the neuroses behind the prose of Virginia Woolf, or the poetry of T. S. Eliot, often read the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* as if God himself (rather than some fellow Ivy Leaguers) had dictated it from the press room on Sinai. What these readers need is not change—not just flip-flopped conventions—but instructions of the sort that come on any decent aspirin bottle. They need to stop, every once in a while, when reading the news, and ask themselves, "If my life depended on proving the claims I've just read, how could I or anyone else do it?" They need to read stories that seem balanced and objective, with an "on the one hand, on the other hand" approach, and ask themselves whether there aren't more than two sides to the issue. They need to identify their cultural and political beliefs, to read publications that oppose them, so that the hidden assumptions they encounter across the journalistic spectrum are exposed.

Occasionally observed, such admonitions can gradually persuade even the most benighted newspaper acolyte that his favorite paper's coverage differs only in scope—not in kind—from what he happens to notice himself. The only answer we can't fairly expect to "What does the press cover?"—or "What should the press cover?"—is "Everything."

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**When?**

*Deadlines, Datelines, and History*

MICHAEL SCHUDSON

David Sarnoff just happened to be the twenty-one-year-old Marconi operator who picked up the dying radio signals from the *Titanic* and kept to his keys for seventy-two hours passing on news of survivors to relatives. At thirty, he was general manager of RCA. Walter Trohan, a longtime Washington correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, began his career as a lowly police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau. He covered for the rewrite man during the lunch hour. On February 14, 1929, a report came in that the city editor would not believe. Trohan, the only employee available, raced to the scene of the St. Valentine's Day massacre, and was the first seasoned reporter there. A few days later, the *Tribune* hired him.

Just as the theater world tells stories of the understudy who gets the big break at the last minute when the star gets sick, so the media world lives on tales of the cub reporter who was on the night desk when "the big story" broke. It is the central myth in the folklore of journalism. Nothing matters more than being in the right place at the right time and filing the story before anyone else does. It is the path to fame and fortune, professional advancement,