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Kevin G. Barnhurst. *Mister Pulitzer and the Spider: Modern News from Realism to the Digital.* History of Communication Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 320 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-09840-6.

Reviewed by Philip Glende

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In *Mister Pulitzer and the Spider: Modern News from Realism to the Digital,* the late Kevin G. Barnhurst argues that news reporting evolved in the twentieth century from a realist collection of occurrences to a modernist presentation of an organized world. This evolutionary arc, Barnhurst writes, was driven by internal and external pressures on the news industry and had profound consequences for journalists, news consumers, news production, and news as a system of knowledge. In practice, this trend increased the emphasis on interpretation and explanation in journalism, crowding out the stories of ordinary citizens in favor of elite sources and journalists themselves.

Barnhurst organized the book according to the classic five Ws of journalism: who, what, where, when, and why. For each, he discusses changes that have occurred in journalism from the days of newspaper innovator and legend Joseph Pulitzer, whose endowment established the School of Journalism at Columbia University and the prize that carries his name, to the present-day interconnected web of the digital age. Each section is supported with content data drawn from a sampling of newspapers and television. Much of the original research has been previously published by Barnhurst. Indeed, the reader is left to assume that methodological details are addressed elsewhere. As Barnhurst suggests in the preface, the subheadings in each chapter provide a brief summary of his central assertions. Like *The Form of News: A History* (2001), an earlier work by Barnhurst and frequent collaborator John Nerone, *Mister Pulitzer and the Spider* draws on a close examination of text across a sweep of time to generalize about the water in which journalists swim every day.

Barnhurst, who was a prolific researcher as well as former chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago before his death in June 2016, traces the evolution of news from the time when newspapers had a monopoly on the audience, through the introduction of radio, television, and the more recent explosion of digital media channels. Journalists might well contest some of Barnhurst's assertions, such as whether local news organizations have drifted away as fully as he suggests from intense coverage of the minutiae of local people and places. But Barnhurst argues that news has evolved in subtle ways, leaving journalists to think of their work in one way though practicing it in another.

Barnhurst asserts that contrary to the belief held in journalism and elsewhere that stories had

become shorter and shallower by the end of the twentieth century, in fact news reports have grown longer. This is largely through the addition of interpretation and explanation. The realist orientation, which presented a random collection of unrelated stories with intense details, relied on the "distributed native intelligence" of readers to make sense of the fire hose of information found in the daily newspaper at the turn of the twentieth century (p. 5). Already in the interwar years, journalists faced mounting criticism over whether the increasingly complex modern world could be understood with mere facts. Walter Lippmann wrote in his influential book ***Public Opinion*** (1922) that the American public had an inadequate knowledge of the world. Curtis MacDougall, newspaper reporter and journalism instructor, was an apostle in the 1930s for interpretative reporting. After World War II, a distinguished panel of authorities under the direction of Robert Hutchins, chancellor of the University of Chicago, produced the report of ***The Commission on Freedom of the Press*** (1947) that called for greater press responsibility in fully informing the public beyond factual statements. Not long afterward, as David Davies noted in ***Fair and Balanced: A History of Journalistic Objectivity*** (2005), the experiences of reporting on Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin and the civil rights movement also challenged journalistic practice and the professional cover offered by sticking religiously to the facts. "In realist terms, the sensation of McCarthy's unexpected accusations about Communists infiltrating the centers of power outweighed their questionable basis," Barnhurst notes. "In a climate of consensus about the dangers of Communism, his announcements at a press conference were without doubt ***news events***" (p. 88).

Internal pressures in the news industry also drove the impulse toward greater interpretation. Beginning in the late 1920s, ***Time*** magazine introduced a new style of storytelling that boldly offered the meaning behind the facts. Soon afterward, radio began to chip away at the newspaper's monopoly on the news cycle as breaking news was delivered over the air. Newspaper journalists saw interpretive reporting, and longer stories, as both a response to a higher calling and a survival strategy. In addition, even as stories became longer during the twentieth century, they also became more homogenized, actualizing Oswald Garrison Villard's lament in ***The Disappearing Daily: Chapters in American Newspaper Evolution*** (1944) that newspapers were losing their individuality as they increasingly relied on wire services and syndicated columnists. "Practitioners remember the push and pull of everyday competition in the short term," Barnhurst notes. "But along with other forces, the market did what it has done with everything from shampoo to hamburgers: it made competing products more alike" (p. 34). The declining competition in daily newspapers allowed news reporters to de-emphasize timeliness as a news value and "turn their attention to past events and to modern analyses of changing trends to serve a smaller, elite circulation" (p. 147). However, more than economic forces were driving the growth of news stories. Barnhurst argues that the increasing length of the stories corresponds to the rising status of journalists as explainers of the modern world. "As the century marched on, more news practitioners held a college education and staked a claim to professional status" (p. 40). This development also corresponds to the growth of the byline.

Although stories did not get shorter over time, the amount of space devoted to sources did shrink, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, as journalists inserted more interpretation and explanation into daily news reports. The sound bite on television and quote in newspaper stories was compressed as journalists sought to place news in a context of past and future. Journalists may cling to the idea that sources and events dictate news content, but increasingly, Barnhurst argues, the journalist was interpreter of the news. In ***Broadcast News*** (1987), the romantic comedy about network television, the old-

timer who managed the newsroom muttered contemptuously when the rising star anchor told the audience that he thought everybody was going to be all right after a potential crisis involving military aircraft. "Who the hell cares what you think?" the character played by Robert Prosky groused. Now, one need only listen to National Public Radio's morning or afternoon news shows or the *PBS NewsHour* to hear journalists routinely give their thoughts on public affairs. Journalists interviewing journalists, Barnhurst observes, is the natural evolution of status as an expert explaining the why behind the what and when.

This interpretive impulse came at a cost. For NPR, public funding was threatened as the network faced criticism for bias. For the broader community of journalists, Barnhurst argues, the emphasis on interpreting events prompted news organizations to echo the consensus news values of elites like themselves and their sources. The sociologist Herbert Gans found in *Deciding What's News: A Study of* CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, *and* Time (1979) that most news on a national level could be categorized into story types that reflected a conservative consensus view of the world. Barnhurst argues that same conservative ideology in the so-called liberal news media might be contributing to the alienation of younger audiences from mainstream news and creating a "clear target for cultural resistance among particular social groups, political blocs, and economic strata and in the culture more broadly" (p. 209). The decline in trust in the news is linked, Barnhurst suggests, to the interpretation of events, facts and news from the point of view of elites and not as ordinary citizens experience and understand them. "News came under fire the more its interpretive style shifted focus of the news onto modern sense making and sense-makers," he observes (p. 187).

News, of course, is not just a report on an occurrence or action. What is selected as news and how it is framed are self-perpetuating manifestations of a particular understanding of the social order. Barnhurst argues that the loss of confidence in the press stems directly from the fact that minorities, young adults, and a host of other groups outside the dominant elite culture see news as foreign to their own experience. For Barnhurst, the growth of digital media, though it promised the possibility of diversified news sources, has largely just replicated the existing patterns of dominance. Barnhurst asserts that as news evolved, individuals began to disappear, replaced by types that represented problems that group leadership could solve. As group problems became the focus of news, the role of the official group leader was elevated. "Modern news is about groups in contest, about blocs of voters, not individual persons" (p. 57). In a chapter headed "News Gains Status but Lost Touch," Barnhurst argues that the increased education, better wages, and rising status of journalists during the century led to a drift away from the working-class masses and the toward those who held and exercised power. "Especially at elite news outlets, reporters are mostly well educated, mostly whites, and a majority male. As a group, they match the description of what sociologist C. Wright Mills called the power elite: professionally employed, urban, and products of comfortable families" (p. 65). Barnhurst sees a direct connection between the rising status of reporters and declining confidence in journalism as a trustworthy source of public knowledge, as reporters increasingly turned to elite sources to define and explain the news from their point of view.

Though critical of the news creation and delivery system as a means of perpetuating elite social power, Barnhurst is not a harsh critic of the journalist or journalism. Indeed, he casts both practice and practitioner as the expected outcome of powerful economic and cultural forces. He concludes on a brief optimistic note, with a hope for the development of digital media outlets. Barnhurst notes that the news industry already has survived the "tough transitions" of the twentieth

century and has been innovative in adapting to the digital environment (p. 225). Online content providers are often the same news organizations providing the same content in the same modern form; however, audiences searching the digital web have shown a keen interest in locally focused information, whether crime details or movie listings. This thirst for recognizable detail might rekindle the realist impulse in news and allow news gatherers to break from the modernist form, which focuses on generalizable problems, individuals as group members, and elite-driven solutions. News practitioners likely will continue to reflect and lend support to the dominant culture, but, Barnhurst concludes, demand for more of Mister Pulitzer's realism in the news could also contribute to a greater focus on the lives of everyday citizens.